**Sir Robert Peel, 2nd Baronet (1788-1850),** was the son of a Lancashire calico manufacturer and MP of the same name.\* He became one of the leading politicians of the first half of the 19th century and is mainly associated with foundation of the Metropolitan Police (1829), and repeal of the Corn Laws (1846). However, his long political career involved him in many contentious issues.

As Chief Secretary for Ireland from 1812-1818, Peel upheld the dominance of the Protestant minority, opposing any relaxation of laws barring Catholics from political office. However, the strength of Daniel O’Connell’s Catholic Emancipation campaign later changed his mind, and Peel gave crucial support to the Duke of Wellington’s 1829 Catholic Relief Act. This led to accusations of treachery from hardliners.

Peel served as Home Secretary from 1822 to 1830. As part of his reforms of the criminal justice system, he reduced the number of crimes carrying the death penalty. In 1829, he introduced the Metropolitan Police force, whose officers were nicknamed ‘bobbies’ after their founder.

As Conservative Prime Minister from 1841 to 1846, Peel oversaw increasing government involvement in social and economic matters. During this time, women and children were banned from working underground in mines, and a Factory Act limited child labour in textile factories to six and a half hours a day. Nevertheless, Peel opposed the mainly working-class Chartist movement’s demand to give the vote to all men over the age of 21. In 1842, following a wave of disturbances in the industrial districts, the government cracked down on Chartism and imprisoned many of its leaders.

The ‘Corn Laws’ were a series of import duties on grain and other foodstuffs, which had been introduced to protect British farmers and landowners from foreign competition. Opponents saw them as a tax on the poor, keeping food prices high at a time when wages were low and jobs scarce. Peel had promised to uphold the Corn Laws as part of his election platform. However, the appearance of blight in the Irish potato crop in 1845 threatened famine and more political unrest, leading Peel to conclude that a tax on food imports could no longer be defended. The laws were repealed in June 1846, but the Conservative Party split over the issue and Peel was driven from office.

Robert Peel died suddenly in 1850 as the result of a riding accident. Across the country, funds were raised for statutes and public memorials. Repeal of the Corn Laws was seen by Peel’s admirers in the northern industrial towns as an act of exemplary statesmanship, putting the national interest ahead of party politics. The Leeds statue, by William Behnes, was erected by public subscription in Park Row in 1852. It was moved in the 1890s to a site adjacent to the Town Hall, before eventually being relocated to its present Woodhouse Moor site in 1937.

\*In 2020 the statue became the subject of controversy when Peel was apparently confused with his father, the first Sir Robert, who had campaigned against the abolition of the slave trade before it was ended in 1807.