

## The Agricultural Riots of 1830

By the end of the eighteenth century, bread and cheese had become, in many southern counties of England, the staple diet of the labourer. They seldom ate meat, although many grew potatoes and greens in their cottage gardens to supplement the family diet. Owing to the high prices resulting from the wars with France, and the low wages paid to farm workers, there was a very real threat of starvation for the rural poor. It was in order to avert this that the Berkshire magistrates met at Speenhamland, just north of Newbury, in May 1795, to fix and enforce a minimum wage for the county in relation to the price of bread. Unfortunately, the magistrates were persuaded not to enforce the raising of wages, but to supplement wages out of the parish rate. This was a cause of additional resentment among the labourers, because it meant that a man in full employment was unable to earn a living wage to support his family, but was forced to accept the indignity of being classified as a pauper. However, the Speenhamland System was adopted by the magistrates throughout the rural counties of southern England.

After the end of the Napoleonic Wars, statistics show the agricultural labourer to have been no worse off in 1824 than he had been thirty years before, but these figures represent an average taken of the country as a whole. In the rural south, away from the wage competition of the factories and mines, the standard of life of the agricultural labourer had declined to a marked extent. In 1832 William Cobbett recorded that Durham miners earned 24s. a week plus house, fuel and doctoring free, and remarked 'Theirs is not a life of ease to be sure, but it is not a life of hunger'. In contrast, even by 1872 agricultural labourers earned nine or ten shillings a week, with carters and shepherds getting a few shillings more, out of which they had to pay a shilling a week for their cottages; theirs was a life of hunger.

In *A History of Everyday Things in England 1733-1942*, the authors recorded a talk they had had with an old farmer, whose father had been an agricultural labourer:

His mother thought she would eke out the flour for bread making by adding barley meal. When she went to the oven to see the result of her experiment, she found that all the loaves had run into one large cake. This was so much of a tragedy that she sat down and wept, and then her husband came in. He went into the garden and got his spade and washed it, and then he cut the cake of bread out of the oven. "Well", we asked the old farmer, "did you eat it?" "Eat it!" he replied. "I should think we did. Why, we were so hungry in those days we very nearly ate one another."

The resentment among the labouring country people erupted in disturbances in various parts of the country as early as 1799. By 1830 there were serious riots in protest against enclosures, low wages and the farm machines which were felt to be keeping people out of work. From Wiltshire to Sussex, gangs of men cut down fences, destroyed machinery, and burnt down ricks and barns. Most of the attacks were preceded by threatening letters, many

signed by 'Captain Swing'. One characteristic letter, quoted in Christopher Hibbert's *The English, A Social History 1066-1945*, said,

This is to inform you what you have to undergo gentlemen if providing you Don't pull down your inesshenes and rise the poor men's wages the married men give two and sixpence a day the single two shillings or we will burn down you barns and you in them this is the last notis....

Simple mechanical threshers, which were a particular target for the rioters, were developed in the 18th century, and by the 19th century they were coming into general use, although they were still very simple. The threshing machines were worked by horse power, and were said to have threshed 60 bushels of corn per hour.

In November 1830 the violence spread to Havant, Emsworth and Westbourne. A mob of labourers congregated in Westbourne, and went from farm to farm destroying threshing machines and setting fire to ricks. On Thursday 18th November, the news reached Havant that 'a large body of men, armed with sledge hammers, cross-cut saws and large club sticks were in the yard of Mr. Gawan Holloway at Emsworth, cutting and knocking his threshing machine to pieces, and that they meant to destroy all other machines in the neighbourhood'.

A Havant magistrate, Captain Leeke, rode to Emsworth to confront the mob, which now numbered at least 30. The rioters would not listen to him but went on to four other farms, at one of which they stole pork and beer. Captain Leeke returned to Havant and with fellow magistrate, Sir John Lee of Bedhampton, contacted the Commander-in-Chief, Portsmouth, asking for assistance. A hundred men of the 47th Regiment, under the command of Captain Dazell, marched to Cosham to await orders. Special Constables were sworn in before the magistrates in Havant, and warrants were issued for the arrest of the ringleaders.

News was received that the ringleaders were in a beershop in Westbourne and a party of men headed by the two magistrates broke down the door and, after some resistance, arrested 11 men, two of whom later escaped.

The use of local yeomanry to put down riots was usual, and in some cases there was loss of life in the resulting clashes. Near Salisbury on 25th December, the mob of labourers fought troops with bludgeons, bars, hatchets, pick-axes and hammers; the yeomanry, of course, had muskets. One man was killed, several others were wounded and 25 arrested. On the whole, though, the destruction and arson were carried on without bloodshed, though men who would not join the rioting were thrown into the village pond.

It was felt by the authorities that local magistrates might be too soft on the offenders. At a hearing held before a Special Commission in Winchester, 298 men were sentenced at Winchester Assizes, the usual punishment being transportation for a fixed period of years, or for life (in other areas the death penalty was used). Among those sentenced to be

transported to Van Dieman's Land, Tasmania, on board the *Eliza*, was James Ford, 19, described as carter/groom, native place, Havant. He was charged with 'having on 18th November at Havant, broken a threshing machine belonging to Sarah Holloway and others'. He was sentenced to be transported for seven years and was received on board the prison hulk *York* in Portsmouth harbour to await transportation. A petition sent from the 'inhabitants of Havant' to Lord Melbourne on 3rd January 1831 stated that although James Ford took part in the riots at Emsworth, he was well known to the petitioners as a sober, honest and industrious individual. In spite of this petition, he was transported: he received a Free Pardon on 3rd February 1836.

William Jenman, a farm labourer aged 21, was also convicted of destroying a threshing machine, 'property of Sarah Holloway, Joseph Freeland and David Walker', and was sentenced to be transported for seven years. He, too, received a Free Pardon in 1836. George Jenman, aged 20, presumably the brother of William. was charged with having, on 18th November, at the parish of Warblington, with divers other persons riotously assembled together and feloniously destroyed a threshing machine, the property of Daniel Wells. Also recorded against him was one charge of poaching at Petworth. He was transported for seven years, travelling on board the same ship as his brother, and died of consumption in Tasmania in September 1831.

John Hotson (or Hudson), aged 33, was another man involved in the machine-breaking incident at the Holloway's farm. John Hotson was described as a ploughman, native place Westbourne, married with four children. His wife Anne was stated to be on the parish at Westbourne, no doubt as a result of the arrest of her husband. John Hotson's death was recorded in December 1832, so he was never to return to his wife and family.

John Duke, aged 20, another of the wreckers of Sarah Holloway's threshing machine, was stated to have served six months for stealing timber, three months for poaching and one month for cutting a fence. He was also said to have been 'punished on board'. His stormy career was continued in Van Dieman's Land, being charged by the Van Dieman Land Company for 'Disobedience of orders in refusing to work on New Year's Day, alleging it to be a holiday'. He was also admonished for 'Disobedience of orders' in March 1836 and for 'being in without a pass' in April 1837. He is described as being 'Free by Servitude' and received a Certificate of Freedom in 1840.

The transportation of so many men from small villages had a disastrous effect on local communities, not the least of which was the burden of supporting on the poor rate the wives and families left behind.

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