



THE SWING RIOTS OF 1830 – 1832 HOW THEY AFFECTED SOUTH EAST SURREY

Driving today through the leafy country lanes of Surrey, Kent and Sussex, it is hard to imagine that just over a hundred and eighty five years ago most of southern England was in a state of riot and insurrection.

These riots and disturbances occurred between 1830 and 1832 and are known as the ‘Swing Riots’.

The main cause was desperation on behalf of the agricultural labourers. Whereas labourers traditionally had lived in with the farmer, there was a now a growing trend for farmers to hire labourers for piecework only (much like dock owners in later years). The majority of agricultural workers at that time were therefore waged labourers, working piece-work, many of whom were on the brink of starvation. In an overcrowded labour market everyone was jostling for a job. Labourer’s wages were kept to a minimum as the system relied on their pay being topped up by Poor Relief. Farmers therefore didn’t need to increase wages and the authorities tried to keep expenditure down by making it as humiliating as possible to receive relief and deter people from claiming.

The riots appear to be the result of a slow burn of resentment. On 7th February 1801 Sir Thomas Turton of Starborough Castle, who was the local magistrate, wrote to the Home Secretary informing about “a petition signed by 200 of the lower orders in protest at the late Act of Parliament for grinding and dressing wheat which they claim is leading to a poorer quality of bread...millers may be tempted to mix unwholesome ingredients with the flour.” (In 1800 Parliament had passed an Act granting Bounties on the importation of Wheat, Barley, Rye, Oats, Pease, Beans and Indian Corn. The measures were intended to protect English farmers from cheap foreign imports of grain but actually resulted in millers supplying poor quality flour). Turton had summoned a meeting with the principal inhabitants and sent notices to publicans to prevent assemblies of persons and the passing of resolutions in their public houses. Similar meetings and protests has been reported in Sussex and Kent. He met the complainants at the workhouse where they produced an example of bread that was their only sustenance and which Sir Thomas described as “extremely indifferent and disagreeable to the taste.”

In the same way that computers have supplanted many jobs today, the threshing machines of 19th century as noted by William Cobbett 'took the wages of ten men'. William Cobbett at the time also wrote of the extreme poverty and starving state of the people.

The winter months were traditionally the time when agricultural labourers could get threshing work. However, the new threshing machines, which had been introduced during the Napoleonic Wars, cut labour requirements drastically and farmers found them to be more efficient, therefore resulting in much unemployment in the winter. It is interesting to note that most of the unrest started in the months of November and December.

Surrey was generally slow to adopt new technology – threshing machines being concentrated mainly in the Guildford and Godalming areas, - but such was the potent symbol the machines had that there are scattered instances of farmers in the county breaking up their machines before rioters could do it for them.

The year 1815 saw the eruption of the volcano Tambora in the Dutch East Indies – the largest eruption in 1,300 years – leading to what was commonly called 'The Year without Summer'. This caused a considerable agricultural disaster around the world which would have a long-lasting effect globally.

A series of terrible harvests also led to a severe agricultural depression which subsequently increased the price of corn. 1829, 1830 and 1831 were exceptionally wet years – the summer of 1830 was cold and wet with a very poor harvest – exacerbating labourers' distress. Not only were the summers wet, but the years 1827 to 1830 also experienced severe winters. The situation in the countryside was pretty dire, especially in the south and east of the country where the wages were lower. The Wealden clay areas with heavy soil were difficult to farm in wet weather. Sheep rot, due to the wet weather had severely affected the sheep farming areas of Surrey in 1820-31 and two million sheep were killed.

An example of a labourer's wage (Henfield, Sussex) – food and rent came to 14 shillings (70 pence in current coinage); his income was 12 shillings and three pence (about 61.5 pence) for 7 working days. The parish added 1 shilling and six pence relief per week which brought his total income to 13 shillings and 9 pence (69p). He still had to find cost of clothing, footwear and heating which meant that he was getting deeper in debt all the time. And in fact I have found reports of 1833 where the lowest paid labourer was paid just one shilling a day.

Surrey farmers claimed that they too had suffered great hardship due to the agricultural depression after the Napoleonic Wars. They just couldn't afford to pay higher wages they said.

Just as with Wat Tyler's famous Peasants Revolt and Jack Cade's Rebellion seventy years later, the riots of 1830 originated in Kent.

By early June 1830 riots started in Kent with the firing of ricks, barns and houses. Just like the recent uprisings in the Middle East, the discontent quickly spread. So that by November the disturbances had affected Sussex and Surrey and had also reached Hampshire, Wiltshire and Dorset.

It should be borne in mind that the country at this time was going through a very unstable period. In July, France and Belgium were experiencing revolutions and the Government was terrified that this would spread to England. As most Members of Parliament were also large landowners, they had a vested interest in defending their concerns, which is probably why the punishments meted out to offenders, when caught, were often very harsh. The old King George IV died on 26th June 1830 and the new king William IV had yet to be crowned. In those days the death of the monarch meant that a General Election had to be held. The country was therefore in between Monarchs and Government at the time of the riots and everything was looking decidedly shaky.

There were over 3,000 incidents of protest in England during this period. In Surrey this took the form mainly of arson attacks, but there was also machine breaking, although it has to be said that the disturbances were not as intense as her neighbours in Sussex and Kent. There were also 4 incidents of riot in the county – the famous one being on 22nd November 1830 at the Red Lion public house in Dorking.

Threatening letters were also sent – many signed with the pseudonym ‘Captain Swing’. Nobody quite knows why this name was chosen. Some theories are that it refers to the flail that was used for threshing; some that it was the command of the Captain of the harvest gang ‘Altogether swing’. It does also have a sinister connotation as that of a hanged man. Because the letters were often signed Captain Swing, the Government suspected that the disturbances were being orchestrated by the same man or group, but there is no evidence of this.

The recipients of these letters and also of the other disturbances, were mainly farmers. Other people who received them were Overseers, who were the men who distributed poor relief, clergymen for a reduction in the tithe, and magistrates. Two millers also received letters.

The only farmer known to have joined the rioters was John Dore a farmer in Dorset, who also kept a beer shop. He was accused of stirring up trouble to help his beer sales. There is evidence that many Beer shops were used for the planning of riots.

The first outbreak of violence in Surrey was at Portley Farm in Caterham in August 1830 when the farmer’s outbuildings containing corn were set on fire. Not all incidents were committed by labourers protesting at low wages. In this instance the resident farmer at Portley Farm, a Mr Gower, was at the time insolvent and was about to have his farm seized to pay his debts; a possible early example of an insurance scam. He was actually brought to trial but discharged due to lack of evidence. Some of the fires were cover for a number of other agendas including criminal gangs and incidents of personal revenge. However, it is safe to say that the majority were the acts of a desperate, starving population.

During the September and October of 1830 other fires broke out around Oxted and Godstone.

On 22nd October 1830 Farmer Thompson of Oxted had his stock of hay and potatoes totally destroyed by fire – Protestors had tried 8 times before they finally succeeding in burning his outhouses and property.

Then on 5th November – an apt date – a fire broke out at a farm in Caterham when three barns full of barley and oats, plus two stacks were burned, estimated as the produce of about 400 acres completely destroyed.

Mr Rose, the Postmaster Godstone Post Office informed that at Oxted on 18th December 1830 a stack of faggots were set on fire belonging to Mr Palmer, farmer adjoining the village of Oxted three miles from Godstone.

The next day a large stack of straw was set on fire belonging to Mr Dartnall, a farmer at Woldingham.

On 22nd September 1831 at Limpsfield Benjamin Steer had 12 acres of peas, beans and hops destroyed.

November was the worst month for disturbance in Surrey. By the second week fires had broken out at Kingston, Byfleet, Cobham, Abinger, Epsom and Merton. Throughout December fires continued locally in Reigate, Oxted, Godstone and Woldingham. And also right across the county in Guildford, Epsom, Banstead, Bagshot

In Sussex on 15th November a mob of about 300 men from Mayfield and Rotherfield marched to Withyham to demand that the parsons lower their tithes and the farmers raise their wages. The labourers of Withyham, much to the crowd's disgust, were apparently reluctant to join them and the mob broke up and went home, thus avoiding a potentially violent situation.

As already mentioned, the disturbances were also seen as an opportunity for many to get even with unpopular overseers of the poor, who were often thrown into village ponds. On 18th November a particularly ugly incident occurred at Robertsbridge in Sussex, which was caused by the decision to give poor relief in kind, constituting measures of bad flour instead of money.

Soon after this incident the government decided to call in the Dragoons in an effort to quell the disturbances. Troops were stationed at Tunbridge Wells, Uckfield, Maresfield, Rotherfield and East Grinstead. However, the appearance of the soldiers did little to calm things down and meetings were held in many of the parishes calling on people to resist the military.

In January 1831 at Albury in West Surrey a miller was besieged in his mill and shot at. The mill was set on fire and destroyed. The mill owner, Mr. Franks, was also an overseer of the poor and described as 'odious to the people', which probably why a mob hung around watching the fire and made no attempt to help put it out. The culprit, James Warner, had previously been employed by the miller and had been sacked, so there might have been more of a revenge motive here. James Warner was tried and hanged. It was the only hanging in Surrey to have actually taken place during the riots, although many were threatened with it.

The favourite targets for arson were hay and straw ricks. The ricks would burn from the inside, smouldering away before bursting into flames. This would therefore give the perpetrators time to escape and compose an alibi when the rick actually caught fire. Once alight it would be difficult to put out – by the time the fire fighters arrived and set up their chain of buckets it was more or less a waste of time.

Although it difficult to find any written instances of disturbances in Lingfield area, there obviously were as can be seen from private letters written at the time.

John Stanford, writing in 1832 to his son William in America states:

“... The country is in a deplorable state at present for we have been visited by incendries again this year. We have had several fires in our neighbourhood; at Wintersell all the barns, and they almost full of corn, almost all the outbuildings, haystack, corn and seed stacks burnt and almost destroyed; only the horse stable, granary wheat stack and one hay stack saved. Mr Sharman had had a barn almost full of corn shead adjoining burnt down to the ground. A shed at Mrs Holmdens at Edenbridge burnt; a hay stack at Mr Saxbys at Sammons; a fire at Sundridge, one at Ardingly, one at Mr Scotts home barn below Outwood and many more too numerous to mention.”

Mr Rose the Godstone Postmaster again informed the General Post Office in London, 7th November 1832: “I consider it my duty to inform you that a Fire took place last night at a Farm called Wintersell in the parish of Crowhurst nr. Godstone, undoubtedly the work of an Incendiary – 3 barns and several hay ricks were consumed. The Home stable, Granary and a Wheat Rick were saved. Mr R. Kelsey the Occupier has offered a Reward of £200 on conviction of the Offender.” Some days later an arsonist struck again. Mr Rose wrote to his employers: “I am sorry again to have to inform you that another incendiary Fire again took place last night in the parish of Lingfield, a very short distance from the one I reported last week which consumed a Barn filled with Corn and 2 sheds.

Lord Elphinstone who lived in Dormansland, wrote to his cousin of his concerns of the disturbances over the price of corn and that some hay stacks had been deliberately set alight in the area of Lingfield, and feared for his own hay ricks.

Lord Elphinstone does not seem to have had much sympathy with the plight of the labourers. He wrote again to his cousin “I have some Wheat Stacks that would make a pretty Blaze and now that I have limited my donations to a certain quantity of Bread instead of money, it is received with grumbling, for Gin and Tobacco are preferred and so in spite my Stacks may go.”

During this time, as in other times of crisis, conspiracy theories abounded. The Government was in denial and it was generally thought that the disturbances couldn't possibly have been organised by impoverished labourers. The unrest had been building up to this point for almost a decade and in fact William Cobbett had warned that this would be the outcome if nothing was done to alleviate the plight of the working poor. The Establishment tended to think that the disturbances were being orchestrated by foreigners, mainly thought to be French conspirators who acted as agitators to the local labourers. Strangers were often reported as being in the vicinity of an outrage, only to mysteriously disappear soon afterwards. Two cases of arson in 1830 were reported by The Times that they were the work of an organised gang.

It was difficult for a farmer to accept that his own labourers would burn down his barn, much more acceptable to think that it was the work of strangers, even more so of

foreigners. There is actually no evidence that the incidents were organised and they were mainly work of individuals.

One pamphlet printed at the time and distributed in the Egham area read
'Awake from your trance! The enemies of England are at work actively to ruin us. Hordes of Frenchmen are employed doing the deed of incendiaries and inciting to acts of tumult.... The fires of Normandy are revived in Kent are spreading to Sussex and Surrey.....shall the conqueror of the Nile, of Trafalgar and Waterloo be tricked by the arts and deceits of Frenchmen.'

Although the main method of protest was arson, there were several riots in Surrey, although not in the scale as Kent and Sussex.

In Dorking and Woking a radical group from Horsham was indicted as inciting trouble and riots were proved to have been organised by this group.

On 22nd November 1830 an angry mob gathered outside the Red Lion at Dorking where the local magistrates were meeting farmers, and demanded relief. The Riot Act was read without much success – it was shouted down by the mob and the Life Guards were called in.

On 26th November 1830 about one hundred labourers assembled at Limpsfield and marched to a farm at Oxted to demand an increase in wages. The men were finally dispersed by magistrates.

The incidents of arson continued for the next two years. By the end of 1832 there were few cases and the revolt appears to have petered out.

Most acts of arson went undetected. In Surrey a special Assizes was formed to try those who were caught. The county of Surrey seems to have got off lightly compared to other counties. 18 men were tried for riotous assembly, of whom only six were found guilty and imprisoned for periods between 6 and 18 months.

In East Sussex alone nine men were executed, 457 sentenced to be transported and 400 imprisoned.

By the end of 1830 a total of nearly two thousand people across the affected areas had been arrested and were awaiting trial of which 19 were executed and 500 transported.

Few labourers benefited from the uprising. Some farmers temporarily raised their wages, but lowered them again when things quietened down and it was many years before agricultural workers saw a substantial improvement in their situation.

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Sources:

The National Archives HO52/10; HO/42/61/38

Swing Unmasked

Pat Dobson – Stanford family personal letters

RH7 Fact Sheet – *Ho Chee and Lord Elphinstone*

