

THE RIOTING CROWD IN DERBYSHIRE IN THE 18TH CENTURY

BY MICHAEL THOMAS

(Department of Economic and Social History, University of Sheffield)

England in the 18th century appears to be the home of two contrasting societies. On the one hand, we see a society characterised by paternalist relations between gentry and working people; one which possessed an element of social mobility, a 'chain of connection' between classes in terms of links of social obligation and slopes of social graduation, and a 'bond of attachment', which was associated with both duty and dependence.¹ On the other hand, we see a society in which there was considerable internal strife. For England was 'pre-eminently the country of the eighteenth century mob',² with years full of rioting crowds, who scoured the countryside for cheap corn, or rose in the market to set the price of provisions at the popular level, and who were noted throughout Europe 'for their turbulence and their lack of deference'.³ In Derbyshire the situation is apparently the same. The evidence as to the existence of a paternalist gentry and a deferential working population⁴ contrasts sharply with evidence as to the turbulence of the people: election disturbances in 1734;⁵ anti-Methodist mobs;⁶ militia riots in 1757, 1760 and 1796;⁷ and food riots in 1740, 1756, 1760, 1763, 1766, 1795-96 and 1800-01. At a more obscure level, we may also note a constant swell of anti-authoritarian responses — poaching, rick-burning, sheep-stealing, cattle-maiming and turnpike-wrecking.

It is wrong, however, to over-emphasise the contrast. Paternalist relations and crowd actions existed together in one society, and we may understand better the nature of this uneasy co-existence if we examine more closely that most characteristic form of 18th-century crowd action — the food riot.⁸

It does not appear at first sight that the food riot is symptomatic of more than the dependence of the poor upon bread, and of the corresponding distress caused by famine prices. If, during the 18th century, the poor did not live by bread alone, bread was a main constituent of the diet of working people. We may see this from the accounts of the weekly expenses of three labouring families at Kedleston in 1788, presented by David Davies, which shows that two families spent almost one-half of their total weekly budget on bread, whilst the other spent one-third.⁹

The role of bread as a staple part of the diet of the working population meant that the supply and price of bread served as the touchstone for much popular discontent. Those years which we have noted as seeing food riots were years also of bad harvests, when supplies were scarce, and prices high. Derbyshire corn supplies seem to have been particularly badly affected by poor harvests, since, even in good years, it would appear that the grain produced was only just sufficient to meet the needs of the population. Pilkington remarks that 'of some kinds (of corn) a larger, and of other a smaller quantity is produced than which is sufficient to supply the inhabitants'.¹⁰ A bad harvest would, therefore, seriously threaten grain supplies in the county, a scarcity situation intensified by the fact that there would be far less available of the crop most in demand — wheat.

It seems from what we know of the pattern of bread consumption for the county that, apart from a small area in the north of the county, where oat bread was eaten, the most common form of bread consumed was wheaten bread.¹¹ In good years the wheat crop was scarcely equal to the demand, whilst in bad years there was quite simply not sufficient wheat to meet the needs of the people. Thus the crop returns for the famine year of 1795 show that in almost every parish in which wheat was grown, there was a fall in the amount produced. Ashover reported wheat 'at 18 Bushels per acre

Worse by 4 Bushels per Acre than the yere 1794'; this year itself saw a poor harvest, and the return from Dronfield stated that wheat was 'less than an Average Crop, by 4 Bushels per Acre', and 'Less than the crop of 1794 by 4 Bushels per Acre'. It was concluded from the returns of each parish that:

The average Crop of Wheat in this County is 19 Bushels per Acre of 32 Quarters weighing 66-lbs. That the produce of the crops of Wheat in the years 1794-5 were nearly equal and were about one-eighth less than an average crop.¹²

In such a situation, prices would naturally rise very sharply indeed. The year 1795, for instance, saw wheat prices rise from 57s. a quarter in January to 111s. by July, and continue at a level of around 100s. until July 1796. And in the period 1799-1801 prices soared from 53s. a quarter in June 1799 to 146s. by February 1801, eventually reaching 152s. a quarter by February 1803.¹³ The picture for working people was further worsened by the fact that they were faced not only with shortages and higher prices, but with the prospect of unemployment in the manufacturing industries, since there would be a contraction in the vital rural demand for manufactured goods.¹⁴

The mechanism which ensured that famine prices occurred at the same time as unemployment seems also, therefore, to have ensured rioting. Historians have been quick to point out a linear development starting with bad harvests, moving through rising prices and starvation, and resulting in rioting. Hobsbawm concluded that a situation of rapid price increases and unemployment 'almost compelled rioting',¹⁵ whilst J. D. Chambers similarly noted, as inevitable partners of that period of Midlands history, 'periods of high prices, with their accompaniments of unemployment, wage reductions, and rioting by starving workmen'.¹⁶ This evident casual relationship between hunger and rioting has led to food riots being seen purely as 'rebellions of the belly'. R. F. Wearmouth, for instance, in his long chronicle of 18th-century popular disturbances, explains their occurrence in one word — 'distress'.¹⁷ And T. S. Ashton, in his survey of rioting colliers, explains that:

the turbulence of the colliers is, of course, to be accounted for by something more elementary than politics: it was the instinctive reaction of virility to hunger.¹⁸

On the face of it, therefore, food riots appear to be nothing more than the natural response of starving people. Certainly such an analysis does explain both the occasion of the disturbances, and the immediate rationale of discontent. We have noted that riots in Derbyshire took place in those years which saw bad harvests and rising prices. Whilst the commonly articulated complaint of the rioters was their miserable situation. Thus the 'general cry' of the rioting Chesterfield miners in 1800 was:

that it was impossible for them to get through another such a Winter as last their children were naked as well as themselves, and that they had neither Money nor Credit to purchase them, Clothing against Winter¹⁹

And yet the self-evident truth, that material suffering causes popular discontent, falls far short of a complete explanation of food riots. In the first place, being hungry — how precisely do people act? Are riots simply outbursts of spontaneous crowd violence, or is popular behaviour modified by culture, custom and reason? In the second place, if hunger is the trigger to crowd action, it is possible to see in these disturbances more deeply-rooted legitimising notions, with members of the crowd acting in the belief that they were defending traditional popular rights and customs, and that they were supported by a wide consensus of the community.²⁰

Such rights existed, not only in the popular conception of the 'freeborn Englishman', that is the general belief 'that Englishmen were "free" and not "slaves"', and did not starve or wear "wooden shoes",²¹ but also, and more practically, they were grounded in the paternalist model of the corn market in the 18th century. In this model, the marketing of grain should, as far as possible, be *direct* from farmer to consumer. Thus farmers should bring their corn in bulk to the local markets and not sell it whilst still standing in the field, nor withhold it in the hope of rising prices. The market itself

was also controlled, the poor being granted the first choice of grain before large dealers were allowed to purchase, and being allowed to buy in small quantities, according to strictly supervised weights. The activities of corn dealers were further limited by the many restrictions encompassed in the laws against 'forestalling, engrossing and regrating', which prevent 'sale by sample', the purchase of standing crops, and buying to sell again (within three months) in the same, or neighbouring, markets, at a profit. Moreover, millers and bakers, when used by the poor, were commonly expected not to seek to make a profit, but rather to behave as servants of the community.²²

It is true that this model always functioned rather imperfectly and that, especially as the century progressed, the model parted company with reality at many points. Nevertheless, what is significant is the way in which this model continued to serve as a reference point for crowd action.²³ The distinctive feature of the crowd is its attachment to the traditional ways of the old village community, and its violent reaction to the sort of changes promoted in the name of 'progress' by governments and corn merchants. So we find underpinning forms of popular violence, demands for the 'restoration' of 'lost rights', such as the 'just price', based on beliefs as to what were 'legitimate' and what were 'illegitimate' practices in marketing, milling and baking. The feelings of the poor were therefore outraged, not so much by high prices as by malpractices on the part of millers, dealers and farmers, which were seen as exploiting the position of the poor, and food riots were often aimed directly against such individuals who were felt to be the enemies of the people.

Dealers especially were a target for popular calumny. During times of dearth, it was commonly believed that such men attempted to use their position and power as a means to personal enrichment. Grievances during the 18th century were particularly aroused by the 'export' of corn from one area to another. Since the economy of the poor was largely local and regional, remaining grounded in the ancient subsistence economy, then it was commonly accepted that corn should be consumed in the area where it was produced. Such a conception was likely to be strengthened in years of scarcity, for to send corn out of the area seemed to be depriving the people in that region of their rightful produce. Moreover, those dealers involved in such practices further outraged popular feelings by appearing to undertake such transactions for the purpose of making a large profit; either by selling the grain in an area where prices were higher, or by maintaining 'famine' prices in the home region by ensuring an artificial scarcity of corn. Thus in Derby in 1740, two wagons 'loaded with 24 bags of fine flower' being sent to Leek were stopped on the road outside the town by a crowd, and forced to return to the market-place.²⁴ Similarly, in 1766, one of the aims of the crowd in the notorious Derby 'cheese riots' was to prevent 'Boats loaded with cheese' from 'going down the water', to which end they brought the cheeses ashore and distributed them among the populace.²⁵

It also seems that popular grievances over 'export' were combined with grievances over the growing practice of sale by 'private treaty', where dealers by-passed both the 'open' market and the laws relating to forestalling by buying up the corn in large amounts direct from the farmer, ready to sell it at higher prices, either in the local market or neighbouring markets. The rioters at Derby in 1740 did not therefore remain contented with having prevented the corn from leaving the county. Having stopped the wagons, they 'took possession of what they considered to be contraband property, and endeavoured to distribute it among themselves'.²⁶ It is apparent here that the crowd's action was informed by the popular belief that dealers who took part in 'illegitimate' practices, thereby forfeited any right to the corn they owned.

Thus, although the paternalist model of the corn market was disintegrating throughout the century, popular notions as to the rights of the poor, and as to the proper functions of respective parties towards the poor, remained deeply rooted. Certainly, as late as 1800, high prices were still being blamed, not on market forces, but on the illegitimate

practices of 'forestallers, engrossers and regraters'. Thus the Chesterfield miners in September complained that whilst they were starving 'there was now plenty of corn in the county', and blamed their continued suffering on 'cornfactors' who 'were the means of keeping up the price'.²⁷ There was also distributed in that year a satirical handbill entitled 'Good News for Poor People, or The Sorrowful Lamentations of the Farmers, Cornfactors, Millers, Badgers, etc.' This professed to be 'a copy of a letter written by one of that class to his correspondent', and in it the writer bemoaned the effects of the good harvest on his attempts to profit from the promised shortage by hoarding grain:

What fools we have been We might (had we not been too greedy) have had 3 pounds per load in our pockets for all our grain; and now we shall hardly get one QUARTER of that sum: I cannot sell at any price. Do bring all you have out the next market day, and make the best of it it must be sold off, the markets are already glutted.²⁸

This was, no doubt, a fictitious letter,²⁹ but it serves to show the continuing role of the farmer, middleman and miller as the enemy of the poor.

It was the miller, as much as the dealer, who was a prime target for the crowd. He had a position of some power within the local economy: relatively free to charge his own price for grinding corn for the poor, entitled to claim a portion of the corn as part-payment for his services, and able to increase his profits by mixing inferior grain with that of the customer, and charging the price for best grain. Mills, therefore, often came under attack from the crowd. We might note especially the occasion of the riots at Wirksworth and Derby in September 1756. On 2nd September the *Derby Mercury* reported that at Wirksworth 'a great Mob arose and pulled down several Corn Mills in that neighbourhood'. A week later the paper reported that mills in the town and neighbourhood of Derby had been attacked by 'a large number of Miners, and other persons out of the Peak'.³⁰ These assaults, however, were not the 'instinctive' reaction to high prices, nor the result of personal vindictiveness, rather they were aimed against the practices of certain millers at Wirksworth and Derby, which were felt to be harmful to the poor. The principal grievance was the use by certain individuals of 'French stones' and dressing mills in the grinding of the corn. These were believed to be 'destructive' to the poor for two reasons. Firstly, because they facilitated the making of outrageous profits on the part of the miller: 'the owners of them engross great quantities of Grain into their hands and advance the Price'. Secondly, because the newly arrived French millstone ground the flour finer than was customary, and made possible the adulteration of the grain: 'there are several things ground and mixed with the flour, that is very prejudicial to the healths of the people, and that they don't know what they buy'.³¹ Millers were accused of grinding peas and beans, and even lime and plaster, in with the flour, and certain of them had a notoriety among the poor for sharp practices. Thus it was commonly known that 'Mr. Evans, miller of Darley, boasted that he could grind ten pounds of corn into twenty pounds worth of flour'.³² The Mayor of Derby attempted to discountenance these fears and popular conceptions, but he was forced to admit that 'these things greatly inflame the Publick and distress the Poor'.³³ Indeed, those mills known to house the new stones were soon to become the targets of determined assaults by the crowd, and several stones were successfully destroyed, including those in the mills of the unfortunate Mayor and the unpopular Mr. Evans.³⁴

As interesting as these particular instances of crowd action are, in revealing the deeper 'legitimising' notions behind popular disturbances, it does seem that the characteristic form of crowd action in Derbyshire, during years of high prices, was not this or that affray against miller or dealer, but the 'risings of the people' in 1756, 1795 and 1800. These 'risings' exhibited a discipline, an organisation and a traditional pattern of behaviour of complex nature. We may note in this respect that the destruction of the 'French stones' in the 1756 riots was not the result of the spontaneous action of separate 'mobs' but the work of an organised and disciplined crowd. The riots were preceded by:

An incendiary letter found dropp'd in the Market Place of this Borough, directed to the Burgesses thereof, tending to incite Persons to rise in a tumultuous and riotous Manner³⁵

But the actual 'Manner' of the rising was not 'tumultuous and riotous' so much as planned and directed. The rioters themselves 'gave out' that they intended 'to destroy the French Stones at all the Corn Mills in this Town and Neighbourhood', and their route seems to have been carefully worked out, for they visited only those mills which used the new stones, beginning with those at Darley before marching on to Derby. Moreover, they were discriminate in their use of violence. Not only did they leave untouched those mills which did not use the 'French stones', but also on at least one occasion, at Mr. Snape's mill, on finding the offending stones had been taken away 'they left the Mill, without doing any mischief'.³⁶

Alongside this evidence as to basic organisation and self-discipline, the crowd exhibited great determination and some grasp of 'strategy' in the face of opposition from the authorities. When they came to Mr. Holme's mill, they found it stoutly defended by the owner, the Mayor, and a party of soldiers. The crowd had arrived during the afternoon, but rather than withdrawing to attack a more vulnerable target, they remained in force in front of the mill and waited until nightfall, when, under the cover of darkness, they began to throw stones at the defenders, and eventually became so disruptive as to cause the soldiers to be 'prudently withdrawn'. Having succeeded in this, the crowd broke into the mill and destroyed the 'French stones'.³⁷

It is perhaps in the later years of the 18th century, 1795 and 1800, however, that we see the 'perambulating' crowd at its most disciplined and effective, directing their corporate attention to mills, farms and markets in turn, and with the central action being the 'setting of the price'. Thus in July 1795 the colliers from Ilkeston left their work and began to tour the county 'in a disorderly manner', searching for cheap corn and attempting to persuade colliers from other mines to join them. In August 'a considerable number of Colliers belonging to the Newhall and Swadlincote Collieries . . . assembled together at the sound of a horn, and proceeded to several places in the neighbourhood for the purpose of obtaining Wheat at a reduced price'. Accordingly, they 'possessed themselves of several pounds of Wheat and Oats' before a magistrate persuaded them to disperse. Later on that day, however, they collected together again, searched Stapenhill for corn, before proceeding to a mill at Burton, where they were finally dispersed by troops. In May of the following year a crowd came out of the Peak to the grain market at Chesterfield, where they:

took the corn and other provisions exposed to sale and only paid to the owners thereof such price for the same as they thought proper.³⁸

The form of these crowd actions shows that 'rioters' were concerned with imposing on farmers, millers and dealers alike the morals of the traditional corn economy of the poor, whereby prices *should* be regulated according to the means of the poor, and whereby those persons seeking to profit from the misfortunes of the poor might be legitimately compelled to comply with popular notions of fair marketing practices and a 'just price'.³⁹ Indeed, this idea of the crowd as a regulating, rather than a destructive, force is brought home by the experiences in 1800.

This year saw corn prices reach their highest level for the 18th century,⁴⁰ a situation accompanied by outbreaks of rioting and incendiarism. As early as May there were riots at Belper and Breson (Breaston), and in September disturbances at Derby, Chesterfield and Wirksworth. Alongside these, there are other indications of considerable popular unrest: the sending of troop reinforcements to the county in November 1800; the increase in the number of indictments for poaching and food-stealing; and the outbreak of incendiarism in many villages towards the end of the year, with corn mills, barns and ricks as the main targets, as well as the occasional farmer's house.⁴¹

These latter forms of popular protest suggest that the people were desperate in the face of soaring prices and mass unemployment, but the food riots, particularly those at Chesterfield and Wirksworth, are notable, at a time of 'revolutionary unrest' as well as economic distress,⁴² for their almost self-conscious restraint. At Wirksworth it would

seem that the crowd had for some weeks been in control of the market, setting the prices at which grain might be sold, and their influence had spread to outlying villages by way of 'a number of disorderly people touring the area, and inviting the populace to join them in their riotous proceedings'.⁴³ Similarly, the miners in the area around Chesterfield had visited the market there on the 6th September, to 'set their prices', and on the 8th had gone to the local magistrate, Sitwell Sitwell, to demand firmer regulations on the price and sale of corn:

this morning, a party came to my house consisting of at least 200 of the dirtiest villains ever seen, with what they called a petition, respecting the price and scarcity of corn.⁴⁴

These 'villains' appear to have made some impression, for Sitwell promised to ensure the supply of corn to the market at 'a lower price', as well as a subscription to help the poor. But the following morning the miners assembled again:

along with many others, with an intention of going to all the Corn Mills and Dealers in Flour and Oatmeal that would not sell their articles agreeable to the prices stated at Chesterfield⁴⁵

They were persuaded from so doing by an agent of the local mine-owners, who explained to them 'the extreme folly of their proceedings, and also the great risk they were going to run of bringing their wives and children to immediate distress'. More practically, he also promised that, if they gave up rioting, 'he would allow them all they paid for their Oatmeal, over and above 18d. per peck for the next month'.⁴⁶ This seems to have satisfied the miners, for there appear to have been no further disturbances.⁴⁷

We can see from these examples of the crowd in action that there is more to the term 'riot' than can be explained by rising prices and hunger. Grievances as to these factors operated within a popular consensus as to what were fair, and what were unfair, practices in marketing, milling and baking, and actions were legitimised by the belief that the crowd was defending, and attempting to restore, rights and customs which had traditionally belonged to the people within the 18th-century food economy. Moreover, such actions were not the spontaneous, blind response of starving people, rather they were 'a highly complex form of direct popular action, disciplined and with clear objectives'.⁴⁸

That the 'rioters' were acting, to a large extent, within the legitimising notions of a traditional view of the 'rights of the poor', and also within the consensus of the community as a whole, is further supported by the attitudes and actions of the authorities. It is true that the authorities did recognise many of the changes taking place in the market economy, but whenever an emergency arose they too were prepared to refer back to this model, and even to revive it, for the protection of the poor. On the occasion of bad harvests in 1756, 1766, 1795 and 1800, the local magistrates were active in reprinting and advertising the laws relating to 'Forestalling, Engrossing and Regrating', and the sale of underweight or 'false mixtures'. They were prepared also to order farmers to bring their corn to market, and to set up 'subscriptions' among the wealthy for the purpose of directly helping the poor, or subsidising the price of corn.

Thus, in 1766 the Mayor of Derby issued a proclamation, stating that:

Whereas the poor of this town have suffered greatly by the dearness of all kinds of provisions; and notwithstanding a plentiful and good harvest, the markets are but thinly supplied with corn: this is therefore to desire the farmers to bring their corn to market⁴⁹

Also, at that year's Michaelmas Adjourned Sessions, the court considered the king's proclamation requiring justices of the peace to enforce the acts against 'forestallers, Ingrossers and Regraters'. Having made the necessary enquiries the court reported that:

Many persons, as well as Badgers, Drovers, Hucksters, Sadors, Kiddors, and Carriers, as others have been guilty of various offences against the said Statutes by buying corn, cattle, and other provisions out of market and which had not been exposed to sale in the open market as the said statutes require.⁵⁰

The court therefore ordered all such offenders to bring their goods to be sold in the proper manner.

Such measures were not notably successful in ensuring peace⁵¹ in the county, but what is significant is not the authorities' ability to prevent rioting, but the extent to which they were the prisoners of the people regarding the nature of the action they were able to take in times of emergency. This ambivalent relationship between crowd and authority can be clearly seen on the occasion of the Chesterfield riots in 1800. Sitwell Sitwell was most certainly angered, and frightened, by the petitioning crowd, but he was forced to promise 'to call a meeting at Chesterfield' to discuss their demands. This meeting resolved to open a subscription for the purchase of foreign corn 'to supply the markets at an inferior price'; to order farmers 'to thrash out their corn and send it to the markets every Saturday, in regular quantities, and at as low a price as possible'; and to bring all forestallers and regraters to justice.⁵²

This relationship of crowd and authority is some measure, therefore, not only of the strength of the attachment to paternalist principles on both sides, but also of the effectiveness of crowd action. In the short-term it would seem that rioting defeated its own objects. Farmers might be intimidated from bringing their corn to market;⁵³ the preventing of the free movement of corn through the country might result in worse shortages in other areas; rioting sometimes resulted in the destruction of those same 'scarce necessities'.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, in the long-term, it was the presence of the crowd which motivated the authorities into encouraging the regular supply of the market, punishing offenders against the marketing statutes, and attempting to obtain grain at reduced prices. And, if nothing else, the fact that the wealthy were prepared, on such occasions, to contribute to a subscription for 'the relief of the poor' indicates the considerable power of crowd action, or threat of action.

However, despite this residue of respect for the paternalist model, and the keen awareness of the presence of the crowd, there were limits to what the authorities could, and could not, condone. Thus as soon as crowd action ceased to be a threat, and became an actuality, then there was a decisive break between the rulers and the rights of the poor. It is at this break that we can see again those two sides of 18th-century society. On one side, the measures taken by the authorities to defend persons and property against 'mob' violence, which included the use of armed troops to disperse the crowd, and severe punishments against offenders.⁵⁵ On the other side, the tumultuous and uproarious nature of the crowd, which, in its resolute defiance of the forces of law and order, exhibited an anti-establishment and levelling character, most disquieting to the minds of contemporaries.

The arrival of troops on the occasion of a riot might immediately put an end to the disturbance. On the other hand, it seems more likely, in Derbyshire, to have further outraged the people. We have already seen how, in 1756, the crowd took on a troop of soldiers defending a mill, but they were further incensed when six rioters were arrested and led off to the county gaol. They followed the troops escorting the prisoners, throwing stones and abuse at them, until finally the soldiers were so enraged that 'they fired singly two or three times, but by which last fire in the market-place, one Frith, a youth of about 16, was dangerously wounded in the knee'.⁵⁶ The troops faced a similar display of hostility in 1766, again on the occasion of the arrest of a number of rioters. The troops were stormed on their way to the gaol, but this time there was no firing. Instead, on reaching the market-place in Derby, the troops were ordered to draw up in ranks, while the Mayor read the 'Riot Act'. The crowd, however, refused to disperse, remaining steadfast until the soldiers were ordered to 'drive them out with their drawn swords'.⁵⁷

The Derbyshire crowd appears to have been less turbulent towards the end of the century (perhaps a mark of their greater effectiveness), but the authorities continued to show signs of disquiet whenever prices rose. In both 1795 and 1800 troops were ordered to the county, and Sitwell wrote to the Home Office in September 1800:

On Saturday the cavalry are to be out and I must own: I think the present state of the County more alarming than heretofore.⁵⁸

We also know, from the diary of William Foreman, that, as a member of the local Volunteer Cavalry, he was called out twice in 1800, to riots at Ashby and Derby. At Ashby 'their was nothink to be dun, the troops slept in Calk Park', but at Derby the situation was more serious:

this morning early, oure troop whas called to Derby and two more troops of oures besides the Derby Infantry all up all night garding the Gale [i.e. Jail] for their whas a man brought to the Gale over night and the mob sade they would pull down the Gale to let him out⁵⁹

It is worthwhile mentioning, in conclusion, that not only did such anti-authoritarian attitudes on the part of the crowd have the immediate effect of frightening the authorities and forcing them into repression, but they also gave grounds for justifying the growing fears among the ruling class concerning the potential threat posed to the *status quo* of traditional society by the expanding numbers of manufacturing workers. Throughout the 18th century, we may note accusations of a lack of respect and deference, too much independence, drunkenness, indolence and general immorality against this 'new' class of industrial workers.⁶⁰ In themselves, these faults were considered serious, but taken together they constituted not just an affront to the niceties of an individual, but a threat to the established order — a threat made manifest by the fact that it was generally this class of the 'lower orders of manufacturing labourers, which went to make up the crowd'.

This is not to be unexpected, for it was this section of the working population which was the most vulnerable to rapid price increases, and least able to protect itself from exploitation.⁶¹ More particularly, the characteristic Derbyshire rioter was the lead-miner and collier.⁶² Their presence might be explained in several ways — their virility, their importance in numbers in the county; their particular exposure to consumer exploitation. Perhaps more importantly, however, we might point to the natural discipline imposed by the nature of the mining community. Thus D. J. V. Jones writes that:

Living and working closely together and in large numbers, such people were able to acquire a unity, discipline, and leadership more easily than the rural labourers.⁶³

And T. S. Ashton agrees that the discipline and sense of co-operation imposed by the conditions of daily work was invaluable also on the occasion of a riot: 'when they set out for bread they marched under captains and when they were forced to retire, they found in the pits themselves places of refuge from their pursuers'.⁶⁴

It is significant as well that the presence of lead-miners and colliers as members of the 'crowd' was seen by contemporary observers as another facet to their generally insubordinate character. Thus, one clergyman in 1800 complained of the lead miner that, not only did he consider himself to be independent, 'and indulge in much drunkenness, with waste, profligance and dram-drinking', but also he possessed a 'rudeness of character, a riotous disposition, and an impatience of supposed grievances and discontent'.⁶⁵ And in much the same way as a refusal to conform to the prevailing moral principles might, on occasions, grow into a readiness to riot, so it was feared that, in a time of political upheaval, and with the spread of seditious principles, this readiness to riot might threaten more than the local corn market. Thomas Brown was only echoing contemporary opinion when he pointed out that the 'seeds of discontent meet with the richest soil in the increased population consequent on manufactures', and concluded that any such seeds sown amongst a class notorious for its insubordinate and riotous behaviour would encourage them to:

flatter themselves that general confusion is the road which will lead them to power. This is readily accepted by the profligate, who supposes he may seize in a scramble that which he has not virtue or patience to acquire by industry.⁶⁶

This view articulates, not the fears of an individual, but of a class, and it thereby characterises the divisions within 'paternalist' society. Whilst the authorities might seek to defend certain popular interests, and even, on occasion, to accede to popular demands, the very fact of crowd action posed a threat to the existing order of society which

could not, except at authority's own peril, be ignored. The relationship between the lower and upper orders in 18th-century society might have been complex, and even ambiguous, but when the lower orders became the 'rioting mob' then the response of the ruling classes was clearly defined:

both Whig and Tory rulers adopted a common stance in 'handling' the crowd, and in times of disturbance they closed their ranks in order, at all costs, to preserve the cultural hegemony of the gentry as a class. Different plays might be permitted: the audience might even hiss or pelt the actors: but the theatre itself must not be pulled down.⁶⁷

REFERENCES

- ¹Asa Briggs, 'The Language of "Class" in Early Nineteenth Century England', in *Essays in Labour History*, ed. Briggs & Savile (1960).
- ²G. Williams, *Artisans and Sans-Culottes* (1968), 10.
- ³E. P. Thompson, *Making of the English Working-Class* (1968), 66.
- ⁴As particular evidence of this we might note that the larger landowners would celebrate a family occasion — a birth, a coming of age, a marriage — by providing feasting and entertainment for the whole of the local community.
- ⁵Derbyshire working people had little opportunity to make their presence felt at election hustings, since there were only six contested elections in the 18th century. In 1734 two Tories were put forward in an attempt to unseat the Whig interest, in the person of Lord Charles Cavendish. Popular feeling was against Cavendish and the Whigs, and his eventual success led to rioting:
'The mob became outrageous at the success of his Lordship; the people assembled before the County Hall and opposed his being chaired windows were broken, and several persons were severely wounded'
S. Glover, *History of Derby* (1829), ii, 386–387.
- ⁶The unpopularity of the Methodists led to attacks on Meeting-Houses and Preachers, especially in the Peak, until about 1770.
J. Everett, *Historical Sketches of Wesleyan Methodism in Sheffield and its Vicinity* (Sheffield, 1823), 200.
S. Evans, *Methodism in Bradwell* (New Mills, 1907), 11.
- ⁷These riots were caused by the attempts to increase the number of working men liable to serve in the local militia. They involved usually attacks on the authorities concerned in the making-up of the 'lists' of able-bodied men, and commonly resulted in the destruction of those lists. They were most widespread in 1796–97.
J. R. Western, *The English Militia in the 18th Century* (1965), 140.
Derby Mercury, 9th May 1760.
Derby Mercury, November and December 1796, January 1797.
- ⁸For studies of crowd action, see especially:
G. Rude, *The Crowd in History* (1964).
E. P. Thompson, *Making of the English Working-Class* (1968).
E. P. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', *Past and Present*, 50, 1971 (*Thompson, Past and Present*)
- ⁹See D. Davies, *The Case of Labourers in Husbandry* (1795).
- ¹⁰J. Pilkington, *View of the Present State of Derbyshire* (Pilkington) 1789, 302.
- ¹¹It is naturally difficult to determine what proportion of the inhabitants of the County consumed what sort of bread, but it would seem that only in the Northern part of the County was oat-bread eaten to a large extent — this due to the poor soil and the relative poverty of the inhabitants there.
Sir F. Eden, *State of the Poor* (1797), 109 and 130.
J. Farey, *General View of the Agriculture of Derbyshire* (Farey), (1813), ii, 127–131.
- ¹²Derbyshire Record Office (D.R.O.), Crop Returns for 1795, Quarter Sessions Records, QAGF1–59.
- ¹³Prices from the *Derby Mercury*. Note also that 1756 and 1766 saw similar, though not so marked, increases in prices.
- ¹⁴See E. J. Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men* (Hobsbawm) (1968), 130.
- ¹⁵Hobsbawm, 130.
- ¹⁶J. D. Chambers, *The Vale of Trent 1650–1830* (Economic History Review Supplement No. 3), 58.
- ¹⁷R. F. Wearmouth, *Methodism and the Common People of the Eighteenth Century* (1957).
- ¹⁸T. S. Ashton and J. Sykes, *The Coal Industry of the Eighteenth Century* (Ashton and Sykes), 122.
- ¹⁹Cited in a letter from Joseph Banks to the Earl of Liverpool, 11th September 1800, in Public Record Office, Home Office Papers (H.O.) 42, 51.
- ²⁰See Thompson, *Past and Present*.

- ²¹G. Rude, *Paris and London in the Eighteenth Century* (1970), 311. Edward Thompson, in a fuller definition of the phrase, notes as its basic constituents: freedom from foreign domination, from absolutism and from arbitrary arrests; the rights of the poor to trial by jury, in equality before the law, and in a limited liberty of thought, speech and conscience; the semblance of participation in Government afforded by the right of Parliamentary opposition, by-elections and hustings; and finally the belief in the crown as the true 'protector' of the people. (*The Making of the English Working Class*, 87.)
- ²²For more detailed descriptions of the mechanics of the 18th-century grain market, see Thompson, *Past and Present*, and the references there.
- ²³It is significant also that, whilst certain traditional market practices had ceased, others continued to be recognised. Thus William Marshall notes that the markets in South Derbyshire, at least, continued to be 'wisely regulated' as late as 1790:
'They open at eleven-o'clock; but no Huckster is permitted to buy until twelve: so that the townspeople have an hour to supply their wants.'
W. Marshall, *The Rural Economy of the Midland Counties* (1790), ii, 231-2.
- ²⁴R. F. Wearmouth, 22.
- ²⁵*Derby Mercury*, 10th October 1766.
- ²⁶A. W. Davison, *Derby: Its Rise and Progress* (Davison) (1906), 73.
- ²⁷Cited in letter to Earl of Liverpool, H.O.42, 51.
- ²⁸Handbill in the Jackson collection, Sheffield City Library, No. 1553. The writer concludes in desperation:
'I shall surely lose my senses; Mr. F has hanged himself, and W has ended his life by poison! I see nothing but ruination before us; I wish I may not, in a fit of despair, use the halter myself With a disconsolate heart I must subscribe
Francis W
B, Near Derby, Aug. 1800.'
- ²⁹Fictitious in the sense that it was written not by a farmer, but by a working-class radical attempting to stir up discontent. Thus it was distributed at a time of much political unrest, and published by a well-known radical printer of Sheffield — Crome.
- ³⁰*Derby Mercury*, 3rd September and 10th September 1756.
- ³¹*Derby Mercury*, 3rd September 1756.
- ³²Davison, 103.
- ³³*Derby Mercury*, 3rd September 1756.
- ³⁴See below for details of assaults.
- ³⁵*Derby Mercury*, 27th August 1756.
- ³⁶*Derby Mercury*, 10th September 1756.
- ³⁷*Derby Mercury*, 10th September 1756.
- ³⁸*Derby Mercury*, 23rd July and 13th August 1795; 12th May 1796.
- ³⁹It is interesting to note that the Derbyshire crowd had used this technique of price-fixing as early as 1764; moreover, on this occasion, the proceeds from the sale of the corn were returned by the crowd to the owners: 'a mob of colliers seized wheat offered in the market as 8s. 4d. the bushel and sold it at 5s. which they asserted was the London price, and handed the proceeds to the owners.' Cited in E. C. Fairchild, *Labour and the Industrial Revolution* (1923), 113.
- ⁴⁰That is wheat was 146s. a quarter. This compared with a national wheat price level of 113s. 10d. (see B. R. Mitchell and P. Deane, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics*, 488).
- ⁴¹See the *Derby Mercury* for numerous reports concerning unrest and arrests during these months.
- ⁴²'Revolutionary arrest' was connected, in this period, with reports of 'underground societies' throughout the country, but centred especially on three towns, Manchester, Nottingham and Sheffield. For further details see especially Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 515-528.
- ⁴³*Derby Mercury*, 9th October 1800.
- ⁴⁴Sitwell Sitwell to Home Office, 8th September 1800. H.O.42.51.
- ⁴⁵H.O. 42.51.
- ⁴⁶H.O. 42.51.
- ⁴⁷More detailed information of riots in this year is made impossible by the fact that the *Derby Mercury's* Editor refused to give details of rioting after July, on the grounds that it might encourage working people to copy their example.
- ⁴⁸Thompson, *Past and Present*, 78.
- ⁴⁹*Derby Mercury*, 3rd October 1766.
- ⁵⁰Derbyshire Quarter Sessions Order Book 1754-1768, f. 528.
- ⁵¹Even in 1766, for instance, there took place the violent 'Derby Cheese Riot' of *Derby Mercury*, 3rd October, 10th October, 24th October 1766.
- ⁵²Sitwell to Home Office, H.O. 42.51.

- ⁵³Hence the assurance to farmers, and others, by the authorities, that should their dealings be impeded by rioters, the offenders would be severely punished.
- ⁵⁴For example, in 1766, cheeses were thrown into the river. Such actions, although apparently rare, hardly coincide with the 'starvation' theory of rioting.
- ⁵⁵This indicates the unity of the ruling class in face of popular hostility, despite the ideals of paternalist society.
- ⁵⁶*Derby Mercury*, 10th September 1756. Frith, in fact, recovered, 'tho' it is feared he will always be lame.'
- ⁵⁷*Derby Mercury*, 10th October 1766.
- ⁵⁸Sitwell to Home Office, H.O. 42.51.
- ⁵⁹See the Account Book and Diaries of William Forman (by kind permission of Miss B. Forman of Chellaston).
- ⁶⁰See Farey, iii, 499.
Pilkington, II, 56.
J. Byng, *Torrington Diaries* (1935), iii, 81-82.
- ⁶¹The more skilled workers might be able to increase their wages in line with price rises, whilst agricultural labourers still remained protected by their traditional position from a free market situation.
- ⁶²The other characteristic Derbyshire worker — the stockinger — seems to have found the market at Nottingham more convenient for his purposes. We must also expect women and children to have been involved in riots — see the 'Derby Cheese Riots'.
- ⁶³D. J. V. Jones, *Before Rebecca* (1973), 32.
- ⁶⁴Ashton and Sykes, 124.
- ⁶⁵Cited in N. Kirkham, *Derbyshire Lead-Mining through the Centuries* (Truro 1968), 27.
- ⁶⁶T. Brown, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Derby* (1794), 39-40.
- ⁶⁷E. P. Thompson, 'Patrician Society, Plebeian Culture', *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History* (October 1973), 27.