

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE AND THE SWING RIOTS

ALAN DELL

The Swing Riots of 1830 had a profound effect on Buckinghamshire; both agricultural and paper-making machinery was destroyed. The author examines the Riots and their possible causes in Buckinghamshire and neighbouring counties. In particular he explores the fates of rioters who were brought to justice, especially of those reprieved from a sentence of death, only to face transportation to the other side of the world.

THE RIOTS AND THEIR CAUSES

The Swing Riots affected the southern and largely agricultural counties of Southern England. Although a great deal has been written about them, notably by Hobsbawm and Rude, they have received less attention than more politically orientated or urban-based protest movements of the same period. Traditionally, the Riots have been seen as a violent reaction to changes in agriculture and hence in rural society as a whole. The biggest change in the generation before 1830 had certainly been the acceleration of the process of Enclosure, begun many centuries earlier. Enclosure, involving the end of the Open Fields and the extinction of various kinds of Common's Rights, had once been disapproved of by the Tudor and early Stuart state. By the last quarter of the eighteenth century and especially during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, however, parliament actively, no doubt influenced by the recommendations of experts such as Arthur Young, actively favoured Enclosure. A more productive system of agriculture seemed to be essential to feed the rapidly increasing population revealed by the early censuses.

Of course, Enclosure was highly controversial. The Northampton poet, John Clare (1793–1864) wrote 'Inclosures, thou'rt a curse upon this land, and tasteless was the wretch who thy existence plann'd.' The *Bucks Gazette*, the county's reforming newspaper, commented on 27 November 1830 that enclosures pressed very heavily on small holders and insisted that if urged, landlords would:

... revert to the system of small farms, to be less inexorable as to rent, and the farmer more kind and sympathetic with his labourers, much pauperism and what

is seen as the consequences of it, would be materially diminished if not altogether abolished.¹

But the connection between Enclosure itself and the Riots of 1830 may not be so clear-cut. In other words, whilst Enclosure may have been the ultimate cause it was not the immediate one. On further examination, what have often been described as 'anti-Enclosure riots' turn out to have been prompted by different, though perhaps related issues. It is striking that there was usually surprising little protest against Enclosure during the Napoleonic Wars. It must be stressed that the prime purpose of Enclosure at this time was to increase output through the more intensive utilization of the land. In other words, it was not a labour saving measure; if anything, at least initially, it increased rather than diminished the overall demand for labour.

But this was to change after 1815. Increasing output brought lower prices and the return to Cash Payments raised the real burden of debt – originally in the depreciated currency of the war years – that had been incurred to finance Enclosure. Faced with declining profit margins, farmers sought to reduce their wages bills – and thought they had found a partial solution in threshing machines. Thus the immediate cause of the Swing Riots must be located in the post-war difficulties facing the agricultural sector.

Threshing machines superseded the age-old system of threshing by flail under cover during the winter months; now the job was finished in days. Inevitably winter employment for farm labourers was drastically reduced. To make matters worse, the winters of 1829/30 and 1830/31 were unusually severe. Wages fell and many were completely with-

out work; demands for poor relief increased sharply. Many local landowners were sympathetic and, shortly before the riots reached his part of the county, Sir Harry Verney of Claydon wrote to the Home Secretary, Lord Melbourne:

... some of the poor are living very miserably ... able bodied young men having only 3s 6d a week ... a pittance must ensure them trying to get more by thieving and poaching ... believe difficulties in this part of the country would be alleviated by an alteration in the game laws, by workhouses and most of all by a legalised labour rate ... new beer shops have added to the number of places of rendezvous for the idle and dissolute.²

But Melbourne disagreed and warned magistrates against trying to settle wages rates in an attempt to placate the labourers.

The complexity of the causes is well exemplified in a contemporary pamphlet sympathetic to the rioters. *The History of Swing – the Noted Rick Burner* declares:

The Riots were caused by Farmers having been turned out of their lands to make room for foxes ... peaceable people assembled to petition Parliament massacred by the Military ... peasants confined for two years in prison for picking up a dead partridge ... English labourers set up to auction like slaves and treated as beasts of burthen and pluralist parsons taking a poor man's cow for the title of his cabbage-garden. These are the things that have caused the burnings.³

Crop and rick burning, together with attacks on machinery and calls for better wages began in Kent in the Autumn of 1830. From there it spread to East Anglia, the Home Counties and the South. Large tenant farmers in particular received letters, said to come from Captain Swing, and containing threats of retribution unless the use of machinery ceased. At first, particularly in Norfolk and Kent, smaller tenants – perhaps those who could not afford machines themselves – were sympathetic. In places, either from sympathy or fear of disorder, the magistrates themselves appeared complaint. Thus the magistrates of the Hundred of Gallow, Norfolk, promised to try to persuade landowners to 'discontinue the use of thrashing machines and take them to pieces'⁴ (Fig 1). But things were getting out of hand; in several parts of the country the militia was called out. Would Buckinghamshire be affected? The answer soon became clear.



WE the undersigned Magistrates meeting in and for the Hundred of Gallow, in the County of Norfolk, do promise to use our utmost Endeavours and Influence we may possess, to prevail upon the Occupiers of Land in the said Hundred,

To discontinue the use of Thrashing Machines, and to take them to pieces.

Dated this 20th. day of November, 1830.

CHAS. TOWNSEND
ROBERT NORRIS
EDW. MARCHM.

FIGURE 1 Magistrates lent their support to those who opposed threshing machines in 1830. (From *Rural Life in Victorian England*. GE Mingay 1976.)

SWING IN BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

The first incident in Buckinghamshire occurred early in November. A barn at an unoccupied farm at Nash, near Buckingham was fired and the flames spread to the cowshed and stables. A steel and flint found at the scene was identified by the village blacksmith as once belonging to him. Then there was an outbreak at Hoare's at Wavendon where wheat, clover and beans were burned; a reward of £200 was offered for the apprehension of those responsible. 'Swing' letters started to arrive. Mr Way of Slough was informed 'I, Swing do hereby certify that Mr Way of Denham will before three knights (sic) are over see a bonfire.'⁵ The letter to Joseph Biddle of High Wycombe (Fig 2) was more explicit:

This is to acquaint you that if your thrashing machines are not destroyed by you directly, we shall commence our labours. Signed on behalf of the whole Swing.⁶

Sir
 This is to acquaint you
 that if your thrashing Ma-
 chines are not destroyed by
 you directly we shall com-
 mence our labours
 signed on behalf
 of the whole
 Swing

FIGURE 2 A Swing Letter addressed to Mr Joseph Biddle of High Wycombe in 1830. (From *Captain Swing*, EJ Hobsbawn & George Rube, 1969.)

There were incidents of machine breaking at Long Crendon, Waddesdon and Upper Winchendon, where Mr Road's machine was dragged into a field and burned by a mob of 80 labourers. Rickford's farm at Blackgrove was attacked and machinery thrown into the yard.⁷ But the worst outrages occurred in the neighbourhood of Hartwell and Stone and at Wycombe. These episodes will be considered in more detail.

Benjamin Todd of Sedrup near Hartwell was particularly unfortunate. He actually destroyed his threshing machine – which had cost him £100 – while other farmers merely hid theirs. But his farm was still attacked on 27 November when 160 pauper labourers descended. Previously, they had destroyed machines at Kingham's Hill Farm, Monk's at Stone and John Farnborough's at Bishopstone.

John Farnborough was a young man of 23 who had farmed at Bishopstone since his father's death in 1824. The farm was held under the terms of Farnborough senior's will until John's younger brothers and sisters came of age. The landlord was Revd. Alexander Loekhart. John Farnborough later

gave evidence that he had received advance warning that the mob was coming. When he saw two of the prisoners at his back door about ten in the evening, he confronted them with a pistol in each hand and shouted, 'What do you want here? If you come here, I will shoot you' One of the men said 'Shoot away' but another in the crowd said 'You ban't going to shoot, be you, Master?' Farnborough replied, 'No. If you do not meddle with me!' Yet the mob destroyed two winnowing and one threshing machines.⁸

Farnborough's cousin, John Monk, who farmed at Stone suffered a similar fate and his winnowing machine was broken up. The third Stone incident involved the destruction of another winnowing machine at John Kingham's Hill Farm, but here the evidence was less compelling. Tensions were clearly high but it was reported that the men conducted themselves with civility and did everything possible to avoid harming livestock.

But things were to be much more violent at Wycombe. Here the riots were not 'agricultural' at all. Rather they involved attacks on paper-making machinery. Here handcraft trades were under threat. The greater violence may have been purely accidental, but it is at least possible that the economic disruption was actually greater than in farming. At the time of the Posse Comitatus of 1798, thirty-percent of the male population of the parish of Chipping Wycombe had been paper-makers. The introduction of machinery would have been traumatic and have led inevitably to a dramatic increase in unemployment and pauperism. It may be too that the ties linking master and man weakened, but still present in farming villages, had disappeared in more urban centres like Wycombe. On the farms, the machines were new, but the land was the same and even most of the Enclosures were at least twenty years old. In Wycombe it was not just the new machines that were hated; the mills themselves were also new and represented the destruction of cottage-based trades. They too would be targets.

Previously there was a meeting on the Rye to protest against machinery that had caused severe unemployment amongst the mill workers. The Riot Act was then read. Early in the morning the workers, summoned by a horn, began to assemble at Flackwell Heath a few miles from Wycombe and the Riot Act was read again. It was claimed later that Flackwell Heath, and the Leather Bottle beer

house in particular, was the secret meeting-place of the organisers of this riot. Although there was to be some disagreement on the sequence of events, the basic story is well documented.

The crowd made its way to Lane's mill at West Wycombe but Richard Hailey, High Constable of Wycombe, saw it as it passed through the town and called upon two special constables to assist him. Consequently the owners, John and Joseph Lane who came from a family of mill owners, were warned of the approaching trouble and made preparations to thwart it. The door was locked and all efforts to break it down failed. Then a shot was fired to frighten those attacking the mill but this merely provoked the crowd. As the mob began to break the windows, a quantity of vitriol used in papermaking was flung from inside the mill. This encouraged the men to redouble their efforts and within a few minutes the place had been stormed and the machinery completely destroyed.⁹

By now the crowd had swelled to nearly five hundred and it moved on to Marsh Green Mill, occupied by Zachary Allnutt. Allnutt's appeal to the rioters to spare his mill was ignored and in no time its machinery had been destroyed. A Justice of the Peace arrived and read the *Riot Act* but this had no effect. The nearby mill of John Hay at Marsh Green was next. The owner told the men that he had given orders for the machines to be put out of action and that if they were destroyed it would put those he employed out of work. The appeal was ignored and the machinery went the way of the others. Inflamed by a large amount of beer consumed at the *Red Lion* during a break in the proceedings, the mob moved on to Plaistow's mill at Loudwater. In spite of declaring that his machines would not be used again until an understanding had been reached with the workers, Plaistow's plea was to no avail.

All this time, unable to act, the outnumbered special constables led by Hailey had been following at a distance. A call had gone out to the Beaconsfield and a number of constables set out to try and make contact with the main body of rioters; this they failed to do. By now Snakely Mill at Loudwater was within the sights of the rioters and in spite of appeal by the owner's brother to spare the machines on the understanding they would never be used again, things had gone too far and the men would not be placated. The arrival of the constables from Beaconsfield only inflamed matters and the intervention of the High Sheriff, Major

General Richard Howard Howard-Vyse of Stoke Place, the 15th Hussars and the Life Guards did little to calm the situation. Eight hundred pounds worth of damage was said to have been caused in the final mêlée of the day. As the evening wore on, the authorities began to get the upper hand and a party of Life Guards from Windsor, augmented by a strong detachment of special constables from Eton, subdued those who had not fled into the nearby woods. In the mopping up which took place a number of the men were taken prisoner and lodged at Beaconsfield overnight. Others were apprehended at the *Leather Bottle* in Flackwell Heath where the ringleaders had taken refuge.¹⁰

The authorities were only now becoming aware of the seriousness of the situation. Two days before the trouble at Stone, the High Sheriff had written to the Home Office comparing the present quiet in Stone with other places in Buckinghamshire but adding a rider as to whether he could apply for any military force in case of necessity.¹¹

The previous day the Marquis of Chandos writing from Hounslow Barracks advised the Home Secretary of his arrival there with a Regiment of Yeomanry adding that in view of:

... the symptoms of insubordination which have manifested themselves in several villages within the County of Buckingham amongst the labourers and these symptoms have increased within the last few days ... is of the opinion that the outrages now being committed in Berkshire will extend into Buckinghamshire...submits the propriety of sending the regiments to Beaconsfield, Marlow, Risboro' and Crendon with a view of being able to act at those points where a military force is most likely to be required ... must be aware that there is no force of any description in the County of Bucks during the absence of my regiment which is composed entirely of farmers who have hitherto volunteered their services gratuitously and whose prolonged absence at any considerable distance from their farms might be detrimental to their interests ... having today made a forced march of thirty eight miles and the horses in my regiment being naturally much fatigued, begs to suggest the propriety of sharing the orders of duty between the Horse Guards at Windsor which is now being performed by regular dragoons of which there are none at this moment nearer than Hampton Court.

The letter is marked, 'inform that the Bucks Regiment of Yeomanry will forthwith return into Bucks'¹²

Others in the county had also been unaware of any problems. Writing on 24th November to Lord Melbourne at the Home Office Sir Harry Verney found:

This part of the county much more quiet and well effected that I had reason to suspect when I had the honour of meeting you last Saturday ... conversed with a great number of the farmers in the neighbourhood on whose discretion I can reply and cannot discover that there is any reason to apprehend any disturbance.¹³

Similarly, Dr John Lee of Hartwell writing from the Doctor's Commons in London to Thomas Tindall, the Clerk of the Peace two days after the riots at Stone observed:

I have this moment received your letter of yesterday ... I had not heard before of any outrage or disturbance committed at Hartwell. I must remain in London until tomorrow and will come to Aylesbury on Wednesday about the middle of the day.¹⁴

The Petty Sessions opened in Aylesbury on Saturday 27th November to try the men arrested at Wadsworth and Upper Winchendon. In particular a draining, plough and chaff-cutting machine had been destroyed at Blackgrove, the farm of William Rickford, Aylesbury's banker and Member of Parliament. It was pointed out that a chaff-cutting machine required three men to operate it and consequently deprived no one of work. Warrants were issued for the apprehension of some named in evidence and others were committed to appear at the next Quarter Sessions.¹⁵

The Monday morning saw Aylesbury in a state of uproar as news arrived of the various riots on the previous Friday and Saturday. News travelled slowly in 1830 and perhaps the first the average citizen, outside the immediate areas of trouble, had heard of any riot was when the jail in Aylesbury began to fill up, but rumour continued to be rife. The press reported one circulating in High Wycombe that the Aylesbury Gaol had been attacked and all rioters liberated and the tread-mill destroyed¹⁶ and in letters from the Revd. Thomas Carter, a Fellow of Eton College, reported that a Frenchman had been taken in a rick-yard at Datchet. His companion an Irishman by birth but speaking French as fluently as a native was lodged in Windsor gaol and Carter asked whether they

should be forwarded to London for further examination.¹⁷ All and sundry were suspected of conspiracy, especially 'foreigners'.

The Petty Sessions opened in a state of confusion with upwards of 150 men packing Aylesbury gaol as they were brought in for trial from High Wycombe and adjoining places. The *Bucks Gazette* highlighted the problems:

We regret we cannot vouch for the accuracy of our report. The Dispositions had been taken elsewhere than in the chamber and in the presence of prisoners which, by the way, is in itself improper and they were read over in such a rate as to deny all powers of note taking or observation. The indecent haste was most objectionable and the Magistrates intervened to prevent unintelligent gabble ... if an improvement is not enforced, the proceedings might well be conducted within closed doors and it is not impossible that even the legality of the commitments may be one day called in question.¹⁸

Two medical practitioners in the town (Robert Ceeley and Charles Edmonds), responsible for the health of the prisoners, had informed the High Sheriff that:

... due to the unprecedentedly over crowded conditions we have every reason to apprehend the occurrence of a contagious fever unless a speedy gaol delivery take place especially as febrile disorders of a tyfoid (*sic*) character are now very prevalent in the neighbourhood.

Their certificate was forwarded to the Home Office together with the comment that:

... as the gaol is in the middle of the town should disease breakout, it would probably extend to the other inhabitants ... what is to done with the other prisoners who it is expected will be yet sent in, in great numbers, charged with capital offences ... no place other than Aylesbury where prisoners of that description are secure and even the security of that place would be hazarded by any increase in numbers which however I may add is impossible.¹⁹

The Petty Sessions sat for four days during which 90 men were committed for trial, 27 bailed to appear at a later date and 24 discharged. The magistrates of the town led by Lord Chandos petitioned the Home Secretary for a Special Commission to be sent forthwith:

... for the delivery of the gaol as well on account of the very crowded state of the gaol as for the more speedy bringing to justice the persons therein charged with the late atrocious and violent felonies and outrages.²⁰

Thomas Tindall, the County's Clerk of the Peace, in another letter, confirmed the state of the sittings so justifying the previous day's application for a Special Commission. The letter in the National Archives is marked 'A Special Commission will be sent.'

Two days before Christmas, the Home Office told Lord Chandos that a Colonel Main, who had organised a Police Force at Salisbury where similar disturbances had taken place, had been directed to proceed to Aylesbury:

... for the purpose of assisting the Magistrates to make arrangement for the preservation of the public peace.²¹

The rather frosty reply came back from Stowe:

I feel that the Magistrates are fully capable of this task themselves but I shall have no objection to communicate to Colonel Main such steps as I have thought it my duty of take for that purpose.²²

Chandos recommended to Lord Melbourne that, as the Quarter Sessions would open on 4th January, minor cases could be taken out. In a postscript he suggested that a squadron of Yeomanry be quartered in adjoining villages pending the sitting of the court in case any attempt was made to defeat the ends of justice. He commended the staff of Militia in Aylesbury and Yeomanry in Whitechurch and added that everything remained quiet in the countryside under his command.²³

Elsewhere in the county some were less confident. In High Wycombe, where the most violent incidents had occurred, a meeting was convened to adopt some plan for the preservation of the peace. Revd. T Vincent, vicar of Hughenden, proposed that a mounted voluntary force be formed and placed at the disposal of the county's magistrates. The Secretary of State should be asked for arms but expenses could be to be defrayed by the volunteers.²⁴ The Home Office agreed but felt it inadvisable for the force to have firearms; rather it should be formed on the principle of the new Police Force, not that of a Military Corps.²⁵

The Force's newly appointed Commanding Officer, Thomas Hall, asked for advice on the number and type of arms and a pencilled comment on the letter notes:

60 cutlasses have been ordered.²⁶

But this did not satisfy the newly formed Mounted Constabulary Association and in a further letter to Lord Melbourne, while acknowledging the arms, complains:

... they are useless ... wholly unfit for the mounted force ... only arms capable of being used would be pistols with holsters, cartouche and sabres²⁷

The letter is marked, 'send sabres and advise'. But Hall did not last long. At a meeting of the Association held a few days later, he tendered his resignation and Lt. Col. Crewe was appointed in his place with Robert Wheeler as his second in command. Writing from his home at Four Ashes near Hughenden to Lord Melbourne, Hall explained that it was:

... not decorous for me to hold command when there was a gentleman belonging to the Corp who was a Lt. Colonel in the Army.²⁸

Special Commissions had been set up in adjoining counties to deal with similar situations and once a decision was made to send one to Aylesbury, worries and acrimony began to surface. At the end of December, James James, a local solicitor of note, wrote asking if the Government was to conduct prosecutions relating to machine breaking as he had been instructed by the Stone farmers to prosecute.²⁹

As there was no response from Whitehall, the Aylesbury Magistrates complained to the Solicitor to the Treasury on 8th January that they had received no guidance from the Secretary of State as to the course to be pursued in the prosecutions before the Special Commission. Word had got back that matters were to be dealt with in the same manner as adopted in Berkshire but Aylesbury had been left in the dark. They also regretted that the Secretary had:

... held communications with a professional gentleman under the impression that he was the Clerk of the Peace without previously ascertaining that he actually

filled that office ... regrets they have had no communication direct or indirect on the part of His Majesty's Government upon proceeding before a Special Commission as considerable assistance would have been given in the proceeding and the ends of public justice would therefore have been more satisfactorily and completely answered.³⁰

Melbourne himself answered these points in a letter of 11th and this was laid before the Quarter Sessions that met three days later. He expressed concern that any inconvenience should have arisen to the Magistrates as a result of the lack of direct communication of the part of his office. The Under Secretary for State had however:

... had a conference with a professional gentleman whom he understood to be the Clerk of the Peace in which it was fully explained the course which had been adopted in Berkshire was to be adopted in Buckinghamshire ... as the most convenient mode of making known what the Government proposed to do.³¹

Back came a note from Aylesbury stating that Mr Chearsley, one of the Coroners of the County:

... who had had some communications with your Lordship's office and was mistakenly considered to be Clerk of the Peace for the County never said one word which could justify us in the belief that he had taken upon himself any such character. He attended your office as a professional gentleman employed by the Magistrates of the High Wycombe Division to conduct the prosecution of the outrages in that neighbourhood.³²

THE TRIALS AT AYLESBURY

Of the 137 men who 'took their trials' before the Special Commission which opened in Aylesbury in January 1831, 57 were acquitted or discharged, having entered into their own Recognisance, or a No True Bill was declared in their favour. Thirty-four were given short prison sentences and 46 were sentenced to death. In due course this was amended to between one to two years imprisonment for 17 and transportation for the remaining 29.³³

Space does not allow a detailed description of every case but a few can be enlarged upon. First there is the question of the charges themselves and the obscurities in the law that became apparent. Upon conviction, the riotous breaking of machinery used in any manufacture was a capital offence

attracting the death penalty: that for breaking machinery without riot was transportation, while the breaking of chaff and winnowing machinery, which was not considered to involve manufacture, was a misdemeanour only. There is clear evidence that the charges were altered in a few cases to make them more serious. The warrant for the arrest of George Showler (Fig 3) of Stone gave the charge as the destruction of a winnowing machine but the word 'thrashing' was substituted making any conviction a capital offence.³⁴

It is ironic that those accused of wrecking Magistrate Rickford's machines were found not guilty on the direction of the judge. James Scott, a watchman called as a witness, named names, one of whom was Purcell Cornelius Turner. Under cross-examination Scott admitted he had been in prison for an assault upon Turner but could not remember how many times he had been there:

It was nothing to do with this. I neither fear him the more nor love him the better for that. I don't recollect how many times I have been in gaol: perhaps two or three times. Upon my life I can't recollect. I hope the next time I am in prison, I shall be there long enough for it to make an impression on my mind.

This did not satisfy the Judge. From the bench came:

'Witness! I shall insist on being told how often you have been in gaol.'

Witness Scott, 'I can't really say, my Lord.'

Justice Park. 'It is impossible you don't recollect! Go down, Sir. Gentlemen of the Jury, you will acquit the prisoner. God forbid I should say the witness did not speak the truth in any particular but men's lives and liberties are not to be put in jeopardy by the evidence of a man who says he cannot recollect how often he has been confined in prison.'³⁵

Scott had already muddled his evidence when he had appeared before the examining magistrates. On the Saturday following the incidence he had sworn to have seen those accused breaking machinery but two days later he re-swore but now believed himself 'mistaken' as to the identity of two of them. The following Thursday he had changed his mind again and reverted to his original statement.³⁶

The riots at the paper mills were considered to be the most serious because the breaking of manufacturing machinery was a capital offence and upon

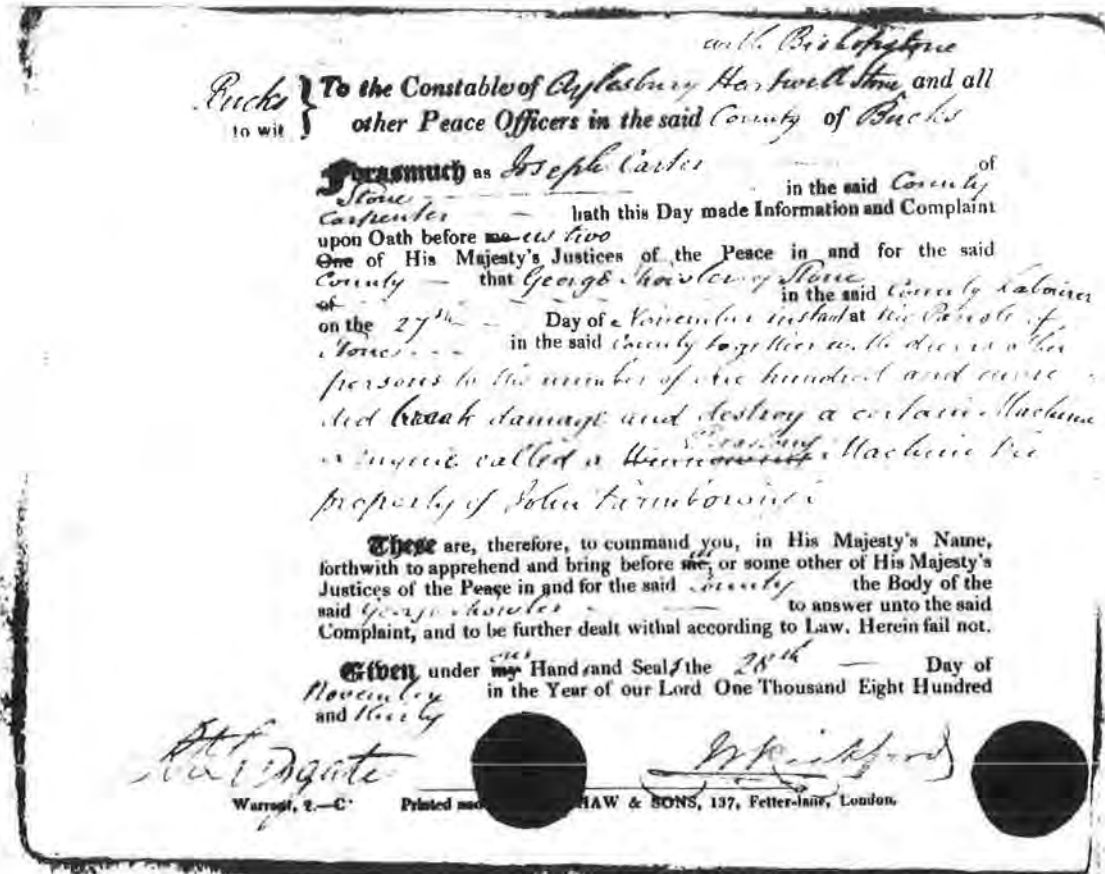


FIGURE 3 A Warrant for the arrest of George Showler of Stone, Buckinghamshire Local Studies. Q/unclassified/X18.

conviction judges had no other option but a sentence of death. There seems to have been an earlier suggestion that the men's lives would be spared if they pleaded guilty to the charges. However although some of the capital sentences were reduced to seven years transportation upon appeal and there were many who spoke up on their behalf as to their previous good conduct, two of the prisoners considered the ringleaders at Chipping Wycombe were to be executed on Friday 28 January. They were Thomas Blizzard and John Sarney or Sawney. Blizzard was a 30-year-old ploughman from Little Marlow said:

... to have a father living who is a labourer but whose conduct has always been something superior to the general conduct of the class to which he belongs.³⁷

Sawney kept a beer house at Flackwell Heath called *The Leuthern Bottle* and was described as a grey-haired man of between 50 and 60 and of an inoffensive appearance. The fact his beer house was the meeting place of the conspirators probably weighed heavily against him.

As the *Bucks Gazette* reported neither appeared at all prepared for the doom that awaited them. The first intimation of it they received was from the Judges placing on their heads:

... the square pieces of black cloth ... the wretched men shrunk instantly and appeared confounded ... Sarney cried bitterly but no sound broke from him... Blizzard groped about the dock, completely doubled up, and apparently quite unconscious of



FIGURE 4 The prison hulk *The York* moored in Portsmouth Harbour. 'Convicts going on board'. (From *Sixty-five Plates of Shipping and Craft*. Drawn and etched by E. W. Cooke, London 1829.)

where he was going or what he did ... the trap door being opened, the prisoners were led down the ladder into the underground passage which communicates with the gaol.³⁸

Having been persuaded to plead guilty of the charges in the hope of a milder punishment but ignorant of the possible consequences, Sarney and Blizzard were obviously dumbfounded when the sentences were announced by Mr Justice Park. As Park said, had they and others come properly and fully before the Court, a very different fate might have awaited them. A trial would have brought more favourable evidence with witness character testimony as subsequent petitions to the Secretary of State show.

A petition seeking mercy was signed by 200 Aylesbury householders and the foreman and eight of the jurors before whom the convicts were tried, and six clergymen, two of whom were the magistrates who presided at the earlier sitting.³⁹ While this document has not apparently survived in the country's archives, one sent from Wycombe from eight owners of paper making mills has. In it they deprecate the death sentence on the two men and

make alternative suggestions.⁴⁰ Frederick Vincent, vicar of Hughenden, lent his support and pointed out that the men imagined they enjoyed the countenance of a great number of respectable tradesmen of Wycombe. Lord Melbourne's blunt pencil is evident on Vincent's letter, which is marked:

Pray inform them that their lives are spared⁴¹

Not everyone was in the same conciliatory mood particularly with regard to the lack of communication between the Government and the Aylesbury authorities who were clearly unaccustomed in dealing with such a situation. Lord Chandos, in particular, complained and cited the debacle at Stone where were discharged those:

... we would have proved to have been ringleaders at High Wycombe.⁴²

Blizzard and Sarney, together with fourteen other convicted men left Aylesbury for Portsmouth on Tuesday 22 February 1831 with a heavy contingent of 150 of the Bucks Yeomanry. They were followed two weeks later by the remaining sixteen

and were housed aboard the prison hulk *The York* (Fig 4).⁴³

TRANSPORTATION BEYOND THE SEAS

Prison hulks were established at the end of the 18th century at Woolwich to which prisoners, after conviction at Quarter Session or County Assize level, were sent by sea from Scotland and the eastern side of the country. But by far the largest concentration of men from the western and eastern area of the country were housed aboard hulks anchored at Gosport or Tipnor on the Island of Portsea. All were converted man-of-war, which had reached the end of their active service.

The York, which housed the majority of the Swing men, started life at Rotherhithe in 1807 as a 74-gun warship and saw service in the Mediterranean and the West Indies. In 1819 she was brought to Gosport and was then used for three decades as a prison hulk. From the prison records, it seems that when *The York* and her sister hulk, *The Hardy*, were operating, those due for imminent transportation found themselves aboard the former and from there despatched to Australia while *The Hardy* (Fig 5), until broken up in 1834, housed older prisoners and those too infirm to be of use in the colonies.

The authority of the surgeon on the transports was all-powerful. *The York* records mention groups of prisoners sent for transportation who were returned to the hulks 'refused by the Surgeons' for reasons of health, age or overcrowding. If given a choice the average prisoner would not have opted for a life aboard the hulks. At least at the other side of the world (if indeed he knew how far he was to travel) he stood a chance of making something of his life after he had served his sentence in Australia. If left in this country upon release, with all character lost, there was little possibility of getting work.⁴⁴

In 1835 a report from the Lords' Committee on the state of the Gaols and Houses of Correction gave a damning indictment of the conditions at Woolwich describing them as utterly disgraceful to a civilised Christian country. It went on to describe that:

Upon death, the breath of life has scarcely escaped his lips when the bed he has lain is ransacked by his fellow prisoners to find and possess themselves of any trifling articles he may have concealed ... corpses are

then put on a handcart and carried out to the marshes to be buried in a strip of unmarked land ... where every trace of former graves was obliterated within a few weeks.⁴⁵

It was reported in *the Times* that the *York* at Gosport was in a state of mutiny for a long period in the 1840's and convicts refused to work; only severe flogging subdued the revolt.⁴⁶ The Penal Servitude Act of 1855, which substituted transportation with hard labour at home, phased out the need for hulks and in 1852 the hated *York*, which had housed the *Tolpuddle Martyrs* for a month in 1832 as well as the Swing Rioters the previous year, was broken-up with the enthusiastic assistance of its inmates.⁴⁷

The Proteus, a teak vessel of 253 tons, left Portsmouth of 14 April 1831 under the command of Captain Brown with Thomas Logan as surgeon with 112 convicts aboard. They included 29 of the men from Buckinghamshire but left John Sarney and William Hancock still aboard the hulk, *The Hardy*. Twenty five-year-old Robert Carey died aboard *The York* a week before his fellow prisoners left the country.

Thomas Logan's medical log has survived⁴⁸ and paints an interesting picture of the sixteen-week voyage to Hobart in Van Dieman's Land; he exercised his overriding authority very early in the voyage:

Most of the men were from the country ... generally speaking they had the sturdy build of labouring men ... their awkwardness and stiffness were such that I became desirous of removing the embarrassment which their irons but too evidently occasioned not to speak of the dangers of accident to which they exposed them ... were all accordingly removed before leaving Portsmouth ... nor did the subsequent experience teach me that this act of consideration and beneficence had exceed the limits of a just prudence.

Logan writes of the smallness of the vessel:

A ship, so small, that from Portsmouth to the Derwent (the river on which Hobart stands) we durst not, for the fear of shipping water, venture to take the scuttles out for air ... except in the finest weather the sea washed over the upper deck ... it was necessary to batten down the main hatch and so keep it nearly all the time ... by reason of this the prison was dark ... it will not be difficult to fancy how sad was the abode of the convicts during this part of the voyage ... if for one fourth of the voyage, the situation of the prisoners was

dismal, the remainder of it was performed in what I must call favourable conditions, everything considered.

Logan emphasises the need for a clean vessel and details his method of dealing with 'the soil cases' and the application of liberal quantities of chloride of lime as well as the twice weekly scrapping:

... the offensive incrustation which sooner or later forms upon them ... after which they are scalded with hot water obtained from the coppers on beef and pudding days which are the days selected on purpose for this purification.

Surgeon Logan's methods appear to have paid off as his charges arrived in reasonable good shape without any deaths aboard. Two prisoners were sent to hospital upon their arrival – one with phthyses (phthisis) and the other with scorbutus (scurvy). The medical log ends with the comment that:

... satisfied that every practical exertion was made for their comfort and cheered by the prospect by a speedy termination of the voyage, the spirits of the convicts continued buoyant to the last.

The conduct and fate of the 29 men from Buckinghamshire who arrived at Hobart on 4th August 1831 is well documented in both British and Australian archives. It would seem that by 1831, the regime in Tasmania was less oppressive than in the past and many of the penal settlements were reserved for long-term prisoners.

Upon embarkation, and after a medical examination, the men were mustered and assigned for duty serving the Crown or, on the Crown's behalf, some private person, for a given span of years. They then received an absolute or conditional pardon (the former quite rare) or a ticket-of-leave, all of which permitted the former convict to sell his labour freely and to choose his place of work.⁴⁹ The selected few were employed as watchmen, constables or postal messengers but the majority became servants of parsons, doctors or army officers. Those who fell foul of their employers, however, could suffer harsh penalties when brought before the Magistrates.⁵⁰

In an analysis of the year ended 31 December 1832, the men's conduct while aboard their hulks at Gosport is given together with the names of those to whom they had been assigned in Australia.

Eleven are noted as good or very good, five as bad or very bad and eleven 'in custody before'; the latter does not necessarily assume a conviction but a charge of such things as stealing wood or turnips.⁵¹

The small percentage of those classified as 'Bad' or 'Very Bad' while on the hulks had continued such behaviour on the other side of the world. Such offences as insubordination, disobedience, insolence, gross immoral conduct, absconding, wilful destruction of clothing, apart from being drunk and disorderly and so on, had occasioned varying punishment of hard labour on the chain gangs as well as periods on the tread wheel, solitary confinement, extension of a year to the original sentence and the notorious lashing. In one extreme case in 1837 the Supreme Court in Hobart passed down transportation for life to one of the Proteus men for stealing goods and copper money. But most English protestors lived quietly on in Australia, doing work England denied them. This emphasises the suggestion that not one of them seems to have engaged in any overt kind of political activity in Australia.⁵²

On 1st August 1835 Lord John Russell, the newly appointed Home Secretary in Melbourne's second ministry, granted free pardons to 264 of the convicts who had been convicted for machine breaking and other acts of rioting except in the cases of any of them were undergoing punishment for offences committee in the colony.⁵³

An announcement in the *Hobart Town Gazette* of 5 February 1836 published the names and these included nineteen of the Buckinghamshire men; the remaining nine were excluded because of the Home Secretary's proviso. In due course a number of these nine were freed, some by servitude and others by ticket-of-leave, in one case by working his passage back to England aboard *The William*.⁵⁴ One left the colony aboard *The Gem*, a mere twelve weeks after the pardons were announced but only two, William Dewberry and James Barton can positively identified in subsequent U.K. census returns: Dewberry to Stone, and Barton to Flackwell Heath.⁵⁵ Four men married in Australia shortly after their release and at least two of the wives left back in Buckinghamshire married again there as 'Widows'.

One man who has hitherto received only a passing reference up to now is John Sarney or Sawney whose death sentence, together with that of his fellow conspirator, Thomas Blizzard, had been commuted to transportation for life. Sarney was in his mid fifties, the oldest of the rioters, and men of that

age, together with the very young, were considered to be unsuitable for work in the colonies. Thus it was that Sarney remained on the hulks and was not included with those who were pardoned in August 1835.

Some time later Sarney's case was brought to the notice of the authorities, when Colonel the Hon. Charles Grey, son of the former Prime Minister and one time Member of Parliament for Chipping Wycombe, became interested and a free pardon was finally granted. Accompanying an earlier petition by the townsfolk (Fig.5) which had been rejected, was a letter from Farmer Edmund Collins who wrote:

I hereby certify that I should be glad to employ John Sarney now under sentence of Transportation and am quite satisfied that he would make a useful and industrious servant and be a quiet and peaceful member of Society.⁵⁶

Thus it was that Sarney returned to Little Marlow, the parish from which he had been removed nearly six years earlier but within a year his wife, Sarah was dead.⁵⁷

When John himself died on 26th December 1840 at Flackwell Heath, Little Marlow, the witness to the event was Elizabeth Moody, the 57-year-old wife of William Moody.⁵⁸ By a strange quirk of fate this woman was the mother of two of the rioters, John and William. The latter, whilst receiving the death sentence for his part in the riots, had his term commuted to twelve months imprisonment. John, the elder of the two, was transported aboard *The Proteus* only to die in an accident within months of his arrival in Australia.⁵⁹

THE AFTERMATH OF THE RIOTS

The Special Commission had hardly closed when those involved in apprehending the rioters began to put in their claims for recompense. The fees of 250 guineas to each of the Counsels, Mr Gurney and Mr Justice Stooks, retained by the Crown to prosecute, were the first to be paid. Then it was the turn of those enlisted as Special Constables. Because of the unprecedented nature of the events everyone felt obliged to fend for themselves and in the absence of advice from the hard pressed Government, all loyal villagers were pressed into service as Special Constables. Most thought it was their

duty to help out but when the rule of law was re-established, no one was willing to pick up the bill for their services. Indeed even those closely involved on the legal side had difficulty in obtaining their fees in full and letters were sent from all and sundry to the Clerk of the Peace seeking financial recompense.

The Treasury Records reveal an interesting sideline to thinking on reward for services or recompense for damage to property. Ninety-seven Burnham Specials shared £639 for their part in quelling the riots at Spicers mill while a pound a head was the order of the day for the Aylesbury men who had helped at Upper Winchendon. Young John Farnborough petitioned for recompense following the trouble at Bishopstone farm and was awarded £90.6s.0d. for the loss of his machinery, Constable Carter £50 for his help, while 88 constables received six guineas each.⁶⁰

James Dover, writing from Aston Sandford in February 1833 two years after the event, claimed he had not shared in the reward of £50 offered by proclamation for the apprehension of Moses Turner:

I have seen Mr Rickford, the Banker of Aylesbury, through whose hands some money passed as rewards to Constables and others ... I apprehended with my own hands at considerable personal risk ... I brought him to my premises and then conveyed him to Aylesbury gaol in a gig with two outriders late in the evening in November 1830,

The message came back:

The reward for the apprehension of Moses Turner has already been paid and my Lords can only repeat that his claim cannot be entertained.⁶¹

More surprising was Lord Chandos' petition on behalf of the non-commissioned officers and privates of 2nd or Hussar Regiment of the Bucks Yeomanry Calvary when he claimed £450 aggregate or £5 for each person apprehended after his regiment had been summoned to help the constables at Stone. The frosty reply came back:

Acquaint the Marquis of Chandos that my Lords are advised that the apprehension of such criminals by a military body does not entitle the individuals comprising it to any reward within the meaning of the Proclamation.⁶²

One man in particular who was beyond any claim for compensation was John Hay, the owner of the mill at Wycombe Marsh, which had received the full force of the rioters' wrath. Although Hay was partially successful in recovering from the destruction of his property, the contents of his mill, which included 1200 reams of paper as well as livestock, household furniture and farming implements were put up for auction by order of the Honourable Excise Commission in September 1832 following his bankruptcy.⁶³

The Judges at the Special Commission, Mr Justice Park, Mr Baron Bolland and Mr Justice Patten, had already presided over the trials at Reading and Abingdon while other Special Commissions had been held at Winchester, New Sarum and Dorchester. Other incidents in Huntingdonshire, Cambridge and Gloucester and particularly Kent had been dealt with at Quarter Session and Assize level. One thousand nine hundred and seventy-six prisoners were tried countrywide, by 90 courts sitting in 34 counties, of whom 252 were sentenced to death but all but 19 were commuted to imprisonment or transportation to Australia and Tasmania.⁶⁴ Like John Sawney, a handful remained aboard the hulks either too old or sick to be of use in the colony but compared with other counties of the South of England, Buckinghamshire rioters received relatively light sentences and none were executed. Yet whole communities in the South of England were for a generation stricken with the effects of Swing and transportation.⁶⁵

The gentry was quick to try to disassociate itself from any possible blame for the troubles. Dr John Lee believed that the lack of a resident vicar at Stone coupled with other matters had been responsible:

Stone has been deprived of both Churchwardens ... no one equal to check those disposed to be disorderly and had the Curate resided ... the parish might have been kept in better order. (The vicar of Stone, who also served Harwell as curate, was resident in the Hartwell vicarage) owing to pressure of the times and heavy burden of numerous poor and two large farms being vacant and unable to employ a usual proportion of labourers since harvest time being placed in large bodies upon the public highway were in a situation to be being worked upon by every excitement and consequently ready to embrace anything which seemed likely to better their conditions ignorant of the dangerous hazards they ran.⁶⁶

The vicar of Hughenden, Frederick Vincent, raised an important point when supporting an appeal against the death sentence passed upon the Wycombe machine breakers when he said that the men were completely blinded to the heinousness of their offences and that they:

... imagined that they enjoyed the countenance of a great number of respectable tradesmen of Wycombe.

He thought the rioters had been influenced in the:

... excitement of a regular battle and by liquor and previous success⁶⁷

Drink appears to have had a significant role, certainly at Long Crendon, as well as in other places. One landlord called stated that the party:

... came in between 9 and 10 in the morning and kept drinking together nearly all the day until 4 in the evening.

A boy, Thomas Shrimpton, in evidence stated:

Two quarts of beer was ordered and drunk by the mob and then those present were told to go up to town and cry 'mob for ever'.

Similarly at the *White Horse* at Upper Winchendon, Thomas Weedon unwisely tried to dissuade the rioters by giving them 85 pints of beer 'through fear'⁶⁸ and as it has been seen Sawney's Flackwell Heath beer house was the rendezvous of the Wycombe rioters.

More recent commentators have claimed that from no other protest movement Luddite, Chartist or trade unions was such a bitter price exacted.⁶⁹ What was achieved from this the last labourers' revolt? It may have contributed to the acceleration of Parliamentary and Poor Law Reform though, at least initially, neither brought much benefit to the rural poor. One thing which is certain, however, but of little comfort to those separated from their families ten thousand miles from home is that the cause of the landless farm labourer was set back for four decades. Only in the 1870's did the labourers' will to resist begin to revive with the creation of a farm labourers' trade union.⁷⁰

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