

Poverty and discontent in 1830s West Sussex lead to riots and dire consequences for two local men

Suggested age groups: KS3 and Lifelong Learners

Subject areas: History, Literacy, Drama

CONTEXT

General

Following years of war, high taxes and low wages, farm workers were so poor and hungry they finally snapped in the 1830s. These workers had faced very low wages or unemployment for a number of years due to the widespread introduction of the mechanical threshing machine and the policy of enclosing fields which forced them off their small holdings. No longer were thousands of men needed to tend the crops, a few would suffice. With fewer jobs, lower wages and no prospects of things improving for these workers the threshing machine was the final straw, the object that was to place them on the brink of starvation. Groups of workers joined together and smashed the threshing machines and threatened farmers who owned them. These riots which occurred across the country, including West Sussex, were known as the Swing Riots. Westbourne and neighbouring parishes witnessed particularly serious rioting.

Westbourne is a parish 0.5 miles northeast of Emsworth. The parish includes the hamlets of Woodmancote and Aldsworth, and in 1830 included the settlements of Southbourne and Prinsted to the south.

In 1801 Westbourne had a population of 1549 and by 1831 this had grown to 2031.

Quarter Sessions Records

Justices of the Peace met in Quarter Sessions (every 3 months or 'quarter of a year') to perform administrative functions on a county-wide basis, such as supervising the administration of roads and poor relief by parish officials, maintaining and inspecting prisons, houses of correction and asylums, supervising the constabulary, licensing alehouses, religious registration, etc. They also had a judicial function, trying a wide range of offences deemed not serious enough to be heard at courts, higher level courts. West Sussex Record Office holds Quarter Sessions records from as early as 1594 through to the 20th century.

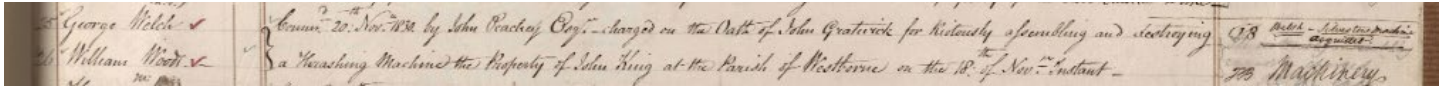
Records of Petworth Quarter Sessions for Jan 1831 list some of the rioters in Westbourne who were prosecuted for their part in the Swing riots and the harsh sentences dealt out to them.

1. Petworth Quarter Sessions Roll, January 1831 (three sources)

[Click here for a hi-res pdf of all three extracts and a transcript of each.](#)

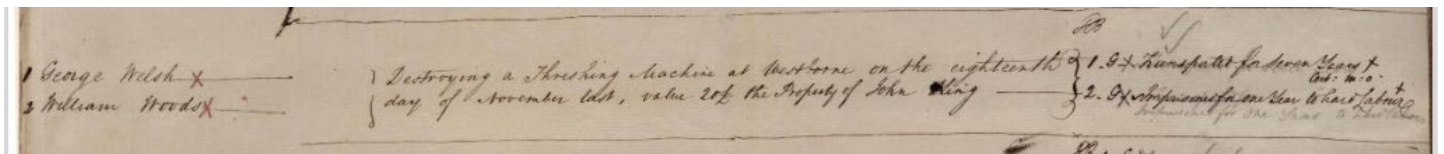
Extract A: The charges against George Welch & William Woods

Ref: QR/W758 f185

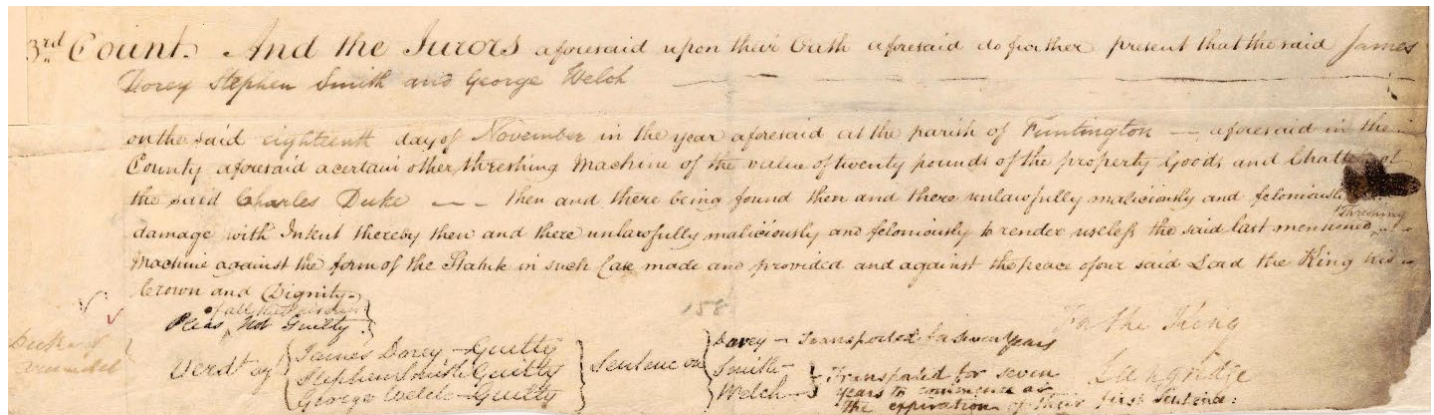


Extract B: Their punishments

Ref: QR/W758 f188



Extract C: Another charge and further punishment for George



2. Westbourne Riots article by P.M. Wilkinson, Senior Assistant Archivist West Sussex Archives Society Newsletter no.6 Autumn 1976

[Click here for a pdf copy of this source.](#)

Ref: Lib 16403



Riots in Westbourne

In 1830 Westbourne was very different from the village we know now - and a considerably less comfortable place to live in. At first sight it might have looked much the same, with strings of houses along the main streets in much the same position as the present buildings. But a closer look would have shown the differences. Behind those streets, where there are now modern housing estates, there were open fields; and this meant that the population was far smaller. Some 2,000 people lived in the parish, and that included the whole of the present day parish of Southbourne as well. The same area today has a population of over 6,000. Even in the main streets the houses were small and mean; many of them would have seemed tumbledown shacks in our eyes. The village was a farming community. Apart from a few small shops and tradesmen, almost everyone was engaged in farming, which meant of course that most of the inhabitants were farm labourers.

And farming was in a bad way. For the previous 30 years things had been going from bad to worse. During the wars with France, times were hard; and when peace came they got worse. When the soldiers came back from the war, there was little work for them. Prices rose steadily all the time: but the farmers refused to raise wages. Even those labourers who were fortunate to have a job could not live off their wages - usually about 1s. 9d. a day. To keep alive they were forced to ask for the hated "Parish pay", a small dole from the rates, grudgingly paid out by the parish officers. A labourer could look forward to a lifetime of hard work, apart from frequent unemployment and "laying off", to appalling housing conditions, a diet of bread and potatoes, to an income which could not support his usually large family. He had no chance of saving to improve his lot, and no prospect of escape into any other kind of work.

In the 1820's this grim picture was made even worse by a new fear - automation. The farmers began to import an important new invention: the horse-drawn threshing machine; and this must have seemed the final blow to the labourers. Previously threshing had been the best work during the slack winter period, with the men under cover in the barns, using flails to separate the grain from the chaff. As more farmers in the parish brought in the machines, more and more men were laid off at the hardest time of the year. Bitterness

and resentment grew, and eventually swept away law and order. In November 1830 the men of Westbourne threw themselves into what has been called the last English Revolution.

Violence had broken out a month earlier in East Kent. It spread day by day across the entire South of England, reaching as far as Dorset. Mobs of rioters roamed the parishes, threatening the farmers and gentry, demanding higher wages, burning hay-stacks and smashing machinery. They delivered anonymous letters, sometimes signed by "Captain Swing", a mythical figure who became the symbol of their violence.

In Westbourne, the storm broke on 18 November. That day a party of labourers destroyed the first machine in Westbourne. Next day, a party of about 50 under the leadership of George Welch and William Woods roamed the parish with sledgehammers, saws and hatchets. They smashed machines at two farms, Mr. Holloway's and Mr. King's, and spent the rest of the day smashing machines in Emsworth and Warblington. It was at Warblington that William Woods started the work of destruction by climbing onto a machine and haranguing his followers. Pointing to the machine he said, "You rogue, you have, you know you have, you starve the poor and make them run - and by God's will it must be done - Go to work, boys." Within ten minutes the machine was destroyed.

At midnight that night a mob came to Mrs. Harfield's farm and demanded that her machines be destroyed. She promised they would be. The rioters then said that they were thirsty, persuaded her to give them money to buy beer and departed. Next morning they returned and started to destroy the machines under the leadership of a labourer named Hurlock Crockford - who, significantly enough, called himself their Captain. He urged the men on shouting, "Do it. Do your work well", and turning to a naval lieutenant who was looking on helplessly said, "What do you think of the machine now, lieutenant?". The lieutenant replied, "There is another sort of machine called the gallows, and you will most likely be hanged on it shortly".

For the rest of the morning the mob continued round farms in Prinsted, Nutbourne, Woodmancote, and Funtington, smashing further machines. Throughout these three days, the rioters spread terror wherever they went, and many of the villagers tried to hide themselves or their possessions. A Mr. Abbinett hid in a stack of straw at Churcher's Farm and was actually touched by the rioters as they speared into the stack. However he kept his nerve, stayed completely still, and was not found. A young man named John Wrapkin was at the 'George and Dragon' (now Broughton and West's) when it was searched. He hid himself in a brewing-copper and escaped detection.

There was some resistance. Admiral Wallis dispersed a mob which threatened his uncle's farm; he stood at the gate with drawn sword, and promised to cut down any of the mob who tried to enter. None did.

With nearly half the country in uproar, the Government was badly frightened, and feared that a French Revolution might be starting in England. They urged the local authorities to take the strongest possible measures. There was a swift response from Chichester under the leadership of Lord George Lennox. On the Friday he collected together about 50 of the magistrates and gentry. They were on horseback and must have formed a formidable force. In the afternoon they rode over to Westbourne; the Riot Act was publicly read; and eight of the rioters' ringleaders were arrested. At the same time, a party of the 47th Regiment marched into Havant and Emsworth to make sure there were no further outbreaks. The final mopping up came next day when a further three men were arrested.

The Government was determined to make an example of everyone who had taken part in the disturbances - as the Westbourne men found when they were tried in the Lewes Assizes and the Petworth Quarter Sessions.

George Welch was sentenced to 14 years transportation to Australia; Hurlock Crockford to seven; William Woods got off relatively lightly with one year's hard labour. Two other men received 14 years and two seven years transportation respectively. Any sentence of transportation was, practically speaking, for life. If the convict survived the voyage out in the prison ship, and the conditions of slave labour as he served his sentence, he would still have little or no chance of finding the money that would buy him a passage home at the end. As Mr. Justice Alderson put it when he gave sentence at Lewes, "I hope your fate will be a warning to others. You will leave the country, all of you; you will see your friends and relations no more; for though you will be transported for seven years only, it is not likely that at the expiration of that term you will find yourselves in a situation to return. You will be in a distant land at the expiration of your sentence. The land which you have disgraced will see you no more: the friends with whom you are connected will be parted for ever from you in this world".

In Westbourne, there were no illusions about their fate. Within days of the arrests, the records speak of the rioters' "widows", and practically speaking they were right. None of the transported men ever returned to the village.

P.M. Wilkinson

Senior Assistant Archivist

ACTIVITIES

Key Question: Why did people emigrate from West Sussex to the USA in the early 19th century?

CHECK/ DISCUSS

- With a partner, have a look at the first 3 extracts from the Petworth Quarter sessions. What do you think they are?
- Try reading them and check what you have managed to read against the transcripts. Were any words particularly difficult to read?
- What 2 offences were George Welch and William Woods charged with in court at Petworth in Jan 1831?
- What do you notice about the surname of one of them and the name of the village where they lived?
- Name any person who owned a threshing machine?
- When did they destroy it?
- Read Source B to find out what punishments were given to George Welch and William Woods by the court?
- The 'Riots in Westbourne' article says George's punishment was harsher than that mentioned in Source B ? Can you work out why?
Clue: read the transcript of Source B and Source C carefully.
- What was the population of Westbourne in 1830?
- Give 3 reasons why life was hard for farm workers in 1830?

- What did a threshing machine do?
- Why did farm workers hate the threshing machines?
- Why did the farm workers riot?
- What was the Government's reaction to the riots?

INVESTIGATE

- Research Captain Swing and find out more about the 'Swing Riots'.
Why did they happen? Where? When?
What happened to the rioters?
If they were prosecuted what type of sentences were handed out?
- Create a glossary showing the meaning of words starting with
Emigration
Quarter sessions
Transportation
Threshing machine
- Find out how a threshing machine worked and how many people were put out of work by one machine.
- Compile a list of reasons why you think some farm labourers in the 1830s might want to emigrate to the USA either voluntarily or because they were given no other choice?
- Think about the economic situation today and discuss/list what reasons might make you think that emigration to another country might be a good idea. Are there any similarities in the reasons you have listed between the early 19th century and now?

DO

- After reading the Westbourne Riots article write a personal account of an attack on one of the farms. You could write it as one of the leaders of the gang detailing the events of the night OR you could write it as one of the farmers whose farm and machinery is being attacked. This could be a diary entry or a witness statement for use at the Petworth Quarter sessions.

- Write a newspaper article either reporting the riots in the Westbourne area OR reporting from the trial and sentencing of some of the labourers at the Petworth Quarter Sessions.
- Write or talk through with a partner the dialogue between a farmer standing by the gates to his property denying entry and the leader of the rioters.
- Act out one of the scenes from the Westbourne riots article.

RESOURCES

<https://schoolshistory.org.uk/topics/british-history/industrial-revolution/the-swing-riots/>

https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/familyhistory/bloodlines/workinglife.shtml?entry=swing_riots&theme=workinglife

<https://schoolshistory.org.uk/topics/british-history/industrial-revolution/the-swing-riots/>

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/z938v9q/revision/4#:~:text=Transportation%20was%20often%20a%20punishment,the%20Tolpuddle%20Martyrs%20were%20transported>

[Images of Agricultural Labourers and Farming in the early 19th Century at West Sussex Record Office](#)