

WEST SUSSEX ARCHIVES SOCIETY

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.

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