

CAPTAIN SWING

First of all, a little rhyme: needless to say it was anonymous because the author was no poet!

Oh Captain Swing, he'll come in the night
To set all your buildings and crops alight
And smash your machines with all his might
That dastardly Captain Swing!

Makes him sounds quite the swash buckler but, in fact, there was no actual Captain Swing, it wasn't a person, but a name given to several threatening letters sent to farmers and landlords during the rural Swing Riots of 1830. It is thought that the term Swing could have derived from several sources, it could represent the fact that the flail used in threshing was known as the swingel and, also of course, it could represent the gallows because punishment for rioting in those days could be very harsh. I for one had an ancestor sentenced to death for stealing a loaf of bread in Hertfordshire after the 1830 corn riots there.

More likely though, the leader of a team of workers was known as the captain and he would shout 'Swing' when it was time to start work with their scythes in the fields.

Although North Walsham did indeed suffer the Swing Riots they did not start there. They appear to have begun in Kent and the south east and in Norfolk itself they began in the north east of the county.

As ever there were several contributory factors. Men who had been away fighting in the Napoleonic wars had returned home in 1815, creating a glut of labourers just as farmers were beginning to introduce machinery to do the work. Also, itinerant Irish labourers were prepared to work for less money and this all at a time of a fall in agricultural prices. At the same time, farmers stopped the custom of allowing their workers to take left over crops after the corn harvest to help the workers and their families through the winter, thus causing even more poverty and hardship.

The Swing movement was a protest by farm labourers against the poor wages paid by the farmers and by the farmers themselves who in turn, claimed that

because of the poor harvest they were unable to afford the tithes demanded by the landlords.

On 19th November 1830 seventy men from neighbouring parishes marched into North Walsham where the justices were meeting and demanded that all threshing machines in the district be destroyed or laid aside. Having delivered this ultimatum, they retired to a beer-house for refreshment - the magistrates not thinking it advisable to interfere with them!

The first machine was broken that night in Paston and, from there machine breaking spread west to Briston, Holt, Melton Constable and Hindolveston followed by Walcot, North Walsham, Honing and Southrepps and thence on to Themelthorpe, Foulsham, Field Dalling, Cawston and Whitwell. The labourers armed themselves with sledge-hammers and bludgeons and set about their work not expecting any opposition, and in fact the farmers were generally submissive. One even told his men to take the machine to pieces and bury it if they thought it was the cause of distress!

Colonel John Wodehouse, chairman of the bench at North Walsham, together with other officials issued a public notice on 24th November 1830.

PUBLIC NOTICE

The Magistrates in the Hundreds of Tunstead and Happing, in the County of Norfolk, having taken into consideration the disturbed state of the said Hundreds and the County in general, wish to make it publicly known that it is their opinion that such disturbances principally arise from the use of Threshing Machines, and the insufficient Wages of the Labourers. The Magistrates therefore beg to recommend to the Owners and Occupiers of the Land in these Hundreds, to discontinue the use of Threshing Machines and to increase the Wages of Labour to Ten shillings a week for able bodied men, and that when task work is preferred, that it should be put out at such a rate as to enable an industrious man to earn Two shillings per day.

The Magistrates are determined to enforce the Laws against all tumultuous Rioters and Incendiaries, and they look for support to all the respectable and well disposed part of the Community; at the same time they feel a full Conviction, that no severe measures will be necessary, if the proprietors of land

will give proper employment to the Poor on their own Occupation, and encourage their Tenants to do the same.

SIGNED

**JOHN WODEHOUSE.
W.R.ROUSE.
J. PETRIE.
GEORGE CUBITT.
WILLIAM GUNN.
W.F.WILKINSON
BENJAMIN CUBITT.
H. ATKINSON.**

***North Walsham
24th November 1830***

Notice issued by Norfolk magistrates, November 1830

However, on 25th November threats were made to pull down the workhouse at Smallborough and the first 'wage and tithe riot' began at Edingthorpe just three miles from North Walsham. Labourers and farmers both - including some of the largest tithe payers - were involved. The rector of the parish Rev. Richard Adams later recalled 'a vast number of people went past my gateway, some halloing and laughing and making other noises'. Two days later the labourers returned 'and asked me for an advance of wages, and I said I would give them 2s. per day from Michaelmas to Lady and 1s 6d from Lady to Michaelmas - 1s 6d per coomb for threshing wheat, 1s for barley, and 9d for peas and oats, at which they were very well satisfied' (A coomb by the way was a measure of volume which in 13th century England was defined as 4 bushels and was in use in Norfolk as a dry measure)

The following morning the farmers asked the Rev. Adams for a reduction in tithes to which he replied that, if it were reasonable and right, and the neighbourhood would reduce their tithe, then he would do so too.

The first phase of rioting was over by 26th November and Colonel Wodehouse reported to the Prime Minister that tranquility had been restored and thirty prisoners had been taken, some by 'specials' armed with cutlasses; but, far from showing undue severity and lack of sympathy for the labourers, Norfolk justices displayed a degree of indulgence that was to bring them a severe reprimand from Prime Minister Lord Melbourne for issuing that public notice.

An anonymous letter to Lord Melbourne from Aylsham commented on the 'half hearted' efforts of farmers and magistrates to suppress the rioters. The 'liberal gentry' he wrote were 'inclined to stress the sufferings of the poor' and were therefore 'weak in putting down disturbance and tend to remain inactive'

