

# The East Anglian Agrarian Riots of 1822

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**Y**EARS like 1816, 1830-32, 1835-36 were exceptional only in the amount of violence that took place. No year in the first half of the nineteenth century was a quiet year in the east. Every year was violent, and the amount of violence that took place was very great indeed.<sup>1</sup> A J Peacock provides a necessary corrective to the sentimental picture of the agricultural labourer stoically enduring his lot until driven to the point of desperate revolt, but in emphasizing the general level of violence there is a danger that the particular features of agrarian riots, as opposed to other forms of rural protest, are obscured. Distinctions have to be made between the various forms of violence and care taken when attempting to correlate them.

Food riots, machine breaking and the protests over tithes, wages and the Poor Laws were all public activities; the participants believed they were acting in a just cause, and sometimes deliberately introduced an element of spectacle. One group of machine breakers in 1822 was accompanied by a small band, and when they found a machine near Attleborough removed it to the town centre before breaking it up. In a later incident a machine was loaded on to its carriage and then dragged triumphantly from Winfarthing to Shelfanger where it was sunk in 14 feet of water.<sup>2</sup>

Other types of social protest, such as arson, poaching, sheep stealing and cattle maiming, need to be looked at with circumspection. The great outburst of incendiarism

in 1843-45 when 250 fires were reported in Norfolk and Suffolk, had some of the features of a concerted campaign of intimidation, but an examination of those brought before the Suffolk assizes shows that personal revenge, exhibitionism and juvenile vandalism lay behind the fire raising as much as any desire for social justice. It should be noted that culprits in these categories were more likely to be caught, and that the fires provided a pretext for bringing in the village ne'er-do-wells. Convictions were often obtained on circumstantial evidence, and great exertions in extinguishing a blaze was looked on as highly suspicious.<sup>3</sup> The upsurge of incendiarism in the years of the major riots cannot be discounted, but the reservations over the motives of the arsonists have to be kept in mind. Poaching also presents problems as 'an index of growing poverty and social tension'.<sup>4</sup> The Game Laws were resented, and their maintenance by the squires and parsons on the magisterial bench must have furthered a sense of injustice, but the Laws also created the poachers' market, by prohibiting the sale of birds shot with proper authorization. Poaching was not simply a matter of finding meat for the pot, it was a business enterprise carried out by large armed gangs, ready to maim and murder to avoid capture and protect their catches.

There was a correlation between poacher and arsonist in 1843-45, but a connection between open protest and clandestine practices cannot be presumed, except in so far as

<sup>1</sup>A J Peacock, 'Village Radicalism in East Anglia', in J P Dunbabin (ed), *Rural Discontent in Nineteenth Century Britain*, 1975, p 39.

<sup>2</sup>*Norwich Mercury (NM)*, 9 March 1822; *Bury Gazette (BG)*, 25 September 1822.

<sup>3</sup>D Jones, *Crime, Protest, Community and Police in Nineteenth Century Britain*, 1982, p 46.

<sup>4</sup>E J Hobsbawm and G Rudé, *Captain Swing*, 1970, pp 359-60.

they are responses to poverty, unemployment and exploitation. The 1822 disturbances differed from those of 1816 and 1830 in being more concentrated geographically, and less diffuse in their objectives.

The 1816 risings had assumed three main forms; traditional food riots at Brandon, Downham Market, Littleport and Ely; machine breaking in Suffolk and Essex; and incendiarism to the south and east of Bury. There were also wages riots at Swaffham Bulbeck and Wattisham, attacks on overseers at Ramsay and Warboys and a number of riotous assemblies in the Norfolk Fens. At Bury the machine breakers' target was a spinning jenny and in Ipswich the trials of rioters were the catalyst for violent protests over the Corn Laws.<sup>5</sup>

## II

The Board of Agriculture's report on conditions in 1816 presented a sombre picture of the situation in East Anglia. Tenants were quitting their holdings in the face of high rents, mortgages and loans which could not be met as grain prices dropped.<sup>6</sup> Diversification and the intensive application of new techniques were eventually to enable producers to take advantage of urban expansion and industrial growth, but in the immediate post-war years only those with adequate capital could afford to take the long-term view. Most farmers thought in terms of rate and tax reductions, a moratorium on rents, increased protection against imports, and cutting of labour costs.

Moves towards retrenchment coincided with the return of men from the war and the rise in the labour force resulting from population increase. Witnesses to the Board drew attention to the plight of the labourers on parish relief and anticipated the troubles, but the actual locations of the riots did not

conform to a pattern of deprivation and seems to have owed more to established precedents. Norwich, Ipswich, Bury and Colchester had a long history of food riots, and close examination of the coincident troubles in the surrounding villages shows that the agricultural labourers were taking independent action.<sup>7</sup>

The most distinctive characteristic of the riots in Suffolk and Essex was the destruction of machinery, and threshing machines were the targets of incendiary attacks at Cockfield and Clare. Threshing machines had been in use since 1786, and as early as 1800 the *Norwich Mercury* was recommending their adoption as a means of preventing waste, reducing labour and checking fraud. Machines did not come into general use in East Anglia until after 1805, when a transportable model, worked by one or two horses, was developed and the smaller farmers could either invest in one or hire it. There were entrepreneurs who leased machines on a fairly large scale, and men who would spend a lifetime's savings on a single machine which they would rely on as a source of income when they were past being able to perform heavier work.<sup>8</sup>

The machines could be operated by women and children, and so saved on wages, but they were first brought into use to compensate for a labour shortage, and the direct financial advantage over hand threshing was slight. A letter to the *Norwich Mercury* questioned the continued use of the machines at a time of high unemployment, and claimed that 'corn may be thrashed as cheap by hand as by machine'. James Buck thought that 'the threshing machine ought not to be found in populous places amidst a numerous poor'.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Outwell, *Cambridge Chronicle* (CC), 31 August 1793; Home Office (HO), 42/35 25 July 1795; Halstead, *Cambridge Intelligencer* (CI), 15 August 1795; Ramsay, HO 42/35 25 July; Wisbech, HO 42/35 3 August; Stowmarket, *Bury Post* (BP), 25 July 1795; Melton, SRO HA 365/2 5 December 1792; Clare, *London Gazette*, 15 November 1800; Great Bardfield, *London Gazette*, 8 July 1800, HO 42/50, Swaffham Bulbeck, HO 42/51 24 September 1800.

<sup>8</sup>NM 18 October 1800; Hobsbawm & Rudé, *op cit*, pp 359-63; SC 27 April 1816; NM 10 August 1816; NC 20 July 1816.

<sup>9</sup>NM 15 June 1816; *Agricultural State of the Kingdom*, p 193.

<sup>5</sup>A J Peacock, *Bread or Blood*, 1965, pp 69-82. *Norfolk Chronicle* (NC), 18, 25 May 1816; NM 20 January, 3 August 1816; *Suffolk Chronicle* (SC), 27 April 1816; NM 4 March 1815. *Suffolk RO* (SRO), HA 247/5/48.

<sup>6</sup>G E Mingay (ed), *The Agricultural State of the Kingdom, 1816, 1970*, pp 190-2, 197, 301, 325.

Despite the doubts and the riots, machines were kept on, the farmers believing it was essential to put their grain on sale before the markets became satiated.

Small owners and occupiers on the heavy clay loams of the Norfolk-Suffolk border, especially those in the Waveney valley, were under particular pressure. The soil needed deep ploughing and good drainage if it was to produce competitive yields, and this meant capital investment. Landowners and farmers persisted with improvements, but when grain prices fell to their lowest level so far in 1821 even the most optimistic lost heart. Average prices can be misleading, for the price varied markedly according to quality and area. In November 1821 wheat was on sale at Woodbridge, Sudbury and Ipswich at between 51/- and 56/- a quarter, while at Stowmarket it ranged from 30/- to 60/-. These figures are of limited use, since there might well have been no buyers for the poorer quality grains.<sup>10</sup>

The labourers derived small benefit from falling grain prices, since whatever form of wage subsidy was adopted the supplement was tied to the price of bread. Scales of relief tended to be revised in accordance with the growing inability or unwillingness of the ratepayer to contribute. J H Rodwell and Robert Harvey, witnesses before the 1821 Select Committee on Agricultural Distress, both owned land on the Norfolk-Suffolk border. According to Harvey 'In four parishes in which I am concerned, take nine out of ten occupiers of land, they have very much reduced their number of labourers'. He preferred taking on extra men to paying higher rates, but he paid them only 1/9d a day, 3d less than the average for 1800-14. The custom of providing beer had been ended 'in conformity with the general practice of the neighbourhood'. Discharged farm workers were 'on the roads or found occasional employment as roundsmen. We have a description that some are dreadfully

distressed, men labouring for ninepence or a shilling a day'. Rodwell spoke of 'a great number of hands, in consequence of the times, thrown out of employment and maintained by the parish at a very small pittance indeed'. There were 480 in the local workhouse: ten years earlier there had been 200.<sup>11</sup>

### III

Overt protests after 1816 were few, but there was a fierce gleaning dispute in 1820 between the poor of Hoxne and Eye hundreds, both areas much involved in the 1822 troubles, and in Loddon there was a riot directed against the overseers and churchwardens. This happened soon after the introduction of new scales of relief for men working on the roads, which gave married men with three children 1/4d a day and single men 10d.<sup>12</sup>

The total crime figures were rising steeply: committals for Suffolk rose by 73.3 per cent in the five years 1815-20, and the increase for Norfolk was 106.5 per cent over the same period. The Norfolk magistrates were considering the organization of 'an establishment that will give vigour and effect to the exertions of the magistrates in preventing robberies, burglaries, larcenies, poaching, and felonies of various description'.<sup>13</sup> The visiting justices at Wymondham, Swaffham and Aylsham bridewells recommended the early installation of tread-wheels to deter crime. The Swaffham magistrates lamented the delays that had already occurred,

as they are every day more convinced of the evils arising from the want of employment. The prison is no longer a place of terror, and in consequence of it (and owing greatly to this cause as the visitors think,) the number is every year increasing: there are now no fewer than eighty three prisoners, notwithstanding the operation of the last Vagrant Act very few vagrants are among the number.

Prisoners were packed three and four to a cell, and there was no way they could be

<sup>10</sup> BG 14 November, 19 December 1821.

<sup>11</sup> *Report of the Select Committee on Agricultural Distress, 1821*, pp 33-42, 82-7.

<sup>12</sup> NM 3 September 1820; NM 3 February 1821; NC 3 March 1821.

<sup>13</sup> *Report of the Select Committee on Criminal Committals, 1827*, p 62; BG 19 December 1822.

classified according to Home Office recommendations.<sup>14</sup>

In February 1822 it was asserted in the Commons that Bury gaol housed 200 prisoners, 'and of these sixty were confined for poaching, and it was a fact that some committed the offence in open day for the purpose of being sent to prison'. John Orridge, the governor, disputed this, but by his own account there were 151 prisoners and 41 convicted under the Game Laws. There were 78 committals for poaching in 1822, and the case would seem to be made for using these offences as a guide to social discontent.<sup>15</sup>

A difficulty is that there is no correlation between the villages where poachers were active and the villages involved in the 1822 riots. Costessy had a notorious gang of poachers, housebreakers and poultry thieves, it was within the main Norfolk riot area, but played no part in the troubles.<sup>16</sup> The poachers would naturally be most active on the larger estates where the owners could afford to preserve the woodland and pay the wages of keepers, and much of the land in south-west Norfolk was owned by small farmers. Nevertheless, some poaching incidents suggest a growing sense of bitterness in the countryside. A spring gun was fixed to fire across the drive at Costessy Park, and guns were fired in the vicinity to try and lure the keepers to the spot. At Culford, on the estate of Lord Cornwallis, one keeper was shot and five beaten with flails in an affray with 16 poachers. William Bilson of Great Saxham owed his life to a flash in the pan, and later in the year there were shooting episodes involving poachers at Cavenham and Mildenhall. It may be significant that in February 1823 three men from Kenninghall and three from East Harling, both riotous villages, were responsible for breaking the

arms of two keepers, the jaw of another, and both thighs of a fourth in a fight at Shropham. A month later a servant of Mr Smith of Frenze Hall, Thelverton, was badly beaten by poachers; Frenze lies a mile from Diss. Open protest had failed, and it is possible that poaching was seen as an alternative. Whether rioters were penalized by their employers cannot be known, but two of the Foxhall rioters were later arrested for poultry and pig stealing, and James Gayfor, acquitted of sending a threatening letter, was taken in for possession of stolen pigs.<sup>17</sup>

John Orridge attributed the record number of committals for poaching in 1822 to 'the want of employment and the inadequacy of the price of labour'.<sup>18</sup> This verdict was seconded by Joseph Crannis, committed twice to Bury gaol. Left alone in the reception room for half an hour, he had time to draw three pheasants on the wall and to write a poem.

I am a carpenter by trade, I never was incroaching,  
I had no work no money, which made me go a  
poaching.  
Three hen pheasants I had got, and homeward I was  
making,  
Two fellows stop'd me in the road, so poor Joe was  
taken,  
Then to the Justice they did bring me, with him I could  
not prevail,  
For my mittimus he did sign, and sent me off to gaol.  
The pheasants I should have caught, I have now left for  
store,  
And this summer if they have luck, they'll breed plenty  
more,  
And as soon as ever the next season do come in,  
If I am alive and not confined I shall be ready to begin,  
And if that I am taken again the money I will pay,  
For I shall never stand for money, while pheasants look  
so gay.<sup>19</sup>

Crannis defies categorization as down-trodden labourer, rural criminal or social protester.

<sup>14</sup>Norfolk Archives Office (NAO) C 54/3 Quarter Sessions Minute Book, January 1820–December 1823, pp 125–33.

<sup>15</sup>BP 27 February 1822; *Select Committee on Criminal Committals*, 1827, p 41.

<sup>16</sup>NM 5 January 1822.

<sup>17</sup>NC 19 January 1822; NM 2 February 1822; SROI, HA 24/50/19/44 (2).

<sup>18</sup>*Select Committee on Criminal Committals*, 1827, p 41.

<sup>19</sup>BG 3 April 1822.

## IV

The last months of 1821 and the opening of the new year was a period of great hardship for the labourers. The harvest had been interrupted by heavy rains, and had not provided a period of continuous employment for whole families. They relied on this to bring in the income needed for rents, new boots and other clothing, and items such as tea, tobacco, coals, candles and soap. Wheat was spoilt by the wet, but the farmers brought it to market 'regardless of condition'. Threshing machines were blamed for causing a glut, as well as denying work to the labourers. Prospects of alternative employment were curtailed by a prolonged period of rain and gales in November and December, the sodden state of the ground preventing sowing or 'fallowing the land at the proper season'.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the obvious distress, the high crime rate and the precedents of 1816, there was no anticipation of a second rising. Incendiary fires were reported at Buxhall, Great Finningham, Ipswich and Nettlestead in January, but these were too dispersed to amount to a campaign.<sup>21</sup>

Twenty machines were demolished in Norfolk on 4 and 5 March but the precise location of every incident is not recorded. Those that can be identified were: Wymondham (2) Attleborough (2) Shropham (3 threshers, 1 drill) Snetterton (2) Blo Norton (thresher and drill) New Buckenham, Hapton, Winfarthing and Morley St Botolph. The total of 52 machines broken in Norfolk and Suffolk compares with a total of 30 given for the two counties during the Swing riots (Hobsbawm and Rudé, *Captain Swing*, p 305).

The first machine breaking incidents occurred in Norfolk and Suffolk on 13 and 16 February to the north and Diss and around Eye. At first the labourers were content simply to stop the threshing machines from

TABLE I  
Machine Breaking Incidents, 1822

| Date           | Location  |
|----------------|---|
| 13/14 February | Burston, Gissing, Shimpling (N)   |
| 16 February    | Eye   |
| 18 February    | Eye (seed drill), Winfarthing   |
| 19 February    | Eye. Occold (2), Tivetshall   |
| 28 February    | Winfarthing, Threshing machine and dressing machine   |
| 4/5 March      | Winfarthing, Attleborough, Shropham, Snetterton, Old Buckenham, Wymondham, Morley St Botolph, New Buckenham, Hapton, Blo Norton |
| 4 March        | Cratfield   |
| 5 March        | Laxfield (5)  |
| 5-15 March     | Southolt  |
| 21 March       | Bungay  |
| 3 April        | Woodton, Ditchingham, Poringland  |
| 14-17 April    | Wrentham, Henstead, chaffcutter   |
| 1 July         | Burgate   |
| 5 July         | Bedingfield   |
| 17 August      | Weeley (Essex)  |
| 11 September   | Foxhall   |
| 13 September   | Norton  |
| 18 September   | Attleborough  |
| 19 September   | Winfarthing   |
| 21 December    | Mendham   |

being used, but once it became apparent the farmers were not going to desist voluntarily, the action became more militant. At the second Winfarthing riot the protesters broke through a cordon of constables and farmers, and seizing Richard Dogget's machine.

They proceeded to demolish the obnoxious engine. A desperate attack commenced with bludgeons and all kinds of weapons. One gentleman was felled from his horse, and several more who were well mounted were compelled to retreat in all directions amidst a heavy discharge of stones and other missiles.<sup>22</sup>

Magistrates enrolled special constables and enlisted the aid of the local gentry to help bring in suspects. When a body of rioters was brought into Diss there was a major

<sup>20</sup> BG 3 October 1821; *Ipswich Journal (IJ)*, 8 December 1821, 15 January 1822; NM 5, 26 January 1822.

<sup>21</sup> SC 5, 19 January 1822; *IJ* 5 January 1822; NM 5 January 1822.

<sup>22</sup> BP 27 February 1822; NM 9 March 1822; BP 13 March 1822.

disturbance in the town itself. Fearing further unrest the justices applied to the Home Office for a directive to be sent to the Secretary at War requiring him to order some regular troops into the area. Thirty men of the 16th Dragoons arrived on 8 March, three days after the worst of the riots.<sup>23</sup>

These began on 2 March, and it was reckoned that 20 threshing machines were broken, dismantled, or stopped from operating in Guilt Cross and Diss hundreds.<sup>24</sup>

The Suffolk and Norfolk yeomanry were called out, and though there had been concern over 'procuring proper persons to act' against the rioters, John Surtees of Banham managed to recruit 250 mounted special constables.<sup>25</sup> In Suffolk a second outbreak at Laxfield was rapidly brought under control by 'the firm and conciliatory measures adopted by the inhabitants . . . Several landlords have written to their tenants requesting them to decline the use of threshing machines on their respective lands.'<sup>26</sup> A willingness to adopt this stratagem might have terminated the riots throughout the border region, but the authorities were alarmed and tended to think more in terms of repression than concession. Colonel Ray, commander of the Eye yeomanry, described the disturbed area as fast approaching the state of our Irish neighbours, and indeed, if an immediate check is not put to the proceedings of the evil disposed in this district, I fear the contagion will spread and become a most formidable evil. Threatening letters are circulated among us most liberally, and the firebrand, the most formidable of weapons, is the portion of those who persist in the use of threshing machines or anyway are obnoxious to the party.<sup>27</sup>

By the time Ray reached Diss the area was quieter, but on the afternoon of 5 March 'we were gratified by the arrival of an express

announcing positive information that a mob of 600 strong were at that time on their march to Buckenham Green'. The 600 turned out to be nearer 60, a 'motley crew' who could have been dispersed by a 'sergeant's guard'. Faced with drawn swords and loaded firearms, the rioters tried to escape into the fields, but twenty were arrested and six committed to Norwich Castle.<sup>28</sup>

When the prisoners came into Norwich a crowd pelted their escort with stones, and were not impressed by the threat of shooting. The Norwich textile workers had reason to sympathize with any protest against mechanization and there were wage riots in the city in the summer. The *Norwich Mercury* dismissed the rioters as 'loose disorderly boys' but the anxiety expressed by Mayor Racham and the other magistrates suggests the situation was more serious.<sup>29</sup>

A riotous disposition has within a few days manifested itself amongst the peasantry in various towns in Norfolk in this neighbourhood, and still exists in the alleged purpose of destroying threshing machines, and this disposition has produced a feverish temper in the lower classes of the inhabitants of this city.<sup>30</sup>

There were further riots after the trials when the men convicted of machine breaking were moved off to the bridewells at Swaffham, Wymondham, Walsingham and Aylsham. It had been feared an attempt would be made to rescue the rioters before the trials, and the magistrates formed a special committee for the duration of the emergency. The West Norfolk Militia were mobilized and the Norwich Light Horse Yeomanry stationed in the local barracks.<sup>31</sup>

No rescue bid materialized, and although there were rumours of further gatherings by the labourers it was felt safe to stand down the yeomanry during the second week of March.<sup>32</sup> There were numerous incendiary attacks in February and March, and some of

<sup>23</sup> NM 9 March 1822; HO 40/17/133a; HO 40/17/3a; HO 41/6 3, 4, 7 March 1822.

<sup>24</sup> NM 9 March 1822; HO 40/17/31 7 March 1822.

<sup>25</sup> SRO HA 247/5/85; HO 40/17/3a.

<sup>26</sup> SC 16 March 1822.

<sup>27</sup> SRO HA 247/5/85.

<sup>28</sup> SRO HA 247/5/87; NM 9 March 1822.

<sup>29</sup> *Annual Register*, 1822, pp 122-3; IJ 9 March 1822; BP 13 March 1822.

<sup>30</sup> HO 40/17/10.

<sup>31</sup> BG 20 March 1822; HO 41/6 7 March 1822; NAO C 54/3 p 136.

<sup>32</sup> IJ 9 March 1822.

the villages in the main riot areas were affected, including Diss, Attleborough, Botesdale, East Harling and Eye. The main concentration of fires lay to the west of Eye, in villages where there were no reports of machine breaking.<sup>33</sup>

The Loddon yeomanry had to be called out on 21 March when parties of labourers assembled at Broome and Ditchingham. A threshing machine was broken in Bungay the same week, but there were no serious outbreaks until 3 April. On that day machines were broken at Ditchingham and Woodton; 20 men were arrested and brought to Bungay, and in anticipation of further disturbances, the magistrates swore in special constables and sent to Norwich for military assistance. These precautions were not totally effective, for the troops were mobbed outside the Three Tuns and the Riot Act had to be read before the crowd would disperse.<sup>34</sup>

The incidents recorded in the remainder of April seem to have been minor affairs, the work of individuals or small groups. The July cases, however, were full-scale riots; there were no arrests following the outbreak at Burgate, and it needed a full turn out of magistrates, constables and volunteer farmers to check the riot at Bedingfield.<sup>35</sup> Sizeable groups were also involved in the September riots. When a posse of dragoons, constables and magistrates went to Winfarthing to arrest the machine breakers, 'a tumultuous mob . . . behaved with brutal violence, and evinced a spirit of daring insubordination'. The Woodbridge yeomanry had to be brought in to deal with the Foxhall rioters, after the constables had been beaten off, and even then the arrests were made in a dawn raid to avoid popular opposition.<sup>36</sup> In Loddon hundred, 50 to 60 labourers

visited most of the farms at Norton, Hadiscoc, Aldeby, Thurlton Crofts, Raveningham, Hales Green etc. in Norfolk, for the purpose of ascertaining whether any machines were at work. They however did not offer any violence to the farmers where they called, but contented themselves with impressing all the farming hands as they proceeded on their visits.<sup>37</sup>

The final episode in the 1822 disturbances was at Mendham on the Waveney, midway between Diss and Bungay. George Rant had his threshing machine 'dismembered' before a posse of peace officers arrived and took 6 supposed ringleaders into custody.<sup>38</sup>

## V

Before the riots the East Anglian press had published letters critical of machinery and had expressed concern for the plight of the agricultural labourers. Once the troubles started the tone of the reports became more hostile. Thrashing machines were 'far from superseding the use of manual labour . . . more instead of fewer hands have been employed where they have been resorted to'. 'Some of the individuals who were apprehended in Norfolk were single men, and constantly earning from 10/- to 12/- a week, wages which at the present moment cannot justify a murmur of complaint.' Machine breaking and arson were 'not unaccompanied by other indications of the most savage ferocity'. Labourers had been stirred up by 'the artful and malignant representatives of political incendiaries'. The *Bury Gazette* quoted with approval an article from the *Sun* suggesting the risings were a conspiracy designed to divert troops from Ireland. All the papers carried the *Norwich Mercury* account of parties of up to 500 labourers marching through the countryside in search of threshing machines and having 'a regular system of organisation between the various villages'.<sup>39</sup> Ray mentioned that reports on the size of the mobs were 'much

<sup>33</sup> BG, NM, SC February-April 1822.

<sup>34</sup> BG 27 March, 10 April 1822; BP 10, 17 April 1822; NAO C 51/21. For later troubles in the Bungay area, see SRO HA 247/5/91.

<sup>35</sup> IJ 14 April 1822; BG 24 April 1822; BP 10, 17 April 1822; SRO HA 24/50/19/44(2); BG 17 July 1822.

<sup>36</sup> BG 25 September; IJ 14, 21 September 1822; SRO HA 247/5/101.

<sup>37</sup> IJ 21 September 1822.

<sup>38</sup> IJ 4 January 1823; SRO HA 24/50/19/44(2).

<sup>39</sup> SC 2 March 1822; BG 6 March, 10 April 1822; IJ 9 March 1822; NM 9 March 1822.

exaggerated', and where actual cases were recorded the parties were estimated at between 30 and 60.

The first trials of the rioters were conducted against this background of alarm and indignation. Opening the Norfolk quarter sessions, the chairman reminded the jury of the threat that violent protest posed to agricultural investment, and argued that if machines were harmful to the labourers they must also be harmful to the farmers. 'The wages and comforts of the poor were dependent on a peaceable and sober disposition.'<sup>40</sup>

Thirty-three men were held on charges of rioting and machine breaking, but 6 were sent to the assizes at Thetford: 2 on arson charges, 1 as an evidence against them, and 3 who had been involved in the same machine breaking incident at Winfarthing. Of those tried at the sessions 2 were acquitted, 5 bound over, and the remainder given gaol sentences from 1 week to 1 year, though most of the sentences were for 2, 3 or 6 months. Robert Chatton, identified as the leader of the Shimpling riot, was fined £5, gaoled for a year, and bound over for 2 years on sureties of £200. 'He appeared to be a man who is prosperous in life.' James Sparham, the prosecutor in the Shimpling case, gave the other men good characters, but James Goddard was imprisoned for 12 months for assaulting a magistrate, and James Crick was also awarded 1 year in Norwich Castle. James Caley escaped with a month in Aylsham bridewell: 'He has shown much contrition for his offence and expressed his full contrition of his error by having been employed for the purpose of working a machine since the riot.'<sup>41</sup>

Dixon, Ellsey and Coleman, the Winfarthing rioters tried at Thetford, were all given 1 year, and William Baker received 18 months. He had avoided trial for arson by

turning King's evidence, but he was believed to have been the instigator of the Winfarthing troubles.<sup>42</sup> In his address to the grand jury Baron Richards reminded them of the Pentridge rising, where he had conducted the trial of Jeremy Brandreth. Considering that precedent, the Norfolk rioters were lightly punished, but the two accused of arson were sentenced to death.

Noah Peak and George Fortis had set fire to the property of John Kent, farmer and Poor Law official at Diss. They were both 'principally employed in the roads by the surveyor of Bressingham'. Their motive was that Kent had been 'so hard hearted as to reduce the allowance of the poor'. Peak and Fortis were the only capital convicts at Thetford refused a commutation of sentence.<sup>43</sup> Peak was 40, and left a wife and 6 young children. Fortis was 29, married with 4 children. They had both seen military service; Peak with the West Suffolk Militia and the King's Own Regiment of Foot, fighting at the battles of Busaco, Albuero and Waterloo, Fortis with the Royal Staff Corps and also at Waterloo.<sup>44</sup>

There was little consistency in the punishments meted out for machine breaking. Three Laxfield men, initially gaoled for 3 months for malicious trespass, were then brought before Sergeant Firth at Bury assize charged with riotous assembly. John Wink received 2 years, William Riches 18 months and William Forman, 1 year. The heavier sentence for Wink was justified by his being a carpenter, without the same excuse for machine breaking as the farm labourers. The most rigorous sentences imposed by the justices fell on the Woodton and Kirstead rioters. Three men were gaoled for 2 years, 3 for 1 year and the rest for 6 months at Swaffham and Wymondham bridewells. At the summer assizes Cornelius Goose was gaoled for 2 years and James Reeve for 1 year

<sup>40</sup> NM 9 March 1822.

<sup>41</sup> NAO C 51/21 pp 107-11; NM 9, 16, 23 March 1822. The warrant for Chatton's arrest described him as a labourer: SRO HD 79/AF4/3/1.

<sup>42</sup> HO 40/17/4; NM 9 March 1822; BP 10 April 1822.

<sup>43</sup> NM 6 April 1822.

<sup>44</sup> NM 20 April 1822.



for having bribed John Rushmer to break the machine at Woodton. Goose was himself a farmer, and Reeve kept the Bird in Hand as Tasburgh; they had approached Rushmer and some others of the rioters when they were working on the road.<sup>45</sup> Three of those who took part in the September riot at Winfarthing were gaoled for 1 year, 2 for 6 months and 2 for 1 month. By contrast the Foxhall disturbance led to 11 men appearing in court, but only 6 were found guilty and the penalty was a shilling fine and 1 month in gaol.<sup>46</sup>

The Suffolk magistrates were more lenient than their Norfolk counterparts and the justices tended to be less severe than the judges, but an important factor was the precise times at which the different riots took place. If the attacks occurred during a time of general unrest, as in February, March and April 1822, there was a far greater chance of heavier penalties being incurred. The same pattern was apparent in 1815-16. Nine men were given 1 month for breaking 2 threshing machines at Gosbeck in 1815, but once the disturbances became widespread the sentences were increased so that those thought to be the ringleaders were quite likely to be sent away for 18 months or 2 years.<sup>47</sup>

Trials and punishments served 2 purposes, judicial and political, and if a particular offence could be interpreted as part of a wider conspiracy, or as indicative of a spirit of insurrection then examples had to be made. The saddest contrast in 1816 was between the executions at Ely and the Brandon rioters discharged with an admonition at the later Norfolk assizes. There was no great difference in the nature of their offences.<sup>48</sup>

There was no repetition of this in 1822, but the Norwich quarter sessions in January 1831 provided a graphic illustration of the thinking behind the imposition of sentences. One man was transported for 14 years and 7 for 7

years, but otherwise the sentences were mostly between 1 and 9 months. Once the troubles were over the magistrates could return to considering individual cases. In March 1831 John Platten was gaoled for a month for his part in breaking 2 machines, and a month later Robert Randle and John Whittaker were given a fortnight for a similar offence. There is nothing to indicate that he was any less culpable than George Cawson, sent to Australia for 14 years.<sup>49</sup>

In Suffolk there was only the one instance of machine breaking in 1830, but again, one man was transported for 14 years and 7 for 7 years.<sup>50</sup> The identity of punishment in both counties was unlikely to have been coincidental.

## VI

One hundred and twenty-three men appeared before the courts in connection with the agrarian disturbances of 1822. The *Bury Gazette* suggested that 'great spouting radicals' had fomented discontent, but of all those whose occupations were given only 5 were designated as other than labourers; a yeoman, a farmer, an innkeeper, a carpenter and, almost predictably, a shoemaker. The rioters were usually active in their own villages and no evidence was produced of any general conspiracy or 'organized system'. The 1816 and 1830 risings took a variety of forms, but in 1822 the labourers were singleminded in their determination to put a stop to machinery. There was no report of the extortions which were such a feature of earlier riots and only one incident of theft was recorded concurrent with the riots.<sup>51</sup>

Very few incendiaries were brought to trial in 1822, but even in the trials that were held the threshing machine question cropped up. At the trials of Charles Stokes and the Jeffries brothers for incendiarism at Eye, a witness claimed that 'William Jeffries

<sup>45</sup> BG 13 March, 10 April 1822; BP 3, 10 April 1822; NAO C 51/21 pp 117-20; BP 17 April 1822; NM 31 July 1822.

<sup>46</sup> BG 25 October 1822; NM 26 December 1822.

<sup>47</sup> NM 8 April 1815, 20 January, 3, 10 August 1816.

<sup>48</sup> *Bread or Blood*, pp 81-2.

<sup>49</sup> NC 8, 13 January, 5 March, 5, 9 April 1831.

<sup>50</sup> John Mead, *Social Protest in Rural Suffolk*, unpubl thesis, Univ Essex, 1978.

<sup>51</sup> BG 13 March 1822.

observed that Mr. Cobbold had got a new threshing machine, and if all would agree like him, it should be broken; also said he should like to have revenge on Mr. Cobbold, and on witness asking him what sort of revenge he should like to have, he answered "set his premises on fire".<sup>52</sup> Ray believed the users of machinery were the particular targets of fires, but there were other motives. Peak admitted to attempted intimidation of farmers and Poor Law officials; a fire at Thrandeston was thought to be the direct result of the occupier's giving evidence in the Cobbold case, and another farmer suffered a fire while he was away at court giving evidence in an arson case. William Peters was the automatic suspect for a fire at Stonham Aspell because he had been told there would be no more work for him once the threshing was finished. William Aldous was thought to have a grievance against his master, but he seems to have been simple-minded and was convicted on the strength of one of his statements in which he confessed to starting a fire. He was the only Suffolk man accused of arson who was convicted, and the judge refused to support the jury's recommendation for mercy. Aldous was seventeen.<sup>53</sup>

A spate of fires in the Ipswich area may have been more organized. A broadsheet scattered in the streets called on the people to 'Prepare for the grand mutiny on the Corn Hill. . . and render your assistance round the town to burn the courts, Mr Cobbold's, Mr Edgars, Mr Roe's and Mr Steward's premises down, our party is now five hundred and fifty strong'. Seekamp, the mayor of Ipswich, dismissed the broadsheet as a hoax, but Roe and Cobbold did suffer fires and he had to admit there was a 'spirit of discontent' brought about by 'the almost total want of employment'.<sup>54</sup>

The feelings of the labourers about arson are difficult to determine. If questioned

directly they would express abhorrence, but the lack of prosecutions, and the failure to secure convictions indicates a great unwillingness to assist the authorities in bringing the culprits to justice. On occasions the crowds of onlookers would impede the fire fighters and at Little Thornham the labourers were reported as saying 'They would be glad if half the town or country were burned, as there would be plenty of work'. A meeting at Hoo was supposed to have passed a resolution to the effect that all farmers who persisted in the use of threshing machines should be burnt, along with their property.<sup>55</sup> The press was careful to mention when villagers helped to deal with fires, almost as if this was something unusual and deserving commendation.

Agrarian incendiarism should not be equated with the more overt forms of protest such as food riots and machine breaking. Spite, revenge and pyromania motivated some of the fires at least; but the correspondence of an increasing number of fires with other signs of discontent cannot be explained by personal malice or mental aberration, and the cases brought before the courts were too few to allow for reasonable generalizations about the incendiaries.

## VII

Contemporary commentators noted the specific nature of the riots: threshing machines were 'the only object' and 'the peculiar object of their vengeance'.<sup>56</sup> This concentration on machinery as the source of provocation diverted attention away from deeper roots of social malaise in the East Anglian countryside. Following the troubles owners and occupiers in Laxfield, Wingfield, Hitcham, Blythburgh, Yoxford, Metfield, and Marlesford agreed to suspend the use of threshing machines for a year.<sup>57</sup> The virtual absence of machine breaking in Suffolk in 1830 suggests that landlords

<sup>52</sup> BG 31 July 1822.

<sup>53</sup> BG 10 April, 13 November 1822; HO 40/17/114.

<sup>54</sup> HO 40/17/114; HO 40/17/117; HO 40/17/17a; HO 52/3/42; HO 52/3/77.

<sup>55</sup> BG 6 March 1822; SC 16 March 1822.

<sup>56</sup> NM 9 March 1822; HO 40/17/4; SRO HA 247/5/85.

<sup>57</sup> IJ 14, 21 September 1822; BG 4 September 1822.

continued to discourage their use, but this did not save Suffolk from 'Swing'.

No such self-denying ordinances were reported in Norfolk, and machines were employed in Diss hundred throughout the riots. John Wright, a resident justice in south-west Norfolk, drew the attention of Peel to the fact that 'There is not a single resident gentleman . . . and it is a heavy enclosed country in the hands generally of small proprietors and occupiers, and of course the common people much neglected'.<sup>58</sup>

Thirty-seven villages in the disturbed region of Norfolk had been affected by enclosure since 1800, including Bunwell, the Tivetshalls, Attleborough, Ditchingham, Wymondham, and Diss, but it does not follow that enclosure was a significant issue in the riots. East Anglian agricultural workers did protest against enclosure, but there was only one recorded incident in the area disturbed by machine breaking in 1822.<sup>59</sup> When enclosure protests were made, they took place in the early stages, when the land was being surveyed, or notices were posted on the church door, not after a lapse of years.

In Suffolk there had been enclosure acts for Rickingham, Walsham-le-Willows, Eye and Stradbroke, all since 1811, but there was again no correlation between enclosure and rioting. Mead found when looking at enclosure awards in Suffolk from 1816 in connection with 'Swing' that, 'no correlation exists between recent enclosure and the incidence of either riots or the complete spectrum of disturbance'.<sup>60</sup>

The absence of major landlords might account for the continued use of threshing machines in Diss and Guilt Cross hundreds, but there is no evidence to support Wright's inference that the presence of the gentry could have stopped the riots from ever occurring. When they had monopolized the

commissions of the peace they made no effort to regulate wages, despite the decline in their real value from 1770 to 1795. It was the gentry who pressed for the establishment of workhouses in Suffolk and Norfolk in the 1760s, advancing as one reason for the new system their being spared association with the lower orders at meetings of the parish vestry.<sup>61</sup>

There was no marked distinction between 'closed' and 'open' villages in the distribution of the riots; Ditchingham, Woodton, Kirstead, Bunwell and Wymondham were described as having 'many owners', but Shimpling was controlled by the Duke of Grafton, and the lords of the manor at the Tivetshalls, Winfarthing and Mendham, Bressingham and Shelfanger, were the Earls of Orford and Albemarle and the Duke of Norfolk.<sup>62</sup>

Arthur Young used the villages of Snetterton, Attleborough and Hingham to provide examples of the inadequate housing provided for farm workers, and the 1821 census supports his choice of south-west Norfolk as the worst part of the county in respect to accommodation. Diss had the worst overcrowding of any hundred in the county, with an average of 1.45 families to every house, as opposed to a county average of 1.22. Over the border, in Hoxne and Hartismere hundreds, the situation was slightly worse; these were the most riot-prone hundreds in Suffolk. Though the population increase in the 'open' villages was significantly higher, as much as 52.9 per cent in ten years at Mendham, they were no more overcrowded than the smaller 'closed' settlements; at Gissing the number of families to a house rose from 1 to 1.64 between 1811 and 1821.<sup>63</sup>

Promising as the connection seems between overcrowding and an inclination to riot, there are qualifications. Winfarthing, such an active centre, was the least

<sup>58</sup> HO 40/17/3.

<sup>59</sup> NM 4 March, 1 April 1822; R Hindry Mason, *History of Norfolk*, 1885, pp 619-21.

<sup>60</sup> W E Tate, *A Handlist of Suffolk Enclosure Acts and Awards*, 1952, pp 247-63.

<sup>61</sup> Paul Muskett, 'A Picturesque Little Rebellion? The Suffolk Workhouses in 1765', *Bull Soc for Study of Labour History*, 41, p 28.

<sup>62</sup> *White's Directory of Norfolk*, 1845, pp 414, 700, 720-6, 893.

<sup>63</sup> N Riches, *The Agricultural Revolution in Norfolk*, 2nd edn, 1967, pp 143-6; *Census*, 1811, 1821.

overcrowded village in Diss hundred, while Roydon, the worst-off in terms of accommodation, played no part in the disturbances. What can be legitimately argued is that the presence or absence of the gentry made little difference.

Wright also stressed the number of 'inferior meeting houses' in his area, 'the pulpits of which are filled by those illiterate preachers whose doctrines are of the most dangerous tendency, being all predestinarians'.<sup>64</sup> Methodists and Particular Baptists had made inroads in East Anglia, but there is no evidence to link them to the 1822 protests. Rural anti-clericalism, especially in the light of the tithe riots of 1830, is a more hopeful field of enquiry. Eric Evans calls this period 'the age of the clerical magistrate' and draws attention to the conflict between their magisterial and pastoral roles.

By dispensing such justice as was embodied in the harsh game laws of 1800, 1803 and 1816, the squarsons were cutting themselves off from the interests of the poor, just as their new rectories symbolised the social gulf between them.<sup>65</sup>

Squarsons were certainly active in 1822. Surtees, who had enrolled 250 special constables, was rector of Banham; the 6 magistrates who met at Framlingham to deal with the Laxfield riots were all clergymen; the justice who committed the Wrentham machine breakers was the Reverend Sheriffe. Clergymen were the targets of threatening letters and incendiarism. Betham of Stonham Aspal suffered two fires, William Kirby received a threatening letter and the Reverend Hill had a fire on his property. Given the small number of arson cases brought to trial, clergymen figure very prominently as victims, but in every case they were the owners, not the occupiers, of the property burnt or threatened.<sup>66</sup> As a

substantial landowning group the clergy were bound to suffer in periods of agrarian unrest, but it was not until 1830 that they can clearly be identified as the object of protest on account of their clerical office.

## VIII

Newspaper reports which described the pursuit of rioters in the language of the hunt, and references to the protesting labourers as 'the Enemy' indicate a breakdown of social relationships in the East Anglian countryside, but the same terminology was used during the earlier food riots, and while it is apparent that the social divisions in 1816 and 1822 were wide, comparisons with the outbreaks of 1740, 1765-66 and 1772 do not indicate a significant deterioration.

The difference was that in the later period those in authority were more concerned to explain what was happening, and to try and find some kind of remedy. In the process they exposed the limitations of their imagination. Poverty was recognized as a major contributory factor towards unrest, but it was seen as the inevitable result of the working of economic laws. The failure of magistrates to regulate prices, or to lay down minimum wages, or to ban the more humiliating features of parish relief, were never considered. The fact that some of the rioters were not personally in desperate want was not seen as evidence of a disinterested sense of social justice, but as a manifestation of peculiar wickedness. When it came to providing a solution to the rising crime rate, faith was placed in the efficacy of the tread-wheel, 'the only thing as to the expenditure of the county of which farmers have not complained'.<sup>67</sup> It is a sad irony that in 1828 a treadmill was set up at Stradbroke for thrashing corn, and the occupiers of land agreed to use this, or hand threshing, so as to keep the labourers in employ.<sup>68</sup>

To explain why some villages rioted while other similar communities in the same

<sup>64</sup>HO 40/17/31.

<sup>65</sup>E Evans, 'Some Reasons for the Growth of English Rural Anti-Clericalism, c.1750-c.1850', *Past and Present*, LXVI, 1975, pp 101-3.

<sup>66</sup>SRO HA 24/50/19/44(2); BG 13 March 1822.

<sup>67</sup>Select Committee on Criminal Committals, 1827, p 43.

<sup>68</sup>E Purcehouse, *Waveney Valley Studies*, undated, p 237.

hundred remained quiet, would require access to information on individual characters and the network of social relations within the villages. There were areas which had a riotous tradition, like the Suffolk-Essex border, and around Woodbridge, and it is remarkable how often the same village would be involved in riots at different times. Old Buckenham was the centre for militant protest in 1800, 1822 and 1830, when people from there joined in the riots at Attleburgh. Diss had had bread riots in 1795, but in 1830 while the hundred was very disturbed, the town itself was riot free. Laxfield featured prominently in 1822, and the church bells were rung to celebrate the death of Castle-reagh, yet there is no mention of this 'parish

notorious for political peddling' in previous riots or in 1830, again showing the need for detailed knowledge of particular communities at particular times if a predisposition to riot is to be identified.<sup>69</sup>

Perhaps the summary of the 1822 troubles should be left to Henry Howard, a Mendham labourer, and the only rioter who had his views recorded:

a hardened old fellow, who behaved with great insolence to the magistrate and prosecutor, declaring that he had done nothing but what was proper and justifiable, and that the general sense of the country was in favour of putting a final stop to machinery of every kind.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>69</sup> *BP* 21 October 1795, 18 June 1800; *BG* 11 September 1822; *NC* 11 December 1830, 8 January 1831.

<sup>70</sup> *IJ* 4 January 1823.

## THE WELSH HISTORY REVIEW

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### CONTENTS

MACSEN, MAXIMUS AND CONSTANTINE.  
J.F. Matthews

'AN OLD AND MUCH HONOURED SOLDIER': GRIFFITH JONES, LLANDDOWROR.  
Geraint H. Jenkins

WALES AND THE PARLIAMENTARY REFORM MOVEMENT, 1866-68.  
Ryland Wallace

THE LLANELLI RIOTS, 1911.  
Deian Hopkin

'THE SQUIRE OF FAIRFIELD':  
RHONDDA ON THE EVE OF ITS INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION.  
T.J. Prichard

WOMEN WORKERS IN WALES, 1968-82.  
Gwyn A. Williams

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