

# The Agricultural Labourers' Standard of Living in Lincolnshire, 1790–1840: Social Protest and Public Order

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## Abstract

In trying to establish what happened to the standard of living of the rural labouring classes in Lincolnshire two statistical variables, the cost of living and the earnings of adult male labourers, have been constructed to determine the long-run trend of real wages. The analysis shows that the cost of living was the dynamic variable in the real wage equation and that in the short-run, as during the French wars, volatile price movements had a devastating effect upon the purchasing power of wages. The level of employment and incomes after 1815, though varying between upland and clayland areas, was a potent cause of distress and class conflict. In analysing the shift in emphasis from overt to covert expressions of anger, attention is paid to the collective response of the county's ruling order to the threat from below and the mechanisms of control that were used to restore law and order.

IN RECENT years an increasing amount of systematic research has been directed towards quantifying changes in rural living standards and identifying the principal causal factors behind the rise in social unrest during the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As a result of this interest, historians have a much clearer understanding of the underlying causes of class conflict, the character of social protest, and the incidence of popular disturbances in the eastern and south-eastern counties.<sup>1</sup> Despite this advance in knowledge, however, more area studies need to be undertaken before the areas of contention which have arisen out of this work

can be satisfactorily resolved.<sup>2</sup> In order to understand the precipitating factors behind the upsurge in overt and covert forms of rural protest, for example, much more statistical information is required on the relationship between wages and the cost of living. Similarly, although historians know much more than hitherto about the timing and scale of the labourers' protest movement, very little detailed information is available on the mechanisms that were created to suppress public displays of anger towards private property and the established landed order. In acknowledging the need for more specific information on these issues, this essay will examine the case of the Lincolnshire agricultural labourers. In order to obtain a quantitative measure of the standard of living, the same methodological approach

<sup>1</sup> T L Richardson, 'The Agricultural Labourers' Standard of Living in Kent, 1790–1840', in D Oddy and D Miller, eds, *The Making of the Modern British Diet*, 1976, pp 103–16; T L Richardson, 'Agricultural Labourers' Wages and the Cost of Living in Essex, 1790–1840: A Contribution to the Standard of Living Debate', in B A Holderness and M Turner, eds, *Land, Labour and Agriculture, 1700–1920: Essays for Gordon Mingay*, 1991, pp 69–90; R A E Wells, 'Social Conflict and Protest in the English Countryside in the early Nineteenth Century: A Rejoinder', in M Reed and R Wells, eds, *Class, Conflict and Protest in the English Countryside 1700–1800*, 1990, pp 65–81. This article was first published in 1981; J E Archer, *By a Flash and a Scare. Incendiarism, Animal Maiming, and Poaching in East Anglia 1815–1870*, Oxford, 1990.

<sup>2</sup> R A E Wells, 'The Development of the English Rural Proletariat and Social Protest, 1700–1850', A Charlesworth, 'The Development of the English Rural Proletariat and Social Protest, 1700–1850: A Comment', and J E Archer, 'The Wells–Charlesworth Debate: A Personal Comment on Arson in Norfolk and Suffolk' in Reed and Wells, eds, *op cit*, pp 29–53, 54–64, 82–9. These articles were first published in 1979, 1980, and 1982 respectively.

to that used in studies of Kent and Essex is employed.<sup>3</sup> In particular, the interaction of two statistical variables, the wage earnings of agricultural labourers and the prices of foodstuffs, is examined in order to determine the long-run trend of real wages. Short-run fluctuations in the purchasing power of wages are then considered in order to throw more light upon the nature of socio-economic relationships in the Lincolnshire countryside.

As most studies of Lincolnshire's agricultural revolution place the landowning and farming classes at the centre of their analysis, the rural labouring classes have long remained neglected figures in the Arcadian landscape.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, most of our knowledge about the agricultural labourers' standard of living is limited to a small number of contemporary printed sources which invariably depict the labourer in a somewhat flattering light. The reclamation and enclosure of the county's 'wild and trackless' wastelands, and the laying down of the fens, heath, and wolds to high-yielding labour-intensive tillage crops, it is emphasized, made exceptional demands upon an indigenous labour force whose short-run supply curve was relatively inelastic. At times, the shortage of labour on the newly drained fens, and the recently enclosed chalk and limestone uplands was so acute that many arable farmers were obliged to recruit gangs of female and juvenile workers from the populous 'open' parishes, and engage sizeable numbers of itinerant Irish labourers to perform the more pressing tasks on the land.<sup>5</sup> Long-term and short-term seasonal imbalances between the demand and supply of labour, it is frequently stressed,

enhanced the labourers' bargaining power with their employers. According to one authority, agricultural wages were 'not fixed by any precise rules', but rather by what the market would bear, and therefore 'the labourer exacts the utmost he can get'.<sup>6</sup> The prevalence of this practice, especially in areas of low population density such as the fens, wolds, and heath, tended to exert an upward pressure on wage rates and piece work earnings. As Arthur Young noted, the 'scarcity of hands' invariably raised the price of labour, thus making agricultural wages in Lincolnshire 'higher than in any other county in the kingdom'.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the landed classes were celebrated for the paternalism they showed towards their work-force. The provision of cow-garths and allotments, it is emphasized, forged a strong bond between farmers and their men, and this made for stability and harmony in the countryside.<sup>8</sup>

In the light of what is known about the incidence of social conflict in the eastern and southern counties, it is evident that the conventional portrayal of Lincolnshire rural life can no longer be accepted uncritically and is therefore in need of revision. Indeed, this essay, in challenging the traditional view, will argue that over a large number of years the labouring classes experienced, and protested angrily against, a deterioration in their material standard of living. During this period the Lincolnshire countryside, far from being a place of peace, stability, and communal harmony, was characterized by violence, discord, and class antagonism.

## I

The statistical evidence used to construct a price index has been derived from a

<sup>3</sup> Richardson (1976), *op cit*, pp 103-16. Richardson (1991), *op cit*, pp 69-90.

<sup>4</sup> J Thirsk, *English Peasant Farming. The Agrarian History of Lincolnshire from Tudor to Recent Times*, reprinted 1981; D Grigg, *The Agricultural Revolution in South Lincolnshire*, Cambridge, 1966; T W Beestall, *The Agricultural Revolution in Lincolnshire*, Lincoln, 1978.

<sup>5</sup> Thirsk, *op cit*, pp 217, 260, 268, 271, 308-9. Grigg, *op cit*, pp 3-4, 48, 192.

<sup>6</sup> T Stone, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Lincoln*, 1794, p 24.

<sup>7</sup> A Young, *General View of the Agricultural of Lincolnshire*, 1813, p 451.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, pp 459-69.

TABLE I  
Distribution of Household Expenditure on  
Food and Drink

	%
Bread	66.1
Meat	14.6
Cheese	5.9
Butter	6.8
Sugar	4.3
Tea	2.3
Total	100.0

number of household and market accounts in nine areas of the county: Belton, Stretton, Gedney, Doddington, Lindsey, Horncastle, New Bolingbroke, Boston, and Grantham. These data embrace the prices of bread (the quartern loaf), meat (beef), cheese, and butter. The prices are annual average weekly prices, and have been weighted according to the amount of expenditure laid-out on these items in agricultural labourers' household budgets.<sup>9</sup> According to David Davies, two-thirds of total household expenditure was allocated to food and drink, and about ninety-three per cent of this outlay was spent on bread, meat, cheese, and butter:<sup>10</sup>

The weights derived from this pattern of expenditure have been applied to the price data to produce a simple base (1790) weighted index of food prices.<sup>11</sup> The data used to construct an index of agricultural earnings, based upon 1790, have been

derived from the wage labour accounts of the Ancaster and Monson estates at Stamford, Normanton, and Burton.<sup>12</sup> In order to obtain a measure of the purchasing power of wages, the wage earnings index has been deflated by the price index to obtain a real wage index.<sup>13</sup>

It is evident from Figure 1 that agricultural wages were relatively 'sticky' in the short-run and, as in the case of Kent and Essex, generally failed to keep pace with the more volatile movements in the cost of living. Prices in Lincolnshire moved in phase with those in Kent and Essex, with major peaks being experienced in 1795-6, 1800-1, 1805, 1812, and 1817, and a deep trough in 1822.<sup>14</sup>

The differential movement of prices and wages during the Napoleonic wars had a devastating effect upon the purchasing power of wages in many areas of the county. Although the costly agricultural improvements carried out on the limestone uplands and fens made exceptional demands upon the indigenous labour force, thus precipitating, at Stamford, a rise in agricultural wages from 9s to 12s a week between 1790 and 1810, real wages fell as faster rising prices outstripped agricultural earnings.<sup>15</sup>

In the country at large, as Wells has demonstrated, acute food storages during the Napoleonic wars gave rise to a number of subsistence crises.<sup>16</sup> A bout of severe weather in 1794-5, which reduced Lincolnshire's wheat crop by a quarter of its normal size,<sup>17</sup> resulted in a 37 per cent

<sup>9</sup> Lincolnshire Record Office (LRO), Monson 12 Household Bills and Vouchers. Ancaster VII/d/4-5, Miscellaneous Deposits. 150/1-2, Farm and Household Account Book of J Hutchinson of Gedney. Harris, III/A/4/3, Lindsey Insolvent Debtors Account Books 1-5. *The Lincoln, Rutland and Stamford Mercury*. The households made regular weekly purchases of small quantities of foodstuffs. The remaining prices are market, or retail, prices quoted at length each week in the local press. Insolvent Debtor's Books include the accounts of local food dealers, especially retailers, and thereby contain information on local prices. J Blackman, 'The Development of the Retail Grocery Trade in the Nineteenth Century', *Business History*, IX, 2, July 1967, pp 112-13.

<sup>10</sup> D Davies, *The Case of Labourers in Husbandry Stated and Considered*, 1795, p 176. Sugar and tea have been omitted from the index owing to a lack of data.

<sup>11</sup> In constructing the index, the proportionate change in the price of each commodity each year, relative to its price in 1790, is multiplied by its weight to provide a base weighted index of price relatives.

<sup>12</sup> LRO. 2 Anc, 9/15/165-7. 3 Anc, 6/24-5, Labour Accounts at Stamford and Normanton. Monson 12, Wage Accounts at Burton, 2/2/4/1-7, 1/2/10/2-3, 10/4B/12-13. 23/8/1. Brace Estate Accounts at Crowle.

<sup>13</sup> The index of agricultural labourers' wages is an unweighted index based, as in the case of the price index, upon the year 1790.

<sup>14</sup> Richardson (1976), *op cit*, p 109. Richardson (1991), *op cit*, p 75.

<sup>15</sup> Appendix I. Complaints about the 'scarcity of hands' were commonplace. *Annals of Agriculture*, XIX, 1792, pp 57, 188. *The Farmer's Magazine*, XVII, 1804, p 119. Young, *op cit*, pp 444-5.

<sup>16</sup> R Wells, *Wretched Faces, Famine in Wartime England 1793-1801*, Gloucester, 1988.

<sup>17</sup> Sir F Hill, *Georgian Lincoln*, Cambridge, 1966, p 171. A similar shortage was experienced in Essex. Richardson (1991), *op cit*, p 78.

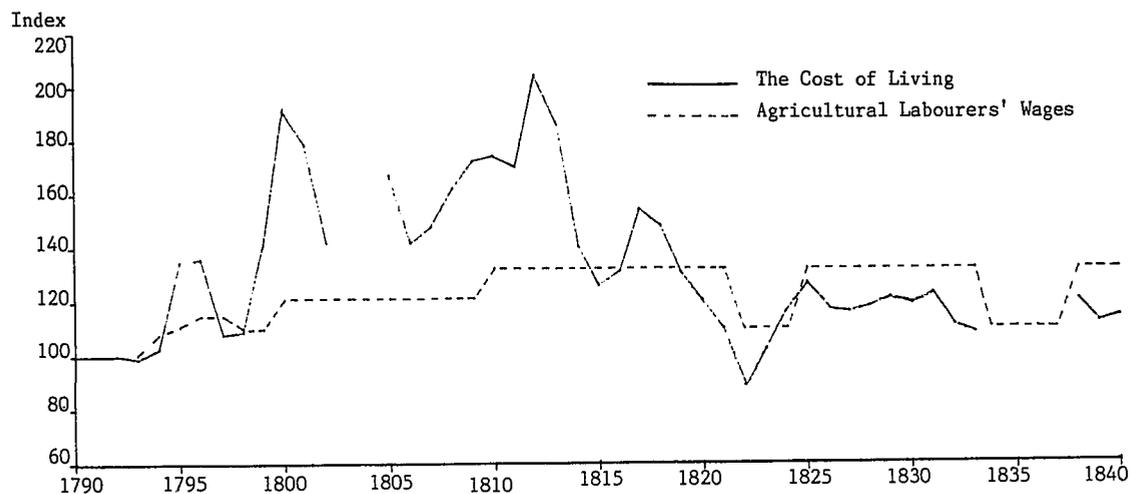


FIGURE 1

Agricultural Labourers' Wages at Stamford and The Cost of Living, 1790=1840 (1790=100).

TABLE 2  
Comparative Changes in the Prices of  
Foodstuffs and Agricultural Labourers'  
Wages in Lincolnshire 1790-1812  
(1790=100)

	1795	1800	1812
Quartern Loaf (Wheaten)	+37	+97	+109
Beef (lb)	+29	+77	+82
Cheese (lb)	+36	+55	+120
Butter (lb)	+29	+24	+88
Agricultural Wages	+11	+22	+33
Real Wages	82	63	65

increase in the price of bread – the staple of the labourers' diet. As prices out-ran wages the index of real wages fell to 82, thus prompting the comment that 'fluctuations in the prices of the necessaries of life makes what a good day's wage twenty years ago, a starving one now'.<sup>18</sup> In the circumstances, labouring families were obliged to substitute cheaper foodstuffs for the more expensive ones in their dietary. At Stainby, Asgarby, and South Ormsby, for example, bread made from a mixture of potato, barley, and rye flour replaced the much preferred wheaten

bread. As one correspondent to the *Annals of Agriculture* noted,

People like to eat wheaten bread of the finest sort; though a great many, of all descriptions, use rye and barley bread: but potatoes are much grown, and used as an excellent substitute, every where in this county.<sup>19</sup>

The dietary evidence of the time indicates that, as a result of the necessary reordering of household expenditure, many families had to subsist on modest amounts of tea, potatoes, and oatmeal, supplemented by small quantities of butter, beef, and mutton 'whenever they can possibly be obtained'. Bacon also disappeared from their tables. As Arthur Young and Eden observed, the rural labouring classes 'consume very little meat' and eat 'a good many potatoes'.<sup>20</sup>

Various efforts were made, at the national and local level, to alleviate the food shortage and offset the severity of inflation upon low-income groups.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> A Native of the County, *Essays on Agriculture Occasioned by Reading Mr Stone's Report on the Present State of that Science in the County of Lincoln*, 1796, p 35.

<sup>19</sup> *Annals of Agriculture*, XXIV, 1795, pp 122, 127, 280. In south Lincolnshire, rice, potatoes, barley, and oats were substituted for wheaten flour. Grigg, *op cit*, pp 38, 77. Indeed, 'The Home Office seized every opportunity to recommend wheat substitutes ...' Wells (1988), *op cit*, p 206.

<sup>20</sup> F M Eden, *The State of the Poor*, ed, A G L Rogers, 1928, pp 233-6. Young, *op cit*, p 460. Wells (1988), *op cit*, p 62.

<sup>21</sup> Wells (1988), *op cit*, pp 202-18.

Bakers were urged to make brown bread instead of white, whilst county magistrates sitting at the Midsummer Quarter Sessions, on the receipt of a circular letter from Pitt, agreed to implement the recommendations of the Privy Council and reduce their consumption of the best wheaten flour 'so as to leave a larger supply of the necessary Article of Food for the People ... and relieve them from their present Difficulties'.<sup>22</sup> Elsewhere in the county the magistrates pursued the government's policy of weaning consumers away from fine wheaten bread in order to encourage the consumption of bread made from mixed grains.<sup>23</sup> At the Lindsey Quarter Sessions, for example, the magistrates, on two occasions, resolved to consume 'only mixed Bread, of which no more than two-thirds shall be made of wheat ... and prohibit in our families the use of wheaten flour in pastry'.<sup>24</sup> In addition to public spirited declarations such as these, a number of well-intentioned steps were taken to retail rice, potatoes, and herrings to distressed families at subsidized prices. Public subscription funds were established in many parts of the county in order to provide cheap bread and flour to the poor. In this way, rice could be had for 3d a pound at Stamford, whilst the labouring classes of South Ormsby, 'relieved by subscriptions from the opulent', were sold bread 'much under its value according to the price of corn'.<sup>25</sup>

Despite these attempts to temper the worst effects of the food scarcity, soaring prices and falling real wages in Lincolnshire resulted, as in other parts of the country, in a souring of social relationships and sporadic outbreaks of unrest.<sup>26</sup> To a

large extent the anger shown by the rural populace was conditioned by the large scale movement of farm produce out of the county. Indeed, by the time of the French wars Lincolnshire was linked, via a well-developed network of road and water communications, to a vast market area which reached from London to Yorkshire. Each year prodigious quantities of cereals, potatoes, poultry, and butchers' meat were sent to this market.<sup>27</sup> This 'export' trade had two main effects upon the standard of living. First, food prices in Lincolnshire moved into line with those in the wider London-dominated market. As Thomas Stone noted, mutton, pork, beef, and bread in Lincolnshire were 'nearly as dear as in London'.<sup>28</sup> Secondly, the large scale movement of foodstuffs out of the county seriously diminished local food supplies at a time when they were already at a low level. This intelligence was the cause of considerable resentment amongst the local community. As one critic pointed out, such was the profitability of the corn trade that Lincolnshire farmers were unwilling to retail corn to their labourers, 'even for ready money', because they could get more by selling their crop in bulk to the wholesale trade.<sup>29</sup>

As Thompson and Wells have shown, in the belief that scarcity was the product of human artifice, the popular response to those who were perceived to be violating the traditional values of the 'moral economy' often took an uncompromising form.<sup>30</sup> In many parts of Lincolnshire, at a time when violent demonstrations were breaking out in many counties, butchers,

<sup>22</sup> *The Stamford Mercury*, 24-31 July 1795, pp 2-3.

<sup>23</sup> Wells (1988), *op cit*, p 210.

<sup>24</sup> LRO, Lindsey Quarter Sessions, Kirton, 18 July 1795 and Spilsby, 14 January 1796, *The Stamford Mercury*, 5 February 1796, p 1.

<sup>25</sup> *Annals of Agriculture*, XXIV, 1795, p 280. *The Stamford Mercury*, 14 August 1795, p 2; 27 May 1796, p 3. Hill, *op cit*, p 171.

<sup>26</sup> Wells (1988), *op cit*, *passim*.

<sup>27</sup> C W J Grainger and C M Elliott, 'A Fresh Look at Wheat Prices and Markets in the Eighteenth Century', *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd series, XX, 2, 1967, pp 257-65. Grigg, *op cit*, pp 46, 71, 162. Stone, *op cit*, pp 30, 44-5, 61, 95. J A Clarke, 'On the Farming of Lincolnshire', *JRASE*, XII, 1851, pp 334-67.

<sup>28</sup> Stone, *op cit*, pp 25, 44-5.

<sup>29</sup> A Native of the County, *op cit*, pp 33-4.

<sup>30</sup> E P Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', *Past and Present*, 50, February 1971, pp 76-136. Wells (1988), *op cit*, p 80.

millers, bakers, butter dealers, and the carriers and shippers of farm produce were frequently the victims of the crowd's hostility.<sup>31</sup> At Grantham, for example, a crowd of angry women attempted to prevent the corn waggons from leaving the area, whilst at Stamford the corn dealers were verbally abused and pelted by an outraged mob. Similarly, following the circulation of a number of 'inflammatory handbills' in Gainsborough, a crowd of women, led by a drummer, assembled to hold-up the corn barges on the Trent. The actions of forestallers and regraters were also the cause of some resentment. A riot broke out at Folkingham fair, for example, when a regrater was observed buying large quantities of butter; and butter dealers were also attacked, and had their wares confiscated, by an incensed crowd at Gainsborough. In view of these public displays of violence, the county magistrates waged a campaign against anyone who interfered with the free working of the market economy. In the case of Stamford, where millers had been assaulted by an angry crowd, the mayor and magistrates threatened to imprison 'any person or persons [who] shall obstruct the sale of any corn, or any other commodity, raise any manner of disturbance, or take any one step to hinder the business and dealings of people'. The authorities were also concerned over intimidatory acts aimed at lowering food prices. An anonymous letter, sent to a miller in Market Deeping, for example, threatened the destruction of his mill if the price of flour was not lowered. At Holbeach a large crowd assembled to demand a reduction in the price of bread and meat. The gathering so alarmed the authorities that the Long Sutton and Spalding Troops of Yeomanry Cavalry were hastily called out to restore order. Similarly, in the

Wainfleet area high food prices provoked an attempt to raise agricultural wages.<sup>32</sup> As far as the farming and commercial classes were concerned, such attempts to interfere with the free working of the market were abhorrent because, as a correspondent to the *Stamford Mercury* put it, 'The Law of God forbids it, The Law of Man punishes it, and the Devil takes delight in it'.<sup>33</sup>

In many parts of the country a fresh wave of rioting broke out in 1800, even though the national food supply was better placed than in 1795.<sup>34</sup> In Lincolnshire the prices of meat, cheese, and bread, as shown in Table 2, soared to new heights, thereby reducing the real wage index, at sixty-three, to its lowest point of the war. The authorities, with memories of 1795 in mind, reaffirmed their adherence to traditional trading practices. Magistrates meeting at Holland, Bourne, and Sleaford Quarter Sessions in January 1800, for example, prohibited the making and sale of any bread that was superior in quality or higher in price than the standard wheaten loaf. Public subscription funds were established to provide cheap corn and soup to the poor, and various Associations for the Prosecution of Forestallers were set up to monitor trading standards. Despite these efforts, sporadic outbursts of violence were reported in a number of areas. A threatening situation developed at Stamford, for example, when a mob assembled to protest against the 'extravagant price of provisions' and the small size of the loaf. Shop windows were smashed during the disturbance and the local Volunteer Infantry were called out to help the civil authorities restore order. Three days later, anticipating more trouble, 100 special constables were sworn-in by the

<sup>31</sup> Wells (1988), *op cit*, p 113. Richardson (1991), *op cit*, pp 79-80. *The Stamford Mercury*, 24 July 1795, p 3.

<sup>32</sup> *The Stamford Mercury*, 15 May 1795, p 4; 24-31 July 1795, pp 1-3; 7 August 1795, p 3; 26 February 1796, p 3; 18 March 1796, p 3. Grigg, *op cit*, p 38.

<sup>33</sup> *The Stamford Mercury*, 7 August 1795, p 3.

<sup>34</sup> Wells (1988), *op cit*, pp 99, 119. Richardson (1991), *op cit*, pp 81-2.

magistrate to supplement the existing forces of law and order. Similarly, a 'violent demonstration' took place against the shopkeepers of Brank Broughton, and other protest meetings took place in and around Tattershall, Boston, Lincoln, Sleaford, and elsewhere.<sup>35</sup>

If the period between 1795 and 1800 was characterized by an upsurge in collective acts of overt protest, it was also accompanied by a determined effort by the authorities to establish an effective system of social control.<sup>36</sup> This control was achieved in two main ways. In order to strengthen the existing forces of law and order, volunteer cavalry units were established over a large part of the county; units such as the South Holland Troop of Yeomanry Cavalry – a 'formidable body of men, ready to act in the defence of their vicinity'. Other Cavalry Troops were raised at Louth, Lincoln, Bourne, Grantham, Spilsby, Horncastle, Folkingham, Stamford, Sutton, and Holbeach. On numerous occasions this 'massive force of armed amateurs', along with large numbers of hastily sworn-in special constables, were called upon by the Justices to disperse rioting crowds and restore order.<sup>37</sup> Secondly, in order to curb the widespread prevalence of non-protest rural crime, such as poaching, arson, and theft, a large number of Associations for the Protection of Property and the Prosecution of Felons was established in the county.<sup>38</sup> Rewards to attract informers were published in the local press.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>35</sup> *The Stamford Mercury*, 5-12 September 1800, p 3; 19 September 1800, p 3. *The Farmer's Magazine*, IV, 1800, p 478. Wells (1988), *op cit*, p 162.

<sup>36</sup> Wells (1988), *op cit*, p 134.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, *The Stamford Mercury*, 7 August 1795, p 3; 7 July 1795, p 3; 5-12 September 1800, p 3.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 17 January 1800, p 1. Associations were formed at Horncastle, Kirton, Grantham, Folkingham, Bourne, Sleaford, Louth, Spalding, Caistor, Long Bennington, Heckington, Boston, Spilsby, Market Rasen, Alford, Grimsby, Barton, Hogsthorpe, Holland Fen, Wainfleet, Tattershall, South Cliff, Coninsby, and elsewhere.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, The Deeping St James Association for the Prosecution of Felons advertised a similar scale of rewards in 1795. *The Stamford Mercury*, 3 April 1795, p 4.

Sheep stealing	Twenty guineas
Firing stacks and stealing livestock	Five guineas
Stealing poultry or grain	Two guineas
Damaging farm implements	One guinea
Robbing gardens and breaking hedges	One guinea

Over the latter years of the French war the number of collective forms of social protest declined dramatically. From that point until at least the 1840s, covert forms of protest, as Wells has argued in a wider context, became the 'most enduring mode of protest' in Lincolnshire.<sup>40</sup>

## II

If the war years were a period of falling living standards and rising social tension, the first two decades of the peace were equally distressing.<sup>41</sup> Farm prices, after reaching their war-time peak in 1812, fell continually (except for a brief rise in 1817) to reach a trough in 1822; a year which came to be known in Lincolnshire as 'the most disastrous year in living memory'.<sup>42</sup> By the end of the hostilities wheat prices were half their war-time peak and it was widely believed that the landed interest faced ruination. Arable farmers in many areas – Louth, Horncastle, Spalding, Market Rasen, Thorney, Spilsby, Long Sutton, and elsewhere – complained bitterly over the 'depressed state of the price of grain' and began to cut back on their labour force and reduce wages. As one observer noted,

Agricultural labourers have yet felt nothing of the pressure; let them also, as well as the Landlords, live rather worse ... It is now the labourers' turn: let the wages be reduced in nearly an exact proportion to the corn; and if families cannot be supported, let the parishes do the rest.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Wells (1979), *op cit*, p 29.

<sup>41</sup> A J Peacock, *Bread or Blood. A Study of the Agrarian Riots in East Anglia in 1816*, 1965. E J Hobsbawm and G Rudé, *Captain Swing*, 1973. Richardson (1976), *op cit*, Archer (1990), *op cit*, Richardson (1991), *op cit*.

<sup>42</sup> Grigg, *op cit*, pp 117-18, 122.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, *The Stamford Mercury*, 27 January 1815, p 2; 3 February 1815, p 3; 17 February 1815, p 4.

The demand for farm servants at the statute fairs fell away, as indeed did the level of their wages, whilst the day labourers were said to be 'starving for the want of employment'.<sup>44</sup> In the circumstances, wage cuts were difficult to resist as magistrates in many parts of the county resolved 'not to sanctions any [poor] relief being given to the sons or daughters of husbandmen who have refused to take such wages as the present depressed state of the times will allow the farmers to give'.<sup>45</sup>

In considering the agricultural labourers' socio-economic position after 1815, it is important to note that the impact of the post-war agricultural depression varied from one part of the county to another. On the whole, the dramatic fall in prices was much less serious for farmers on the lighter upland soils than on the heavy undrained clays. According to one authority, in the former case low prices 'seem to have acted as a stimulus to improvement', and therefore most of the agricultural progress which took place up to the middle of the century, such as the widespread adoption of an 'elegantly interlocking system' of crop and stock husbandry, tended to be confined to the heath, cliff, and wolds rather than the inhospitable cold clays. In view of this differential pattern of advance, agricultural employment and incomes on the chalk and limestone uplands fared better than on the relatively unprofitable claylands.<sup>46</sup>

As the post-war fall in farm prices brought the cost of living down with a run, agricultural labourers in full employment were well placed to see an improvement in the purchasing power of their wages. Apart from the years 1822-4 and

1834-7, agricultural earnings at Stamford and Normanton were maintained at 12s a week throughout the post-war period and therefore real wages rose (Appendix 1). However, whilst estate labourers in regular employment experienced a rise in living standards, field labourers in the disadvantaged farming areas, such as the central clay vale, were said to be 'without the means of independently and profitably earning their bread'.<sup>47</sup> In addition to long-run cyclical factors, short-run seasonal changes also exerted a profound influence upon the labourers' position. A run of bad weather, especially during the 'three deplorable years' between 1826 and 1829, badly damaged the corn harvest and seriously reduced the demand for labour. The 1826 corn harvest, which was described as 'the most oppressive and the most appalling ... within the recollection of the oldest man', was accompanied by a rise in unemployment and a fall in wages as farmers sought to cut their costs and minimize their losses. According to a local report, 'The demand for labourers declines: many men are getting on the roads as many farmers who still have the power to pay them are determined to lay out as little as possible in temporary or permanent improvements'.<sup>48</sup> The cold spring of 1828, and the heavy rains which followed, devastated corn crops once more, as indeed did the wet, cold weather of 1829. Inevitably, these adverse conditions brought considerable distress to the low-lying claylands and marshlands and led to the 'almost total stagnation' of markets. The demand for farm servants at the hiring fairs fell away and large numbers of field labourers were 'thrown out of regular employ' and on to the roads. At times a third of the labour force, or about half the number of day labourers, were out of work in some clayland par-

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 12 May 1815, p. 3. Board of Agriculture, *The Agricultural State of the Kingdom, 1816*, reprinted 1970, pp. 150-2, 156-7.

<sup>45</sup> *The Stamford Mercury*, 1 December 1815, p. 4. Labourers who suffered from low incomes were reduced to a diet of bread, potatoes and a small amount of mutton fat. *Ibid.*, 3 November 1815, p. 1.

<sup>46</sup> Thirsk, *op cit.*, pp. 198, 217, 257-60, 268, 307-8. Grigg, *op cit.*, pp. 117, 126-8, 137, 144-5, 152-3, 178-9, 191-2.

<sup>47</sup> *The Stamford Mercury*, 7 June 1822, p. 2.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 16 June 1826, p. 4.

ishes – thus raising the poor rate there to a level that was, at times, twice that found on the fens, heath, and wolds. Indeed, the agricultural sector was so depressed by the autumn of 1829 that it was said that 'all is doubt, anxiety and alarm ... there was never recalled any harvest time like the present – the farmers impoverished and alarmed, the labourers dissatisfied and grumbling'. According to the *Stamford Mercury*, 'those who cannot procure farmers' employment are increasing in number every day', whilst those who were in work had their wages reduced to 9s and 10s a week. In many areas of the county agricultural wages were said to be 'very indifferent' and it was widely believed that work would be 'difficult to procure, even at low wages' during the winter of 1829–30.<sup>49</sup> In the circumstances it is perhaps not surprising that when the agricultural labourers' protest movement began some twelve months later a disproportionately large number of the disturbances took place on the lowland clays.<sup>50</sup>

The rise in social distress amongst the rural working classes during the 1820s was accompanied by a 'frightful contagion of pauperism and crime' throughout the eastern counties. In Lincolnshire, as in nearby Norfolk and Suffolk, covert forms of poverty-induced crime, such as the theft of foodstuffs from fields, barns, and game reserves, was endemic – and had been since at least the time of the Napoleonic wars.<sup>51</sup> In many areas, such as Claxby and Alford, the poaching of rabbits, hares, and game birds was rife, as was sheep stealing on Sutton Marshes. Around Tattershall and Coningsby, and in and around the 'open' village of Binbrook, 'immense'

numbers of poultry were stolen from farms during the winter months, whilst the theft of foodstuffs – corn, potatoes, eggs, meat, and dairy produce – from hen roosts, larders, and outhouses took place 'almost nightly' in the villages.<sup>52</sup>

In addition to the ubiquitous prevalence of petty subsistence crime, a disturbing number of overt forms of protest, such as sporadic attacks upon property and persons, were also being reported in the local press. Indeed, throughout the 1820s the rural labouring classes reacted vehemently against anything which appeared to threaten their livelihood or reduce their standard of living. Factors such as a rise in the cost of living, or a fall in wages due to unemployment or underemployment, were bitterly denounced and responded to with violence. At times, as during the 1790s and 1800s, the price of bread was the cause of some public outrage. When the bakers of Spalding refused to retail bread at the price stipulated by the magistrates, an angry crowd assembled and smashed their shop windows.<sup>53</sup>

The annual influx of alien workers into Lincolnshire, who were extensively engaged by farmers on the clays and the fens, was another source of contention. The fact that the earnings of the indigenous labour force were 'remarkably precarious, depending on the arrival and assistance of many or few Irish labourers', invariably led to a rise in social tension in the years when the local take-home pay was low. After the poor harvest of 1829, for example, it was noted in the *Stamford Mercury* that owing to the presence of large numbers of Irish harvesters in the county 'the price of reaping wheat has been lower than for some years, and this has caused great dissatisfaction amongst

<sup>49</sup> *The Stamford Mercury*, 7 June 1822, p 2; 19 May–8 December 1826, p 4; 25 January 1828, p 4; 30 January–23 October 1829, p 4; 22 January 1830, p 4. Beastall, *op cit*, pp 117–18. Thirsk, *op cit*, pp 271, 308.

<sup>50</sup> See Figure 2.

<sup>51</sup> *The Stamford Mercury*, 3 April 1795; 17 January 1800; September–October 1806; 7 August 1807; 15 April 1808; August–September 1809, *passim*. Archer, *op cit*, pp 12–16, 87.

<sup>52</sup> *The Stamford Mercury* 4 January 1827, p 4; 8 February 1828, p 4; 2–30 January 1829, p 3. Beastall, *op cit*, pp 126–7. R J Olney, ed, *Labouring Life on the Lincolnshire Wolds. A Study of Binbrook in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, Occasional Papers in Lincolnshire History and Archaeology, Sleaford, 1975, p 26.

<sup>53</sup> *The Stamford Mercury*, 6 February 1829, p 3.

the labouring classes ... and in some cases has produced ill-treatment of the Irish by them'. 'Murderous attacks' were made upon the Irish, and continued to be made upon them throughout most of the 1830s, in many parts of the county. According to the local press, a certain amount of 'mischief' was also committed against the property of farmers who employed them.<sup>54</sup>

Other types of violence also indicated how antagonistic social relationships had become in the Lincolnshire countryside. Sporadic outbreaks of incendiarism, although not as serious as those experienced in Norfolk, Cambridgeshire, Suffolk, and Essex during the 1820s, revealed the lengths the labouring classes were prepared to go to in order to punish their perceived oppressors.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, so serious was the number of criminal offences against private property and persons that the commander of the Louth Troop of Yeomanry Cavalry, in an address to the gentry and magistrates of Lindsey in 1827, was moved to denounce the 'race of riotous and evil disposed people' who 'exercise the most disorderly and brutish conduct amongst us' and 'take every possible opportunity of committing depredations'. The commander, Captain Chaplin, a wealthy landowner with an estate of some 23,000 acres, emphasized the Yeomanry Cavalry's long established role in the county in maintaining law and order and keeping 'such dispositions in proper subjection'. In view of the crescendo of civil unrest that was to unfold in the winter of 1830, the captain's observation that 'a domestic foe is more to be dreaded by us than a foreign enemy' was indeed prophetic.<sup>56</sup>

## III

Social distress appeared to be on the increase in Lincolnshire towards the end of 1829 owing to the partial failure of the corn harvest; a harvest which was described in one local report as 'the most unpleasant one this country has had since 1799, which it has greatly resembled, wet, cold and windy'.<sup>57</sup> From that point until the onset of the Swing disturbances the number of labourers out of work multiplied. 'Farmers seem disposed to dispense with the labours of domestic servants as much as they possibly can', noted one observer, 'Wages have fallen to 9s and 10s ... for regular labourers; and those who cannot procure farmers' employment are increasing in number every day'. The lack of work in the Sleaford area was the cause of much hardship, whilst at Horncastle an 'alarming rise' in poverty forced the poor law authorities into considering building a larger workhouse. It is perhaps significant that both these localities were subjected to incendiary attacks some months later.<sup>58</sup>

During the early summer of 1830 the agricultural sector experienced another setback when a bout of wet weather damaged the corn crop and raised fears that the harvest would be worse than that of 1829. These fears were realized during September when it was discovered that the wheat, barley, oat, and bean crops were 'backward and deficient' and the turnip crop was 'almost a total failure'. As on previous occasions, some farming areas fared better than others. While the harvest on the heath and cliff was 'unusually productive', the wolds suffered a late and deficient harvest, the fens a 'defective crop', whilst the harvest on the cold claylands was 'the worst that has

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 14 August–25 September 1829, pp 3–4. Beasall, *op cit.*, p 118. Thirsk, *op cit.*, pp 217, 271.

<sup>55</sup> Archer, *op cit.*, *passim*. Richardson (1991), *op cit.*, p 86. Beasall, *op cit.* p 126.

<sup>56</sup> *The Stamford Mercury*, 15 June 1827, p 4.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 23 October 1829, p 4.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 9 October 1829, p 4; 15–22 January 1830, p 4; 19 February 1830, p 3.



the heart of the labourers' disturbances of 1830. In the Spilsby area, where some of the worst incidents were to take place, it was said that 'the most industrious man can seldom find employment without claiming it of his parish, nor in many cases will his wages alone suffice for the maintenance of a numerous family'. Evidence of social deprivation in the adjacent marshlands, owing to the lack of work, was 'not wanting' as the condition of the labouring classes in that deprived area was regarded as 'still more degrading'.<sup>61</sup> Similar conditions to these prevailed in the more populous 'open' parishes of the claylands: especially in the larger townships and villages such as Louth, Horncastle, Caistor, Market Rasen, and Brigg. The agricultural labourers at Heckington were so dissatisfied with the inadequacy of their earnings that a crier was sent around the parish to announce that a wage meeting would be held on the village green. About fifty labourers attended the meeting and agreed that they would not work 'at any lower or less rate than two shillings and sixpence for the day for any master or employer whatsoever'. Similar wage meetings took place at Swineshead and in the villages around Boston.<sup>62</sup>

It is evident from the violent language used in threatening letters sent to farmers, clergymen, and overseers of the poor what the labourers' grievances were and what their response would be if there was no improvement in their socio-economic condition. 'Mossop you are damd baden', stated one letter, aggrieved over the fact that the farmer used machinery rather than hand-labour to thresh his corn, 'blast and buger your eyes ... we will burn you in your bed'. Similarly, an anonymous

letter sent to another farmer carried a grim warning: 'Stevens, you may think it a great favour that we write before we fire ... and if fire will not do we will dredge poison on your turnip shells'. In a letter signed 'Bread or Blood or Fire and Smoke', William Green, a farmer and overseer of the poor, was advised that if his attitude towards the poor did not improve he would have to 'sleep with one eye open' as he could 'expect a visit some night' and 'a bullet'. John Thorp of South Owersby was accused of 'pulling down wages' and 'ruining the low class', whilst another letter, addressed to 'the grinder of the poor', pointedly asked 'Who is it that holds you up, is it the poor or is it the rich?' The labourers' concern over the decline in their standard of living, and the indifference shown towards their condition by their social superiors, was stated with some clarity in a threatening letter sent to the Rev William Waters of Rippingale, near Bourne:

We have suffered so much poverty and distress that we ... will not put up with it any longer for you have been A hard task Master laying more poverty upon us that we are Able to bear ... when the Poor has come to you for Justice it has not been done ... we find charity very cold and I would remind you concerning the Poor Men that is Obligated to work at Parish Work for A Man and his Wife cannot live under 9s per Week and those that have families accordingly ... and so if there is Nothing considered for the poor you may Expect Fire and the Farmers likewise.<sup>63</sup>

Many distressed labourers believed that winter unemployment and low wages were caused by labour-saving machinery. 'Thrashing mills', which had been introduced into Lincolnshire during the French war to offset the labour shortage, were in regular use throughout the 1820s and by the eve of the Swing riots they were said

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 31 December 1830, p 2.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 10 December 1830, p 3. LRO, Bourne Quarter Sessions, 4 January 1831. Sleaford Quarter Sessions, 6 January 1831, B A Holderness, ' "Open" and "Closed" Parishes in England in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries', *Ag Hist Rev*, XX, 1972, pp 130. Beastall, *op cit*, p 113.

<sup>63</sup> *The Stamford Mercury*, 3-17 December 1830, p 3; 7 January-18 February 1831, pp 3-4. LRO, Bourne Quarter Sessions, 5 April 1831. Kirton Quarter Sessions, 8 April 1831. Sleaford Quarter Sessions, 6 January 1831.

to be 'busily employed in all directions'.<sup>64</sup> The labouring classes, however, regarded the use of these machines as being morally indefensible, as it deprived them of work during the winter quarter of the year, and they therefore reacted to the machines, and the farmers who used them, with some violence. Threshing machines were attacked and destroyed, invariably by fire, in a number of areas: Sedgebrook, Folkingham, Barrow-on-Humber, Grantham, North Fen, Weston, Moulton, Kirton Meers, and Deeping St James.<sup>65</sup> A farmer at Barrow-on-Humber who continued to use his threshing machine despite being warned not to do so, and who used 'strong language' on his labourers, had three of his corn stacks set on fire. The local populace, who turned out to watch the blaze, 'looked on with the most perfect indifference'. Similarly, a letter sent to a farmer at Baumber, near Horncastle, warned 'If you have a machine in your yard, we will set fire to the stacks the first opportunity ... you and all the farmers must give better wages to the labourers, or we will fire'.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, the nocturnal destruction of threshing machines, corn stacks, and farm buildings by fire was regarded as a particularly vindictive form of protest and was the cause of considerable alarm amongst the ranks of the landowning and farming classes:

The panic among the Lincolnshire farmers is universal, particularly such as have threshing machines on their premises. Many have received threatening letters and the breaking of machines, and the conflagration of property form the unvarying theme of conversation amongst all ranks of society.<sup>67</sup>

It is clear from Figure 2 that the number of incendiary attacks upon farm property greatly exceeded the number of disturbances aimed at raising wages or destroying agricultural machinery. Indeed, the number of acts of collective overt protest during the Swing disturbances was negligible. Compared with the eastern counties, the number of threshing machines destroyed in Lincolnshire (9) was much lower than the number destroyed in Norfolk (29), Kent (37), and Essex (15), but higher than the number destroyed in Yorkshire (2) and Cambridgeshire (1).<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, the machines in Lincolnshire were destroyed by fire rather than by physical attacks carried out by marauding bands of labourers. Most acts of rural protest in the county, as Wells has argued in a wider context, were essentially covert in character. Incendiarism, in particular, far from being peripheral to the labourers' movement, was a central and 'enduring mode of protest' in the Lincolnshire countryside.<sup>69</sup> As Hobsbawm and Rudé have noted, apart from a few threatening letters, 'the emphasis was all on arson'.<sup>70</sup> Compared with the eastern counties, the number of incendiary attacks in Lincolnshire (c. 50) greatly exceeded the number recorded for Norfolk (28), Suffolk (19), Cambridgeshire (7), and Essex (8). Only Kent (61) exceeded Lincolnshire. As Archer has emphasized, in his analysis of East Anglia, arson was 'the prime weapon in the rural war'.<sup>71</sup>

Although a small number of fires broke out in Lincolnshire during September and October 1830, the majority of the incendiary attacks, which amounted to about fifty, took place between mid-November and the following March. During Nov-

<sup>64</sup> Young, *op cit*, pp 93-7. *The Stamford Mercury*, 13 September 1822, p 3; 15 April 1824, p 3; 5 January 1827, p 4; 10 October 1828, p 4; 12 June 1829, p 3.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 1 October-24 December 1830, pp 2-3; 7 January 1831, p 4. LRO, Bourne Quarter Sessions, Easter 1831. See also R C Russell's review of E J Hobsbawm and G Rudé, *Captain Swing*, in *Ag Hist Rev*, XVIII, 1970, p 175.

<sup>66</sup> *The Stamford Mercury*, 10 December 1830, p 2. R C Russell, *Stack Burning and Discontent in Lincolnshire—the 1830's. Notes for Discussion*. Unpublished private communication from the author.

<sup>67</sup> *The Stamford Mercury*, 10 December 1830, p 2.

<sup>68</sup> Hobsbawm and Rudé, *op cit*, p 262-3. Somewhat different figures are given on p 167.

<sup>69</sup> Wells (1979), *op cit*, p 29.

<sup>70</sup> Hobsbawm and Rudé, *op cit*, p 136. See also Russell (1970), *op cit*, p 174.

<sup>71</sup> Hobsbawm and Rudé, *op cit*, pp 170, 262-3. Archer, *op cit*, pp 69-70.

ember, for example, a number of corn stacks were fired at Easton, Stickford, Swaby, Muckton, Burwell, Irby, South Reston, and Spalding. As one alarmed observer noted, in a letter to the Kesteven magistrates, 'the feelings of the lower classes in general is not favourable, and when this will end it is not easy to foresee ... it is a dreadful state of things'.<sup>72</sup> By the first week in December the *Stamford Mercury* could report that 'the incendiary proceedings which have agitated other counties' have begun to spread to a 'considerable extent' into the hitherto unaffected areas of the county. Arson attacks took place at Grantham, Spilsby, Spalding, Moulton, Deeping, Market Rasen, Horncastle, Sutton, Leake, Frieston, and Butterwick. County magistrates, in the hope that they might bring an end to the 'conflagration of property', offered substantial rewards for information that would lead to the arrest of the 'diabolical incendiaries'. Despite this initiative, the fires of discontent continued to burn, as at Ulceby, Deeping Fen, Moulton Marsh, Stickford, Harbling, Swineshead, Leake, Ropsley, Spilsby, and Folkingham, throughout the winter of 1830-1 and beyond. Low and inadequate wages lay behind most of these burnings. The incendiary fire at Folkingham, for example, was the direct result of a wage dispute, whilst the firing of three corn stacks at Swineshead took place because the labourers were 'very dissatisfied with the wages offered by the farmers'.<sup>73</sup>

#### IV

The unrest which swept over the Lincolnshire countryside during the winter of 1830, by posing a threat to the sanctity of private property, provoked a swift and effective response from the judiciary and

the landed order. Attitudes towards the labouring classes hardened, and the magistracy and gentry, aided and abetted by the farming classes, moved together in order to present a united front against, what was sometimes perceived to be, an insurrection from below. To a large extent the closing of ranks, and the policies adopted to suppress the labourers' movement, was prompted by a stream of directives from Lord Grey's Whig government to the county authorities. On the 25 November Lord Melbourne, in a letter to Lord Brownlow, the Lord Lieutenant, expressed his alarm over the recent upsurge of 'outrage and violence' in the county and urged him to adopt 'with the least possible delay ... such measures as may be effectual for the repression of tumult, the preservation of the public peace and the protection of property'.<sup>74</sup> Within a few days of its arrival the Home Secretary's letter had precipitated an energetic response. At numerous public meetings held up and down the county the landed classes agreed to 'stand by each other in defence of themselves and their neighbours, to protect property of every kind from either secret injury or open violence, and to resist every demand made upon them by persons illegally combined'.<sup>75</sup>

The farming classes, for example, opposed the labourers' demand for higher wages, whilst in the law courts the magistrates dealt firmly with those who were found guilty of 'conspiring and combining unjustly to increase and augment the wages of themselves and other labourers'. Lord Melbourne, in a letter to the county's judiciary, emphasized with some force the fact that magistrates 'are invested with no general legal Authority to settle the Amount of wages of Labour' and that 'any

<sup>72</sup> LRO, General Proceedings and Correspondence, Kesteven, 1830. Letter from W Thompson to W Forbes, 29 November 1830.

<sup>73</sup> *The Stamford Mercury*, 3 September 1830-18 March 1831, pp 3-4.

<sup>74</sup> LRO, General Proceedings and Correspondence, Kesteven, 1830. Letter from Lord Melbourne to Lord Brownlow, 25 November 1830.

<sup>75</sup> *The Stamford Mercury*, 3 December 1830, p 2.

Interference in such a Matter can only have the Effect of exciting Expectations which must be disappointed and of ultimately producing, in an aggravated Degree, a renewed Spirit of Discontent and Insubordination'. The county's landowners, farmers, and magistrates readily put the Home Secretary's advice into practice. Sir Robert Sheffield, for example, a wealthy landowner with a 9000-acre estate in Lindsey, opposed the labourers' attempts to raise their wages. 'The Wages in this Part are 2s a day', he informed Lord Brownlow, the Lord Lieutenant, 'and if any refractory spirit should show itself here among the Labourers it will be for an increase of Wages ... but a stand will be made at present at two shillings'. The magistrates were equally opposed to any form of 'collective bargaining by riot'. The labourers of Heckington who dared to organize a wage meeting, and demand 2s 6d a day, were found guilty of 'not being content to work and labour at the usual rates for which they and other labourers were accustomed to' and were sentenced to three months hard labour in the Folkingham House of Correction. The women of Heckington, who also assembled to protest over the high price of flour, received the same sentence as their menfolk for their riotous behaviour.<sup>76</sup> Richard Tomlin, who threatened to fire the stacks of farmers who did not pay their labourers 'wages whereby they could maintain their families', was given six months hard labour by the magistrate.<sup>77</sup>

In order to bring a stop to the destruction of stacks, barns, and farm machinery by fire, the county authorities, building upon the experience gained during the subsistence crises of 1795-1800, built up a

highly organized network of control across the length and breadth of the county. Perhaps the most important manifestation of this policy was the mobilization of a number of Yeomanry cavalry units and the establishment of various armed associations, such as the Association for the Preservation of Public Peace and the Protection of Property and the Association of Gentlemen Farmers and Graziers on Horseback, to assist the civil authorities in the suppression of the 'tumultuous assemblies'. The membership of these associations consisted of the 'most respectable Yeomanry', especially those 'who could furnish themselves with horses', and various 'graziers, tradesmen, and their confidential servants'. Public subscription funds were launched in order to finance their operations and reimburse the more ordinary members for participating in the day and night patrols. Once the 200 or so members of each association were assembled together, they were divided into mounted and unmounted sections with the task of arresting 'all suspicious characters and persons who may be found assembled for the breach of the peace'.<sup>78</sup> Large rewards were offered in the hope they would attract informers. The Stamford Association for the Prosecution of Felons, for example, in an advertisement in the *Stamford Mercury*, drew the reader's attention to the £500 reward offered by Royal Proclamation and the fact that,

Any person discovering the authors, abettors or perpetrators of outrages in riots or tumultuous assemblies, dictating to employers the giving of certain wages by force or violence, and compelling destruction of agricultural property, is entitled to a reward of Fifty Pounds, besides a free pardon, in case such persons discovering may be liable to be prosecuted for the same.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>76</sup> LRO, Bourne Quarter Sessions, 4 January 1831. Sleaford Quarter Sessions, 6 January 1831. General Proceedings and Correspondence, Kesteven, 1830. Letter from Lord Melbourne, 8 December 1830. R J Olney, *Rural Society and County Government in Nineteenth-Century Lincolnshire*, Lincoln, 1979, p 84.

<sup>77</sup> J Hughes, 'Tried Beyond Endurance', *The Land Worker*, November 1954, p 9.

<sup>78</sup> LRO, General Proceedings and Correspondence, Kesteven, 1830. Circular letter from the Chief Constable for Kesteven, 1 December 1830. Circular Letter from W Forbes to the Magistrates of the County, 29 November 1830. *The Stamford Mercury*, 7 January 1831, p 3.

<sup>79</sup> *The Stamford Mercury*, 7 January 1831, p 1.

The role played by the armed associations in containing the labourers' movement was effective because it was disciplined and well organized. In a letter to the county magistrates on the 25 November, the Home Secretary suggested that the Duke of Richmond's 'Sussex Plan', which had been employed to put-down the agricultural labourers in that county, should be used in Lincolnshire to subjugate the 'tumult' and restore the 'public tranquillity'.<sup>80</sup> The county authorities responded to the Home Secretary's suggestion with some alacrity. In Kesteven, clusters of four to five parishes were grouped into districts and placed under the direction of a Superintendent. Within each district farmers, 'their confidential Servants and respectable Labourers, Pensioners and Tradespeople' were sworn-in as special constables, armed with staves, and instructed to 'apprehend all suspicious Characters'. Similarly, the Grantham district, which embraced the parishes of Little and Great Gonerby, Manthorpe, and Grantham, had a volunteer force of 247 special constables at its disposal. Sixty-nine men formed the Mounted Section whilst 178 formed the Dismounted Section. In the event of an incendiary attack or a riot, bugles and church bells were sounded and the constables were assembled at various pre-determined points, such as the town hall or the market cross, before moving on to engage the labourers. Day and night patrols were established, fire appliances were given a mounted escort, and each constable was instructed to 'retain in his memory the Names of as many of ... [the rioters] as he possibly can in order that they may be afterwards apprehended'. Men with military experience were frequently put in charge of the operations. The 125 members of the Armed Association for the

Protection of Property in Stamford, for example, were sub-divided into five sections and placed under the command of a captain or a lieutenant.<sup>81</sup>

The Market Rasen Corps of Volunteer Cavalry, under the command of Ayscough Boucherett of Willingham House, a wealthy landowner with a 6000-acre estate in Lindsey, provided a military presence in the central claylands. Indeed, it is evident from Figure 2 that the spatial distribution of the Yeomanry Cavalry units and the labourers' disturbances were closely correlated. Most were located on the claylands and marshlands; especially along the eastern and western margins of the wolds, the eastern margin of the heath, and on the southern fenlands:

Alford	Folkingham
Horncastle	Grantham
Market Rasen	Stamford
Caistor	Deeping
Brigg	Spalding
Grimsbey	Long Sutton
Barton	Heckington
Barrow	Sleaford
Gainsborough	Lincoln
Bourne	Holland Fen

The North Wold Troop covered a large area of Lindsey and had detachments based at various centres such as Caistor, Brigg, Barton, and Winterton.<sup>82</sup> The mounted detachments were a particularly formidable force because they were armed with sabres, pistols, and muskets. The Sleaford Association of Volunteer Horsemen, for example, acquired 100 'scymetar' swords, leather belts, scabbards, and a quantity of muskets from the Royal Ordnance Store at Hull. Major Handley of the Folkingham Yeomanry obtained 100 'sycimitar' swords from the same source, whilst the Gran-

<sup>80</sup> LRO, General Proceedings and Correspondence, Kesteven, 1830. Circular Letter from Lord Melbourne, 25 November 1830.

<sup>81</sup> LPL. UP 1051. Printed Rules and Regulations for the Preservation of Peace and the Protection of Property in Kesteven. 1 December 1830. LRO, General Proceedings and Correspondence. Printed List of Special Constables in the Grantham District, 13 December 1830. Printed List of the Armed Association for the Protection of Property at Stamford. December 1830.

<sup>82</sup> *The Stamford Mercury*, 21 January-8 July 1831, p 1-3. R J Olney, *Lincolnshire Politics 1832-1885*, Oxford, 1973, p 15.

tham Yeomanry Cavalry acquired 150 sabres from the Weedon army barracks in Northampton. As one volunteer noted, in a letter to the Kesteven magistrates, the cavalry kept a vigil in the countryside whilst 'those of us who had no horses ... [were] ready to start on foot with our guns all day'.<sup>83</sup>

## V

Despite the array of forces before them, in the form of an unsympathetic government, a hostile judiciary, and the collective opposition of a well armed coalition of landowners, farmers, and tradespeople, the agricultural labouring classes continued to make their presence felt throughout the remainder of the decade. During 1831-2, for example, the labourers appeared to redirect their grievances over unemployment and poor wages from the farming classes to the itinerant Irish. The fact that the Irish competed for work in the local labour market, and were prepared to accept low wages, caused considerable friction within the Lincolnshire countryside. According to one local report, the Lincolnshire labourers were 'not well satisfied' with the competition posed by the Irish and that 'the farmers are somewhat to blame in rather restricting the Wages of our Men'. Indeed,

*Many, though civil, are gloomy and discontented. In populous villages, where they are less restrained, dark hints and threats to those who may employ Irish-men to reap in harvest are not unusual; and, in some instances, some of these unfortunates ... have been greatly maltreated and assaulted.*<sup>84</sup>

Irish labourers making their way to the fenlands ran a gauntlet of abuse in the villages, as at Willoughby, Newton, Dunstan, Hameringham, Whittering, and Spalding. The populous around Boston were so incensed by the influx of Irish

harvesters that a riot broke out and local magistrates had to provide them with an escort to the fens. Irish labourers at Holbreach were rounded up and driven out of the area by local labourers wielding pitchforks and clubs, and similar attacks took place at Spalding and Long Sutton. Such was the state of tension between alien and denizen workers that it was said that 'Many farmers have refused to employ them ... the country labourers threatening gross assaults to the Irishman, and still worse to those farmers who may engage them'.<sup>85</sup>

Apart from these overt expressions of anger, throughout the 1830s there appeared to be no 'disposition to acts of tumult or riot amongst the labourers, nor any orgained system of outrage'. Discontent, however, on the question of low wages, and the practical implementation of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, continued to find expression in covert acts of intimidation. Farmers who paid their men poor wages, such as those in the Laceby area, continued to receive threatening letters:

Firing is no warning to you at Laceby; you must not try the poor so any longer, for they will not submit to working for 1s a day; young men are fools to stand it any longer; they mean trying it; they would not if you would allow anything fair — you might sleep comfortable; if you do not raise their wages, you must suffer by the consequence.<sup>86</sup>

Elsewhere in the county, the curtailment of outdoor poor relief, at a time when farm wages were low, was said to be the cause of a number of 'diabolical acts'. 'Their minds are so excited ... against any curtailment of what they consider their rights', noted one observer, 'that they will do anything'. Reports of 'numerous instances of Malicious Injury to cattle' was a particular cause of concern, as was the 'atrocious crime' of arson. Indeed, throughout the remainder of the decade incendiarism remained a seri-

<sup>83</sup> LRO, General Proceedings and Correspondence, Kesteven 1830. Letter from W Thompson to W Forbes, 29 November 1830. Letters of Indenture and Receipt of Arms. *The Stamford Mercury* 24 December 1830, p 3.

<sup>84</sup> *The Stamford Mercury*, 29 July 1831, p 4.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 5 August-9 September 1831, pp 3-4; 10-26 August 1832, pp 3-4.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, 13 March 1835, p 2.

ous problem in Lincolnshire. As the *Stamford Mercury* noted, 'The county appears Tranquil, but that dreadful fiend of incendiaryism is not yet satiated'.<sup>87</sup>

## VI

The foregoing analysis suggest that the existing model of Lincolnshire rural life can be revised in two main ways. First, although agricultural wages were high, they progressed only very slowly in the long-run and, until the 1820s, were invariably out of phase with variations in the cost of living. Given the stability of earnings, volatile short-run fluctuations in the prices of common foodstuffs proved to be the dynamic variable in the real wage equation. In view of the dichotomy between prices and wages, labourers in

regular employment on the Ancaster and Monson estates experienced a notable fall in their standard of living between 1794 and 1818. Elsewhere in the county, spiralling prices and falling real wages during the French wars, and the onset of unemployment and low wages up to 1830, especially in the clayland parishes, precipitated an upsurge in class antagonism and civil disobedience. The Lincolnshire countryside, far from being a place of peace and social harmony, witnessed a marked deterioration in class relations and the waging of a bitter struggle that was only partly resolved by the force of arms. Although most overt expressions of discontent were suppressed, the labourers' anger was not extinguished and continued to surface in the guise of covert acts of violence against landed property until at least the 1840s.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 7 January 1831, p 4; 18 March 1831, p 4. LRO, 3 Anc 7/23/29-32/1-9.

APPENDIX I  
Indices of Agricultural Labourers' Wages, the Cost of Living and Real Wages in  
Lincolnshire, 1790-1840  
(1790 = 100)

Year	Cost of Living Index	Agricultural Labourers' Wages	Stamford Wage Index	Real Wage Index	Year	Cost of Living Index	Agricultural Labourers' Wages	Stamford Wage Index	Real Wage Index
1790	100	9s 1d	100	100	1816	131	12s 0d	132	101
1791	100	9s 1d	100	100	1817	154	12s 0d	132	86
1792	100	9s 1d	100	100	1818	148	12s 0d	132	89
1793	99	9s 1d	100	101	1819	130	12s 0d	132	101
1794	103	9s 10d	108	105	1820	120	12s 0d	132	110
1795	135	10s 1d	111	82	1821	110	12s 0d	132	120
1796	136	10s 6d	115	85	1822	89	10s 0d	110	123
1797	108	10s 6d	115	106	1823	102	10s 0d	110	108
1798	109	10s 0d	110	101	1824	116	10s 0d	110	95
1799	141	10s 0d	110	78	1825	126	12s 0d	132	104
1800	191	11s 0d	121	63	1826	117	12s 0d	132	113
1801	179	11s 0d	121	68	1827	116	12s 0d	132	114
1802	142	11s 0d	121	85	1828	118	12s 0d	132	112
1803		11s 0d	121		1829	121	12s 0d	132	109
1804		11s 0d	121		1830	119	12s 0d	132	111
1805	167	11s 0d	121	72	1831	123	12s 0d	132	107
1806	142	11s 0d	121	85	1832	111	12s 0d	132	119
1807	148	11s 0d	121	82	1833	108	12s 0d	132	122
1808	162	11s 0d	121	75	1834		10s 0d	110	
1809	172	11s 0d	121	70	1835		10s 0d	110	
1810	174	12s 0d	132	76	1836		10s 0d	110	
1811	170	12s 0d	132	78	1837		10s 0d	110	
1812	204	12s 0d	132	65	1838	120	12s 0d	132	110
1813	186	12s 0d	132	71	1839	112	12s 0d	132	117
1814	140	12s 0d	132	94	1840	114	12s 0d	132	115
1815	126	12s 0d	132	105					

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