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## SWING: THE YEARS 1827-1830 AS REFLECTED IN A WEST KENT NEWSPAPER

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According to Hobsbawm and Rudé in *Captain Swing*,<sup>1</sup> their detailed study of the agricultural disturbances in the southern and eastern counties of England in 1830, the riots were a phenomenon of that year, breaking out initially in Kent, where they were characterised by arson in west Kent and, above all, by attacks on threshing machines in east Kent. Although Hobsbawm and Rudé refer to fires in west Kent having occurred in June before the outbreak of machine destruction at Lower Hardres, near Canterbury, in the east of the county, nevertheless it is this particular eruption of violence at the end of August which for them marks the true beginning of the Swing riots, as they came to be called.<sup>2</sup> While Hobsbawm and Rudé do, of course, recognise that life had been very hard for the agricultural labourers ever since Waterloo,<sup>3</sup> they see the uprisings of 1830 as something quite unexpected:

'But on the whole the observer of the southern English countryside would hardly have predicted a general outbreak of active discontent, because there was virtually nothing to announce it.'<sup>4</sup>

While it is certainly true that the bulk of the disturbances occurred in the autumn of 1830, I feel it is possible to show that the discontent which ignited most forcibly in 1830 was present in Kent well before this, and that its presence was fully recognised by the authorities

<sup>1</sup> E. Hobsbawm and G. Rudé, *Captain Swing*, R.U. Edn. (1970).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* See the opening of Ch. 5, 'The Riots in the South-East'.

<sup>3</sup> Rural discontent is generally recognised to have a very long history (see e.g. (Ed.) A. Charlesworth, *An Atlas of Rural Protest in Britain 1548-1900* (1983)) although it has not been closely documented for Kent.

<sup>4</sup> Hobsbawm and Rudé, *op. cit.*, 82-3.

locally. It seems clear, too, that this discontent was already making itself felt in similar ways, and that fires and the destruction of threshing machines had, from at least as far back as 1827, frequently gone hand in hand, and were by no means compartmentalised within the county. This study is based on an examination of the various incidents and related occurrences such as petitions referring to distress which were reported in *The Maidstone Journal*,<sup>5</sup> a west Kent newspaper, over the years 1827 to 1830. The newspaper, a well-established one, which had been founded in 1786, was not a scaremonger, and did perhaps pursue actively the policy of believing that if unpleasant things were ignored they would go away: in June 1831, on the reappearance of arson in Kent, it was to write,

'the time is past, when by a studious avoidance of the topic, we could in any way hope to repress the crime itself'<sup>6</sup>

and it seems safe to assume, therefore, that what we have here is minimum coverage of such events. The picture which emerges, nevertheless, of the county of Kent over this time shows mounting unrest, and reveals an explosive situation with a very long fuse.

#### 1827-1829

The first few months of 1827, as reflected in *The Maidstone Journal*, uncover a state of affairs not very far removed from that of the beginning of 1830, although there is not quite such desperation in reports of distress, and there still seems to be time for debate and manoeuvre. January shows considerable activity among landowners and farmers, who scent the possibility of the introduction of foreign wheat below the level fixed in 1815 of 80s. a quarter. Two things emerge from accounts of their meetings: the first is a quite evidently genuine fear on the part of corn growers that the importation of foreign wheat will throw even more English labourers out of work, and the second is the extraordinarily depressed conditions which are being described. In the words of the petition prepared and sent to the Houses of Parliament from 'Land-owners, Clergy, Occupiers of Land, and Tradesmen, residing in upwards of fifty Parishes in the Western Division of the County of Kent', the effects of the depressed price of corn earlier in the decade (1820-22) had been

<sup>5</sup> *The Maidstone Journal* does not in fact appear in the bibliography of Captain Swing.

<sup>6</sup> *The Maidstone Journal* (hereafter MJ), 21 June, 1831.

'Thousands of respectable and industrious Farmers reduced to labourers – Hundreds of Thousands of Labourers to paupers – and very many of both classes to acts of desperation.'<sup>7</sup>

Distress, however, was by no means limited solely to agricultural districts: in *The Maidstone Journal* for 16 January we read that on the previous Sunday,

'His Majesty's Circular Letter was read in our Churches . . . in this town, calling upon the inhabitants for a general subscription . . . in aid of the fund for the relief of the destitute poor in the manufacturing districts.'<sup>8</sup>

In February we hear of public charity at Deal, where a public meeting has raised £270 for the relief of the poor during the winter.<sup>9</sup> And in Parliament, petitions are also being presented praying for a revision of the corn laws: Lord Milton, in presenting such a petition from Yorkshire, is reported as saying that

'So long as the Government continued to step in between a large portion of the people and their food, this question could never be said to be settled.'<sup>10</sup>

On 6 March a 'malicious fire' is reported in the neighbourhood of Faversham, in an outhouse<sup>11</sup> near a parsonage barn, stacks and straw yard, which were saved from conflagration only by a contrary wind.<sup>12</sup> Towards the end of the same month a meeting of 'the Central Committee of the several Associations of Dover, Hythe, Ashford, Canterbury, Maidstone and Rochester', held at Sittingbourne, spells out the fears of those who are against a free trade in corn, stating

'That the depressed state of Agriculture renders it difficult for the farmers to find employment for the labouring poor, which difficulty, the adoption of measures inadequate to afford a sufficient protection would seriously increase, and be productive of the most serious consequences, by driving them to the already burthened poor rates for a scanty subsistence, and thus adding to the misery at present existing from a want of sufficient employment.'<sup>13</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *MJ*, 9 January, 1827.

<sup>8</sup> *MJ*, 16 January, 1827.

<sup>9</sup> *MJ*, 6 February, 1827.

<sup>10</sup> *MJ*, 27 February, 1827.

<sup>11</sup> Outhouses, commonly referred to in Kent as lodges, were used for housing machinery such as wagons and threshing machines.

<sup>12</sup> *MJ*, 6 March, 1827.

<sup>13</sup> *MJ*, 27 March, 1827.

At the heart of the matter is the 'want of sufficient employment'. Throughout the period – and indeed, long before – schemes were being brought forward by the 'agriculturists' for the employment of those who were out of work in their parishes, ranging from 'spade husbandry'<sup>14</sup> (in effect, reverting to a method which predated the invention of the plough), through the careful regulation of available work so that each man would have a little,<sup>15</sup> to the provision of cottage allotments for poor families.<sup>16</sup>

By 'acts of desperation' the January petition was perhaps alluding to suicides (of which the paper steadily reports a considerable number) rather than to felonies. However, by no means all those who could find no work saw fit to punish themselves still further but chose instead, and increasingly, to turn their anger against the system which was responsible for their predicament. In April, we read of another fire in the Faversham area,<sup>17</sup> and of anonymous letters which threaten fire and the cutting of hop-bines at Thurnham and Detling,<sup>18</sup> while in May fires occur at Langley<sup>19</sup> and at Kingsnorth, near Ashford,<sup>20</sup> and extensive 'depredations' are reported at Stelling Minnis.<sup>21</sup> Throughout the county, horse- and sheep-stealing are now very common. In July, hop-bines are actually cut at Thurnham.<sup>22</sup> In September, when there is a fire at a house at Staplehurst, some looting takes place.<sup>23</sup> There is a fire at East Peckham in October, reported in November,<sup>24</sup> while in December we read that six labouring men from East Farleigh are to appear at the sessions charged with riot and assault.<sup>25</sup>

With the approach of winter the wealthy endeavour to stave off, by the distribution of largesse – Lord Sondes, for example, is reported in December as giving away blankets to the poor<sup>26</sup> – both the destitution of families without work and the imminent collapse of

<sup>14</sup> *Parliamentary Papers*, 1818 (400) V.91. (Select Committee of the House of Lords to consider the Poor Laws: letter from Thomas Selby, overseer of Otford, to Lord Camden).

<sup>15</sup> *MJ*, 5 May, 1829.

<sup>16</sup> *MJ*, 20 November, 1827.

<sup>17</sup> *MJ*, 24 April, 1827.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *MJ*, 1 May, 1827.

<sup>20</sup> *MJ*, 22 May, 1827.

<sup>21</sup> *MJ*, 29 May, 1827.

<sup>22</sup> *MJ*, 31 July, 1827.

<sup>23</sup> *MJ*, 4 September, 1827.

<sup>24</sup> *MJ*, 6 November, 1827.

<sup>25</sup> *MJ*, 11 December, 1827.

<sup>26</sup> *MJ*, 18 December, 1827.

society as they know it. A perceptive article on 'Agricultural labourers in Sussex', taken from *The Brighton Gazette* and reprinted in *The Maidstone Journal* in November, begins,

'The situation of this class of persons is, at present, the most wretched that can be conceived'

and ends:

'The poor-laws, which are the only remaining protection to the stacks, houses and barns of the farmers, dole out but a miserable existence to those whose grandfathers were well dressed and well fed young men.'<sup>27</sup>

At the close of the year *The Maidstone Journal* is deploring 'the almost nightly depredations committed on the property of Agriculturists in this and adjoining parishes'.<sup>28</sup>

1828, viewed through the pages of *The Maidstone Journal*, presents a similar picture, even although not quite so many fires are reported. The early months continue with charity to the poor: Sir John Honeywood, in Waltham and Elmsted, giving beef and bread to 632 families in these two parishes alone,<sup>29</sup> Folkestone running a 'Soup Society' to provide soup twice a week, on Wednesdays and Saturdays, as well as organising the distribution of coals.<sup>30</sup> The depredations, on the other hand, do not lessen: a reward of £25 is offered in connection with a burglary at Ash Place, near Wrotham, on 1 January,<sup>31</sup> while in February we read of crime in Deptford.<sup>32</sup>

In particular, this year, hardships in the docks and coastal areas of Kent are brought to our attention. In January,

'In consequence of the severe sufferings of the inhabitants of Queenborough, Mr Capel, one of its representatives in Parliament, visited it about a fortnight since.'

Capel appears to have made house to house visits among the people, where he

'witnessed their extreme suffering. This, they stated, had been brought upon them by depriving them of the benefits of their fishery, on which they entirely depended for support, and by general restrictions on their trade.'<sup>33</sup>

<sup>27</sup> *MJ*, 13 November, 1827.

<sup>28</sup> *MJ*, 18 December, 1827.

<sup>29</sup> *MJ*, 1 January, 1828.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *MJ*, 26 February, 1828.

<sup>33</sup> *MJ*, 8 January, 1828.

Capel promised support and help, but little seems to have been done: the misery in Queenborough was to be described again on two occasions in January 1829, on the second of which *The Maidstone Journal* begged its readers to come to the aid of the starving fishermen.<sup>34</sup>

Greenwich in February is petitioning Parliament for the introduction of a Bill for the better regulation of the poor of the parish,<sup>35</sup> a petition which is presented in the House of Commons by Sir Edward Knatchbull, one of the county members. Later the same year he was to be asked to present a petition on behalf of the inhabitants of Chatham and its vicinity, complaining of the use of convict labour in the docks,<sup>36</sup> a matter which was not in fact in dispute. Only a few months earlier, *The Maidstone Journal* had reported:

'There are on average about 4000 convicts employed by Government at Woolwich arsenal and the different dockyards; it is said that the Lord High Admiral has recommended that this number should be reduced, and their place supplied by industrious labourers of good character, thousands of whom can obtain little or no work.'<sup>37</sup>

The reply made by Robert Peel to Sir Edward Knatchbull when he presented the Chatham petition shows clearly the government's attitude to the situation, which was perhaps barely perceived as a problem:

'Mr Peel said it was impossible to deny that the employment of convicts did not diminish the demand for other labourers. At the same time, the expense of sending them to New South Wales was so great, that the Government was disposed to avoid it when it could be done, and if these were not transported, it were better, for the sake of morality and economy, to employ, than to keep them in idleness. If they were kept at home they must be fed, and as they were only employed in the docks and on public works, a great saving accrued to the public, without greatly interfering with the employment of other labourers. He would add, that unless they were fed well, their strength would not permit them to fulfil the labour which they had to perform.'<sup>38</sup>

Fires there certainly were during the year: one is reported in a barn at Westbrook, near Margate (east Kent) in September,<sup>39</sup> and another

<sup>34</sup> *MJ*, 27 January, 1829.

<sup>35</sup> *MJ*, 12 February, 1828.

<sup>36</sup> *MJ*, 10 June, 1828.

<sup>37</sup> *MJ*, 23 October, 1827.

<sup>38</sup> *MJ*, 10 June, 1828.

<sup>39</sup> *MJ*, 23 September, 1828.

at Bromley (west Kent) in October.<sup>40</sup> The words in which the fire at Bromley is described are particularly revealing, as they make clear that there is already considerable feeling against threshing machines, and also that their destruction was neither a new thing nor unexpected:

'A barn filled with wheat, belonging to a Mr Cranfield, a wafer manufacturer, whose country residence is about a mile beyond Bromley, in Kent, towards the village of Hayes, was discovered on fire at 9 o'clock on Thursday evening . . . Property to a considerable extent has been destroyed. It is supposed that some maliciously disposed person set fire to the thrashing machine, which was in the barn, as the flames were seen bursting forth in that direction.'

Similar ominous events recur throughout 1829. The winter months are again characterised by descriptions of 'alleviations' of the sufferings of the poor in both east and west Kent: by Lord Sondes at Lees Court,<sup>41</sup> by the Reverend Richard Warde at Ditton,<sup>42</sup> by Sir William Garrow and I.A. Warre, Esq., at St Lawrence, Ramsgate.<sup>43</sup> Soup is distributed to nearly one hundred poor families at Matfield after 200 children have been regaled on beef and plum puddings at Matfield Green Chapel,<sup>44</sup> the Soup, Bread and Coal Society resumes its operations in Rochester and the neighbourhood,<sup>45</sup> *The Maidstone Journal* issues its appeal on behalf of the starving fishermen of Queenborough.<sup>46</sup>

February brings accounts of numerous burglaries and 'outrages', particularly in the Bromley area.<sup>47</sup> £100 is offered for information leading to conviction in the case of a violent attack on premises at Mount Noddy, near Westerham, where stones have been thrown through windows, pistols let off, gates and posts torn up and an uninhabited cottage very badly damaged.<sup>48</sup> Rochester, as well as doling out soup and tickets for bread, finds it necessary to call a public meeting with regard to better protection against the depredations of thieves.<sup>49</sup> Hadlow, too, in April, calls the first meeting of its Prosecuting Society.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>40</sup> *MJ*, 14 October, 1828.

<sup>41</sup> *MJ*, 6 January, 1829.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *MJ*, 13 January, 1829.

<sup>44</sup> *MJ*, 6 January, 1829.

<sup>45</sup> *MJ*, 20 January, 1829.

<sup>46</sup> *MJ*, 13 and 27 January, 1829.

<sup>47</sup> *MJ*, 24 February, 1829.

<sup>48</sup> *MJ*, 17 February, 1829.

<sup>49</sup> *MJ*, 24 February, 1829.

<sup>50</sup> *MJ*, 21 April, 1829.



The keen interest in Kent in the reception now being accorded to threshing machines is shown by two items relating to other counties. The issue of 3 February, 1829, carries a report of the destruction at Stambourne, in Essex, of a threshing machine let out for hire.<sup>51</sup> In September, there is an account of a locomotive threshing machine at Alnwick, Northumberland, (described as a 'metal elephant', which 'ascended the hill to the gate majestically slow, at a rate of about three miles an hour') which ends optimistically:

'It is pleasing to contemplate that the slavery of the horse is now drawing to an end, and that in a few years we may double or treble our population, for the lands which now grow oats for horses may then be applied to grow wheat for men. *Vive la mécanique* (sic)!'

To this, the *Maidstone Journal's* editor adds the troubled comment:

'We would also say *Vive la mécanique* if it will enable us to appropriate that corn to feed the poor which is now consumed by beasts, but mechanics had better never be known if they are to *supplant human labour*, and thus increase the distress of our *unemployed and half famished labourers*.'<sup>52</sup>

Fires this year are reported as occurring at Aylesbury, Bucks., in May, where a parish officer (as so often) is the victim,<sup>53</sup> and in the autumn, at Blean Common<sup>54</sup> and at Cuckfield, near East Grinstead,<sup>55</sup> while in November there is a spate of fires in the Isle of Sheppey, near Sheerness,<sup>56</sup> where barns, lodges<sup>57</sup> and stacks of wheat are repeatedly destroyed, and in connection with which a reward of £200 is later offered. In December, the theatre at Ramsgate is destroyed by a fire for which 'no cause can be assigned'.<sup>58</sup>

Throughout the year, and particularly in the winter months which open and close it, the greatest distress is again revealed, not only in the county but in the whole country. The disturbances consequent on the distressed state of the silk-weaving areas of Spitalfields and Macclesfield, with considerable destruction of property and looms, are mentioned several times in the paper.<sup>59</sup> A letter from a Streatham

<sup>51</sup> *MJ*, 3 February, 1829.

<sup>52</sup> *MJ*, 22 September, 1829.

<sup>53</sup> *MJ*, 12 May, 1829.

<sup>54</sup> *MJ*, 13 October, 1829.

<sup>55</sup> *MJ*, 20 October, 1829.

<sup>56</sup> *MJ*, 3 and 10 November, 1829.

<sup>57</sup> See note 11.

<sup>58</sup> *MJ*, 8 December, 1829. Greenwich Theatre also was to be destroyed by fire, in mysterious circumstances, in January 1831. *MJ*, 18 January, 1831.

<sup>59</sup> *MJ*, 5, 12 and 26 May, 1829.

resident, in June, speaks of the labourers of England as being in a 'state of utter destitution and hopelessness'.<sup>60</sup> In May the paper publishes details of a plan which, it is said, is 'sanctioned by the magistrates of Oxfordshire and Northamptonshire', and also adopted in other counties, for the regulation of the poor, who are described as 'those countless shoals of indigent, whose squalid looks and destitute condition meet us, whether in town or country, at every turning'.<sup>61</sup> Another leading article, in November, deals with 'affording relief in a *suitable* and *effectual* manner', and comes down against pecuniary relief, preferring a system of tickets, exchangeable against a loaf and a night's lodgings, which, says the paper, has been put into effect 'with the greatest success in Bath, Ipswich, and other large towns'.<sup>62</sup>

However, in spite of *The Maidstone Journal's* stand against relief in the form of money, which it saw as 'giving a bounty on mendicity, encouraging vagrancy, and taking from its objects every inducement to obtain an honest and respectable livelihood', the paper should not be condemned as reactionary. It was not radical, and did not have the vision to recommend the total re-ordering of society, which would have swept away the vast inequalities which were the root cause of the distress. But it made no attempt to cover up the existing state of affairs, and gave ample space to reports of meetings and petitions, such as that of 8 December (in connection with a desired repeal of the Malt Tax)<sup>63</sup> which did not mince matters when describing the 'present overwhelming distress' and the 'dreadful state of suffering and degradation' among the 'labouring and industrious classes of the community'.

The same can be said of the magistracy of the county as has been said of *The Maidstone Journal*. As a body the magistrates probably knew as well as anyone the full extent of the misery in Kent, and by individual acts of charity, and by their support of institutions calculated to improve the lot of the poor (under the system as it then existed) such as dispensaries, savings banks, benefit societies, and the like, they may be said to have worked actively to try to head off the disaster which they saw looming. Sir Edward Knatchbull, Bt., the chairman of the East Kent Quarter Sessions from 1819 to 1835 and also one of the Kent M.P.s, although far from radical, was extremely active in the House of Commons in presenting petitions which spoke plainly of the distressed state of the county. The end of 1829 is

<sup>60</sup> *MJ*, 2 June, 1829.

<sup>61</sup> *MJ*, 5 May, 1829.

<sup>62</sup> *MJ*, 24 November, 1829.

<sup>63</sup> *MJ*, 8 December, 1829.

marked by a letter sent by the gentlemen of the Grand Jury of the Kent Winter Assizes (county magistrates almost to a man, and some of the most distinguished members of Kent society among them) to the Duke of Wellington, the then Prime Minister, in a desperate attempt to alert the government to the plight of the county of Kent. The text of the letter was published in *The Maidstone Journal* twice, on 22 and 29 December. In it the magistrates speak of

'the deep and unprecedented distress which, from our personal and local knowledge, we are enabled to state prevails among all classes throughout this county, to a degree that must not only be ruinous to the interests of individuals, but must also, at no distant period, be attended with serious consequences to the national prosperity.'<sup>64</sup>

The insurrections of 1830 can have come as no surprise to his Majesty's Justices of the Peace for the county of Kent. Indeed, in the light of the views of the gentlemen of the Grand Jury, so powerfully expressed, it is understandable that the magistrates of east Kent should have been unwilling to impose heavy sentences on the first batch of machine breakers who came before them in October of the following year.

## 1830

1830 is undeniably the year when distress and insurrection, as the magistrates had predicted, could be contained no longer. In *The Maidstone Journal*, February and March are characterised by the numerous references to the widespread distress in the county. The issue for 2 February carries an article headed 'Distress of the Country', which agonises over the very prevalent 'distress . . . at this inclement season', but endeavours to take comfort from the fact that 'those whom Providence has blessed with abundance do not fail to mitigate the sufferings of the poor as far as possible'.<sup>65</sup> *The Maidstone Journal*, in line with the main body of Kentish agriculturalists at this time, goes on to attack 'free trade', the temporary admission of foreign corn and the suspension (since 1827) of the Corn Law of 1815, which it saw as tending to exacerbate rather than relieve the situation. Meanwhile, individual and parish relief continued. In

<sup>64</sup> *MJ*, 22 and 29 December, 1829. This letter is mentioned in the Hammonds' *Village Labourer*, but they were unable to give a date for it or state where the full text could be found. J.L. and B. Hammond, *The Village Labourer 1760-1832*, 4th Edn. (1927), 229.

<sup>65</sup> *MJ*, 2 February, 1830.

Sevenoaks there were 'increased exertions of the committee for supplying the poor in this parish with coals', the correspondent adding that 'the greatest praise is due to them for the liberal manner in which they have supplied above 400 families (once or sometimes twice a week) with faggots, and from one to two bushels of coal, at about half the cost price'.<sup>66</sup>

Even at this late stage, not every county saw the cause of the distress as something outside the control of the labourers. Part of the text of a letter from the Lord Lieutenant of Buckinghamshire to his magistrates was quoted in *The Maidstone Journal* for 9 February: it dealt with the necessity of putting the poor to work:

'The Magistrates will soon find that the demand for relief will rapidly diminish when it is found that it will be given only in exchange for work.'<sup>67</sup>

In Kent, however, the situation could no longer be viewed so simplistically. The issue of the newspaper for 2 March carried a requisition to the High Sheriff of Kent, Edward Rice, to call a meeting of the freeholders of the county to petition the King and the two Houses of Parliament on 'the severe distress with which the County is now afflicted'. But it was already too late: a few days earlier a shot had been fired into the parlour of the Bull Inn, Benenden, where the parish vestry was holding a meeting, and effectively broken up its proceedings.<sup>68</sup> Thereafter, in spite of an apparent slight lull in the spring – although it is impossible to know how many small incidents went unreported – the number of disturbances and protests was to escalate as the year wore on.

There was no cessation in the attempts of the county authorities to have the worsening situation recognised officially. The County Meeting was duly held on Penenden Heath, and reported on at length in *The Maidstone Journal*, which commented that 'not an individual attempted to hint a doubt as to the existence of distress',<sup>69</sup> and on 29 March the resulting petition was presented in the House of Commons by Sir Edward Knatchbull.<sup>70</sup> The issue of 13 April carries a searing report of the distress in Deptford Dockyard due to what is called the 'breaking up' of the naval arsenal there, and the removal of all government work from it: from a report of a public meeting held

<sup>66</sup> *MJ*, 9 February, 1830.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *MJ*, 2 March, 1830; see also 20 April, 1830.

<sup>69</sup> *MJ*, 16 March, 1830.

<sup>70</sup> *MJ*, 6 April, 1830.

here later in the year, we can see that the magistrates took a close interest in this.<sup>71</sup> On 18 May, a meeting of 'Overseers and Churchwardens of Parishes in the County of Kent', is called for the 27th of that month at the Bull Inn, Maidstone,<sup>72</sup> and on 1 June the newspaper carries the wording of the resulting memorial to be presented by a deputation of parish officers to the Lords of his Majesty's Treasury.<sup>73</sup> A few days later the memorial was presented to Henry Goulburn, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, in person, by a deputation consisting of parish officers from Ulcombe, Headcorn, Sutton, Smarden and Mereworth, who were introduced by Sir Edward Knatchbull. The deputation described the situation in their own parishes, and the Chancellor, according to the report,

'appeared surprised at the information, and said he was not aware that any district had been so distressed as was represented. The deputation assured the Chancellor that the statement was strictly correct, and in this they were confirmed by Sir Edward Knatchbull.'<sup>74</sup>

June was to see the beginning of the mischief on a serious scale. Although not reported until later, when at the Kent Summer Assizes a lad of 17 (who was acquitted) was charged with arson at the farms of a Mr Mosyer and a Mr Voules, there were several fires in the Orpington area in early June.<sup>75</sup> At the beginning of July, according to a report appearing only in *The Kentish Gazette*, there had been a very bad fire at the farm of Samuel Love, in Shoreham,<sup>76</sup> and on 22 July, at Farningham, a stack of straw belonging to Charles Colyer was set on fire and a threatening letter found near it.<sup>77</sup> On 10 August, *The Maidstone Journal* carried a report taken from *The Kentish Gazette* of a fire which had occurred near Ashford in the parish of Great Chart towards the end of July,<sup>78</sup> and throughout that month fires seem to have been occurring in the Orpington and Brasted areas. In September, we read of the formation at Sevenoaks of an association for the detection of incendiaries,<sup>79</sup> and there is also a report, enlarged on the following week in a letter reprinted from *The Brighton Gazette*, on

<sup>71</sup> *MJ*, 13 April, 1830; see also 19 October, 1830.

<sup>72</sup> *MJ*, 18 May, 1830.

<sup>73</sup> *MJ*, 1 June, 1830.

<sup>74</sup> *MJ*, 15 June, 1830.

<sup>75</sup> *MJ*, 10 August, 1830.

<sup>76</sup> *The Kentish Gazette*, 6 July, 1830.

<sup>77</sup> *MJ*, 27 July, 1830.

<sup>78</sup> *MJ*, 10 August, 1830.

<sup>79</sup> *MJ*, 14 September, 1830.

fires in the area.<sup>80</sup> More threatening letters are mentioned (although there is no reference to Swing at this time) and appear to have been sent to a number of well-to-do people in the area: Mrs. Hubble, of Ide Hill, Mr Morphew, of Sevenoaks, and Peter Nouaille, of Greatness silk mill.

The same issue carries a report of a riot and the destruction of threshing machines at Hardres and in the neighbourhood on the evening of Sunday, 29 August.<sup>81</sup> Little resistance appears to have been offered here, but fears by its owner, William Dodd, that Hardres Court was to be attacked on the following day, and that the civil power would be unable to quell the attackers, brought two of the county magistrates, Richard Halford and General Frederick Mulcaster, together with a number of special constables, to the spot. Thirty of the 7th Dragoons were also sent from Canterbury to follow the magistrates, although it was not intended that these should be used unless and until 'the civil power should be overpowered by the mob'. The alarm proved unfounded, however, and in the words of the report, 'after waiting some hours without observing any rioters, they returned home'. It is worth noting that the number given as having gathered to destroy threshing machines on the Sunday, of around 400, does not appear to have been exceeded or even equalled by any other reported mob in Kent during the whole of the Swing riots, except for the November meeting called on Penenden Heath, for which *The Maidstone Journal* put the figure at around 400, and *The Kentish Gazette* at 'upwards of 500', although each paper admitted that its figure was inclusive of onlookers and local 'mechanics'.<sup>82</sup>

There was now a rapid increase both in cases of arson and the destruction of threshing machines. October brings reports of fires at Ash, near Sandwich, Lyminge, Hadlow, Otford (where a threshing machine went up in the conflagration), Borden, near Sittingbourne, Stockbury, and in the vicinity of Cobham Hall, the residence of the Earl of Darnley.<sup>83</sup> Threshing machines are broken in Sturry and Hougham,<sup>84</sup> and are generally being put out in fields for taking apart by the labourers, when they were not infrequently stripped of their ironwork and then set on fire. A letter from a correspondent in the issue of 19 October states that some 60 such machines have now been

<sup>80</sup> *MJ*, 14 and 21 September, 1830.

<sup>81</sup> *MJ*, 7 September, 1830.

<sup>82</sup> *MJ*, 2 November, 1830; *The Kentish Gazette*, 5 November, 1830.

<sup>83</sup> *MJ*, October 1830, *passim*.

<sup>84</sup> *MJ*, 12 October, 1830.

destroyed. Significantly, there is another anti-vestry riot, when a meeting of the vestry is rudely and roughly interrupted at Ulcombe.<sup>85</sup>

Although not apparently reported in *The Maidstone Journal*, October had seen the start of some noisy gatherings of labourers.<sup>86</sup> November opens with a long notice inserted in *The Maidstone Journal* by the justices of the county, admitting that unemployment is the cause of the riots (and in dealing with the first batch of machine breakers at the East Kent Michaelmas Sessions in October, Sir Edward Knatchbull, chairman of the bench, had accepted the magistrates' statutory duty to find employment for the unemployed),<sup>87</sup> but expressing a determination to suppress illegal assemblies.<sup>88</sup>

The papers this month carry reports of numerous fires: at Salutation Farm, near Sandwich, at Selling Court, at Lenham, Monkton, Orpington, Greenhithe, Isle of Grain, Chatham, Canterbury, Hythe, Preston, near Faversham, Newington, Boughton, Hernhill, between Margate and Ramsgate, at Allen Court Farm, at Boughton Monchelsea and at Alland Grange.<sup>89</sup> Machines are broken at Charing and Lenham, and, interestingly, there are threats to destroy ploughs.<sup>90</sup> Riots or wage-meetings appear to have been held in some thirty places, the majority of them in the eastern part of west Kent. Disturbances frequently take place within a group of neighbouring parishes, as at Charing and Lenham; Hollingbourne, Langley and Sutton; Hadlow, East and West Peckham, Nettlestead and Yalding; Meopham and Ash. Mass meetings are held in Hawkhurst and the adjoining parishes, demanding higher wages and a proportionate rise in parish relief, work or no work. In Maidstone there is a strike of papermakers, and a meeting, already referred to, on Penenden Heath.<sup>91</sup> In Wrotham, a confrontation takes place between the labourers and the rector, the Reverend George Moore, with demands for a considerable reduction in his tithes, and there is clear evidence here (which was recognised at the trial of William Harding and James Buss, both labourers, and George Ayling, a shoemaker, at Quarter Sessions the following January) that the farmers were encouraging the labourers to take up this matter. However, the Wrotham encounter developed into a brief siege of the vestrymen in

<sup>85</sup> *MJ*, 26 October, 1830.

<sup>86</sup> Kent Archives Office: Q/SBw/124.

<sup>87</sup> *MJ*, 26 October, 1830.

<sup>88</sup> *MJ*, 2 November, 1830.

<sup>89</sup> *MJ*, November 1830, *passim*.

<sup>90</sup> *MJ*, 2 November, 1830.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

the church, with the assistant overseer put in a cart and uncere-  
moniously wheeled to the parish boundary and back again. Apart  
from the insult offered to the dignity of a parish officer neither  
damage nor injury was done, and the crowd had dispersed before the  
soldiery arrived.<sup>92</sup> At Sutton, near Langley, the crowd's spokesman  
was a journeyman bootmaker named Adams, who addressed the  
magistrates, who were doubtless mounted on horseback, also moun-  
ted – on another man's shoulders.<sup>93</sup>

By 23 November, although the disturbances were by no means  
over, *The Maidstone Journal* could report that all now seemed quiet  
in the western part of the county, and, on 30 November, that the  
whole county had, for a week, been in a state of 'perfect tran-  
quillity'.<sup>94</sup>

Naturally, some late November disturbances only came to light at  
the beginning of December – one of them the riot at Wrotham  
already mentioned. Another was an incident in which two farmers,  
on the horse-patrol which had become common during the night in  
many parishes to deter and detect incendiaries, had been shot at in  
the parish of Hoath, near Canterbury. Whitehall was moved to offer  
a reward of £50 in connection with this.<sup>95</sup> December also witnessed  
fires at Aylesford, at Brompton, Boughton Hill, Hernhill, Kingston,  
between Hadlow and Tonbridge, at Charing and Wingham. And the  
year ended with the partial destruction of Lewisham church, reluc-  
tantly conceded, in the New Year, to be the work of incendiaries.<sup>96</sup>

After October, when nine men, who appear to have given them-  
selves up, were charged with machine-breaking in east Kent, the  
regular courts (and several special sessions) held over the next few  
months dealt with a number of prisoners in connection with the  
disturbances. The indictments were mainly for machine-breaking and  
for rioting – relatively few of the arsonists were caught, in spite of  
large rewards offered by the government for information leading to  
conviction. The disturbances, nevertheless, died out slowly, arson  
occurring sporadically throughout 1831, and one of the last sufferers  
in that year being William Cork, the overseer of Ulcombe, who had  
chaired the deputation which met the Chancellor of the Exchequer  
some eighteen months earlier: his double-floored barn, with a quantity  
of wheat, pease and oats, went up in flames in December 1831.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>92</sup> *MJ*, 7 December, 1830; 11 January, 1831.

<sup>93</sup> *MJ*, 2 November, 1830.

<sup>94</sup> *MJ*, 23 and 30 November, 1830.

<sup>95</sup> *MJ*, 7 December, 1830.

<sup>96</sup> *MJ*, 28 December, 1830.

<sup>97</sup> *MJ*, 27 December, 1831.



## THE SEARCH FOR 'SWING'

Was there a 'Captain Swing'? Most of the men sentenced were labourers: it is hard to point to any leaders among them. Of the 26 men who came before the magistrates at the East Kent Special Sessions held in November, all but one, a shoemaker, were labourers.<sup>98</sup> Of eight men charged at the West Kent Epiphany Sessions in 1831, six were labourers, one a shoemaker, and one, Robert Price, a former seaman, who certainly acted the part of leader in risings in Stockbury, Yalding and East Malling, on three separate occasions – for which he paid with a total of five years' hard labour in the house of correction.<sup>99</sup> It is true that there are occasional mentions of shadowy, only half-seen leaders: the trial which came on at the Kent Winter Assizes, for a fairly brutal raid on Alland Court for the purpose of machine-breaking, contained a reference to 'General Moore' – but this was probably the George Moore of the trial, sentenced, with his three accomplices, to seven years' transportation.<sup>100</sup> At the November Special Sessions in east Kent, a trial for machine-breaking at Wingham brought a reference to 'the man in the white hat', who was said to have given instructions, and to have settled any bills owing to the publicans.<sup>101</sup> The court does not seem to have followed this will-o'-the-wisp, however.

The first mention of 'Swing' in *The Maidstone Journal*, in early October 1830, comes in the following dispatch from Dover:

'Anonymous letters, signed 'Swing', have been received by post, by two individuals in this town, threatening the destruction of their premises by fire, which has caused great alarm in the families. The dead walls all through the town, and for some miles on the road to Canterbury, all bear the same significant word, 'Swing', written in chalk, and it may turn out applicable to some of the authors of the threats.'<sup>102</sup>

Apart from this, *The Maidstone Journal* appears to have made no reference to Swing the man, Captain or otherwise.

*The Kentish Chronicle*, on the other hand, carried at least two reports of his arrest. The first of these, dated 30 November, was in fact the arrest at Challock of John Field, or Dyke, who had been wanted in connection with a fire at Bearsted, and who was apprehended by the superintendent of the Maidstone police, Mr Faucitt.<sup>103</sup>

<sup>98</sup> Kent Archives Office: Q/SBe/120, 121.

<sup>99</sup> Kent Archives Office: Q/SBw/124.

<sup>100</sup> *MJ*, 21 December, 1830.

<sup>101</sup> *MJ*, 30 November, 1830.

<sup>102</sup> *MJ*, 12 October, 1830.

<sup>103</sup> *The Kentish Chronicle*, 30 November, 1830.

Field appears to have been a local man, who was to be convicted and left for hanging by the Kent Winter Assizes. Baulked of its prey, *The Kentish Chronicle* unearthed another 'Captain Swing' a month later, when it reported his arrest at Bury, in Suffolk.<sup>104</sup>

More thoughtfully, a correspondent in *The Kentish Gazette*, discussing the possibility of 'premeditation and concert' in the labourers' risings, had the following to say:

'No evidence, however, has yet been heard of any combination or association for the purpose, and except that throughout the county there appears a common spirit of maliciousness against the employment of threshing machines, and a universal complaint of want of work and low wages, there is no ground to suppose that the agents of these atrocities have a common connection. One fact militates only with the supposition - the fact alluded to is, that all the threatening letters are signed *Swing* - the representative I suppose of the Irish Captain Rock, so famous for similar outrages.'<sup>105</sup>

There is little doubt that 'Captain Swing' became a useful symbol both for the spirit of the uprisings and for an unknown, perhaps mythical, leader, the implication of swinging from the gallows adding a further lurid colour to the name. It seems quite possible, however, that this is a totally false interpretation of the word. In December, in the aftermath of the worst outbreaks, *The Maidstone Journal* carried the following small item of information:

'The ambiguous cognomen, Swing, is a term used by haymakers; when the party at work stop to sharpen their scythes, and are prepared to resume their labours, the signal for commencing all together is given by one who acts as leader of the party, calling out - 'Swing'.<sup>106</sup>

It is an accepted fact today that unions whose members are widely dispersed, and often employed under a wide variety of conditions, have little chance of achieving their ends. Similarly, the small, relatively isolated groups of Kentish agricultural labourers of 1830 were contained and suppressed without much difficulty by the established forces of law and order (directed from Whitehall rather than from Maidstone or Canterbury). But if the meaning given to 'Swing' by *The Maidstone Journal* is correct, it reveals a belief in the power of combined action, in solidarity, which was in line with the developing theories of trade unionism. There is no apparent evidence of initiatory rites or 'twisting in'; but perhaps there was no need of this: when the time came they were all haymakers. 'Swing' may well have been a symbol to the labourers themselves of rather more harmony and dignity than it is often crudely represented to be.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 28 December, 1830.

<sup>105</sup> *The Kentish Gazette*, 2 November, 1830.

<sup>106</sup> *MJ*, 14 December, 1830.

## CONCLUSIONS

This account of the incidents reported in *The Maidstone Journal* over the years 1827–1830 reveals a clear build-up to the events of 1830. Arson and the destruction of threshing machines, both in isolation and together, are already features of the Kentish scene, and we find local and county authorities very much aware, by the end of 1829, that an explosion of some sort is imminent. There is also a relatively high incidence of attacks on vestries or vestrymen, as the lowest level of authority with which labourers had dealings, and definite evidence of labourers being encouraged by farmers to assist in pressing for a reduction in tithes.

In addition, the picture revealed by this west Kent newspaper seems to call for a reassessment of the views commonly held on the Kentish disturbances in three areas. In the first place, considerable distress and disaffection are found in dockland and fishing areas at this time, and these should certainly not be left unexamined in searching for cause and source of what became principally an agricultural movement. In the second, the attitude of the magistrates, including their lenient sentencing of the first machine breakers, gains in coherence when it is seen to stem from their understanding of the general background against which riots occurred, and their explicit recognition of 'the right to work'.

In the third place, if the real meaning of 'Swing' is indeed 'All together, now!', as the brief mention in *The Maidstone Journal* would seem to suggest, the riots should be seen, not, *pace* Hobsbawm and Rudé, as something forlorn and 'archaic',<sup>107</sup> but as something far more in keeping with the temper of the times, and within the context of the burgeoning trade union movements of the first third of the nineteenth century. While no evidence seems to have come to light of the organisation which characterised trade unions even at this early period, the use of violence, conversely, to intimidate masters was frequently brought into play where it was thought it would be effective, and was therefore a latent characteristic of many such movements. Organisation may have appeared an insuperable problem in hamlet England, not to be tackled by unionists for another forty years, but the impulse towards united action displayed in the Swing riots, with their attempts to improve employment prospects and wages, ought to be sufficient to make us ask whether Swing did not perhaps become a movement rather than remaining simply a riot.

<sup>107</sup> Hobsbawm and Rudé, *op. cit.*, 19, 292.