

3. 1830 RIOTS IN THE SOUTH EASTERN COUNTIES¹²

By 1830, working conditions were worse than before the Napoleonic Wars and workers were suffering from *"appallingly low wages, bad conditions and incredibly long hours of work"*. The recently introduced threshing machine deprived them of one of their main sources of winter work and, faced with a generally uncaring ruling class they took matters into their own hands.

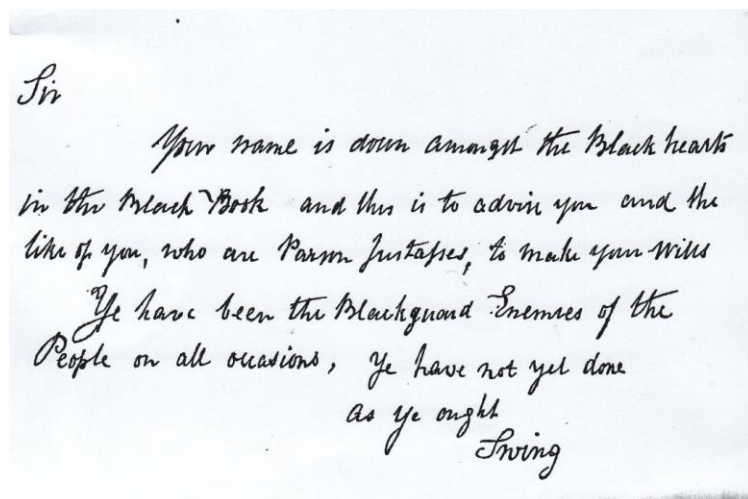
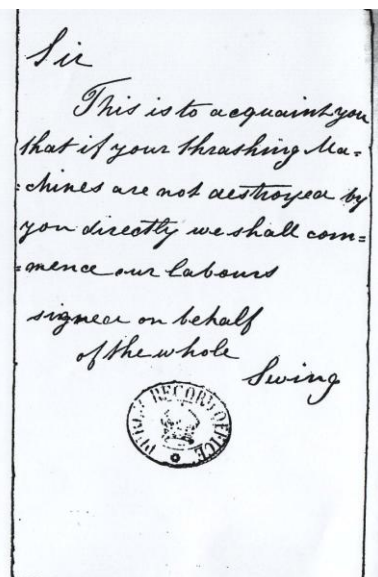
The normally passive and quietly suffering labourers had had enough. Despite those in Wiltshire and Dorset being the lowest paid in England (some receiving only 8/- per week compared with 10/- to 12/- elsewhere) the pressure for increased wages started in Kent.

What became known as the "Swing Riots" started on 28 August with a threshing machine being destroyed at Lower Hadres in Kent. The French revolution in July had no doubt excited the labourers but their main motivation was simply for a fair wage. Despite the isolated attempts of extreme radicals, there was no organised plot or co-ordination between these and later outbreaks.

Breaking of threshing machines was a feature of the rising but it was only one of a number of ways that used to draw attention to the cause. In Kent where the movement first started and persisted the longest, there were five noticeable phases: arson; threatening (or Swing) letters; wages meetings; attacks on justices or overseers; and riotous assemblies to extract money or provisions or to enforce a reduction of rents or tithes.

The riots came to be known as the Captain Swing Riots because of a number of letters and notices sent about which were signed "Captain Swing" or just "Swing". The identity of the person or persons responsible for these letters was never established.

Mystery surrounds the name of the "Captain Swing" who is supposed to have written several of the letters sent to farmers and others. These were first mentioned by *The Times* on 21 October. It is generally thought that the name was simply adopted to puzzle those to whom the letters were sent, and to instill fear into them by its overtones of hanging.



Two Swing Letters

¹ The Swing Riots Around Burbage www.burbage-wiltshire.co.uk

² Captain Swing E J Hobsbawn & George Rude

Most letters threatened arson as a reprisal. Some seem to be the work of disgruntled individuals, perhaps to settle a private grudge. According to *The Times* on 29 November 1830, the boys at Eton wrote one as a joke, to protest to the Headmaster about excessive use of the "threshing machine", or birch.

Few (if any) writers were brought to trial, so it is not known how many letters were real or fake. Some were evidently written by educated people, but some were written in a deliberately illiterate style. Relatively few are likely to have been from the labourers themselves. This seems especially true in the context of the high levels of illiteracy:

<i>Illiteracy in the Swing Counties 1838/39 (per cent)</i> ³			
Beds.	60	Wilts. Essex	50
Herts.	55	Oxon, Cambs, Suffolk	49
Hunts.	51	Bucks.	48

These were gross underestimates since they were based the numbers signing the marriage registers with a mark and this was not an effective test of literacy. In practice, and especially among farm labourers, ignorance was much greater. A report from Buckinghamshire suggested that of adult labourers and their wives, one in six could read and one in ten could write.

Until the middle of November the rising was confined to Kent, Sussex and parts of Surrey, with occasional fires and threatening letters in neighbouring counties. After that time the disturbances became more serious, spreading not only to the West of Sussex, but to Berkshire, Hampshire, and Wiltshire. On 22nd November the Duke of Buckingham wrote from Adington in Hampshire to the Duke of Wellington:

'Nothing can be worse than the state of this neighbourhood. I may say that this part of the country is wholly in the hands of the rebels. 1500 rioters are to assemble to-morrow morning, and will attack any farmhouses where there are threshing machines. They go about levying contributions on every gentleman's house. There are very few magistrates; and what there are completely cowed. In short, something decisive must instantly be done.'

The risings in these counties differed in some respects from the rising in Kent and Sussex. The disturbances were more a sudden and spontaneous explosion. They lasted only about a week, and were well described in a report of Colonel Brotherton, one of the two military experts sent by Lord Melbourne to Wiltshire to advise the magistrates. He wrote on 28th November:

'The insurrectionary movement seems to be directed by no plan or system, but merely actuated by the spontaneous feeling of the peasantry and quite at random.'

The labourers went about in larger numbers, combining with the destruction of threshing machines, the demand for higher wages, and a claim for 'satisfaction' as they called it in the form of ready money.

³ Captain Swing E J Hobsbawn & George Rude