

4. THE WILTSHIRE RIOTS¹²

The Wiltshire labourers like those in other counties were drawn into the riots by the activities emanating in neighbouring Hampshire and Berkshire. But they also had their own particular local grievances which served as an immediate spur to action.

The wages demanded in these counties were 2s. a day, whereas the demands in Kent and usually in Sussex had been for 2s 6d or 2s. 3d. Wages had fallen to a lower level in Hampshire, Berkshire and Wiltshire. Wages in Wiltshire were notoriously low. The normal weekly rate for an able bodied man in full employment in Wiltshire was 7s.or 8s in winter or 8s or 9s in summer, and Colonel Mair, the second officer sent down by the Home Office, reported that wages were sometimes as low as 6s. It is therefore not surprising to learn that in two parishes the labourers instead of asking for 2s a day, asked only for 8s or 9s a week.

A letter to *The Times* from Melksham Wilts at the end of November claimed that there were fifty poor men in the parish without wife or children who were working for 8d per day. Henry Hunt, an MP, who traveled through Wiltshire related how he was told on 20 November "*We don't want to do any mischief, but we want that poor children when they go to bed should have a full belly of tatoes instead of crying with half a belly full.*"

Given these conditions the labourers' attentions settled on threshing machines, and in Wiltshire, more than in any other county, these became the rioters' main target. After the riots, 97 of the 208 indictments related to the destruction of agricultural machinery.

The first threshing machine was broken on 21st November at All Cannings followed by another at Hippenscombe. However, the number of breakings escalated over the subsequent days with 15 on 22nd, 12 on 23rd and 11 on 24th November. The Yeoman Cavalry had been called out and many arrests had already been made.

On 25 November there were riots and machine breaking in Wiltshire at about 8 locations including Boyton, Hindon, Tisbury, Tollard Royal, Fonthill Gifford, Fonthill Bishop.

Samuel Harford was born at Heytesbury and there were riots and breakings in that area on 25th November. His convict records also show that his "Native Place" was Tisbury. However, we believe that this may have resulted from a misinterpretation or mishearing of his response to the question of where he lived. Tisbury and Heytesbury were located quite close to each other and it was the events at both of these places on 25th November which are seen as being the climax of the Wiltshire riots.

RIOTS AT TISBURY³⁴

The riot which attracted most attention and was the most sensational and bloody of all the Wiltshire riots took place at Pyt House, John Benett's estate in the Parish of Tisbury on 25 November, 1830. John Benett, was a Member of Parliament for the county, a local magistrate and a well-known local figure who had given evidence before several Committees on Poor Laws.

Benett had no sympathy for the labourers before a Poor Law Committee of 1817 he threatened to pull down his labourer's cottages. It did not matter to him how far a labourer walked to his work: '*I have many labourers coming three miles to my farm every morning during the winter, (the hours were six to six) and they are the most punctual persons we have.*' At the time he gave this evidence, he stated that about

¹ Captain Swing EJ Hobsbawn & George Rude

² The Swing Riots Around Burbage www.burbage-wiltshire.co.uk

³ The Village Labourer J.L. and Barbara Hammond Ch10 P156

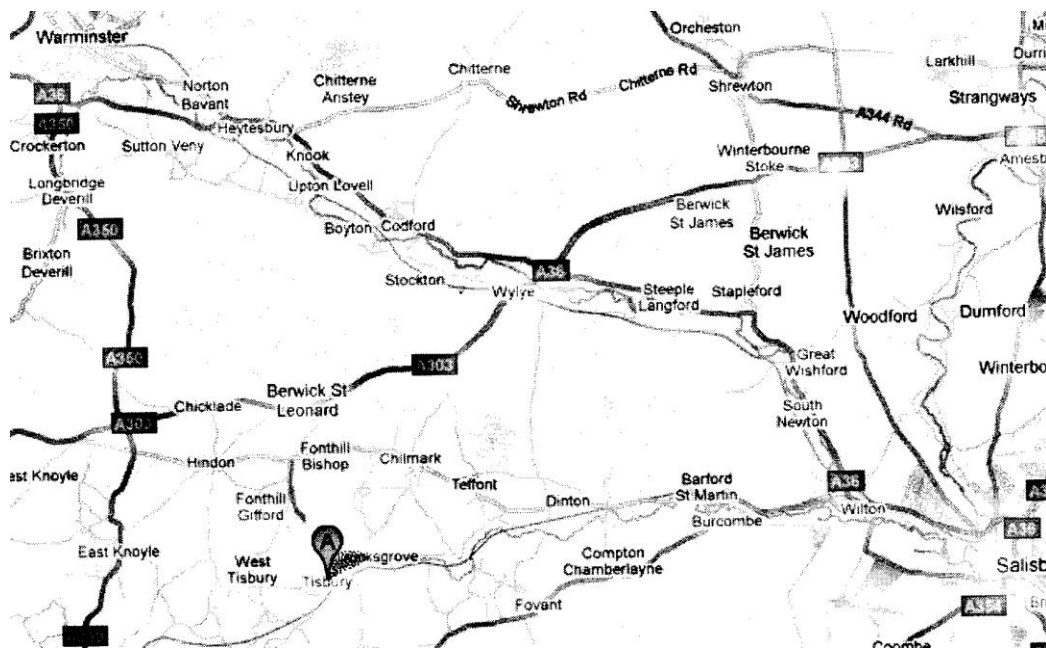
⁴ Wiltshire Machine Breakers Vol. 1 Jill Chambers

three-quarters of the labouring population in his parish of Tisbury received relief from the poor rates and he declared that it was useless to let them have small parcels of land.

The condition of the poor had not improved in Mr. Benett's parish between 1817 and 1830, and Lord Arundel, who lived in it, described it as '*a Parish in which the Poor have been more oppressed and are in greater misery as a whole than any Parish in the Kingdom*'.

It is not surprising that when the news of what had been achieved in Kent and Sussex spread west to Wiltshire, the labourers of Tisbury rose to demand 2s. a day, and to destroy the threshing machines. A mob of five hundred persons gathered, and their first act was to destroy a threshing machine, with the sanction of the owner, Mr. Turner, who sat by on horseback, watching them.

Afterwards they proceeded to the Pyt House estate. Mr. Benett was aroused by James Jay, his bailiff, at about seven o'clock with a report that the rioters were coming from Hindon *with the avowed purpose of destroying a factory and also threshing machines*". He rode to meet them with his steward Arthur Legge and a servant, Thomas Ball, shortly after nine o'clock. They found some 400 labourers at the lime kiln at Fonthill Gifford about half a mile from Hindon. Many had armed themselves mostly with sticks but some had hatchets and hammers.



Tisbury relative to Heytesbury & Salisbury

Benett owned two large threshing machines one at Pyt House, worked by six horses and the other worked by water at his Linley Farm close by. The rioters behaved politely but firmly, telling him their intentions that they wanted 2s a day in wages and that "*they would break all the threshing machines, and mine among the rest*". He tried to divide them by threats and appeals and he read out a newly issued Royal proclamation. This proclamation promised a reward of 50 Pounds to anyone who offered information that resulted in the capture of a machine breaker and 500 Pounds for an incendiary. The men insisted they had nothing to do with incendiaries.

'I then,' said Mr. Benett afterwards, *'pointed out to them that they could not trust each other, for any man, I said, by informing against ten of you will obtain at once £500.'* As it happened, the half starved,

degraded and brutalized Wiltshire labourers had a different standard of honour from that imagined by this magistrate and Member of Parliament, and they rejected the temptation to inform on one another.

They went on to Fonthill Gifford where they broke machines belonging to Mr. Candy and Mr. Lampard and they attacked a blacksmith's shop and armed themselves with bludgeons and crowbars. They destroyed a stable and barn and moved on to Lawn Farm and then moved on the Pyt House where they were again met by Mr. Benett.

After destroying the threshing machines on Mr. Benett's farms, they refused to disperse and after a good deal of sharp language from Mr. Benett, they threw stones at him, one of which hit him between the eyes. Mr. Legge, his steward, was also hit in the face by a stone.

At half past ten the Hindon troop of Yeoman Cavalry, of 48 men, marched out of Salisbury. Despite proceeding with all possible speed it arrived too late to prevent Mr. Benett's machines being destroyed. They came up and engaged the rioters in the wood adjoining the Pyt House farm.

The Yeomen received orders to fire blank cartridges above the heads of the mob. This only produced laughter but they began to charge and the mob took shelter in the plantations around Pyt House. The troop divided into two groups one going around to attack from another side. The skirmish had been going about half an hour before the Yeomenry opened fire on the men in the plantation. The mob fought with hatchets, hammers, pick axes, sticks, stones and pieces of broken machinery. They engaged in hand to hand fighting for about 20 minutes before they broke and fled in all directions, pursued by the Yeomanry.

One of the rioters, John Harding, was shot dead and many others were wounded. Twenty five were taken prisoner. None of the Yeomen were killed but Captain Wyndham was wounded on the face and head and many of the troopers were badly cut and bruised. A wagon and cart were procured to take the prisoners to Fisherton Gaol.

The whole troop escorted the prisoners to Fonthill Park where Corporal King with a detachment of 15 men returned to Pyt House where they mounted a guard all night. The remainder of the troop went on to Barford. From information received there it was thought necessary to send Sergeant Goddard and nine men back to Mr. King's at Chilmark. The remainder of the troop escorted the prisoners to Fisherton Gaol arriving there around midnight. Those prisoners that were badly wounded were taken to the infirmary and the others were lodged in the gaol. The troop having delivered their charges returned to their headquarters at Salisbury.

One of the wagon drivers was John Brickle who worked as a carter for Mr Benett and we have his account of the event:

"We had to get our farm horses and wagons and take them to Salisbury- and the blood did trickle out of the wagons- the whole way to Salisbury- I was carter and drove the first wagon. When we got to the Black Horse at Chilmark they did cry out for summat to drink poor fellows but the Cavalry wouldn't let 'em have nothing-they wouldn't. It were an awful cold night and were most shramm'd with the frost-and some of 'em couldn't wag a but. When we got to Salisbury we took one load to Firmary and t'others to jail".

At the inquest at Tisbury on the man John Harding, who was killed, the jury returned a verdict of justifiable homicide, and the coroner refused to grant a warrant for burial, saying that the man's action was equivalent to *felo de se* (One who kills himself doing an illegal act). Henry Hunt stated later in the House of Commons that the foreman of the jury was the father of one of the yeomen. Local tradition has it that Harding was killed by a farmer before the Yeomen Cavalry arrived.

RIOTS AT HEYTESBURY

On the evening of 24th November, Colonel a'Court, a local magistrate, had met a mob at Heytesbury and proceeded to give them a warning to disperse. At seven o'clock the next morning a mob began to assemble ignoring the previous warning. When Colonel a'Court arrived shortly after, the crowd had grown to eighty or ninety standing in a dense mass. He was able to identify Bartlett, Munday, Beminster, Hunt and **Harford**. Colonel a'Court tried to dissuade them from assembling but when this had no effect he read the Riot Act.

This proclaimed:

"Our Sovereign Lord the King chargeth and commandeth all Persons here assembled immediately to disperse themselves, and peaceably to depart to their Habitations or to their lawful Business upon the pains contained in the Act made in the first year of King George for preventing tumults and riotous assemblies.

God Save the King.

The mob moved out of Heytesbury around nine o'clock telling Colonel a'Court they were going to Knook to have the cider that farmer Parnham had promised them. Colonel a'Court went with them but at Knook he left them after they told him that they would keep the peace and separate after they had drunk their cider.

About two hours later Colonel a'Court was told the mob had not separated and was on the road to Corton. He sent for the assistance of the Yeoman Cavalry and the Special Constables, telling them to meet him at Corton. Colonel a'Court met the mob on the Corton road. It now numbered about 30 and when he arrived they were deciding which turn to take. Many of them had armed themselves with sticks, hammers, axes and other weapons. Some of them carried parts of broken threshing machines.

Colonel a'Court noticed a change in the temper of the mob from what had been shown in the morning. He begged them to desist and told them he would mark everyone who was there. The more he spoke, the more they hooted and having made their decision they took the road to Ambrose Patient's farm, at Boyton, arriving there at about 12 o'clock. William Bartlett appeared to be their leader. He cheered them on and gave commands which were passed on by William Munday. Colonel a'Court followed the mob to Mr. Patient's.

Mr. Patient had two threshing machines, but had dismantled them, and in common with many other farmers, had left the parts of one near his house so it could be seen that he was no longer using the machines.

Mr. Patient asked them the reason for wanting to break threshing machines as they could see he had already dissembled them. They gave no reason but one of the men, **Samuel Harford**, said that he had come to break the machine and break it he would, and he asked Mr. Patient where the cylinder was.

"It is with the rest of the machine" answered Mr. Patient. *"But I advise you not to break the machine. If you do you will repent it"*

They ignored Mr. Patient's warning and the presence of Colonel a'Court, and proceeded to break up the pieces of the dismantled machines. When he saw they were determined to break the machine, Mr. Patient returned to his house where he had left his wife and children.

Having completed their destruction, the mob followed him to the house and demanded beer and cider, which at first he refused to give them. They told him they had been given half a hogshead of cider by another farmer whose machine they had broken and they must have the same from him. Colonel a'Court

pushed his horse through the mob to Mr. Patient and warned him, at his peril, not to give them any cider. Mr. Patient said he was forced to do so.

Colonel a'Court followed the mob to another farm where they broke another machine and when he left them he heard them say that they would go to Sutton which was about a mile and a half from where they were. (This was the place where Samuel's son Stephen was baptized just two months later).

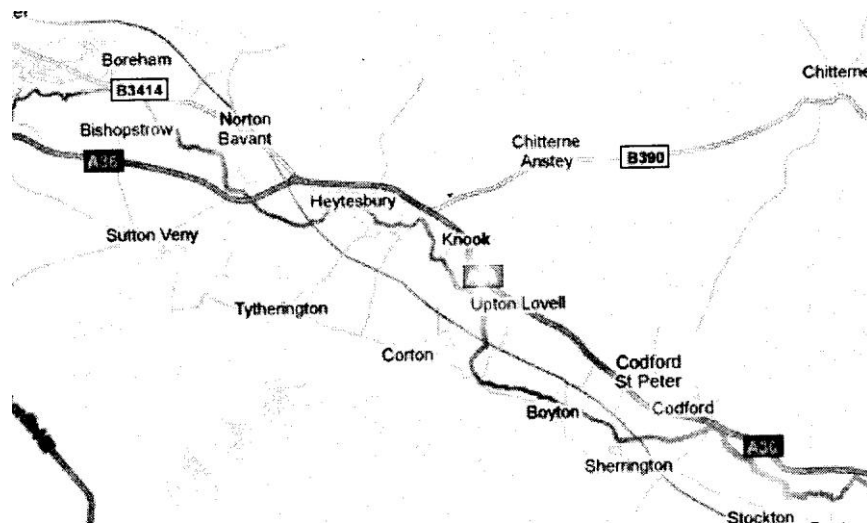
Shortly after, the mob saw the approaching Yeoman Cavalry and Special Constables. Many of them crossed the river (Wylde) in the hope of getting away. They then dammed up a portion of the stream and made it very difficult for the troop to get at them. Some time was spent dodging about the water meadows before 21 of the rioters were captured.

Colonel a'Court ordered them to be taken to Devizes and said that he would send there to ask for an escort to meet them at Erlestoke. By this time, the river had risen considerably due to the dam the rioters had made at Codford and Captain Long found it impossible to re-cross the river and had to march around by way of Warminster.

They arrived at Warminster at about five o'clock to find the turnpike gates closed against them and a number of rioters, having arrived there before them, made an attempt to rescue the prisoners. Stones and other missiles were thrown at the troop but they were eventually able to force their way through and went on to Erlestoke.

Finding no one waiting for him there, Captain Long sent his prisoners on with an escort of a sergeant and 12 men, while he returned to Warminster where he found things so threatening he applied for further assistance from Devizes.

At least two other rioters were taken in their homes by Colonel a'Court.



Heytesbury and neighbouring places