

A RURAL RIDE THROUGH THE HARD PARISHES: A STUDY ON THE MID HAMPSHIRE CHALKLANDS PRIOR TO THE SWING RIOTS

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ABSTRACT

The period leading to the 1830 Swing riots was a time both of social and technological change and of post war depression and overpopulation for the agriculture based Hampshire economy. As conditions deteriorated William Cobbett, a farmer and reforming radical, reported on the developing tensions in his weekly paper, the Political Register. The chalkland farmers were to be described as the finest in the county, but Cobbett sought to champion the 'wretches' they employed. Balancing Cobbett's Rural Rides with estate records, this study looks at the Hard Parishes in the Dever valley, so called by Cobbett because of the difficult nature of the land combined with the attitude of some farmers towards the labourer. Perhaps because of this these parishes, where Cobbett's paper was enthusiastically read, were among the most politically active in Hampshire.

Locals believe there is a spot in Micheldever churchyard where the snow never lies. This is on the grave of a youth hanged in Winchester prison. A labouring woman recalled the hanging of Henry Cook in 1831 and vowed 'you may depend upon it, it will never be forgot, all round about here, to the end of the world' (Dyck 1992, 152). However the dramatic events which led the young man to the gallows are not so widely known although the disturbances have earned a place in popular history. Because of the signature on letters sent to intended victims these became known as the Captain Swing riots.

Starting in Kent, the riots swept across southern and eastern England and the government, alarmed at their contagious spread in areas not given to collective action, responded with severity. In Hampshire between 10 and 26 November 1830 the despair and frustration of agricultural labourers, faced with low wages or unemployment,

erupted in violence against property and in particular by the breaking of the threshing machine which was a symbol of their distress. In 1834 a royal commission heard that the cause of the riots was 'the want of good feeling which used to exist between the Farmer and the Labourer' and William Cobbett (1762-1835) shared this opinion (Afton 1987, 241). At one time a farmer from Botley, he was also the editor of a radical journal the *Political Register*, but always proudly called himself a 'chopstick', a name that Cobbett applied to all rural manual classes. His paper was intended for the common man. He had been distressed by the poverty of cottagers on enclosed commons and set out to educate the rural workers in the ways of making their grievances known and redressed (Dyck 1992, 35).

In the 1820s he began a series of rural rides to gather information to support his views for publication in the journal. Cobbett's aim was to observe and record the struggle he felt was developing between the labourer, the new-fashioned farmer and the landowner, while warning of the consequences if his message was not heard. In 1830 some of these narratives were published as *Rural Rides* and provide a view of the countryside unique in its straightforward airing of Cobbett's prejudices and his biased political arguments. These views were combined with a close identification for the condition of the labourers and an informed appreciation of the agriculture where they worked. Cobbett often returned to Hampshire because of a strong love for 'those countries of chalk, flint and dry-top soil with hard roads and high bare hills ... with clumps of lofty trees'. He pitied those who saw the downs as 'naked and barren' and fled from them 'as from pestilence' (Cobbett 1985, 289). However he also found those labourers with

'that haggard look so painful to my eyes' in what were locally called the Hard Parishes of the Dever valley (Dyck 1992, 112).

Henry Cook's home was in Micheldever, one of those hard parishes that stand on the chalklands a few miles north of Winchester. W Marshall observed of this area in his *Rural Economy* (1790s) that 'the almost only eligible sites for towns and villages were in the deeper vallies not so much on account of the shelter they afford, as the water they furnish and the lines of demarcation were drawn across the vallies, to give each township its proportionate share of high and low, of fertile and infertile lands' (Naish 1960, 208). Typical of these were the parishes of Micheldever, Stoke Charity, Hunton, and Wonston that followed the river Dever as it flowed west through Bullington to join the river Test beyond Barton Stacey. It was in the rolling arable lands of the Micheldever valley, where the agriculture was advanced, that Cobbett had found large farms and those hungry labourers (Dyck 1992, 112).

There were two main reasons why Cobbett considered these parishes hard. The first was the nature of the downland where the shallow soil on solid chalk offered little natural resource; the second was the attitude of the farmer towards the labourer. Water was scarce and the Dever was a valuable commodity. Unfortunately the water meadows at Wonston and Stoke Charity were on badly drained peaty soil and too expensive to keep up, thus depriving the parishes of a valuable asset (Naish 1960, 356). Woods and coppice were important for fuel and employment on the chalklands – Cobbett felt the hazel underwood produced the finest wattles he had ever seen – but again it was a scarce and hard won resource (Cobbett 1985, 44). At Bullington, for example, the coppice of wood had to wait fifteen years against the usual ten years (Naish 1960, 369). On a Monday morning in October 1825 William Cobbett set off to ride from Winchester to Whitchurch. The fine views and free hunting country with no hedges for some eight miles impressed him, but while he admired the majestic downland he was also aware of the hardships for the labourers living there. Cobbett felt they were 'greatly worse off than those of the woodland countries' because, through the loss of access to

common rights, 'they suffer from want of fuel and have only their *bare pay*' (Cobbett 1985, 258). It was the low wage that many farmers were prepared to pay their workers that angered Cobbett. At Stoke Charity he stopped at an old farmhouse, now the home of a labourer, to beg a greatly enjoyed 'hunch' of bread and cheese. The labourer's wife explained that she had to buy bread because of lack of fuel to bake. Cobbett calculated fuel could cost a quarter of their earnings, making nourishing meals expensive, even if they could afford ingredients (*ibid* 259). The near-by parish of Barton Stacey had no woodland apart from plantation shelter belts and withies in the river valley, meaning wood must be imported (Naish 1960, 375). Their overseers' accounts 1809–24 regularly list people in receipt of faggots for fuel (HRO 60/M70/P03). Furze had also been a useful source of fuel and William Cobbett deplored the effect of enclosures on the downs that removed this resource from the labourer. However records show that the furze-covered downland at Stoke Charity had been ploughed in 1726/7, so the villagers would have long ago adapted to the loss (Naish 1960, 131). Nevertheless it was one more factor that made life so bitter for some in the hard parishes. Moreover the Hampshire economy was heavily dependent on agriculture and thus suffered in the early 19th-century depression.

William Cobbett observed that the poorer the soil the better off the labourer. On commons that had escaped the enclosure bills, such as the Mildmay estates on poor soil south of Winchester, there were smaller farms with abundant commons and woods and he thought the cottagers 'happy and well'. This was in marked contrast to a popular contemporary view expressed by William Gilpin, who saw them as 'an indolent race, poor and wretched in the extreme' (Dyck 1992, 112). Whatever the perspective, the steady advance of enclosures did undoubtedly influence the rural workforce. Some contemporaries were aware of other changes. A farmer wrote in 1802 of 'a time of very material change, not only by the rapid progress made in the real knowledge of the art itself, but also by the introduction of many new implements of husbandry, calculated to facilitate the operations necessary in the cultivation of the soil' (Naish 1960, 216). These changes were

fuelled by demand generated during the French Wars 1793–1815 and by a population explosion, which successfully encouraged the farming industry to increase productivity. This was achieved by accelerating a movement that can be traced back to the 16th century, or even earlier, as agriculture emerged from the subsistence open-field system to farming for the market. It was this transition that was to prove difficult for some of the local population in the hard parishes.

Of this area Defoe had written in the early 18th century that from Winchester the traveller passed over the most charming plains with vast flocks of sheep (*ibid*, 116). However the move to convert down to arable, achieved by a change in sheep husbandry and the introduction of fodder crops such as turnips, was already underway. This change was also observed by Defoe, who noted that the number of sheep was falling as the down became 'turned into arable land and sowed with wheat' (Jones 1974, 26). Stimulated by the demand for wheat, even the marginal downland found in parishes such as at Stoke Charity was enclosed and mainly converted to arable by the 19th century. As an open parish, wheat could be grown only once in six years, but the farm accounts of J Reynolds illustrate the profit-motive driving the changes. In 1728 a balance of £166.15.0*d* was increased to £306.12.10*d* in the following year after the down was broken (Naish 1960, 132). William Cobbett expressed concern that the ten farms of the parish had been reduced to two and estimated as a consequence that at least fifty people must be close to starvation because of the changes. He blamed the system that crushed the little proprietor down into labourers and paupers. This progress, he felt, must come to a dreadful end when even the natives in 'this obscure village of Stoke Charity' would rise (Cobbett 1985, 266).

At the western end of the hard parishes, Barton Stacey had been enclosed in 1755 by private agreement between the Lord and tenants because the arable was 'situated inconveniently to the severall proprietors and thereby rendered incapable of improvement' (Naish 1960, 147). As was usual, the Lord and in this case his son received larger allotments because of extensive rights of common and were apportioned the whole of the downs and pasture. They were of course in a better position

to stand the expense of converting the down to arable. Charles Vancouver in an 1810 survey of Hampshire farms pointed out how uneconomic it was to farm the land high on the down. The solution was to create new buildings complete with wells and dew ponds for the sheep (*ibid* 316). The frequent use of such names as New Barn or 'Down' as in Borough Down Farm at Micheldever illustrate this innovation.

By the time William Cobbett made his ride towards Whitchurch in 1825, the nearby Barton Stacey downs had been converted into three arable farms with beech shelter belts. The provision of roads and water that was demanded by these conversions represented considerable investment by the landlord. This was reflected in the increased value of the land; it was reported in 1801 that downs worth 2*s.* per acre as sheep feed became worth 12*s.* as arable (*ibid* 279). The outlay was hopefully recouped by creating a far more attractive renting proposition and the large chalkland farms, sometimes extending over 1000 acres, were preferred by men of capital as the dry soils enabled them to keep stock at lower cost. This part of Hampshire became known as 'the land of gentlemen farmers' and these were the great farmers identified by Cobbett as 'having 40–100 wretches at home' to maintain their investment (Dyck 1992, 67).

Back in 1800 it was perhaps the good investment potential, combined with social prestige, that attracted the Barings, an international banking family, to purchase an estate with land in Stratton, Micheldever and Popham. The power and wealth of the Barings can be imagined from the comment of the Duc de Richelieu 'there are six great powers in Europe – England, France, Russia, Austria, Prussia and the Baring Brothers' (Colson 1937, 165). Despite their eminence they did typify the new-fashioned landowners and their tenant farmers that, in the view of William Cobbett, created the 'want of good feeling'. He felt they used their enhanced wartime wealth in expressions of conspicuous consumption such as large houses with fine parks and gardens, while perhaps becoming remote from the labourers' experience of pauperism and low real wages (Dyck 1993, 188). Indeed Alexander Baring was to remodel the Grange at Northington and surround it with 530 acres of gardens and parkland. To the eye of William

Cobbett, in 1822, the enclosure and plantation of the downland lacked good taste and totally defaced the beauty of the estate with badly planted, dying trees (Cobbett 1985, 44).

Despite the 'new implements of husbandry', introduced during the rapid changes in agriculture to increase production, it is possible that the huge new chalkland farms provided large-scale employment. Arthur Young (1741–1820), an agriculturist, had noted 'the great numbers of men that ... are constantly employed in hedging and ditching' and 'labour-intensive crops ... which involved the use of more hands in their cultivation' (Mingay 1997, 145). The word 'constantly' could be significant, as the seasonality of farmwork was a feature that often caused problems for the community. Notwithstanding Young's comments, it is now argued by revisionists that increased productivity was often achieved by efficiency rather than by providing labour opportunities (Turner 1984, 83). There is also evidence that leading up to the 1830s the demand for labourers might have been curtailed. This was because of a swing back to a larger acreage of pasture in response to the 'great price sheep bring', as John Twynam of nearby Whitchurch explained to the select committee on Agricultural Distress in 1837 (Naish 1960, 259).

A glimpse into the employment opportunities in part of the hard parishes can be found in the Micheldever vestry book. Inside the back cover is an undated list of employers and labourers. This was possibly drawn up after the February 1834 vestry meeting which called for 'a list of labourers in employ of each Rate payer' in order that the unemployed could be assigned to those with the least employees *pro rata* to the rate paid. There are 14 farmers listed with a total of 158 labourers plus 9 noted as not in regular employment. Thomas Dowden employed the largest number with 30 labourers and while three farmers had about 20 men or boys, four supported only one (HRO 7M80/PV1). Bearing in mind Cobbett's view of the number of 'wretches' needed to run the chalkland farms, it would have been useful to know the sizes of the holdings involved. Over a decade later, the 1848 Micheldever Tithe Awards map does show acreage, but it is disappointing to find that the Baring estate is omitted because tithes had been commuted earlier. However Thomas Dow-

den is shown as tenant of 371 acres at Warren Farm, Weston. The only smallholder shown is William Waterman with 3 acres of meadow and orchards among the large arable holdings (HRO F7/156/1–2).

Riding through Micheldever in November 1825, William Cobbett ruminated on the changes of the past ten years. In his opinion the Baring family had swallowed up 30 or 40 small gentry without noticing the small farmers 'in their bellies' of which 'not a few will actually come to the 'parish-book' (Cobbett 1985, 270). However, comparing surveys of the Micheldever estate dated 1775 and 1799, it is possible to see that the changes had mostly taken place by the time Sir Francis Baring bought the estates from the Duke of Bedford. They illustrate how Weston Farm of 1,086 acres in 38 lots had engrossed six separate holdings of 303 lots during the 24-year period. A further four farms roughly doubled their acreage, while the overall lots shrank from 1,104 to 126. East Stratton saw 14 freehold and tenant farmers reduced to three during the same period (Milner 1924, 244–5). In 1784 Carew Gauntlett, a Winchester wine merchant, sold 116 acres in Weston to the Bedford estate (HRO 4M62/108–122). The 1799 surveyor noted a 'vast improvement by general exchange and inclosure of lands and purchase of the Gauntlett's farm was of great consequence'. The survey lists four old farmhouses on the Weston Farm including the Gauntlett farmhouse that was occupied by the son of the tenant William Dowden (HRO 92M95/F8/5/6). As the surveyor had noted and the Bedford estate records in the Hampshire Record Office reveal, many purchases of land took place, particularly during the 1780s, as a farrier, a butcher, a blacksmith and several yeoman among others, sold up (HRO 4M62/108–304 *passim*). In fact this was also the period when the open field system was abolished as Micheldever Northbrook, Micheldever Southbrook and West Stratton were enclosed by agreement in 1783 with Weston following in 1788 (Chapman & Seeliger 1997, 53). Cobbett's view of the small farmer being dispossessed has been described as romantic. The events around Micheldever do suggest a loss of opportunity as holdings were engrossed, albeit this may have happened earlier than he estimated.

As Cobbett suggested might be the case at Stoke Charity, perhaps some like William Dowden the tenant of Weston Farm grasped the opportunity to expand and profit from the wealth being generated, while others sold up or slipped down the hierarchical ladder. From the landowners' point of view one reason for not taking up the challenge of improving land was the cost of enclosure which was borne by them. This could have been prohibitive on a small parcel of land. Revisionists argue that the cost of enclosing small allotments could be as high as £12 per acre, so perhaps many had little choice when letting go of their land (Turner 1984, 59). Cobbett's prejudice against the new landowners may have led him arbitrarily to apportion blame, but the surveys do confirm that the Micheldever holdings were greatly reduced over one generation, with obvious implications for 'the small fry' that so concerned him. E L Jones suggests that the small tenant farmer and labourer who had rented property were often converted into workers, perhaps unable to meet the increased rent which the landlord would need to charge to cover expenses (Jones 1974, 101). Many besides Cobbett remarked on this movement at the time. A report in the *General View of Agriculture in Berkshire* (1813) noted 'good servants every year are more scarce. The good domestics used to be among the sons and daughters of little farmers ... but since that valuable order of men has been so generally reduced in every county, almost annihilated in some, servants are of necessity taken from a lower description of persons' (Hobsbawm & Rudé 1969, 41). The poet Robert Southey, in *Letters from England*, (1807) mourned the loss of the yeoman and described them as 'above the labourers, though labourers themselves' (Southey 1985, 113). At Broughton, a parish a few miles west of Winchester, the poor rate was halved in the year following the enclosure award of 1790, but soared in subsequent years (Jones 1974, 100). This does substantiate the argument of Michael Turner that the cottagers and other common right owners were the first to sell up their allotments (Turner 1984, 82). In 1801 Arthur Young had been appalled at the increased poverty he felt caused by the loss of access to land (Mingay 1997, 154). William Cobbett also deplored enclosures, but condemned the farmer that, in his view, paid

low wages and took advantage of the Poor Laws. However he put the real blame on the 'taxing system' which 'in a dreadful progress ... took the little gentleman's estate, the little farmer's farm and made the labourers' paupers' (Cobbett 1985 266). During this period of rapid change in agriculture there were many factors which combined to cause the rural unrest which, as Cobbett warned, would force even the obscure village of Stoke Charity to rise.

The progress of change by the improving movement had stimulated a general interest in agriculture and the Board of Agriculture had been established in 1793. In this environment the wealthy landowners and their knowledgeable tenants were able to bring about a revolution in the farming practices of the hard parishes. They were perhaps better placed to weather the long depression that followed the French Wars than the small farmer who had often over-extended on capital commitments to convert marginal land at the time of high corn prices. Unfortunately, as William Cobbett was seeking to emphasise, their communities were faced with an intractable problem; too many labourers were unable to support themselves on their wages, even if they could obtain sporadic work. Ironically the industry initially experienced difficulties in finding suitable workers. Between 1801-1811 Barton Stacey, Bullington and Hunton experienced net losses of population, probably due to the migration which Hobsbawm and Rudé identify as normal in agricultural counties up to this period (Hobsbawm & Rudé 1969, 43). At that time Southey wrote that 'the country is mostly down, recently enclosed and of wonderfully thin population in comparison of the culture. Indeed harvest here depends upon a temporary emigration of the western clothiers' (Jones 1974, 35). So rural workers probably did not anticipate employment problems.

In 1802 Thomas Edwards of Hunton had to engage soldiers to reap his wheat, although it should be noted that the harvest fell during the Peace of Amiens when service men seeking work led to complaints that farmers were unwilling to employ available labour (*ibid* 34). A reason for their preference can be found in the charge that employers were recorded as voicing 'serious accusations of indolence against the Hampshire

labourer'; it was noted that he often left work at 3.30 in the afternoon even in the summer (VCH 1973, 502). Cobbett grieved that no allowance was made for the starving labourer's odd temper. He felt he understood and illustrated this by a trivial incident on that ride through Stoke Charity. He discovered how tetchy missing breakfast could make a man when he unfairly snapped at his son over a broken saddle leather. Cobbett guiltily realised that the snack they had enjoyed would be more than a labourer and his family of 4 or 5 children could afford to eat in a day (Cobbett 1985, 260). He calculated that if a labourer worked every day of the year at 12s a week he and his family must die unless supported by the parish (Dyck 1992, 35).

Initially, during the first decades of the 19th century, the rural workers in the Dever valley may have been encouraged by the rise in wages that appeared to take place in order to compete with Portsmouth or Southampton for young, able-bodied workers (VCH 1973, 502). This increasing cost of labour during the war might have caused investment in the threshing machines, which Charles Vancouver reported to the Board of Agriculture in 1808 'had been erected of late years, and at a very heavy expense, in many parts of this county' (Jones 1974, 35). Threshing could provide work from November to February and might account for 25% of farm labour requirement. Faced with a machine that robbed them of limited winter work these threshing machines became a hated symbol of their distress to the labourers. Many machines were destroyed in the county during the Swing riots – a swing being part of the flail used in manual threshing.

William Cobbett's concern about the farmer's attitude to the labourer, particularly on pay, was perhaps justified by the royal commission findings that a low wage was one of the most commonly cited causes of the Swing revolt. A fellow Botley farmer had cautioned that 'while agriculture has made great strides we must deplore that the social and moral condition of the farm labourer, the machine to carry out improvements, has not kept pace' (Geddes 1981, 55). Keith Snell has shown that in fact real wages fell during the war years (Dyck 1992, 136). The poverty of the labourer is difficult to gauge from contemporary sources;

Vancouver reported to the Board of Agriculture in 1813 that the peasantry in Hampshire was better housed than in many areas. He also confirmed Cobbett's finding of an average wage between 1804–1810 of 12s a week that was generally supplemented by the rates (VCH 1973, 502). This was a common practice even before the Speenhamland allowance system of 1795 and could explain the small part labourers usually played in protest disturbances. They were cushioned against price fluctuations and the seasonal nature of their work. Cobbett also acknowledged that farm workers would take bounty from nature's larder by extra-legal means if forced to do so to obtain a fair living (Dyck 1992, 161).

The concerns voiced by Cobbett and others convey how the old Tudor code that a man must labour and receive a just annual wage, fixed by a local magistrate, was breaking down. Certainly it was a difficult time as Hampshire agriculture struggled with war debts and bad harvests. Contemporaries were also aware of a further factor, that of social change, which may have fuelled rural unrest and can be identified in a song of the labourer,

The farmers and the servants together used to dine,
But now they are in the parlour with their pudding,
beef and wine,
The master and their mistress, their sons and daughters all alone,
And they will eat the beef and you may pick the bone (*ibid* 64)

It was Cobbett's argument that the farmers pianofortes and parlour carpets were bought at the expense of a just annual wage for the labourer (*ibid* 138). Added to these changes came the end of the Wars in 1815, which saw the return of a huge body of men. Estimates range between 250,000 to 400,000 men combined with a population growth to create a surplus of labour in an industry that was experiencing severe economic depression (Hobsbawm & Rudé 1969, 49; Jones 1974, 215). An 1816 report claimed that many farms stood deserted and labourers wandered the county looking for work (VCH 1973, 503). The depth of the depression can be seen at Weyhill Fair near Andover in 1822 where Cobbett described the

mournful countenances of the farmers that reflected their ruinous state. He calculated that where as sheep sellers used to take home £300,000, this was reduced to £70,000 while their overheads remained the same (Cobbett 1985, 58). Despite protective duties tithes, taxes and falling product prices crippled many farmers. Even so many, which were in a position to do so, tried to alleviate the distress of the labourers. A South Warnborough estate considered 50 labourers necessary to cultivate 2,150 acres of arable and 80 acres of pasture, although 70 were actually supported (Simpson 1946, 46).

William Cobbett had thundered that any man that believed in the census figures of 40% population increase must also 'literally believe, that the moon is made of green cheese' (Cobbett 1985, 13). Despite Cobbett's view, it is now estimated that during the period 1800–31 the national increase was approximately 93% (Mingay 1997, 146). The problem of over-manning can perhaps be imagined when considering the population in the parishes that contained the Baring estates. These appear to have grown almost three times faster than the western hard parishes. The early censuses are not completely comparable but taking the figures supplied by the *Victoria County History of Hampshire* the population in Micheldever may have increased by 131% compared with 44.5% in Barton Stacey (VCH 1973, 448). Perhaps people were attracted by the hope of employment offered by the arable conversion of an area which, as Southey observed, had been thinly populated. It would certainly seem that the progressive farmers backed by the wealthy Baring family had created a thriving community. Village craftsmen and traders also benefited from wages in cash and hiring by the day which became the norm. Unfortunately most were to suffer as the economic depression reduced spending power.

The opinion of William Cobbett that the Baring family had swallowed up small landowners, which in turn had forced small farmers onto the 'parish-book' reflected growing concern as the effects of the depression took hold. During the 1820s parishes made strenuous efforts to reduce the rate load on the community and take into account falling food prices. The East Stratton vestry records for 1827 show a reduction of future relief 'as

per scale' from 2s. to 1s.6d. in some cases, but there is a note to 'pay the rent of houses occupied by poor with four children and up' (HRO 7M80/PV1). The ratepayers were probably encouraged to find that after these measures the number receiving relief was halved (Kent 1997, 6). By 1826 there was an average rate payment of 4s. in the pound in Hampshire, but the 1826 Barton Stacey rate book records a frugal 1s. in the pound and might explain their labourers' readiness to radicalism (HRO 60M70/P04). Anthony Anthony who received £2 fluctuating down to 11s and finally £1.1s.0d heads their overseers' account 1817–1825 monthly list. (HRO 60M70/P03). He was one of 26 from the parish to sign the Hard Parish petition sent to the King in September 1830 calling for parliamentary reform; nineteen of whom were subsequently to stand trial for riot (Chambers 1990, 344).

The use of petitions to press for political change was an approach that William Cobbett encouraged among the rural workers. He favoured this action to replace the traditional form of protest by rick-burning, cattle maiming or destroying crops that was experienced by the industry throughout the period (Stevenson 1979, 129). He felt they had much to protest about. In 1830 the Winchester magistrates reduced the allowance of bread and Joseph Carter, the only person from Wonston imprisoned for involvement in the Swing riots, longingly recalled the food provided as better than the usual labourer's diet (Kent 1997, 6; Chambers 1990, 347). Cobbett felt ashamed of a country where the system gave the magistrate power to allow the labouring poor less to live on than the felons in the gaols (Cobbett 1985, 262).

Riding through Stratton on a Sunday in November 1822, Cobbett spoke to a schoolgirl dressed in a camlet gown, white apron and plaid cloak. The girl told him that Lady Baring gave her the clothes and taught her to read. Cobbett felt the motive was good but – in his jaundiced view – it was a queer society that had to educate the poor in order to insure their own safety (Cobbett 1985, 74). Whatever their motive, from the initial purchase of the estate, the Baring family had been aware of obligations to the community and their great wealth put them in a position to act. Examples of an advanced type of workers' cottage dated

1801 can still be seen in Micheldever and Stratton, although any hovels where 'the inhabitants crowd in heaps under the same roof' as seen by Gawler at nearby Abbots Ann have long disappeared (Geddes 1981, 45). There are frequent references to hovels in the 1799 survey. For example Widow John Garrett leased an old timber and thatched cottage in bad repair with two hovels in the garden, although these may have been open sheds for livestock rather than a ramshackle dwelling (HRO 92M95/F8/5/6). From the huge population increase it is easy to imagine this type of habitation would have been prevalent especially for those working on the smaller holdings. A letter addressed to Sir Thomas Baring, the son of Sir Francis, survives from 1825 that conveys an awareness of the housing problems of the labourers. It points out that the cottage rents are 50s. above the level for the rate of pay and while the farmers refuse to pay more for labour, the landlords will not reduce the rent. The writer suggests the parish should consider the erection of cottages to let at affordable rents (HRO 77M95/1/7). A further example of attempts to alleviate poverty in the villages is found in the parish records for 1827. These record that Sir Thomas Baring provided a poor house for the parishes at £1 per annum and land to employ the surplus labourers in cultivation by 'spade husbandry' (HRO 7M80/PV1). William Cobbett felt Sir Thomas Baring would do better to use his influence in his neighbourhood to 'prevent diminution in the wages of labour' (Cobbett 1985, 45).

Cobbett addressed a general warning to Sir Thomas Baring, but it is doubtful if it was heard. An undercurrent of resentment was obviously fermenting in the hard parishes. Isaac Hill, the elder, had his allowance withdrawn after the 1827 Micheldever vestry meeting and was to take a very active part in the coming disturbances (Kent 1997, 6). Most villages had a core of singers and politicians led by a local 'lion', as it was put by a Suffolk labourer, and the hard parishes are thought by some historians as the most politically active in Hampshire (Dyck 1992, 86). 'Orator' Hunt, a renowned radical, had indeed once lived at nearby Overton and was educated for a time near Micheldever (Afton 1988, 247). Hunt and other leading radicals believed the agricultural

workers were too ignorant to include in their urban based platforms, although they were taken seriously as the Swing riots flared across the country (Dyck 1993, 186). It is recorded that at a gathering of the mob in Overton on 18 November 1830 Hunt mediated to avoid violence and obtained an agreement of a rent free 12s a week wage for the labourers (Hobsbawm & Rudé 1993, 118).

Labour disputes during the period have been described as 'collective bargaining by riot' to convey how violence against property was often used to create a platform for negotiation and how the authorities, by being slow to put rioters down, appeared to sanction them (Stevenson 1967, 109). Although there could be initial violence to ensure solidarity, the movement was a mainly disciplined and ritualistic cross-section of the working population. Even in rural areas this would be comprised by at least 25% in non-agricultural trades as was the case in the Swing riots themselves. The trial committals show, where occupation is given, that 36 of the 74 defendants were craftsmen (Afton 1987, 244). The better educated in the community were seen as natural leaders, both by the labourers and the authorities. Such men were William Winkworth, a shoemaker and former constable and Joseph Mason together with his younger brother Robert, sons of a schoolteacher. The brothers put their learning to good effect as leading members of a political club, the Radical and Musical Society. Meetings were held in cottages and alehouses around Bullington where they lived with their mother (Dyck 1992, 171). They certainly acted as spokesmen for the gangs during the riots for which they were to pay a heavy price.

A great deal has been written about the riots that lasted just three days in the hard parishes, from Thursday 18 November to Saturday 20 November. It is perhaps no surprise the picture is one of some confusion as gangs of over 800 men – perhaps the workforce of a dozen large farms together with village craftsmen – went on the march (*ibid* 175). Possibly it was this scale of participation which, like everything else connected with this population, was getting out of proportion, that was to cause such alarm at a once tolerated pre-industrial form of protest.

It had always been a rural practice for men to organise themselves into labour gangs under an elected 'captain'. They would tackle harvest and perhaps more clandestine activities such as poaching parties with the proceeds equally divided among members (Stevenson 1979, 240). There was also a tradition of forming clubs where a treasurer would collect subscriptions to give members insurance against hard times. A popular feature was the Club-Walk, a celebration where members would parade around their 'territory' calling on the middle-class or gentry to collect a 'drink' (Geddes 1981, 46). This may have been the spirit of most in the gangs that marched on Sir Thomas Baring's estate at Stratton on 19 November as they decorated their hair with laurel leaves and looked 'all very gallant'. Demands were made for higher wages but there was a new ingredient noted by Sir Thomas Baring who found 'not distress but a revolutionary spirit at work' (Dyck 1992, 175). Obviously the revolution that year in France had made the authorities in England uneasy and perhaps oversensitive. On the other hand there certainly was a political ingredient as the mob had initially assembled at nearby Sutton Scotney, where the Radical and Musical Society held meetings at the White Swan Inn (Chambers 1996, 19). So there seems a confusion of the festive club-walk with requests for a 'drink' or a levy from the gentry and a political awareness fed by William Cobbett's *Political Register*, which was regularly read at their meetings (Dyck 1992, 171).

It is recorded that William Cobbett tried to influence and communicate directly to the 'chopsticks' through a political network of linkmen, usually local craftsmen, while Hobsbawm observed that rioting parishes often had a high number of shoemakers (Hobsbawm & Rudé 1969, 229). In Micheldever, Sir Thomas Baring described shoemaker William Winkworth as 'most dangerous' and suspected him of being a linkman acting between the parishes (Chambers 1990, 339). Although in the hard parishes 'Captain Swing' letters were not a feature in the disturbances, it is thought a letter from Enos Diddams, another radical shoemaker, sparked off the open revolt when it urged members to stop work and 'break sheens' (Dyck 1992, 175).

Sir Thomas Baring had confused feelings during the riots, being moved by the support of his men forming what they called the 'Spruce body' to protect his home Stratton Park. He was also devastated to find that Stratton and Micheldever 'have been the most active, those I have been most kind to and were best provided for having taken the lead' including members of the Spruce Body (Afton 1988, 114). Certainly the Baring family, with large investments in the area to protect, were very active in rounding up the perceived leaders of the rioters. They made strenuous efforts to make sure an example was set to the local radicals and were described as 'our worst enemy' by the Mason brothers who were transported for their alleged leadership of the rioters (Dyck 1992, 177). Their exhortations from Australia for the struggle to continue did not go unheard and two Barton Stacey rioters were eventually executed for arson in 1832 (Chambers 1990, 71).

The Swing riots flared at a highly sensitive time for the newly elected Whig government, which resulted in harsh treatment for the labourers and their leaders in what was regarded as collective crime. The vow of the old labouring woman that their actions would 'never be forgot' in Micheldever was of course the intention. Selected terror had always been an accepted form of social control by the authorities before the establishment of an official police force, which in fact also took place in 1830. Fearing revolution and unhappy with the leniency of the judicial proceedings in Kent, the government set up a special commission of assize commencing in Winchester. Manipulative lawyers turned the familiar procedure of collecting club-walk money into the crime of robbing or extortion that, unlike machine breaking, carried the death penalty (Hobsbawm & Rudé 1969, 67). Many were shocked by the severity of 101 death penalties, although in fact only three were executed and 117 men were eventually transported. This compares with four executions and 25 transportations in Kent (*ibid* 262). Cobbett lamented 'rural people were not aware that transportation or the gallows awaited them for merely assembling in bands of sturdy beggars and frightening people out of a little money without touching or attempting to touch a hair of their heads to do them harm.' (Dyck 1992, 181).

Tragically, the hard parishes saw one of the few reported physical assaults when Henry Cook, sometimes described as a young unemployed ploughman, tried to fell Sir Thomas Baring's nephew Bingham with a sledge-hammer, an action that was to cost his life. Many blamed the Barings for such a harsh penalty on 'as quiet, civil, honest and industrious a young man as ever lived' as he was later described in Micheldever (*ibid* 181). While *The Times* had a different point of view describing him as heavy and brutish with three months previous for horse maiming (Colson 1937, 186). Whether or not Henry Cook was an innocent victim swept up in the mob hysteria of the moment, his death was ultimately in vain. In the short term it has been thought that the rioters did see an initial improvement in their wage. A farmer in Newton Stacey gave evidence in the Parliamentary report of the select committee on the Andover Union 1846 that there had been a general increase in pay from the time of the riots (Spaul 1975, 10). However a second farmer gave evidence that able-bodied labourers would offer to work for 5s or 6s a week although he allowed them 10s (*ibid* 4). This was despite the chalklands between Winchester and Basingstoke being described as 'the country for gentlemen farmers, the farms are larger, the residences superior, the buildings more adequate, the teams finer, everything on a more liberal scale than elsewhere in the county' (VCH 1973, 504). The husbandry of the improving farmers had allowed the hard parishes to enter into the golden age of farming.

Unfortunately during this period it was generally accepted that distress was, in the words of the

Tory politician Sidmouth, 'regrettable but inevitable', and the establishment felt obliged to react to any class organisation with severity (Stevenson 1979, 206). Certainly the world of Cobbett's happy cottager had passed and it was a stark economic fact that their agriculture could not meet the challenge of the modern industrial Britain. The transition had harsh consequences for many, which Cobbett set out to emphasise as he journeyed through the county. He defined the period leading to the riots as an insoluble struggle, as some farmers provided minimum wages and the labourer responded with just enough work to obtain food (Dyck 1992, 157). This want of good feeling allowed the local radicals to mobilise the rural working gangs and culminated in the Captain Swing riots. Although the events of those three November days in the hard parishes are perhaps long forgot, Cobbett was convinced that Henry Cook's 'blood will never be forgotten' and to this day villagers' of Micheldever still maintain that on his grave the snow never lies (*ibid* 184).

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