

## Lecture 10 handout: rural resistance

### Structure of the lecture:

- Source of the week
- What was rural resistance? – incendiarism, enclosure riots, animal and tree-maiming.
- Bread and Blood and back to Captain Swing

### Rural society and 'weapons of the weak' -

Keith Snell - 'deferential bitterness'<sup>1</sup>

James C. Scott – 'weapons of the weak', 'hidden transcripts'<sup>2</sup>

### What was rural resistance?

- Was there a distinction between overt and covert protest?.....  
1723 Black Act made poaching a crime punishable by death.
- Incendiarism.....
- Enclosure riots.....

*Northampton Mercury*, 29 July 1765 –

'West Haddon, Northants, July 27<sup>th</sup> 1765. This is to give notice to all Gentlemen Gamesters and Well Wishers to the Cause New In Hand, that there will be a foot-ball play in the fields of Haddon on Thursday 1<sup>st</sup> day of August for a Prize of considerable value...'

*Northampton Mercury*, 5 August 1765 –

'On Thursday and Friday last a great number of People being assembled there, in order to play a Football Match, soon after meeting formed themselves into a Tumultuous Mob, and pulled up and burnt the fences designed for the Inclosure of that Field...'<sup>3</sup>

- Animal and tree maiming.....

1820 Malicious Trespass Act, 1824 Vagrancy Act, and 1827 Larceny Act contained provisions which provided summary trial for stealing or damaging plants, fruits, vegetables in gardens and orchards.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Keith Snell, 'Deferential bitterness; the social outlook for rural proleteriats in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England and Wales', in Michael Bush, ed., *Social orders and social classes in Europe since 1500: studies in social stratification* (Harlow, 1992), pp. 158-184.

<sup>2</sup> James C. Scott, *Weapons of the weak everyday forms of peasant resistance* (Yale, 1985)

<sup>3</sup> J.M. Neeson, *Commoners, Common Right, Enclosure and Social Change in England, 1700-1820* (Cambridge, 1996), 191.

<sup>4</sup> Hay and Snyder, *Policing and Prosecution in Britain*, p. 142.

**Role of ritual and custom -**

- disguise: .....
- levying and perambulating .....
- adornment – .....
- a named leader or officials – .....
- effigies – .....
- 'rough' music .....
- mock violence .....<sup>5</sup>

= **charivari**.....

**East Anglian 'Bread and Blood' Riots 1816**

*Bury & Norwich Post*, 28 May 1816

I have just returned from the place where the rioters have assembled to the amount of 200 people armed with implements of agriculture as weapons. Last night they destroyed Mr John Smith's threshing machines then this morning they visited Mr Robert Smith's farm at Byton Hall and destroyed a plough on a new construction.

On Friday last there was a crowd of nearly 200, armed with axes, saws, spades etc, when they entered the village of Gt Bardfield with the intention of destroying threshing machines, mole ploughs etc, they made their attack on the premises of Mr Philip Spicer who had the spirit and resolution to defend his property with the assistance of 20 of his neighbours who were unarmed and by the Waterloo movement got between the rioters and the barn where the machines were and they wisely retreated.

**Custom and the poor law**

Swing riots 1830-2.....

Began on 29 August 1830 at Hardres in Kent, where 400 labourers destroyed some threshing machines and later fired the hayricks of an unpopular farmer and magistrate. The agitation spread to Sussex, Hampshire, Wiltshire and Dorset, across the rest of the South and then north.

- burning hay and grain stacks
- attacking threshing machines
- threatening letters signed 'Captain Swing'
- going from house to house demanding money

Eric Hobsbawm and George Rude, *Captain Swing* (1969)

<sup>5</sup> Graham Seal, 'Tradition and Agrarian Protest in Nineteenth Century England and Wales', *Folklore*, 99: 2 (1988), 150; Alun Howkins and Linda Merricks, 'Wee be black as hell: Ritual, Disguise and Rebellion', *Rural History*, 4: 1 (1993), 41-7.

New studies – regionalism, arson more common than machine breaking, ‘moral economy’ in relation to Speenhamland and the old poor law system.

Rebecca riots 1840s.....

**Further reading:**

- John E. Archer, *By a flash and a scare: incendiarism, animal maiming, and poaching in East Anglia 1815-1870* (Oxford, 1990)
- Poole, Steve, "A lasting and salutary warning": Incendiarism, Rural Order and England's Last Scene of Crime Execution,' *Rural History*, 19:2 (2008), 163-77
- Wells, Roger E., 'The development of the English rural proletariat and social protest 1700-1850', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 6 (1979), 115-39;
- Charlesworth, Andrew, 'The development of the English rural proletariat and social protest, 1700-1850: a comment', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 8 (1980), 101-11.
- Carl Griffin, 'Cut Down by Some Cowardly Miscreants: Plant Maiming, or the Malicious Cutting of Flora, as an Act of Protest in Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Rural England', *Rural History*, 19: 1 (2008), 29-54