The Swing Riots, 1830

‘Sir, your name is down amongst the Black Hearts in the Black Book and this is to advise you and the like of you to make your wills. The lane down to your farm is dark. We will light it’.

In 1830 rural England was quite literally set alight by the discontent of common people. This was a period of great change in Britain. New farming techniques and mechanisation combined to place significant pressure on the livelihood of the country’s poorest and it was not long before they reacted to this strain.

The main issue was caused by a process known as ‘enclosure’. This created much larger farms and enabled food production rates that could better support the country’s growing urban population. Whilst this was obviously good for industrial communities, those that worked the land faced terrible hardship.

There was much for rural workers to be unhappy about. They were forced off common land, lost privileges and were forced to work for increasingly wealthy landowners. After enduring continued hardships and falling wages many ordinary people were left starving and desperate.

There was further cause for concern due to the invention of the Threshing Machine in 1784, by Scottish Engineer Andrew Meikle. This invention represented a serious threat to the already fragile economic status of many of Britain’s working poor. Its ability to drastically reduce harvest time meant it quickly became a symbol of their hatred.

Many farm labourers were forced out of work and without a welfare state to compensate or support them they either had to leave for work in the cities or stay and starve. Some workers felt they had little choice but to fight for their rights. Protests were quick to spread. Workers took it upon themselves to attack the property of their landowners or burn harvests, but their main focus was destruction of the threshing machines.

They worked together to produce petitions, held wage meetings and sent threatening letters to landowners signed ‘Captain Swing’. This invented character was not just to preserve the protestors anonymity, it was also a sarcastic comment in response to the landowners insistence that those responsible would ‘swing’ or be hanged for their actions.

United under the banner of ‘Captain Swing’ the riots spread across the agricultural areas of England, including the Ridings of Yorkshire.

Unlike the Peasants Revolt or similar protest action before it, the Swing Riots represented the potential of collective action.

Although the Swing Riots brought the plight of the country’s rural community to the attention of the wider population, many of the gains of the movement were sadly short-lived. Under pressure, landlords seemed to respond. They reduced rents and proposed increased wages but once the rioting subsided many of these changes were reversed and the landlords looked to root out and punish the rebels. With the help of the authorities almost 2,000 people were tried; 19 of them were executed and a further 481 were transported to the penal colonies in Australia. Despite this defeat the legacy of Captain Swing would not be so easily forgotten.

In the longer term, the movement has become recognised as progressing the method of widespread protest, particularly by ordinary working people. However, like other isolated incidents (e.g. the Peterloo Massacre or Luddite activity) the movement failed because of its lack of political representation. Whilst violence and agitation would continue, its proponents rarely had success in changing the circumstances they faced alone.

The memory of the riots were a strong influence in Earl Grey’s Whig government and parliament’s attempts to pacify the populace. The roots of the Great Reform Act (1832) and the Poor Law Amendment Act (1834) can be traced at least in part to the rural rioters and their campaign for fairer treatment and conditions.

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The image explained

- This image of the Swing Rioters is set in Yorkshire but is representative of actions that took place as part of a countrywide campaign against agricultural upheaval throughout the second half of 1830.
- In keeping with the Swing Riot movement, the subjects are wearing make-shift disguises made out of hessian sacks to protect their identities. This is the only photograph in the ‘Hidden’ series where we cannot see the subjects’ faces. What we do see are the very intense stares in their eyes.
- The strength of this movement was its ability to make use of a fictional character known as Captain Swing. This allowed peasants who would have otherwise easily been identified by the authorities to strike out against the landed classes who had cost them their livelihoods.
- The scene is set at night which is when most of the attacks on threshing machinery and property took place. The group of raggedly dressed agricultural labourers are sneaking through a marshland on their way to cause damage.

Key discussion questions

- What can you see in this image?
- Where do you think these three people are?
- Do you think these are men or women?
- Why do you think they are wearing masks?
- What do their clothes tell us about them?
- Are there any other clues in the image that tell us what they are about to do or where they are going?