

CHAPTER 5. THE LAST LABOURERS' REVOLT IN WORCESTERSHIRE 1829-1831

The Last Labourers' Revolt of 1830 to 1831 is known to historians by several names, including the 'Swing Riots'. It has been seen by some historians as the culmination of all the factors associated with rural deprivation in southern England post-1815: enclosure; low wages; unemployment and underemployment; harsher poor relief; the breaking of bonds between farmer and labourer; the decline in farm service; rising crime and harsher punishment. Explaining the primary causes of the Revolt, however, has proved increasingly complex and elusive. For E.P. Thompson, the rebellion consisted of 'curiously indecisive and unbloodthirsty mobs' whose main purpose was to destroy machinery with little ulterior political motive. Whilst supposing that some younger men involved might have been politicised, Thompson found little evidence that sufficient political consciousness existed during the period 1829 to 1831 to enable urban radicals to link with rural labourers in a common cause to fight mutual social and economic injustices.¹ More recently, Barry Reay has called the Revolt, 'a series of sporadic, locally based riots rather than a nationally co-ordinated rising, even if its scale encouraged some into the illusion of the latter'.²

In the first significant study of the Revolt, Hobsbawm and Rudé (1969) found many economic causes for unrest in 1830, but disputed the commonly held view that increasing mechanisation of agriculture was a prime factor in the disturbances. As well as citing evidence of little mechanisation in rural areas of southern England prior to 1840, they pointed out that incidents of unrest were often linked to labourers' local experiences of deprivation and whether they lived in 'open' or 'closed' villages.³ In their view, the riots were predominantly the work of young men, because these received least in terms of poor relief and were often forced into doing degrading parish work when they were unemployed, like mending the roads.⁴ Whilst suggesting that some men may have been influenced by organised radical

¹ Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*: 252

² Reay, *Rural England*: 149.

³ Hobsbawm & Rudé, *Captain Swing*: 57.

⁴ Hobsbawm & Rudé, *Captain Swing*: 66.

nuclei in small market towns, Hobsbawm and Rudé thought it more likely that labourers aired their grievances in informal groups before staging an open demonstration of disaffection in front of the house of a local farmer, rector or squire.⁵

Rudé, in a previous essay, written in 1967, suggested that whilst both urban and rural disturbances in 1830-31 could be linked to the wider social transformation taking place in England post-1815, rural unrest was fundamentally different from the urban unrest occurring in the same period.⁶ This was partly due to the specific problems labourers experienced in rural parishes, but also due to the geographical and chronological nature of the unrest. The Last Labourers' Revolt was largely confined to the southern counties of England and mainly took place during the autumn of 1830. Rudé argued that although industrial unrest began in the Midlands and the north and west of England in the same year, it did not reach its climax until 1834, long after the Last Labourers' Revolt was over.⁷ Rudé also found no evidence of contact between urban and rural labourers, although he thought it possible that interplay between townspeople and agricultural labourers might have taken place when the latter came into local towns to hold wage meetings.⁸

Subsequently, historians have made more detailed studies of the unrest and discovered a greater complexity. Andrew Charlesworth (1979) suggests that the Revolt took many forms, including demands for higher wages and tithe reforms (but not always together) and attacks on poor law overseers. In a few places there were also attacks on particular workhouses and forced levies of money from local farmers. Threatening letters were also common, as was the destruction of threshing machines and setting fire to ricks and barns.⁹ He also argued against Hobsbawm and Rudé's view that the revolt was simply a rural phenomenon motivated by local social and economic change and increasing pauperisation. After mapping the incidents of unrest and finding them predominantly along major route-ways

⁵ Hobsbawm & Rudé, *Captain Swing*: 60.

⁶ George Rudé, 'English Rural and Urban Disturbances on the Eve of the First Reform Bill, 1830-1831, *Past and Present*, No.37, July, (1967).

⁷ Rudé, 'English Rural and Urban Disturbances on the Eve of the First Reform Bill', 88.

⁸ Rudé, 'English Rural and Urban Disturbances on the Eve of the First Reform Bill', 100.

⁹ Andrew Charlesworth, 'Social Protest in a Rural Society', *Historical Geography Research Studies*, Number 1, (October 1979): 1.

between towns and villages, he suggested that the Revolt of 1830-31 involved collective action. He produced evidence to show that protests were often organised by one or two men in each area or sometimes by a small group. Such organisers were politically conscious and could, when the time was right, persuade others to meet and plan what action to take and against whom. As well as William Cobbett's much publicised involvement with the unrest in Kent, Charlesworth found evidence of a well-known radical's leadership of riotous labourers in Tadmorton, near Banbury and of labourers holding organized meetings in Kent and Sussex.¹⁰ He also found evidence that protesters in different areas communicated with each other by letter and that this may have encouraged unrest to spread further. Charlesworth also argued that the Revolt gained momentum because early covert acts of arson and threatening letters to farmers, which first appeared in Kent in August 1830, were simply testing the waters. When the majority of labourers found that the forces of law and order were not being raised against the first protesters, collective action became more frequent. By October 1830 groups of labourers became more demanding and in Kent they had the support of many farmers. As the Revolt developed, the forces of law and order were too small to deal with the numbers involved.

By November 1st 1830 unrest spread from Kent to Sussex and this led to a surge of protests between November 15th and December 10th across southern and eastern England. Charlesworth argued that, at their peak, the rioters became increasingly open and some attached ceremonial to their activities by parading through villages and town streets, often in their best clothes.¹¹ After November 23rd, however, the unrest faltered, partly because landowners in Wiltshire and Hampshire were much more active in suppressing riots and because by this time the new Whig Government of Lord Grey was prepared to defend property at all costs, dispatching military officers into the troubled counties to advise magistrates on how to levy local volunteers.¹² In the West Midlands, Charlesworth argued, a number of steps had been taken to restore paternalistic links between landowners, farmers and

¹⁰ Charlesworth, 'Social Protest in a Rural Society', 32. This was Philip Green, a well-known local radical and friend of Cobbett.

¹¹ Charlesworth, 'Social Protest in a Rural Society', 12. 14.

¹² Charlesworth, 'Social Protest in a Rural Society', 17- 18.

labourers and this may have discouraged the possibility of any incipient unrest spreading further.¹³

Ian Dyck (1992) also made much of the politicisation of agricultural labourers in the two decades before the 1830 Revolt and suggested that, after 1815, Cobbett's *Political Register* increasingly influenced rural labourers. He also believed that Cobbett's views influenced popular ballads of the time, which became increasingly anti-farmer. He argued that, by 1810, farmers had greater social aspirations and were openly rejecting any social, cultural and economic identification with their labourers because they were more interested in embellishing their homes and giving their daughters a genteel education. Such behaviour, Dyck suggested, led to rural labourers developing a greater sense of class-consciousness, often embodied in widely printed protest songs like 'The New-Fashioned Farmer'.¹⁴ Wells (1990) also believed class-consciousness was the primary stimulus behind the riots and that as early as 1800 rural labourers became a landless proletariat polarised against those who were oppressing them and already expressing class antagonism through arson, crop theft, threats to local officials and demands for increases in pay.¹⁵ Wells believed that The Last Labourers' Revolt was simply a culmination of previous sporadic outbreaks of violence and an open expression of 'class war'. That said, Wells also believed that many aspects of the Revolt followed traditional patterns of popular protest and were not essentially concerned with promoting and bringing about any vision of political change in society as a whole.¹⁶

Regional studies of the unrest, however, have questioned the notion that this was an organised general uprising and have noted that the Revolt in individual counties was both contained and relatively short-lived. Billenge (1984) in her study of unrest in Wiltshire pointed out that although there was much unrest in the county, it was over and done with a short space of time. The Revolt in Wiltshire began on November 19th but was over by November 25th, with most of the violence

¹³ Charlesworth, 'Social Protest in a Rural Society', 18.

¹⁴ Dyck, *William Cobbett and Popular Rural Culture*: 57.

¹⁵ Wells, 'The Development of the English Rural Proletariat and Social Protest', 39. 40. 45.

¹⁶ Wells, 'The Development of the English Rural Proletariat and Social Protest', 30. 45.

confined to the 23rd - 25th November.¹⁷ Despite evidence of seemingly organised large mobs of labourers, Billenge found no evidence that they were politically motivated or that there were any links between rural unrest and workers in Wiltshire textile manufacturing towns.¹⁸ What she did find was that the riots affected both open and closed parishes, particularly those where there was a higher ratio of labourers to farmers and where underemployment and unemployment were rapidly increasing.¹⁹ The rioters in Wiltshire, as elsewhere, tended to be young men, average age twenty, and many were married with families to support.²⁰ Rioting took place at a time when most men would have previously been employed at winter threshing, hence the severity of attacks in Wiltshire on threshing machines, then being used more frequently by farmers in the county's arable areas.²¹ Despite the fact that Billenge found no connection between rural and urban labourers, she did find some evidence of non-agricultural labourers such as sawyers, tanners and blacksmiths being involved in the protests. A number of farmers were also involved in Wiltshire since labourers' grievances gave farmers the opportunity to publicise their own concerns about rents and tithes. Although Colonel Brotherton, military adviser to the Home Office, found no evidence of leadership or organised political meetings, Billenge did discover that some groups of rioters were led by leaders called 'the Captain' and that tricolour flags were sometimes flown. Henry Hunt had also attended meetings in the county prior to the riots, although there was no evidence to connect him to the unrest.²²

A close study of some of the men and women involved in the Headley Workhouse Riots in Hampshire in 1830 also revealed some interesting details about individual rioters and suggested that not all could just be classified as agricultural labourers. Aaron Harding, one of the main perpetrators, for example, was a known law-breaker who had appeared in court three times and been jailed twice. Those arrested also included two carpenters, a bricklayer and a knife-grinder. Others referred to by the courts and newspapers by the generic term 'agricultural labourers', appeared to have been multi-skilled and not reliant on threshing to earn

¹⁷ Billenge, 'Rural Crime and Protest in Wiltshire', 134.

¹⁸ Billenge, 'Rural Crime and Protest in Wiltshire', 143.

¹⁹ Billenge, 'Rural Crime and Protest in Wiltshire', 160.

²⁰ Billenge, 'Rural Crime and Protest in Wiltshire', 148.

²¹ Billenge, 'Rural Crime and Protest in Wiltshire', 159.

²² Billenge, 'Rural Crime and Protest in Wiltshire', 170-176.

a living. Unlike Wiltshire, although many rioters were young, the leaders in the Headley Riot were men in their thirties.²³ They were been brought together by specific local grievances about the way the Poor Law was operating within the parish when it required unemployed labourers to undertake parish work. Presumably spurred on by unrest elsewhere, a group of agricultural labourers approached the parish vestry in nearby Selborne with a demand for increased wages for working on the roads from 10d a day, generally deemed too low, to 2s a day, an unrealistic sum given that the weekly wage for agricultural labourers in the area was 9s. When this was refused, the initial group of protesters invited labourers from the surrounding parishes to join the protest. The protest then shifted focus and pressure was put on local farmers to force the vicar to take less in tithes so they could pay more in wages. This proved successful and, buoyed by their victory, the crowd, estimated at 900 strong, summoned more labourers to join them the next day by sounding horns and moved on to Headley intending to force a similar rise in wages there. However, no agreement was forthcoming and the crowd almost immediately destroyed the workhouse.²⁴

The way the riot developed suggested that it became increasingly organised as it progressed, particularly when labourers ‘negotiated’ their proposed increase in wages to be paid out of a decrease in tithes. In this instance a small delegation made the initial approach to the vestry at Headley, before summoning up a crowd to intimidate both the vestry and the vicar into acquiescing to their demands. The use of horns to summon the crowd appeared to have been agreed in advance and those who formed the crowd knew what to do when they heard a signal that further support was needed. There was also a suspicion that local farmers may well have instigated the idea that labourers’ demand the vicar’s consent to a reduction in tithes since prior to the march on the workhouse, farmers had agreed to demands that they raise labourers’ wages to 2s a day. Their agreement, however, was

²³ <http://www.headley1.demon.co.uk/riot/personal.htm>, Some personalities associated with the Selborne and Headley Workhouse Riots in 1830.

²⁴ <http://www.headley1.demon.co.uk/riot/personal.htm> , Letter of Wiliam Cowburn written shortly after the riot

probably accompanied by the proviso that the labourers demanded a reduction in tithes so that farmers could afford the pay rise.²⁵

Given the evidence, it was not surprising that most modern historians saw the Last Labourers' Revolt as complex and multi-faceted. Some contemporary commentators were equally perceptive. Edward Gibbon Wakefield in a pamphlet published in 1831 looked beyond the initial suggestions that the Revolt was born of panic, that the riots were perpetrated by French Jacobins or by farmers destroying their crops to get lower rents. He also dismissed suggestions that there were well-dressed men travelling the country in gigs deliberately starting fires to raise the price of wheat or to bring about Parliamentary Reform.²⁶ He began by making the point that incendiarism was not a new crime, all that was new about the events of 1830 was that more labourers appeared to be systematically destroying the food they had produced. Gibbon Wakefield also dismissed the view that labourers were universally anti-farmer, because he found evidence during the riots that there were 'signs of sympathy, if not of concert, between the farmers and the peasantry'. This was probably because farmers were unable to pay higher wages because they were constrained by high rents on the one hand and tithe payments on the other.²⁷ Gibbon Wakefield believed that the root cause of unrest lay in the Poor Laws because they encouraged farmers to pay low wages and this meant that able-bodied agricultural labourers could not support themselves sufficiently. The end result, he argued, was that intelligent and physically able labourers were forced into poaching and smuggling in order to provide for themselves and their families. Poaching, however, inevitably led to trouble with the law and murderous conflicts with gamekeepers. Sending such men to jail, Gibbon Wakefield argued, only encouraged more lawbreaking and an implacable hatred of the rural magistracy. He also argued that the root cause of all these problems lay with landowners, because:

²⁵ <http://www.headley1.demon.co.uk/riot/personal.htm> , Letter from James Bridger, a local farmer, to William Cowburn , January 12th 1831.

²⁶ Edward Gibbon Wakefield, *Swing Unmasked or The Causes of Rural Incendiarism*, (London: 1831). Wakefield was an articulate anti-government polemicist and had only just been released from prison after an abortive attempt three years earlier to marry an heiress below the age of consent. His own prison experiences gave him an insight into the punitive nature of the English judicial system. He later became a key figure in the colonial settlement of New Zealand.

²⁷ Wakefield, *Swing Unmasked*: 20-22.

They enclose commons. They stop footpaths. They wall in their parks. They set spring guns and mantraps. They spend on the keep of high bred dogs what would support half as many children, and yet persecute a labouring man for owning one friend in his cur. They make rates of wages, elaborately calculating the minimum of food that will keep together the soul and body of a clodhopper. They breed game in profusion for their own amusement, and having thus tempted the poor man to knock down a hare for his pot, they send him to the treadmill or the antipodes for that inexplicable offence.²⁸

Gibbon Wakefield also accused landowners of attacking rural labourers' pleasures, like alehouses, skittles and fairs, thus curtailing their already narrow choice of amusements. This, he maintained, was not a new state of affairs but significant because labourers were sufficiently educated to feel the depths of their own deprivation. Newspapers and pamphlets were widely available, spreading ideas as far as 'the hovel of the peasant'. This meant that agricultural labourers became increasingly aware that rural society was divided into two classes, the rich and the poor, 'those who enjoy and those who produce, those who suffer and those who execute the law'.²⁹ As evidence that this awareness led inevitably to social protest, Gibbon Wakefield cited the support given by rural labourers to Queen Caroline when the King was defeated in his attempt to divorce her. He claimed the peasantry generally found the means to illuminate their cottages not out of any particular dislike for George IV, or love of his spouse, but merely because the aristocracy, as a class, especially the landlords and the beneficed clergy took the part of the King'.³⁰ Gibbon Wakefield has been quoted at length because, although partisan, his views appear to support the views of many modern historians who believed that class distinctions had become polarised and, as a consequence, agricultural labourers had grown in political awareness and by 1831 were prepared to take collective action. Gibbon Wakefield, however, was a polemicist and his own imprisonment for eloping with an heiress may have coloured his views on the

²⁸ Wakefield, *Swing Unmasked*: 12-15.

²⁹ Wakefield, *Swing Unmasked*: 16-20.

³⁰ Wakefield, *Swing Unmasked*: 24.

aristocracy. Nevertheless, his views were important when considering the impact of the Revolt in Worcestershire.

Worcestershire shared many of the problems of the southern and eastern counties, such as increasing unemployment, underemployment and low wages, yet despite William Avery of Redditch remembering ‘a great number of incendiary fires in the neighbourhood’,³¹ the actual incidents of unrest in the county in 1830 could be counted on two hands. This implied either that Worcestershire labourers were in less straitened circumstances than those elsewhere or that there were other factors checking unrest or inhibiting politicisation. In considering why the Last Labourers’ Revolt had little impact on Worcestershire, some modern historians’ views of class and class-consciousness were moved to one side because they were likely to simplify the issues and colour the search for an explanation. In a previous study of class and class-consciousness in two rural villages in the Worcestershire between 1815 and 1841, no evidence could be found to justify the modern use of the term ‘class-consciousness’ in early nineteenth-century Worcestershire and certainly not as a blanket term to explain every incident of social dislocation or social unrest.³² Whilst there was much evidence of changing social relationships during the period, there was little evidence that these constituted ‘class relationships’ as historians understand them today.

What was evident, however, was that early nineteenth-century agricultural labourers did not conform to the traditional stereotypes applied to them by supporters and apologists from the right or left. Such labourers were neither romantic peasants nor Neanderthal ‘clodhoppers’. Many travelled extensively during their working lives both between the county’s rural parishes and its market towns and industrial centres. Whilst many remained labourers, there was evidence in Worcestershire that a number had other aspirations. This led to some becoming small farmers themselves, whilst others were both entrepreneurial and speculative, albeit in a modest way. If there were some who were regarded as feckless, there were others who were hardworking and thrifty. Nor were they necessarily unintelligent, simply because the majority were unable to read or write. As well as

³¹ William Avery, *Old Redditch* (Redditch: Redditch Indicator, 1887): xv.

³² Maynard, ‘Class, Community and Social Relationships’, Chapter Seven.

having a rich heritage of traditional ballads and stories, from the 1790s onwards labourers in the Midlands had access to political handbills, seditious pamphlets, political ballads and radical books and newspapers. Worcestershire itself had two twice-weekly newspapers, *Aris' Birmingham Gazette* and *Berrow's Worcester Journal*, both of which carried reports of major political unrest, local radical activities, and riots. Inability to read did not mean that these publications were inaccessible since many public houses employed individuals to read newspapers aloud.³³ There was no proof, however, that the ideas generated from such literature fulfilled modern concepts of 'class-consciousness', particularly in relation to the work of Marx, Lukacs, and others.³⁴ All that could be said with some certainty was that from the eighteenth century onwards both male and female labourers were quite capable of understanding political and social issues and acting on them when their personal values or sense of injustice was aggrieved. That said, there was also evidence which suggested that as well as being influenced by political opinions, the labourers' world view was coloured by custom, tradition and deference. Since the latter embodied values that were essentially conservative they could have been powerful conditioning factors in their own right and inertia may have delayed the spread of radicalism in rural areas by twenty or thirty years. It was important, therefore, to see the Last Labourers' Revolt in Worcestershire within its contemporary context and to examine the circumstances which labourers found themselves in immediately prior to the Revolt and their reactions to news about riot and unrest in the southern counties of England. It was also essential to look closely at the incidents of unrest in Worcestershire since a detailed examination of local circumstances was more likely to draw out similarities and differences with events happening elsewhere.

By 1829, existing evidence suggested that although employed labourers in Worcestershire were no worse off than they had been in previous periods, fewer were being employed all the year round and those who were unemployed were

³³ Maynard, 'Class, Community and Social Relationships', 219. In any case, sedition could always be spread verbally.

³⁴ Maynard, 'Class, Community and Social Relationships'. See Chapter 8: 'Problems and Conclusions'.

worse off than they had been between 1793 and 1815.³⁵ After 1815, an increasing number of parishes were subsidising labourers' wages and paying their rents, particularly during the winter months.³⁶ Unemployment was thought to be higher in poor soil areas, but in the more fertile southern part of the county local farmers categorised some of the unemployed as 'idle and undeserving' often sending them to the workhouse rather than relieving them at home.³⁷ This was not to say that those in employment were particularly well off. Although average wages were 9s a week in 1830, they had fallen from 10s a week in 1812 and contemporaries regarded wages in 1830 as insufficient for labourers to lay money by to see them through the winter months.³⁸ Those labourers who sought to supplement their income by poaching were increasingly in danger of being arrested during village 'purges' after 1825 and there was evidence of increased attempts to limit labourers' movements, not only through the Settlement Laws, but also by restricting their ability to roam within the boundaries of their own parishes. Just as the fields were out of bounds and subject to fines for trespass, the law was even more severe when it came to poaching. In *The Long Affray*, Harry Hopkins pointed out a close link between the harsh sentences imposed on poachers and a subsequent rise in violent poaching offences immediately prior to 1830.³⁹ A similar pattern of harsher punishments and increasingly violent offences was apparent in Worcestershire, particularly in the south of the county. In April 1829, for example, 12 poachers found guilty of shooting affrays with keepers were transported for life, while another 15 men guilty of just poaching were each transported for fourteen years.⁴⁰ In December of the same year, 12 poachers who physically attacked the Earl of Coventry's gamekeepers at Cadicroft Close, Pershore, presumably in order to evade arrest, received similar lengthy sentences of transportation.⁴¹

³⁵ BPP, *Agriculture, Volume 2, Select Committee on Agriculture 1833*, Evidence of William Woodward, farmer of 1,100 acres and agent for Sir John Sebright and the Dean and Chapter of Worcester Cathedral: 91.

³⁶ BPP, *Agriculture, Volume 2, Select Committee on Agriculture 1833*: 85.

³⁷ BPP, *Agriculture, Volume 2, Select Committee on Agriculture 1833*: Evidence of Joseph Stallard, farmer of Red Marley: 85.

³⁸ *ABG*: August 29th 1829.

³⁹ H. Hopkins, *The Long Affray: The Poaching Wars in Britain* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1983).

⁴⁰ *BWJ*: April 16th 1829.

⁴¹ *BWJ*: December 21st 1829.

As well as low wages and severe punishments for crimes of poaching and trespass, there were other signs of unrest in the Midlands in 1829 that, with hindsight, could be seen as precursors of worse to follow. The year had begun with widespread distress that provoked isolated incidents of arson in the neighbouring county of Warwickshire. In January 1829, there was a case of arson at Binton near Stratford-upon-Avon, the sixth incident in the parish in twelve months⁴² and a fortnight later a fire at nearby Treddington destroyed a barn with fifty bags of wheat and 300 fleeces of wool.⁴³ By February 1829, so many people in Worcester were in want that a soup kitchen was set up to deal with them.⁴⁴ By March 1829 unemployment in the industrial areas of north-west England led to a general reduction of wages and there were strikes at Rochdale and Stockport.⁴⁵ By May 1829 unemployment was of such concern in Birmingham that a public meeting was held to petition Parliament to do something regarding the distressed state of the country.⁴⁶ Not surprisingly, local newspapers looked anxiously to the 1829 harvest in the hope that this would help remedy the situation by lowering the price of food. They were to be disappointed, however, because by August 13th it was clear that the wheat harvest in the Midlands was likely to be poor. The arrival of heavy rain made matters worse.⁴⁷ By September 17th the barley harvest was also judged bad and by September 24th some of the wheat harvested was stale and damp. The bean harvest was also worse than anticipated.⁴⁸

A poor harvest meant higher prices and higher prices usually brought more unrest, which was compounded in some parishes by the presence of Irish labourers employed by local farmers as cheap labour. At Kempsey in August 1829, four local men attacked Irish labourers working in the parish. When they were arrested and committed to gaol by the parish constables, local feeling was so strong that fellow labourers attacked the constables and helped two of the men to escape.⁴⁹ On August 29th 1829, the situation was made worse when it was reported that there

⁴² *ABG*: January 12th 1829.

⁴³ *ABG*: January 26th 1829.

⁴⁴ *ABG*: February 22nd 1829.

⁴⁵ *ABG*: March 23rd 1829.

⁴⁶ *ABG*: May 11th 1829.

⁴⁷ *ABG*: August 13th 1829.

⁴⁸ *ABG*: September 24th 1829.

⁴⁹ *ABG*: August 10th 1829.

were vast numbers of Irish labourers in the county working for 6d or 4d a day and that some were working just for food. Although numbers were probably exaggerated, those who were still in the county suffered the consequences.⁵⁰ On October 29th, for example, four Worcestershire labourers attacked Irish reapers at Salwarpe and Martin Hussingtree and drove them out of the area. The magistrates at the next Quarter Sessions gaoled the men responsible for six months each, a harsh punishment that would have been thought of as singularly unjust by most Worcestershire labourers.⁵¹ At the opening of the Michaelmas Quarter Sessions a week earlier, however, the Chairman of the county's magistrates made it clear that such attacks would not be tolerated, despite his having sympathy with, 'the general want of employment of the labouring classes', and that those who attacked Irish labourers could expect to be suitably punished.⁵²

This was not to say that every farmer was experiencing difficulties in 1829 or that every parish experienced incidents of unrest. Frank Wheeler's journal for 1829-30 contained no comments about distress or unrest occurring in his own parish. He did, however, record a later incident of arson in the village of Cleeve Prior in 1835 and claimed to know the man responsible for it. Wheeler, however, did note one sign of the times in 1830 when he recorded that a local man, Joseph Smith, 'a good Sheppard and a very engenous Farmers servant'(sic) was selling up at the age of 52 and emigrating to America.⁵³ Smith was lucky perhaps since he was a specialist worker rather than an ordinary labourer and he had property to sell in order to subsidise his journey. That said, his journey could hardly have been one motivated by youthful endeavour and the pursuit of new opportunities. Instead, given his age, Joseph Smith's departure was no doubt an act of desperation and a sign of how bad the times were if skilled men were failing to find sufficient employment at home.

⁵⁰ Although Wells noted apparently large numbers of Irish harvesters in Kent and Sussex in 1830, McLynn notes earlier attacks on Irish labourers at Kingsbury, Edgeware and Hendon in 1774. Neither writer quantifies how many Irish harvesters were involved, but no doubt they were easy scapegoats in periods of economic distress. Attacking Irish harvesters was clearly not a new phenomenon in 1830. See Wells, 'The moral economy of the English countryside', in Randall and Charlesworth (eds.) *Moral Economy and Rural Popular Protest*: 236 and McLynn, *Crime and Punishment in Eighteenth -Century England*: 221.

⁵¹ *BWJ*: October 29th 1829.

⁵² *BWJ*: October 22nd 1829.

⁵³ WRO: BA/5044/7, Memorandum book of Frank Wheeler 1829-30. See entry for April 3rd 1830.

More significantly, December 1829 saw evidence of another increasingly desperate act in neighbouring Gloucestershire when a group of sixteen ‘poachers’ went to the house of Henry Hicks at Eastington and shot tame pheasants trained to wander about on the front lawns. When Hicks came to the front door to see what the noise was all about the poachers continued shooting and dared anyone to stop them. Given the context, this open act of pheasant shooting was clearly not about poaching at all but a symbolic act of protest about worsening living conditions in the countryside. It was also a show of strength in front of a landowner and obviously meant to be intimidating, despite the fact that those involved made no specific demands on Hicks nor aired any general grievances.⁵⁴ There were also other similar symbolic acts of ‘criminal’ protest elsewhere in the same month. At Upton-on-Severn, Worcestershire, in December 1829, thieves not only stole a quantity of apples from a local farmer, but they destroyed several trees and fences in the process.⁵⁵ Elsewhere in the Midlands the number of cases of arson reported were increasing, especially in Oxfordshire, Cambridgeshire and at Welford near Stratford-upon-Avon.⁵⁶ Industrial unrest also increased and in November 1829 Bromsgrove’s nailers went on strike because some employers were using the ‘truck’ system instead of paying wages.⁵⁷ Whilst incidents of unrest in Worcestershire were sporadic, disturbances in other urban and rural areas across the country were of sufficient seriousness for correspondents to inform the Home Office of their concerns. Letters expressing worries about agricultural distress were sent to Robert Peel from John Stevens of Cherry Hinton, Cambridgeshire and Edward Daniel of Gloucester.⁵⁸ Peel also received a number of letters from industrial areas of Yorkshire and Leicestershire. Two letters also arrived from Worcestershire asking for the military to be put on alert because large groups of striking nailers were now assembling in Bromsgrove and there was a growing fear

⁵⁴ *BWJ*: December 10th 1829. Why Hicks was singled out cannot be ascertained, but in 1802 he had a public footpath diverted so that it no longer crossed his grounds indicating a wish to remain aloof and isolated on his estate. See Gloucester County Record Office: Q/Srh/1802 Quarter Sessions Rolls.

⁵⁵ *BWJ*: December 23rd 1829.

⁵⁶ *BWJ*: December 24th 1829.

⁵⁷ *BWJ*: November 9th 1829.

⁵⁸ PRO: HO/40/24/2/207, Letter of John Stevens October 28th 1829 and Letter from Edward Daniels October 28th 1829.

of rioting.⁵⁹ In many ways, therefore, the increased incidence of unrest in the autumn and winter of 1829 was a precursor of the further unrest that followed in 1830.

The only link that could be made between urban and rural unrest in Worcestershire came from the fact that William Cobbett did speak at Worcester during a tour of the border counties in May 1830. Writing from Shrewsbury to G. Brooke, a Worcester draper, on 18th May, Cobbett apologised for not being able to speak at Worcester before he visited Monmouth, but confirmed his intention to stay for three days and to make at least three speeches.⁶⁰ An account of his journeys in *Rural Rides* showed Cobbett's interests and concerns at the time and these undoubtedly coloured his speeches. Firstly, before Cobbett came to Worcester he had already delivered a series of speeches at Dudley, Birmingham, Wolverhampton and Shrewsbury. From his own account of his journey, conditions in industrial areas appeared to dominate his thinking although he did believe farmers were experiencing distress similar to conditions in France immediately prior to the French Revolution. Cobbett's main concern, however, was to condemn the truck system operating in urban areas of the Black Country and to attack falling agricultural prices at Shrewsbury market, taxation in general and the Corn Laws in particular. His only references to agricultural labourers were implicit in his attack on country shopkeepers because he claimed they were allowing labourers to run up debts equivalent to five or six weeks' wages. This would suggest that many families in both Worcestershire and Shropshire were failing to subsist on their wages and having to buy goods on credit. There was no evidence, however, of his meeting with any agricultural labourers or that they were present at his speeches. The fact that the meetings were partly organised by a Worcester draper, suggested that Cobbett was predominantly addressing local tradespeople.⁶¹ Another indicator that Cobbett's views were not a factor in stimulating rural unrest in Worcestershire during 1830, lay in the fact that when unrest came it developed sequentially and geographically. The Revolt began in Kent in October and then spread south and

⁵⁹ PRO: HO/40/24/2/ 224, Anonymous undated letter from Aston and Letter from George Biggs of Tardebigge, a Worcestershire magistrate.

⁶⁰ WCRO: BA/8720/1(ii), Letter from William Cobbett to G. Brooke, draper, Worcester 18th May 1830.

⁶¹ Cobbett, *Rural Rides*: 496-504.

south west into Sussex and Hampshire by November and then, by late November, northwards through Wiltshire and Gloucestershire. There was no incident of Swing unrest recorded in Worcestershire before early December 1830 and the majority of unrest was suppressed within a week and was quickly followed by ‘show trials’ in January 1831. Unrest in Worcestershire was limited in scale and seriousness, although one subsequent incident of rick-burning in March 1831 led to the execution of Thomas Slaughter, the only man hanged in Worcestershire for an offence linked directly to the Last Labourers’ Revolt.

The reason that the Last Labourers’ Revolt in Worcestershire was relatively low-key and largely ineffective undoubtedly lay in the fact that once unrest began to spread from Kent into Sussex, it was anticipated elsewhere and plans were put in place to take fast and firm action against any troublemakers in Worcestershire. In a letter to Melborne dated November 29th, the Vice Lieutenant of the county, Viscount Deerhurst, reported that whilst there was, ‘no trouble in the county as yet’, a meeting of magistrates was to be held ‘on December 2nd in order to be on the safe side’.⁶² On the same day, a public meeting of landowners and occupiers of land took place at Evesham town hall which resulted in a poster being distributed full of conciliatory messages for local agricultural labourers. Whilst deploring the incendiarism and riots taking place elsewhere, farmers and landowners attending the meeting pledged themselves to provide adequately for the poor and promised to ensure suitable employment for labourers in all parishes so that they could earn a comfortable living. At the same time, the poster threatened to punish any law-breakers and stated that, unlike farmers elsewhere, they would never give in to intimidation by the mob and would be asking for military support to quell any disturbances.⁶³

The reason this meeting took place in Evesham may have been the result of two Swing letters that had recently appeared in the town. The first, picked up in the street and written by a fairly illiterate person read, ‘The Bag is Burst wee shall soon

⁶² PRO: H0/40/25/2/294, Letter from Viscount Deerhurst to Viscount Melborne, November 29th 1830.

⁶³ Birmingham Record Office: MS3192/Acc1941 – 031/269. Petition from overseers and occupiers of land at Evesham to demand protection against violence November 29th 1830.

be with you between Now and crishmas'. (sic) The second, pinned against the town hall door was in a better hand and threatened armed insurrection. It read:

Come Brittons Englishmen

And honest men come armed fight for your rights do not fight against them that fight for your good fight not for farmers that tread the poor in the ground Be not afraid of Evesham new police for they'r nothing but thieves and robbers.

Down with machinery and a free trade in corn.⁶⁴

Trouble, however, was not far away and on December 2nd 1830, the day magistrates met at Worcester to prepare for any unrest, a crowd of labourers assembled at Crowle, where a threshing machine had been hired, and they threatened to destroy it. They only dispersed on the promise that it would not be used and no further unrest was subsequently reported from that parish.⁶⁵ A few days later, on December 6th 1830, the Reverend Briggs, a county magistrate, received a Swing letter and three days afterwards two young men, George Brown, the son of a carrier and his friend Atkins, the son of a corn factor of Banbury, were arrested on the road between Droitwich and Bromsgrove. Both young men had been travelling in a gig and asking people where the Reverend Briggs' residence was. They told one labourer that they stopped to question that he should tell Reverend Briggs to look to his ricks, but after their arrest claimed that they were simply having some innocent fun at the rector's expense. Brown's handwriting was found to be similar to the Swing letter received by Briggs, but Brown claimed that the letter was simply a joke.⁶⁶ Eventually both young men were believed and discharged from custody on December 16th.⁶⁷ On the same day that Brown and Atkins were taken into custody, there were two further arrests: James Lambert for

⁶⁴ PRO: HO/40/25/2/352, Undated Swing letters sent to Viscount Melborne from John Thomas, Mayor of Evesham in 1830.

⁶⁵ *BWJ*: December 2nd 1830.

⁶⁶ *BWJ*: December 9th 1830. See report of the arrest.

⁶⁷ *BWJ*: December 16th 1830.

threatening to set fire to the premises of J. Goatman at Berrow and William Pee and James Wright who had been overheard threatening to destroy a threshing machine at St. John in Bedwardine. However, none of these men were brought to trial and they were discharged from custody on December 16th.⁶⁸ Far more serious, however, was the arrest of six young men for destroying needle-making equipment at Tardebigge on December 6th and five young men at Hanley William, near Tenbury for destroying a threshing machine left at the roadside. Six young men from Pershore were also arrested for demanding drink and food in the villages of Defford and Pinvin between December 6th and 8th and a threshing machine was destroyed at Red Marley, but no one arrested. Paradoxically, the only other person brought to trial was Lord Northwick, who had instructed his workers to dismantle the threshing machine of one of his tenant farmers.⁶⁹

The speed of the arrests and the trials the following January demonstrated just how prepared the county magistrates were to deal with any unrest. The trials themselves were also interesting since, unlike the trials resulting from the Kidderminster weavers' riot in the same year and the machine breaking at Tardebigge by disgruntled needle-makers, all those arrested for Swing incidents were released. In the case of the Hanley William machine breakers, the Grand Jury ignored the indictment and the men were discharged⁷⁰ whilst the Pershore young men were brought to trial but released because of 'lack of evidence.'⁷¹ Such leniency was all the more remarkable since at the same assizes, an agricultural labourer, James Walker, got twelve months hard labour for stealing a side of bacon and two young Dudley Colliers, who stole some chickens, both received 14 years transportation.⁷²

The case at Pershore was particularly interesting because every effort was made during the trial to humiliate the young men concerned. The six young men, aged between 17 and 27, comprised three agricultural labourers, two bricklayers and a butcher. All were described as healthy and well dressed and it was suggested

⁶⁸ *BWJ*: December 9th and December 16th 1830.

⁶⁹ *BWJ*: December 9th and December 16th 1830.

⁷⁰ WCRO: BA/6, Judges Order Book: Epiphany 1831.

⁷¹ *Worcester Herald*: January 8th 1831.

⁷² *WH*: January 8th 1831.

in court that, far from being distressed paupers, they were taking advantage of the climate of unrest and going around farms and houses in the area of Defford and Pinvin to extort food and money from people out of sheer greed. They were held up to ridicule during their trial when it was reported that on the day they were arrested they had encountered an agricultural labourer near Peopleton and asked him if the wheelbarrow he was pushing was a threshing machine. This led to much laughter in court and even more laughter followed one witness's statement that one of the accused, William Checketts, had claimed to be acting on behalf of 150 unemployed men in Pershore and that there would soon be 'a Revolution in England'.⁷³ That this was indeed a show trial with a symbolic purpose was given credence by the fact that some of the Pershore rioters were already known criminals and had recently served significant prison sentences. In March 1829, for example, one of the Pershore rioters, Joseph Vale, aged 18 and a butcher by profession, was sentenced to twelve months hard labour and two public whippings for stealing the skin and part of the carcass of a sheep from a farm at Wyre Piddle.⁷⁴ In June 1830 William Checketts, aged 17, another of the 'rioters', was already imprisoned in Worcester gaol where he received further punishment for stealing bread, meat and puddings from the prison bakery and selling these to other prisoners.⁷⁵

After the trial, some of the young men involved continued to be involved in criminal activities. On April 26th 1832, Joseph Vale and another 'rioter', Arthur Spruce, were charged with killing two sheep belonging to John Stevens of Pershore, skinning the carcasses up to the head and taking away the livers and kidneys to fry up and eat at a public house in Worcester. Interestingly, the dead sheep were 'discovered' by William Checketts who knew that John Stevens was at Worcester market on the day that his sheep were killed. He went there to inform on his former friends, which suggested that Checketts may have fallen out with Vale and Spruce and was taking his revenge by acting as an informant.⁷⁶ Both Vale and Spruce tried to escape from Worcester gaol before their trial with the help of other 'capital

⁷³ *WH*: January 8th 1831. Account of the trial of the Pershore Rioters.

⁷⁴ *BWJ*: March 5th 1829.

⁷⁵ *WCRO*: BA/1/122/4/2, Visiting Magistrates Memorandum Book, Volume 2. See entries for June 8th 1830 and July 3rd 1830.

⁷⁶ *WH*: April 26th 1832.

prisoners' and after this they were double ironed and kept under close scrutiny.⁷⁷ At their trial on March 10th 1832 both men were sentenced to death, although the sentence was later reduced to transportation for life.⁷⁸ Despite efforts made by the author of this thesis to trace them, no evidence of their subsequent history can be found. William Checketts, however, was again in trouble with the law in 1835 when he attacked a baker selling confectionary at Pershore Fair and then resisted arrest. Rescued from the constables by a group of his friends, Checketts went on the run and was arrested a few days later in Dudley. He was put on trial at the Quarter Sessions and fined £5 or faced two-months imprisonment.⁷⁹ Checketts chose the latter, although after this punishment there is no evidence that he re-offended. In the 1881 Census he was still living in Pershore and was listed as an agricultural labourer aged 69 and a widower.

The criminality of these three young men from Pershore suggested that Checketts was merely bragging when, as was claimed at their trial, he said that they were acting on behalf of the Pershore unemployed and expecting a revolution in England. The Last Labourers' Revolt simply provided Checketts, Spruce, Vale and others with an opportunity to intimidate rural farmers and cottagers into giving them food and money, although they were perhaps chancing their luck when they called at the house of a local magistrate! That two of them were well known to the authorities was intriguing, since no mention of their previous offences was made at their trial or commented on in local newspapers. This strengthened the view that theirs was a show trial and that their release was probably made acceptable by the fact that the ringleaders were likely to be back in gaol sooner rather than later.

Unlike the Pershore young men, those involved with the Hanley William machine breaking were in some ways more important. Those arrested formed part of a larger group of twenty agricultural labourers who actually destroyed a threshing machine. Although only four of the accused could be traced as residents in the parish, it was significant that the accused men came from families living around Broadheath Common, which was still common land, but much encroached

⁷⁷ WCRO: BA/1/122/4/2, Visiting Magistrate's Memorandum Book, Volume 2. See entry 26th December, 1831.

⁷⁸ *WH*: April 26th 1832.

⁷⁹ *WH*: July 11th 1835.

on, and that one of the rioter's families was receiving poor relief. Two of the accused were unmarried at the time of the offence and the youngest arrested was aged only 14.⁸⁰ The Hanley William men, therefore, appeared to have been genuinely motivated by poverty and a sense that the threshing machine was a real threat to local employment. Although clearly identified as machine breakers, the indictment was thrown out before the assizes took place and the men were never brought to trial. This again suggested that magistrates were prepared to be lenient rather than pass sentences that might lead to further unrest.

In order to pre-empt trouble, the county's Magistrates also encouraged landowners to dismantle threshing machines⁸¹ and this led to the most curious of Worcestershire's incidents of machine breaking. This began with Lord Northwick, a substantial landowner in the Blockley area, ordering his bailiff and five other men to dismantle the threshing machine of Fretwell, one of his ex-tenants, whose loss of tenancy was a result of an unsuccessful claim for rent remission. In 1820, Fretwell had successfully applied to Lord Northwick for a reduction of £75 on the rent of his farm but in 1830 he applied for a further reduction of £125 and was turned down, even though his family had rented the farm from the Northwicks for fifty years. Fretwell then resigned his tenancy, but was allowed to stay on the farm until a new tenant was found. When Lord Northwick heard that Fretwell was still using his threshing machine, despite current unrest, he asked him to desist. Fretwell refused, so Lord Northwick ordered his bailiff to remove it secretly. Fretwell then turned the tables on the bailiff and his men by accusing them of being machine breakers. Since they had no legal right to remove the machine they were technically guilty of machine breaking and Magistrates found in favour of Fretwell at the Epiphany Assizes 1831.⁸² One account of the trial, no doubt out of deference, took great pains to point out that, in the Magistrates' view, the case had been motivated solely out of malignancy and spite towards Lord Northwick.⁸³

By December 22nd 1830, in keeping with the short duration of unrest elsewhere, the Last Labourers' Revolt in Worcestershire was effectively over - if it

⁸⁰ WCRO: Census Returns, Eastham, Microfilms 1-2.

⁸¹ WCRO: BA/4221/36, Blockley Riots: Case for the Defendants.

⁸² *ABG*: January 10th 1831.

⁸³ *WH*: January 8th 1831.

can ever be said to have truly begun. Captain Hovenden wrote to Viscount Melborne and reported that all was now quiet in Worcestershire. Army pensioners had been sworn in throughout the county to deal with any unrest, but there were no signs of any trouble and towns like Malvern, Upton-on-Severn and Tewkesbury were said to be calm.⁸⁴ Hovenden did report the possibility of further disturbances in the Bromsgrove area in January 1831 over nailers' wages, but even this was not thought to be particularly threatening.⁸⁵

The saddest case associated with the Last Labourers' Revolt in Worcestershire, however, took place in the village of Elmley Lovett and led to the trial and execution of Thomas Slaughter for rick-burning in March 1831. Thomas Slaughter was a waggoner living as a farm servant on a farm tenanted by Mrs. Rebecca Tomlinson. The young servant had had an argument with his mistress the day before the rick-burning because it was Sunday and she wanted him to go to church, but he had complained that he did not have a clean shirt. She sent him to fetch one from his home, a mile and a half away, but he left the farm at eleven in the morning and did not return until late in the afternoon. When he arrived back and went straight to his bedroom, Mrs. Tomlinson followed him upstairs and threatened him with the magistrate for not obeying her orders.⁸⁶ The following morning, at 4.30 am, Thomas Boucher, the bailiff, who shared a room with Slaughter, told him to get up and feed the horses and to come back and wake him at 5.00 am. Fifteen minutes later Boucher saw the wheat rick on fire and rushed down to the yard to try to put it out. Another labourer, John Taylor, who got up after Slaughter, also saw the rick on fire, but no one near it. Then he saw Slaughter come out of the stable with a lighted candle in a lantern. Taylor asked Slaughter had he started the blaze, but Slaughter denied it and helped to try to put it out. Their efforts, however, were to no avail and the uninsured wheat rick was completely destroyed.⁸⁷ Another labourer, William Collins, later gave evidence at the young man's trial that he was working with Slaughter in the fields a fortnight before and he remembered the two of them talking about the arson taking place elsewhere. He reported that Slaughter

⁸⁴ PRO: HO/40/25/2/231 and 244, Letters from Captain Hovenden to Viscount Melborne, 22nd December 1830 and 26th December 1830.

⁸⁵ PRO: HO/40/25/2/244, Letter from Captain Hovenden to Viscount Melborne January 3rd 1831.

⁸⁶ *BWJ*: March 10th 1831. Evidence of Rebecca Tomlinson at the Trial of Thomas Slaughter.

⁸⁷ *BWJ*: March 10th 1831. Evidence of Thomas Boucher and John Taylor.

said that if he were Mrs. Tomlinson he would have the wheat rick threshed in case anything happened to it. After the fire, Collins asked Thomas Slaughter if he had fired the rick, but Slaughter again denied it. William Collins then retorted he had a good mind to go and consult the famous white witch, 'Bet Swan', in Kidderminster to see if Slaughter was telling the truth and advised the young man that if he had set the rick on fire he had better confess to it.⁸⁸ Eventually Thomas Slaughter confessed to the magistrates that he had started the fire, but that he had not meant the rick to be destroyed. On his way to the stables, he passed the rick and wondered what would happen if he lit just a bit of it. Then he lowered his lantern and let the candle flame touch the grain. The rick quickly took flame and the terrified servant panicked, went to the stables, but then came back out and tried to help to extinguish the blaze.⁸⁹

After signing his confession, Slaughter wanted to plead guilty, but the magistrates again staged a show trial in order to determine whether this case of arson was a 'rarity' or 'was now a prevalent occurrence'.⁹⁰ The presiding judge, Justice Bosanquet, referred to Thomas Slaughter as having a 'depraved disposition' and had no hesitation in sentencing him to death, despite evidence of Slaughter's good character. On March 25th, Slaughter was hanged on one of the turrets over the front of Worcester Gaol. He went to his death advising others, 'if all servants had done as he had done, the people would die for want of bread' and that, had he not been executed, 'others might have done the same'.⁹¹ Ironically, in his last week of life the visiting magistrate ordered that Thomas Slaughter should be given extra nourishment and daily meat, a better diet than he had probably experienced in the whole of his short life.⁹² At the time of his death, Thomas Slaughter was only 17 and described as 'a simple looking farming youth of diminutive stature'.⁹³ He was also said to be, 'totally uneducated and of apparently no very strong intellect'.⁹⁴ As this was the case, it seems unlikely that the words he spoke at his execution were

⁸⁸ *BWJ*: March 10th 1831. Evidence of William Collins.

⁸⁹ *BWJ*: March 10th 1831. Evidence of Richard Allen, Clerk to the magistrates.

⁹⁰ *BWJ*: March 10th 1831. Report of comments made by Justice Bosanquet at Slaughter's trial.

⁹¹ *BWJ*: March 31st 1831, Account of Thomas Slaughter's execution.

⁹² WCRO: BA1/122/4/2, Visiting Magistrate's Memorandum Book, Vol.2. See entry for 15th March 1831.

⁹³ *WH*: March 12th 1831.

⁹⁴ *BWJ*: March 31st 1831.

his own. They were clearly put into his mouth by those representatives of authority who had made an example of Slaughter at his trial and wished to make a further example of him at his execution.⁹⁵ Indeed, given his intellectual capabilities and his presumed state of terror, he may not even have said them at his execution, the authorities simply reporting what they wished to appear in the local press. Interestingly, his body was given to his brother for burial rather than being buried within the gaol, although no record of his final resting place could be found. There was no record of Thomas Slaughter having a Church of England baptism or marriage either, for he was indeed married, suggesting that his unwillingness to attend church in the first place was that this was not his chosen denomination. In his confession, Slaughter had made it clear that he had fired the rick out of pique and that when the flames took hold he panicked: 'I then fell to the ground, I was so frightened and sorry at what I'd done'.⁹⁶

The lack of Swing incidents in Worcestershire, combined with swift action and show trials staged by the Magistracy, clearly indicated that despite some incidents of violent unrest and symbolic crime in the county from 1829 onwards, rural unrest in Worcestershire was stopped in its tracks. It may also be the case that it was relatively easy to stop the spread of unrest in the period 1829-31 because working conditions in many parts of rural Worcestershire were not as universally bad as they were elsewhere. For example, whilst Worcestershire was not a predominantly high wage area, it was also not a specialist cereal area so that there were few threshing machines in the county.⁹⁷ That said, the focus on destroying threshing machines in Worcestershire, as elsewhere, indicated that local men in those areas probably saw the few that were being used in Worcestershire in 1830 as the precursors of many. This indeed appeared to have been the sole motivation of the Hanley William machine breakers when they destroyed a threshing machine on hire from a farmer in Hallow, the first to be used in their parish. Conversely, however, the threshing machine had been in use in some parts of England, Scotland and Wales for many years and none had been attacked previously. Indeed, in 1826 Richard Llewellyn was fined at Kington, Herefordshire, for leaving a threshing

⁹⁵ For a full account of scaffold rituals see V.A.C. Gattrell, *The Hanging Tree*: 80-82.

⁹⁶ *WH*: March 12th 1831. Quote from the confession of Thomas Slaughter.

⁹⁷ Hobsbawm & Rudé, *Captain Swing*: 25.

machine unattended on the street – an ideal opportunity for it to be attacked – yet the machine remained unscathed and the owner’s offence was more akin to the modern phenomenon of parking a car on double yellow lines.⁹⁸

It was possible, however, that because of their declining economic circumstances, more rural labourers had become politicised, although this was extremely difficult to prove. Certainly, by November 1830 parts of the Government were increasingly alarmed by the attacks on property and the police in London and the number of handbills being put up on display in radical public houses. A spy writing to the Home Office on William Cobbett’s lecture delivered at the Rotunda on 15th December, 1830 reported him as beginning by telling his audience that city labourers were not as badly off as agricultural labourers in Wiltshire and then describing how those labourers lived. The response of the audience to examples of rural labourers’ poverty was cries of, ‘Shame! Shame!’⁹⁹ If Cobbett’s urban audience of some 800 to 900 understood and sympathised with Wiltshire’s agricultural labourers, might it be that urban labourers in Worcestershire had links with rural labourers and that rural labourers took their cue for machine breaking from the Kidderminster carpet weavers’ riot of 1830 and the needle-makers’ strikes at Redditch in 1826 and 1830?

Existing evidence suggested that whilst this was a tempting scenario, there were no discernible connections between urban and rural unrest in Worcestershire. The disputes in the carpet industry¹⁰⁰ and the needle industry related to specific grievances in the industries themselves, although the Redditch dispute was interesting because the machine breaking incident followed a similar pattern to much Swing unrest in Wiltshire and elsewhere. Between 1829 and 1830 needle stamps were coming into use in the Redditch area in order to speed up production and this clearly threatened an end to hand stamping the eyes into needles. As in the

⁹⁸ HCRO: D65/75, Report of a fine on Richard Llewellyn for leaving his threshing machine unattended in Kington, Herefordshire.

⁹⁹ PRO: H0/40/25/2, Report of a lecture delivered by William Cobbett at the Rotunda 16th December 1830.

¹⁰⁰ L.D. Smith’s study *Carpet Weavers and Carpet Masters, The Hand Loom Carpet Weavers of Kidderminster 1780-1850* (Kidderminster: Kenneth Tompkinson Limited, 1986): 149. Smith notes that the weavers’ riot in August 1830 began with a dispute over reduced wages and ended with attacks on street lamps and the houses of prominent carpet weavers. It had direct links with the weavers’ strike of 1828, but Smith does not connect this subsequent riot with rural unrest.

case of the Headley Workhouse Riot, a small deputation went to meet the owner of the machinery but received no satisfaction. A man called Jason Boulton, known by his nickname of 'Lawyer Court', then addressed a crowd of needleworkers before some 200 to 300 people, led by two men playing a fife and drum, marched to the owner's premises at Bredon, Tardebigge, where forty to fifty people entered the premises and destroyed the machine stamps.¹⁰¹ The key similarities of this incident to Swing activities, especially in Kent and Hampshire, lay in its organisation, a preliminary meeting with the owners before further action was taken and the subsequent ability of the organisers to bring together a larger crowd. Accompanied by music, the leaders then marched at the front of the crowd and a designated group went onto the premises and destroyed the offending machinery.

The destruction of threshing machines in Worcestershire, however, never involved the large numbers mustered by the needle-makers and involved no discernible organisation. The actual machine breaking at Red Marley and Hanley William and the threat to destroy a threshing machine at Crowle appeared to be spontaneous unconnected incidents and showed no evidence of leaders called 'Captain' or 'Swing' or elements of parading or processions. It was likely that the sheer numbers involved in the Redditch incident, as opposed to the small numbers involved in rural unrest, led to the Redditch rioters receiving the much harsher punishment of twelve months imprisonment when the case came to the Assizes.¹⁰² It was difficult, therefore, to see rural labourers in Worcestershire simply copying their urban counterparts. What was much more likely was that those Worcestershire agricultural labourers who were aggrieved were putting into practice what they had heard of by word of mouth. Evidence for this not only lay in the fact that Swing activities in Worcestershire were predominantly localised, occurring mostly in the south of the county shortly after unrest had reached Gloucestershire, but because, bearing in mind the testimony of William Collins in the trial of Thomas Slaughter, even the most uneducated labourers were talking

¹⁰¹ William Avery, *Old Redditch*: 13. See also accounts of the trial of rioters *WH*: January 5th 1831.

¹⁰² It was also the case that Judges in the early nineteenth-century used their sentencing powers shrewdly. Hay has pointed out that the authorities knew when sentences needed to be waived or mitigated in order to meet popular ideas of justice and when harsher sentences were needed to prevent popular protest going too far. Douglas Hay, 'Property, Authority and the Criminal Law', *Albion's Fatal Tree*: 48-50:

together about Swing unrest as they were working in the fields.¹⁰³ Labourers, therefore, knew what form the unrest was taking even if they had no idea about how such events were organised.¹⁰⁴ Conversation alone, however, did not imply radicalism or discontent and despite one of the Evesham Swing letters referring to political reform, there were no open meetings specifically calling for political reform in the county until the first public meeting was held at Worcester in January 1831 immediately after the incidents of unrest in the county had been suppressed.¹⁰⁵ Although political meetings had clearly taken place hitherto, these appear to have involved Worcester's embryonic middle-class of small manufacturers and retailers rather than urban and rural labourers. Nor was there any evidence in rural areas of agricultural labourers being radicalised by political ballads about gentrified farmers and impoverished labourers, as Dyck has suggested. Moreover, it was interesting to note that some of the ballads cited as evidence by Dyck were printed in Birmingham and may well have been intended for an urban and not a rural audience.¹⁰⁶ Rural tastes in Worcester generally tended towards the melodramatic, such as the ballad of 'Mary of the Wild Moor' or fantasy fulfilment as in 'The Thresher' where a nobleman asked a labourer how he managed to maintain his wife and seven children. When the labourer replied that he did so by constant hard work, the nobleman gave the thresher fifty acres of land as a gift and the family lived happily ever after.¹⁰⁷

What final conclusions, then, could be drawn from the Last Labourers' Revolt in Worcestershire, other than it was a damp squib? Rudé maintained that the industrial and agricultural revolutions left 'a trail of grievances and romantic yearnings' across England, and that rural villages were 'a battle-ground of conflicting interests'. On this battleground, Rudé claimed, the farmer fought against the landlord over rent and the parson over tithe and 'took it out on the

¹⁰³ Barry Reay has found evidence that talk of the Revolt was also common in beer-shops and public houses. Reay, *Rural England*: 149.

¹⁰⁴ *BWJ*: March 10th 1831. Evidence of William Collins at the trial of Thomas Slaughter.

¹⁰⁵ *BWJ*: January 20th 1831.

¹⁰⁶ Dyck, *William Cobbett*: 80. Dyck particularly cited a ballad printed by William Pratt of Digbeth, Birmingham, called 'The Labouring Man' predominantly concerned with the sacrifices of 'the lads that plough the ground'.

¹⁰⁷ Barnard (ed.) *Evesham and Four Shires Notes and Queries*, Vol. 2: 252-253.

labourer by reducing his wages or turning him over to the overseer'.¹⁰⁸ If this was indeed the case, surely there should have been even more unrest at village level in Worcestershire instead of disturbances in a very few parishes? Rudé's explanation was that urban unrest, rural unrest and the movement towards political reform were three distinct and unrelated forms of discontent and that rural unrest, far from being revolutionary, was simply another example of social protest using methods tried and tested in pre-industrial England during bread riots and other disturbances. All that labourers were doing during their 'revolt' was actually clinging stubbornly to what they saw as the ancient rights and traditions of the village and that this was the major basis for their actions.¹⁰⁹ This suggested that agricultural labourers had a 'customary lifestyle' that they both valued and thought it worth fighting for.

What, then, did this lifestyle consist of and how did it manifest itself in labourers' daily lives? One fruitful means of exploring these issues further was to make a closer examination of what Dyck called the labourers' 'magico-religious' beliefs¹¹⁰, to see what role traditional customary beliefs had in promoting social protest whilst falling short of contemporary urban trends towards political radicalism. Although many historians have cited culture and community as being important factors in agricultural labourers' consciousness, there have been few systematic studies of the role these played in individual communities and the impact on everyday behaviour. Many historians have agreed with Hobsbawm and Rudé that rural customs and traditions were ritual occasions that provided 'a built-in safety valve for the tensions that exist in all stratified societies'.¹¹¹ It was also clear that these were under 'official' attack during this period as archaic, unpleasant or irrelevant. It remains to be discussed whether these growing attacks on customary beliefs and practices contributed to rural unrest or whether labourers' concepts of hierarchical relationships still ultimately control the way they resolved local disputes in the same way that they did in the middle of the eighteenth century?

¹⁰⁸ George Rudé, 'English Rural and Urban Disturbances on the Eve of the First Reform Bill, 1830-1831', 87.

¹⁰⁹ Rudé, 'English Urban and Rural Disturbance', 90.

¹¹⁰ Dyck, *William Cobbett*: 82.

¹¹¹ Hobsbawm & Rudé, *Captain Swing*: 61.

