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EIGHTEENTH CENTURY PRICE RIOTS AND PUBLIC POLICY IN ENGLAND

In an earlier article in these pages[1] I examined the origins of the price-control legislation of the Jacobin phase of the French Revolution, suggesting that it ought, most properly, to be regarded not as a revolutionary innovation, but rather as the re-emergence in a new environment of an old and well-established tradition of popular action to fix fair market prices, and thus maintain living standards, by riot and demonstration. At the same time, and in passing, I indicated briefly that a similar tradition existed in 18th-century England, if anything more strongly marked and more widespread than in France itself. The present article will be concerned with a discussion of the significance of this English tradition.

Sufficient secondary sources are now available to provide a more or less adequate outline of the incidence of popular discontents and their violent expression in England during the 18th century. A few years ago Dr Wearmouth's study of *Methodism and the Common People of the 18th Century*[2] began to fill in the gap in descriptive history which formerly existed for the period between the two foundation studies by Professor Beloff[3] and Dr Darvall,[4] respectively of public order and popular disturbances in the periods 1660-1715 and 1811-1817. A number of specialised studies of 18th-century industries, and notably cotton, coal-mining and cornish tin throw much incidental light on the social conditions of the workers in particular trades, and the methods, often violent, which they used to express their economic

[1] Robert Barrie Rose, 18th-century price-riots, the French Revolution and the Jacobin Maximum, in: International Review of Social History, vol. IV (1959), Part 3, pp. 432-445.
[2] Robert Featherstone Wearmouth, Methodism and the Common People of the 18th Century, London 1945.
[3] Max Beloff, Public Order and Popular Disturbances, 1660-1714, Oxford 1938.
[4] Frank Ongley Darvall, Popular Disturbances and Public Order in Regency England, Oxford 1934.

demands.[1] Professor Barnes's important study of the conditions of the English corn trade similarly illuminates the area of investigation, though from a different angle.[2]

For the special purposes of the present article, however, most of these studies are of only very limited value. In most cases, Dr Darvall perhaps excepted, they deal only incidentally with working-class life and with popular discontent, while in all cases, even within this incidental treatment, only the most marginal consideration is given to riots themselves as a subject of valid historical enquiry. Nor is this an unconscious omission only; in some cases at least it is a conscious and justified act of policy. Thus while noting the prevalence of hunger-riots throughout the entire period 1660-1846, Professor Barnes dismisses the subject with the comment that "In general these disturbances were more or less alike, and hence nothing is gained by giving a detailed account of each one".[3] In almost as many words Professor T. S. Ashton and J. Sykes, the authors of a study of the coal industry in the 18th century, acknowledge the persistence in the second half of the century of endemic "rebellions of the belly" in the coalfields, but protest that "to ascertain the details of all the uprisings of the poor during these fifty years would involve labour disproportionate to the value of any generalisation that would be likely to emerge".[4] It would be unfair to three eminent historians to comment on the apparent reversal of inductive historical method which these quotations seem to indicate. There are, however, contemporary historians who would take issue with the implication that "uprisings of the poor", "rebellions of the belly" and "disturbances" are not worthy of as close an examination in their own right as, say, the machinery of public order, the development of the coal industry or the complexities of the corn laws. In the past few years the analysis of the compositions and the psychology of rioting crowds, and of the structure and form of the riot itself has been pushed forward to a respectable degree in England, for example, by Dr Rudé[5] and Dr

[1] E.g., Alfred P. Wadsworth and J. De Lacy Mann, The Cotton Trade and Industrial Lancashire, Manchester 1931; Thomas Southcliffe Ashton and Julia Sykes, The Coal Industry of the Eighteenth Century, Manchester 1929; Alfred Kenneth Hamilton Jenkin, The Cornish Miner, London 1948; John [William] Rowe, Cornwall in the Age of the Industrial Revolution, Liverpool 1953.

[2] Donald Grove Barnes, A History of the English Corn Laws, 1660-1846, London 1930.

[3] Ibid., preface, pp. xiv-xv.

[4] T. S. Ashton and J. Sykes, The Coal Industry of the Eighteenth Century (op. cit), p. 126.

[5] Cf., for example, George Rudé, The London "Mob" of the Eighteenth Century, in The Historical Journal, II, i (1959), pp. 1-18; George Rudé, The Gordon Riots:

Hobsbawm[1], and it is no accident that both these writers have drawn attention to the importance of the hunger riot as a method of exerting popular pressure both in France and England, particularly at a date when no other method, political or industrial was generally open to "working men" to express their grievances effectively.[2]

An essay of this length and nature cannot pretend to replace an exhaustive study even of a selected aspect of 18th-century rioting. Its aim will be, therefore, less ambitious: to attempt to define the problem presented by the price-fixing riot, to measure its extent, and to assess its importance in terms of such general conclusions as may properly be advanced in the circumstances of such a limited approach.

As a preliminary it should be remarked that 18th-century hunger-riots were by no means the simple homogeneous outbreaks they have been painted. Like the French riots described in my earlier article, they fall into certain well-defined categories, of varying degrees of sophistication. Grain riots, for example, always the most common type of outbreak, may be divided into four classes, varying from a simple outbreak of looting, through riots directed against the tranportation and export of corn, to direct action by rioters to impose fixed prices on the market, and attempts to force local magistrates to decree maximum prices by mob pressure. In order to narrow the scope of the article and to sustain the French comparison the last two types of riot only will be chosen for special study below.

Cases of both these kinds of popular price-fixing abound in English history from at least 1693 until 1847, and, as will be shown, were not restricted to grain alone.

On the face of it, one would expect the price-fixing riot to be at least as old as the medieval doctrine of the just price, to which it bears an obvious affiliation. In point of fact the earliest example of which the present writer is aware occurred in Oxford in April 1693, when "the poor... by clamouring, brought the price of corn from 9s. to 6s. 2d." [the bushel]. In October of the same year, Northampton-

A Study of the Rioters and their Victims, in: Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 5th Series, vol. 6 (1956); George Rudé, Wilkes and Liberty 1768-9, in: Guildhall Miscellany, no. 8, July 1957.

My own studies of the Liverpool riots of 1775 and the Birmingham riots of 1791 also bear on similar topics: R.B. Rose: A Liverpool Sailors' Strike in the Eighteenth Century, in: Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society, vol. LXVIII, 1958; R. B. Rose, The "Priestley" Riots of 1791, in: Past and Present, no. 18, November 1960.

[1] Cf., Eric Hobsbawm, The Machine-breakers, in: Past and Present, no. 1, February 1952.

[2] For the indication by Rudé, see G. Rudé, The Crowd in the French Revolution, Oxford, 1959, chapter XV, "The Revolutionary Crowd in History", esp. pp. 236-7.

shire was the scene of riots in which wheat was seized from corn-dealers' carts "and sold at the next market at 5s. a bushel", while in November, "great numbers of women came into the market with knives stuck in their girdles to force corn at their own rates", and corn was also seized from engrossers' wagons in Banbury, Chipping Norton and Charlbury in Oxfordshire, the rioters allegedly saying "they were resolved to put the law in execution since the magistrates neglected it".[1]

In an enquiry of this kind it is difficult to be definite about a negative finding. It would be surprising if some evidence were not eventually to turn up for riots of a similar type in years prior to 1693. In the interim, such evidence may, with confidence, be described as at least rare, however, and there are certain circumstantial reasons for selecting the closing decade of the 17th century as the period during which the price-fixing riot first achieved historical significance. Support for such a conclusion may be drawn, for example from the changing nature of governmental regulation of the corn trade, with the fluctuations of the harvest the most potent factor in fixing the market price of grain. In his *History of the English Corn Laws* Professor Barnes emphasises the importance of the Restoration year, 1660, as a watershed in governmental policy. Before 1660, he writes under the "elaborate paternal bureaucracy" of the Tudors and the early Stuarts the interest of the consumer was regarded as predominant. The activities of corn dealers were closely checked. The exportation of grain was restricted when the price rose above certain fixed levels; restrictions were rarely placed upon imports.[2] This is not the appropriate place to enter into a discussion of the degree either of benevolence or effectiveness of Tudor and Stuart paternalism. However, it is worth noting in the present context that Professor Barnes' analysis is supported in general by Professor Supple, in his recent work on the economic history of early Stuart England, in which he concludes that the Stuart government "was never reluctant to use its powers in the cause of protecting living standards by the enforcement of general poor relief, price control, and minimum wage supports".[3] Even more specifically the same author goes on to remark that "during the crises of the early 1620's and the early 1630's the government moved as firmly as it could to control the supply of

[1] M. Beloff, Public Order and Popular Disturbances (op. cit.), pp. 62-4.
[2] D. G. Barnes, op. cit., preface, pp. xiv-xv.
[3] Barry E. Supple, Commercial Crisis and Change in England, 1600-1642, Cambridge 1959, p. 244.

grain, eliminate speculators and hoarders, avoid unnecessary processing of barley, and bring down the current price of bread".[1]

By contrast, after 1660, in Professor Barnes's words, the producer "received fully as much consideration as the consumer". Practically all restrictions on the activities of the internal corn trader were removed by the law of 1663, which also placed a duty on imported corn. The "Glorious Revolution" of 1688, though not so identified by Barnes, also emerges as an important watershed with the introduction of export bounties on grain, a *quid pro quo* offered to the English landowning class by the grateful William III.[2] In view of these changes and the general background of the insidious price inflation characteristic of the century, there would seem to be a *prima facie* case for expecting the Restoration period to yield a picture of swelling protest and hunger riot. In fact the highly relevant researches of Professor Beloff, for whatever reason, show no such picture. The explanation may be found, at least in part, in the counteracting influence of a series of good harvests and consequent years of plenty. From 1680 to 1692 for example, there were 12 successive years of favourable seasons and low prices, with the exception only of 1684. A wet autumn in 1692 however ushered in six lean years, heralded by the catastrophic harvest of 1693, said to have been the worst recorded since the reign of Elizabeth, and harvests were not really good again for almost a quarter of a century.[3]

Only in the 1690's, therefore, did the English people face, for the first time, the test of bad harvests and scarcity in the new political conditions, with, on the one hand, a local magistracy no longer prepared to impose controls on the market and the dealers as in Tudor and early Stuart days, and on the other, a system of regulation designed explicitly to encourage exports, discourage imports and keep prices high. It is from this period, therefore that we may date with some confidence the growing prevalence of hunger riots and price-fixing riots.

In attempting to fix the date at which price-fixing riots ceased to be a common feature of English social history we are faced again with an inevitable imprecision. It is impossible to state with any certainty that such riots did *not* occur after any particular date. It is clear, however, that the price-fixing riot survived, as an institution, until well into the nineteenth century. Hunger rioting played a conspicuous part in the disturbances analysed by Dr Darvall in his study of the period 1811-1817, and the author identifies several outbreaks un-

[1] Ibid., p. 245.
[2] D. G. Barnes, op. cit., preface, pp. xiv-xv.
[3] Ibid., p. 21, no. 20; cf. M. Beloff, op. cit., pp. 63-4.

mistakeably as price-fixing riots. This is true of riots at Carlisle[1] and Oldham in April 1812,[2] for example. Price-fixing riots also occurred at Manchester[3] and Birmingham[4] during the same month.

In recalling this epoch of Birmingham's history a contemporary later wrote: "During times of dearth bread riots were common, followed by attacks on bakers, hucksters and farmers. On one occasion there was a curious attempt of the mob to fix the rate of prices. A body of men seized on the loads of potatoes brought into the Birmingham market, and their leaders, having fixed on a price which they considered proper, though much below the actual value, they sold all the potatoes accordingly, and handed over the proceeds to the owners. The result of this proceeding was that for a whole month afterwards not another potato was brought to the Birmingham market, and the article could not be obtained at any price".[5]

Circumstantial arguments suggest the 1840's as the last decade in which the English version of "taxation populaire" might be expected to have been at all significant, for it was in this decade that the general strengthening of the machinery of public order resulted in the decline of the riot as an endemic symptom of English social discontent. In fact, price-fixing riots are nowhere identified as such in F. C. Mather's recent study on this topic,[6] while the same author reserves for hunger riots in general only a very minor rôle in his analysis of the disturbances of the "Hungry Forties". A critical reading of Darvall and Mather suggests that already, even by 1812, hunger rioting, and with it popular price-fixing had become a less important method of expressing popular discontent than a variety of new competitors, and as the century progressed the working-class turned increasingly to other tactics, like Luddism, or machine-breaking, rick-burning, industrial combination (especially after 1824) and political agitation, first of a Radical, and later of a Chartist complexion. The decline in the incidence of price-fixing riots may also have been hastened after 1795 and before 1834 by the spread of the "Speenhamland" system of poor relief, by which pauper families received an individual subsidy adjusted to the price of bread. By this means the spur of utter desperation was frequently removed in important districts.

The older traditions lingered on, however, and at least one full-

[1] F. O. Darvall, Popular Disturbances and Public Order (op. cit.), p. 95.
[2] Ibid., p. 99.
[3] Ibid., p. 100.
[4] John Alfred Langford, A Century of Birmingham Life, or A Chronicle of Local Events from 1741 to 1841, London 1868, Vol. II, p. 322.
[5] Frederic Hill, Autobiography of Fifty Years in Times of Reform (edited by Constance Hill), London 1893, p. 37.
[6] Frederick Clare Mather, Public Order in the Age of the Chartists, Manchester 1959.

blooded example of popular price-fixing is recorded as late as the great crisis of 1847 when poor crops and a trade depression coincided, as they had often done in the past. In May 1847 Cornish copper miners from Caradon invaded Callington market and forced the sale of wheat, barley and butter at fixed prices. Similar events involving copper and tin miners and quarrymen took place at other Cornish towns like Launceston and Penzance, and an interesting link between old and new working-class traditions is provided by the fact that some of the Cornish rioters chose to march about their business behind the red flag.[1]

It seems probable that the Cornish outbreaks of 1847 must be regarded as the last important examples of their kind, and an admittedly superficial[2] investigation of the hunger-riots and looting of February 1855 in London, the Midlands and Liverpool does not lead to any conflicting conclusion.

In spite of the 17th-century and 19th-century examples adduced, we should be justified in regarding the English price-fixing riot, in perspective, as primarily and typically an 18th-century phenomenon. In examining the precise incidence of such riots within the 18th century the usual reservation about negative findings must be made, but in general it is possible to say that price-fixing riots, like hunger-riots, followed closely the pattern of the fluctuating fortunes of the grain trade. In this respect both Professors Ashton and Barnes are agreed in dividing the century into two contrasting halves, with the division fixed at 1765 in the first instance,[3] and at 1750 in the second.[4] During the first period, from 1715 to mid-century, harvests were, with a few exceptions good, production was expanding, and prices fell. During the second half of the century, and particularly after 1765, bad harvests became almost the rule rather than the exception, and prices were high and generally rising, to reach, in 1795, their highest point for two centuries.[5] In Professor Ashton's phrase, during the first period hunger riots were epidemic; during the second period they became endemic. The same observation applies to price-fixing riots. On closer analysis the outbreak of price-fixing riots is however seen to have reflected quite closely the incidence of high prices either in expectation of or in response to individual bad harvests. At the same time another work recently published by Professor Ashton on

[1] J. Rowe, Cornwall in the Age of the Industrial Revolution (op. cit.), pp. 160-1.
[2] Using The Times, The Annual Register, and local journals.
[3] T. S. Ashton and J. Sykes, Coal Industry of the 18th Century, p. 125.
[4] D. G. Barnes, English Corn Laws, pp. 12, 28 sqq.
[5] Ibid., p. 71.

trade fluctuations in the 18th century[1] has illuminated the other side of the picture, the incidence of unemployment or under-employment, and therefore the fluctuating ability to pay. It is found that in a significant number of cases years of high food prices were also years of trade depression. This is true in particular of thirteen years: 1727, 1740, 1752-3, 1766-8, 1773-4, 1784, 1789, 1793 and 1800.[2] There is evidence for price-fixing riots in no less than ten of these years, the exceptions being 1774, 1784, and curiously enough, in view of events across the Channel - 1789. In addition, bad harvests and high prices alone helped to spark off price-fixing riots in the following years: 1709, 1756-7, 1772, 1782, 1783 and 1795; there were also riots in Shropshire in 1764, though no general shortage.[3] Similar data for the years 1790-1850 has of course been processed in a more sophisticated and statistical way by Dr Rostow elsewhere to produce an interesting graph of relative "social tension".[4]

Although, as we have seen, the grain harvest was the crucial factor, and it is true that most riots aimed at reducing the price of wheat, barley, oatmeal or their derivatives, flour and bread, other essential commodities were also frequently "regulated", such as potatoes (Manchester: 1757,[5] 1812;[6] Truro: 1766;[7] Birmingham: 1766[8]), butter (Stourbridge, Bewdley, Kidderminster, Worcester,[9] Oxford,[10] Birmingham: 1766;[11] Stourbridge, Kidderminster: 1767,[12] Bury St Edmunds: 1772,[13] Birmingham: 1782,[14] Liverpool: 1793,[15] Hull: 1795;[16] Cornwall: 1847[17]), cheese (Exeter, Oxford, Halesowen, Coventry,[18]

[1] Thomas Southcliffe Ashton, Economic Fluctuations in England, 1700-1800, Oxford 1959.
[2] Cf. ibid., pp. 172-3, cf. D. G. Barnes, English Corn Laws, passim.
[3] In most cases further indications for these riots are supplied below.
[4] Walt Whitman Rostow, Business Cycles, Harvests and Politics, 1790-1850, in: Journal of Economic History, vol. I, November 1941, no. 2.
[5] See below.
[6] F. O. Darvall, Popular Disturbances and Public Order, p. 100.
[7] A. K. Hamilton Jenkin, The Cornish Miner (op. cit.), pp. 151-3.
[8] See above.
[9] R. F. Wearmouth, Methodism and the Common People (op. cit.), pp. 33-4.
[10] Ibid.
[11] See below.
[12] Annual Register, vol. X, p. 148.
[13] R. F. Wearmouth, Methodism and the Common People, p. 37.
[14] See below.
[15] R. F. Wearmouth, Methodism and the Common People, pp. 36 sqq.
[16] Ibid., p. 48.
[17] See above and below.
[18] R. F. Wearmouth, Methodism and the Common People, pp. 33-5.

Birmingham,[1] Setbury:[2] 1766; Bury St Edmunds: 1772[3]; Birmingham: 1782;[4] Etruria 1783; Nuneaton: 1800[5]), butchers' meat (Stourbridge, Bromsgrove,[6] Redruth and St. Austell: 1766;[7] Boston, Lincs.: 1768;[8] Leadenhall: 1772[9]), bacon (Oxford,[10] Setbury: 1766;[11] Nuneaton: 1800), malt, (Wednesbury, Birmingham: 1782[12]), candles and soap, (Oxford 1766).[13]

Once again, in discussing geographical distribution, the familiar reservations must be made. Where simple hunger riots are concerned, no part of England seems to have been immune. But while a closer scrutiny of hunger riots, in areas apparently unproductive of price fixing, such as for example, the Tyneside coalfields may substantially modify the picture, it seems probable that the price-fixing riot was particularly prominent in only two regions: the West Country, from Cornwall north through Devon and Somerset to Bristol and Gloucestershire, and the West Midlands, from Worcestershire north to Derbyshire, and including Warwickshire, Oxfordshire, Leicestershire, Northamptonshire, Staffordshire and Shropshire. The West Country riots were most often the work of Cornish tin and copper-miners, and the Midlands riots of Black-Country colliers, though other industrial groups also played their part, as, for example, the Kingswood colliers at Bristol, the Black Country nailers, or the Staffordshire potters.

A tentative conclusion based on the admittedly inconclusive evidence available might be that the price-fixing riot originated in Oxford and Northamptonshire in the 1690's[14] and spread outwards slowly from there, south-west, via Bristol, where there were riots in 1709,[15] to the West Country, where there were riots in Somerset in 1753 and in Cornwall in 1766. By 1740 price-fixing riots are known to have been occurring as far west as Pembroke[16] and as far east as Wisbech,

[1] See below.
[2] Annual Register, Vol. IX, pp. 120 sqq.
[3] See below.
[4] See below.
[5] R. F. Wearmouth, Methodism and the Common People, pp.33-5.
[6] Annual Register, vol. IX, pp. 137-40.
[7] Ibid., vol. XI, p. 118.
[8] Ibid., vol. XV, pp. 90-91.
[9] R. F. Wearmouth, Methodism and the Common People, p. 33.
[10] Annual Register, vol. IX, pp. 120 sqq.
[11] See below.
[12] See below.
[13] R. F. Wearmouth, Methodism and the Common People, p. 34.
[14] See above.
[15] See below.
[16] See below.

in Norfolk.[1] In 1756 there were outbreaks north as far as Shropshire, while Manchester was affected in 1757.[2] Popular price-fixing is not reported from Yorkshire before 1783,[3] and the price-fixing riot apparently remained almost unknown north of Lancashire and Yorkshire, with the exception of Carlisle, where we have already noted a disturbance in 1812.

The only concrete evidence for the actual process of dissemination seems however, to be the allegation that the leader of some rioting colliers at Prescot (Lancashire) in 1757 was "a noted ringleader, by trade a stocking-loom maker, and formerly one of the principal rioters at Nottingham".[4]

Just as the objects marked for regulation varied from place to place, so did the tactics of the rioters. Open and direct intimidation of the vendors was common. In November 1756, for example, there was a five days' riot in Shropshire. It began with an assembly of colliers from Broseley and district, called out by the sounding of horns, a common feature of colliers' riots in the 18th century. The miners were later joined by "a few watermen and other labourers" and over a number of days they invaded successively the markets of Much Wenlock, Shifnal, Broseley, and Wellington "and obliged the sellers of grain and other commodities to reduce their prices". In anticipation of further trouble two prominent landowners, Sir Thomas Whitmore and Sir Richard Acton went to Bridgnorth market and "obliged their tenants to sell wheat at 5s. per bushel or under" at the same time promising to compensate them by foregoing their rents for a few weeks. Elsewhere the houses of many grocers, bakers and farmers were broken into and sacked, and some persons were violently handled. Ultimately a force of 2,500 servants, tenants and townspeople was raised "all pretty well armed", and the insurgents dispersed.[5] During a similar episode at Birmingham in 1766 troubles began in early September, when rioters seized butter in the market priced at 10d. a lb., "sold it at 7d. and gave all the money to the dealers". Later, on Michaelmas fair day "a common labourer", said to have been a Dudley miner "erected his standard, an inverted mop, and called out 'Redress of Grievances', after which parties went round forcing stallholders and grocers to sell bread, cheese, bacon and other

[1] R. F. Wearmouth, Methodism and the Common People, p. 21.
[2] See below.
[3] Cf. R. F. Wearmouth, Methodism and the Common People, pp. 36-48.
[4] A. P. Wadsworth and J. De Lacy Mann, The Cotton Trade and Industrial Lancashire (op. cit.), p. 360.
[5] Public Record Office, SP 36/136/25; R. F. Wearmouth, Methodism and the Common People, pp. 27, 59.

provisions at a fixed price". A local magistrate eventually managed to restore order with the aid of 80 special constables armed with staves, but not before the rioters had been promised a sufficient quantity of household bread at 1d a lb.[1] At Oldham in 1812 ordinary shopkeepers were the victims when "the mobs presented lists of prices to the shops, accompanying with threats of burning the premises. The two Methodistical Jacobinical constables not venturing to show themselves, "goods were sold at forced prices".[2]

On other occasions the rioters' concern was primarily with seeing that goods were brought to market and put up for sale at the decreed prices. Thus rioters at Honiton in 1766[3] and in Cornwall generally in 1847[4] made a round of the public houses to collect up grain held back and stored there in the expectation of rising prices. Bedworth colliers in the Coventry riots of 1766 "began by plundering the warehouses of cheese and selling the same at low prices", and wharfside grain warehouses were similarly treated in the Nottingham Goose Fair riots the same year.[5] Farmers were also "encouraged" to send their goods to open market by deputations of rioters as in the Warwickshire outbreaks of 1756[6] and 1800.[7] In the Cornish riots of 1847 "bands of miners and quarrymen visited the farms and ordered the occupiers to thresh supplies of corn, take the grain to market, and sell it at 'fair' prices".[8] Rioters were also vigilant against any attempt to carry provisions out of a region in which they were already short, and in general seem to have regarded stocks in transit as fair game. Thus in May 1740 Pembroke colliers broke open the hatches of a vessel laden with corn for Bristol and carried away part of the cargo. They then invaded the market, set a price for corn, and threatened to burn down the town if the maximum was not observed.[9] After the Birmingham outbreak of 1766 a "well armed" Birmingham gang made its way along the route to the inland port of Stratford on Avon, stopping all the grain wagons along the way and selling their contents

[1] R. F. Wearmouth, Methodism and the Common People, pp. 33-35; James Jaffray, "Hints for a History of Birmingham", chapter IX (unpaginated item in Birmingham Reference Library); Annual Register, vol. IX, p. 140; John Freeth, The Political Songster, or a Touch on the Times, on various subjects, 6th edition with additions, Birmingham, 1790, note to "The Dudley Riot" on p. 28; William Hutton, History of Birmingham, 3rd edition, Birmingham 1806, p. 388.

[2] F. O. Darvall, Popular Disturbances and Public Order, p. 99.

[3] Annual Register, vol. IX, p. 119.

[4] J. Rowe, Cornwall in the Age of the Industrial Revolution, 160-1.

[5] R. F. Wearmouth, Methodism and the Common People, p. 35.

[6] Public Record Office, SP 36/135/59.

[7] See below.

[8] J. Rowe, Cornwall in the Age of the Industrial Revolution, 160-1.

[9] T. S. Ashton and J. Sykes, Coal Industry of the 18th century, p. 119.

at a fixed price.[1] In 1783 Josiah Wedgwood's potters intercepted two canal boats at Etruria, laden with flour and cheese for Manchester, and emptied both vessels by a forced sale, paying over the proceeds, however, to the masters of the boats. It required a reading of the Riot Act, and the joint efforts of the Welsh Fusiliers and Staffordshire Militia to disperse the crowd; one of the ringleaders, Stephen Barlow, was afterwards hanged for his part in the events.[2] Perhaps the most remarkable intervention of 18th-century rioters in normal commercial activities, however, is said to have taken place near Burton on Trent in 1764, when the local colliers refused "to pay 8s.4d. for wheat, which they thought unreasonable, as it took so much of their money for bread only. So they enquired out both buyer and seller, brought them face to face, and obliged the seller to return 3s.4d. of the money per bushel, and cleared the market at 5s. per bushel, which they said was the London price".[3]

Such riots were characteristically ephemeral, spontaneous outbreaks without either serious organisation or lasting effect. There were others, however, on a larger scale, which represented nothing so much as an attempt to impose a kind of local, limited "dictatorship of the proletariat" by forcing the local magistrates to add official sanction to the rioters' decrees. Beginning with the invasion of Bristol by the Kingswood colliers in 1709[4] there are many records of riots during which justices of the peace and other officers yielded in this way, at least temporarily. At Manchester, in November 1757, colliers from Ashton under Lyne, which was already under mob law, marched on the city "armed with sticks, clubs, pickaxes and other dangerous weapons" and ordered the High Sheriff to fix a favourable maximum for oatmeal, potatoes and flour "for 12 months to come". The Sheriff's refusal to obey resulted in a ptched battle with troops, the famous "Shudehill fight".[5] In October 1782 colliers from the Dudley and Walsall districts turned out, led by the legendary champions "Irish Tom" and "Barley Will", and, their ranks swelled by local nailers and spinners, began to impose price regulation on the countryside, beginning with Wednesbury, where they compelled a reduction in the

[1] R. F. Wearmouth, Methodism and the Common People, p. 36.
[2] John Ward, The Borough of Stoke-upon-Trent, London, 1843, pp. 444-6.
[3] Jack Lindsay, 1764, London 1959, p. 271.
[4] M. Beloff, Public Order and Popular Disturbances, p. 68. Cf. William Barnett, History and Antiquities of the City of Bristol, Bristol 1789, p. 696, which dates the riots 1708.
[5] A. P. Wadsworth and J. De Lacy Mann, The Cotton Trade and Industrial Lancashire, 359-60; Arthur Redford, A History of Local Government in Manchester, Manchester 1939-40, vol. I, pp. 143-6.

price of flour and malt. An orderly party arrived in Birmingham on 17 October and negotiated with the "officers of the town" a list of prices for malt, flour, butter, cheese, and other goods, before they withdrew at the threat of military force. On the following Saturday, 23 October, a meeting of inhabitants actually agreed to the imposition of a maximum price list, and also the appointment of 140 special constables to prevent further disorder.[1]

In May 1793 a large number of tin-miners collected at Falmouth to demand that the mayor fix the prices of corn and wheat, before marching round the county to enforce a general reduction of prices.[2] In September 1800 the Bedworth colliers turned out again and marched on Nuneaton, where "they procured to be drawn up" (presumably by a magistrate) "a statement of their grievances and fixing as a price for peace and good order a maximum for wheat, bacon, cheese, etc., with which they waited upon farmers and others and forced their signatures assenting to sell at the prices required, viz., wheat 7s. a bushel, bacon 7d, cheese 4d lb." In many instances they seized the articles and sold them at the price fixed. On Tuesday 10th September they invaded Coventry "in very considerable numbers, armed with bludgeons, stakes etc." but were dispersed by the dragoons. Although four rioters were seized they were afterwards freed by the county authorities, who had themselves already begun to take action against forestalling and regrating.[3] In May 1847 the miners of West Penwith invaded Penzance in force, but came to an agreement with the justices that the maximum price of barley, until the harvest was reaped, should not exceed 42s.8d. per quarter for men earning less than 55s. per month. The previous week the price had been 60s.[4]

Occasionally riots, or the fear of riots drove the magistrates to take other preventive measures which, while popular, fell short of price control. In the autumn of 1756 for example Liverpool Corporation borrowed £ 2000 to buy corn, which was rationed and sold to the poor at cost price.[5] The same year, after yet another irruption of Bedworth colliers, the mayor of Coventry circulated an abstract of the Acts of 1552 and 1563 against forestalling, engrossing and regrating, presumably as a warning of future action against unscrupu-

[1] J. A. Langford, A Century of Birmingham Life (op. cit.), vol. II, p. 311; J. Freeth, The Political Songster, Birmingham 1790, p. 29.
[2] Annual Register, vol. XXXV, p. 21.
[3] Jopson's Coventry Mercury, 8 September, 1800, 15 September, 1800. At this date Coventry was a separate county in its own right and not part of Warwickshire.
[4] J. Rowe, Cornwall in the Age of the Industrial Revolution, 160-61.
[5] A. P. Wadsworth and J. De Lacy Mann, The Cotton Trade, p. 359.

lous dealers.[1] Ten years afterwards, at the height of the almost nation-wide outbreak of rioting in 1766 a royal proclamation was issued to enjoin the general enforcement of the same Acts, as a concession to the hungry and rebellious populace.

This attempt to force the highly-developed 18th-century grain and provision trades back into an antiquated strait-jacket of Tudor regulation was soon abandoned, however, in 1772, when all the restrictive statutes hindering dealers were repealed.[2] Common law provisions against monopoly could still be invoked however, and, as late as the crisis of 1800 the popular temper was somewhat assuaged when a London corn jobber, John Rusby, was successfully indicted before King's Bench for grain-cornering.

Apart from such not insignificant triumphs, probably the most significant achievement of the 18th-century rioters was the indirect influence of popular discontent and public disorder in reducing the effect of the highly protectionist corn laws. In 1773 for example, following the severe disturbances of the 1760s, the export bounty and the import price threshold were both lowered.[3] Moreover, as the historian of the corn laws remarks, even before that date "the landed interest did not reap the benefits of high prices during years of scarcity because Parliament, under pressure from London and the manufacturing and mining districts, was forced to allow importation free and prohibit exportation".[4] Without venturing far into the very complex detailed history of the 18th-century corn laws, we may note that between the years 1698 and 1800 the exportation of grain was in fact prohibited for all or part of twenty-three years – 1698, 1709-10, 1740-1, 1756-7, 1766-74, 1789-90, 1792, 1795-7, and 1800 – while the bounty was withheld during a further six years: 1699-1700, 1764-5, and 1782-3. In addition import duties for some or all protected grains were suspended during thirteen years: 1757-8, 1764-8, 1772-4, 1795-7.[5]

It is hardly necessary to labour the connexion between such emergency measures of government and the incidence of hunger-riots. "The government", as Professor Barnes remarks, "was sensitive to public opinion as expressed in grain riots"[6] and, as we have seen, probably most powerfully and effectively so expressed in price-fixing riots.

[1] William White, Coventry Directory, Coventry 1850, p. 500.
[2] D. G. Barnes, History of the English Corn Laws, pp. 39-45.
[3] Ibid., pp. 80-81. As if as a sequel to the case there occurred in December 1800 the only important recorded example of a price-fixing riot in London. Ibid.
[4] Ibid., p. 59.
[5] Ibid., passim.
[6] Ibid., p. 16.

It has been shown here that such uprisings were not mere stereotyped outbreaks of primitive and sterile violence. In fact, it seems likely that there were almost as many different types at least of price-fixing riots as there were outbreaks of rioting, each involving different aims and different tactics.

At the same time, and despite the pessimism of those who have previously looked at the problem, it is clear that a closer analysis of such riots, even of the present modest dimensions, may be fairly productive of valuable generalisations. Perhaps some of these may be summarised in conclusion. In England, just as in France "*taxation populaire*" or the fixing of the prices of essentials by popular riot was a traditional mode of working-class action, particularly in the South and South-West, and particularly in the 18th century. To a large extent the incidence of such riots was a function of harvest fluctuation, but also of trade fluctuations. The price-fixing riot appears to have appealed to many different strata of workers and artisans. It was particularly favoured however, by such homogeneous working-class groups as the Cornish tin and copper miners, and, above all, the coal miners of the South-west and the West Midlands. For these groups popular price-fixing represented a well tried form of industrial action, directed not against the mine-owners, however, but against a more generalised target of popular wrath, the food profiteer, real or imaginary, whether as farmer, dealer or retailer. Indeed in their struggle against the "profiteers" the rioters were occasionally able to enlist the sympathy of landowning magistrates, hostile to "bourgeois" traders, of burgess magistrates, more concerned for the maintenance of general public order than the profits of a minority group of food speculators, and of mineowners, whose interest it was to keep the price of food low, and the coalfields peaceful and productive.

Our knowledge of the general pathology of 18th-century riots is also enhanced by a close study of the price-fixing riots. Thus though two to three thousand tin-miners are said to have been out at Falmouth in 1793,[1] and perhaps a thousand rioters may have been involved in the Warwickshire outbreaks of 1766,[2] the actual business of rioting, to whatever degree the typical price-fixing riot may have received widespread mass support, was conducted by much smaller groups of disciplined militants, numbering generally from two to four hundred. Estimates of this order are recorded for parties of rioting

[1] Annual Register, vol. XXXV, p. 21.
[2] R. F. Wearmouth, Methodism and the Common People, p. 36.

colliers at Bristol in 1709,[1] at Coventry in 1756 and 1766[2] and Kidderminster in 1767,[3] for a rioting crowd at Boston in 1768[4], and for individual parties of Cornish rioters in 1847.[5] The number of colliers involved in riots at Shepton Mallet in 1753,[6] and of tin miners at Padstow in 1773[7] was placed somewhat higher, at 7-800. There is here an interesting contrast with French experience, where estimates for rioting crowds were commonly of the order of six to ten thousand.

Inevitably the riots everywhere threw up natural leaders of the working-class, some of whom, like the Nottingham man at Prescot in 1757,[8] may have been virtually professional agitators. Such leaders were converted into folk-heroes in the English tradition of Jack Straw and Ned Ludd, and ballads were sung in the Midlands, for example, about the miners' leaders "Irish Tom" and "Barley Will", and the anonymous leader of the Birmingham riots of 1766.[9]

At the level of national politics the riots, by drawing attention to serious and well-founded discontent, helped to point the arguments of those economists and members of Parliament who still thought in terms of a policy of provision, and an equitable, just balance of the interests of producer and consumer, and those statesmen concerned with the problem of the long term maintenance of public order at a time when the repressive forces of government were weak and scattered. As a result, though without political representation or solid industrial organisation, the English proletariat of the 18th century was by no means voiceless or without indirect political influence. Though the "Maximum" was never decreed in England except on the municipal level, the force of popular pressure was felt through the many suspensions and modifications of the corn laws, for all that they were a vital bastion defending the economic position of the English ruling class of landowners and merchants.

[1] M. Beloff, Public Order and Popular Disturbances, p. 68.
[2] T. S. Ashton and J. Sykes, Coal Industry of the 18th Century, p. 123.
[3] William Reader, History and Antiquities of Coventry, Coventry [1824?], p. 9 (giving date as September 1765).
[4] Annual Register, vol. X, p. 148.
[5] Ibid., vol. XI, p. 118.
[6] J. Rowe, Cornwall in the Age of the Industrial Revolution, pp. 160-61.
[7] T. S. Ashton and J. Sykes, Coal Industry of the 18th Century, p. 121.
[8] A. K. Hamilton Jenkin, The Cornish Miner, p. 152.
[9] J. Freeth, The Political Songster, Birmingham, 1790, pp. 28: "The Dudley Riot", and 29: "The Colliers' March".