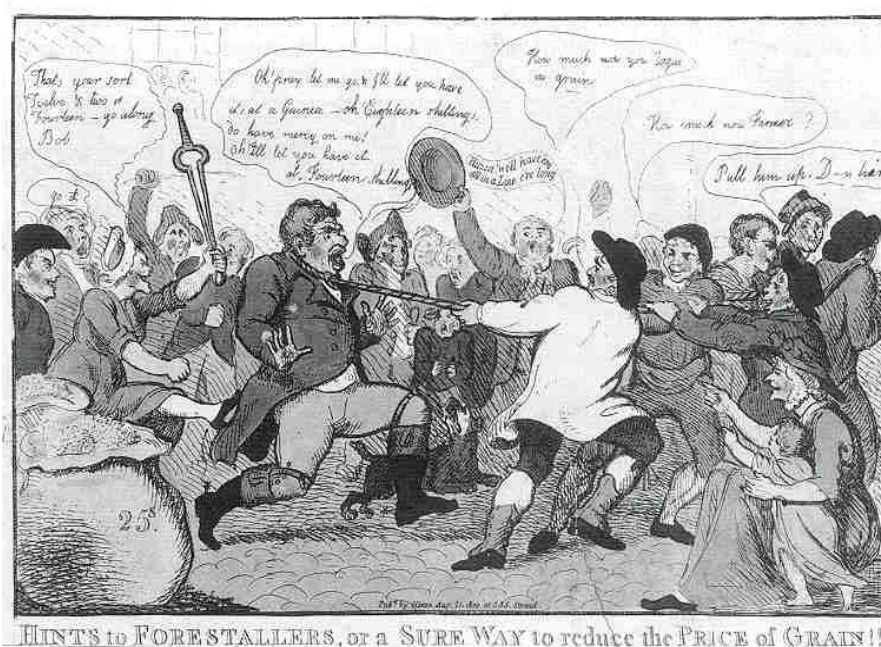


DOCUMENTS IN FOCUS: THE STOGURSEY RISING OF 1801

In the second of an occasional series in which practising historians take a detailed look at a single item of historical evidence, STEVE POOLE introduces a 200 year old letter recording tumultuous events in a small West Somerset village.

INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 1801, the county of Somerset was convulsed by some of the most severe and sustained food rioting ever experienced in the southwest region. Against a background of wildly spiralling prices in every basic commodity, large crowds toured the county's mills, markets, baker's shops and farms demanding cheaper bread and forcing fair-price agreements on both producers and local magistrates. Although the immediate cause was the disastrous harvest of 1799, the wartime blockade of continental supplies made corn doubly scarce and the Pitt government's sudden conversion to the economic principles of *laissez-faire* only compounded the problem. Ministers were reluctant to organise relief shipments from America and India (as they had during the previous scarcity of 1795-6), and they expressly warned JPs against interference with market forces. Bread prices should not be set by law, nor farmers ordered to lower their prices. Troops of militia were despatched to the south-west to protect markets and prevent organised urban workers stirring revolt amongst rural labourers.



Pitt's advocacy of Adam Smith was less than cheering for the beleaguered magistrates of Somerset however. *Wealth of Nations* was not required reading in the empty parlours of the labouring poor, and the crowds who now demanded intervention and economic 'justice', looked not to *laissez faire* for salvation but to the customary practices of moral economy. Unconvinced that the scarcity was genuine, consumers largely blamed farmers for hoarding or exporting grain to inflate its domestic value. Popular calls on the county Bench to compel farmers to bring corn to local markets at an affordable price placed magistrates in a quandary. Home Office guidelines were clear enough: price protesters were to be dispersed by military force, not indulged or placated. On the other hand however, Volunteer and

militia units were notoriously unreliable against civilian crowds; their introduction as likely to inflame a difficult situation as calm it. And the county Bench knew better than anyone that the maintenance of order was too complex an issue to be resolved at bayonet-point. Grassroots negotiation and compromise were inevitable in practice, regardless of the wishes of government.

This is the contextual background for a remarkable series of documents in the Somerset County Record Office recording food price disturbances in the Stogursey region between March 1800 and April 1801. In the letter reproduced below, a gentleman of the county sends word of recent developments to John Acland of Fairfield House, Stogursey, a county magistrate currently (and perhaps fortuitously) away from home at Bath. In its rich language and detailed evaluation of the problem, the letter offers a rare glimpse of the workings of law and order in a rural area at the end of the eighteenth century.

David Davis to John Acland, 1 April 1801; Somerset County Record Office, DD/AH, bundle 59/12

April 1st 1801

Dear Sir,

My fears suggested that the people of Stogursey would not be long quiet after you were gone to Bath and the event has justified my apprehensions. On Monday morning, they collected to the number of 100 or more and proceeded from thence to Stowey where they were joined by a still greater number. The articles of their grievances were read there in the market place and by all approved. The next object was to fix on a redress which consisted in the following particulars:- the wheat to be sold at 10s a bushel, the barley at 6s, beans and pease at 6s and potatoes at 5s the 3 bushel bag. On settling this business, they thought it the most prudent step they could take would be to entreat the magistrates to take their distressed case into consideration. They therefore went first to Major Tynte and Mr Parsons, but they were gone to Petherton to settle a similar affair between the farmers and inhabitants of that parish. They consequently marched there, but they came too late, as the business was settled and the magistrates gone to Taunton.

On this disappointment they walked to Bridgwater, snowball-like, to the number of 1000. Two or three were deputed to wait on Mr Noller with their petition. They desired him to sign it and to be their friend. He very deliberately read it and put it in his pocket, and told them that they were acting in a very illegal manner, and, unless they immediately dispersed, he would commit some of them. As they found he would not countenance their proceeding, they begged he would be kind enough to return their petition. On his refusal I should suppose some words ensued, that he collared Symons, the mason who worked with you, and gave him a black eye. A scuffle was the consequence and the Justice's coat was rent from top to bottom. He ordered them out of the house, but they told him they would not go without their petition, which for some time he imprudently refused to give them. However, when he became a little cool and saw, perhaps, the consequence that would ensue should he persist in keeping it, he delivered it to them with the gratuity of a shilling apiece. This, in my humble opinion, he should not have done, as it was a tacit acknowledgement that he was in the fault. If he had not returned it, as they were very much incensed at his conduct, they would in all probability have pulled down his house.

The military were called out, but the greatest part assured the people that they would not fire on them. The sailors placed their little swivel guns in such direction as to command Castle Street and declared that if the soldiers fired, they would immediately discharge their pieces. However, all this was prevented by the orderly behaviour of the petitioners, for I will not call them a mob. They protested to the inhabitants and to the soldiers that it was their intention not to commit any riotous act, which they really fulfilled if I can give credit to what I have heard. For they had no bludgeons or sticks of any kind in their hands.

At last they came to Mr Everard's at Hill, who assured them, with tears, that he felt for their distresses and promised to exert his utmost to relieve them. With this assurance they were very well pleased and immediately returned to their homes. What he intends to do I have not heard, but something he must now do as his faith is pledged to them. However, he gained their affection as they declare they will, at any time, spill the last drop of their blood in his defence.

Thus I have given you, sir, a detail of this disagreeable business. I cannot help thinking that the farmers are to blame, as they had strong intimations given them of their intentions. In such a case they should have voluntarily met the wishes of the poor halfways. But what impression can be made on hearts hardened not through avarice, but from fear? It is dangerous for such people to be made sensible of their power; for on another occasion they may be guilty of outrage. I most heartily congratulate you on being at Bath. Had you been at Fairfield, if you had given sanction to their proceeding, you would have been by many condemned, and that you did it from the motive of fear. If you had not, on the other hand, you would have been subject to the resentment of these people...

I am, dear sir, your obliged and grateful servant,

D. Davis.

AN APPRECIATION

Two things in particular are very quickly apparent in Davis's text. Firstly, it is clear that institutional authority was thinly spread and that the art of effective law enforcement depended heavily upon a magistrate's rhetorical skills of communication. Secondly, it is equally clear that crowds did not simply 'riot' in eighteenth century England; they acted assertively and with energy, but violence was only offered here in one very particular and transgressive circumstance. A well understood and collectively recognised set of procedures and protocols may be seen underpinning customary readings of law and dispute in eighteenth century Somerset, deeply embedded in the social structure of the community via a shared language of negotiation.

The problematic spatial diffusion of the county Bench is highlighted in Davis's first (and very knowing) remarks to Acland; the magistrate's presence on his estate considered inseparable from the exercise of social control in the surrounding parishes. But the rising was no chance event. The rendezvous of 100 Stogursey labourers and a 'still greater number' from elsewhere at the market town of Nether Stowey indicates forward planning and regional co-ordination. Their agreed list of 'just' prices had presumably been prepared in advance; its emphatically public adoption in the market place before an audience of farmers and tradesmen a theatrical flourish, challenging the 'official' market clerk's declarations of cost.

The crowd was pragmatic enough to understand, however, that popular regulation required magisterial approval. Two regulators who 'fixed' bread prices at nearby Old Cleeve without

the compliance of magistrates would discover the truth of this maxim a few days later when they were both hanged at the scene of their crime for constructive theft. The fact that the nearest county JPs had decamped to Petherton, eight miles to the south east, 'to settle a

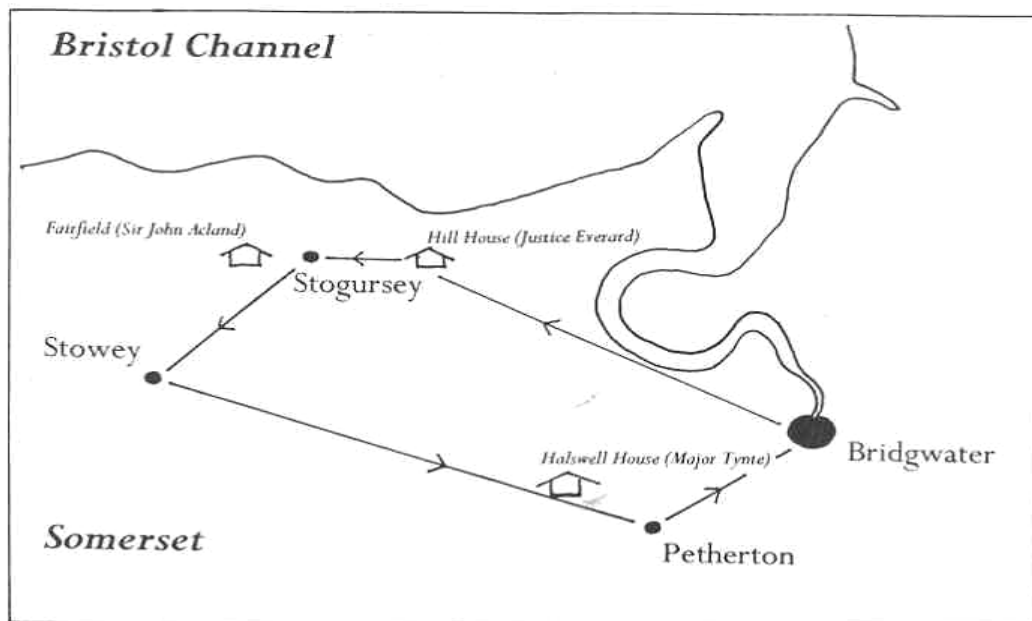


Fig 1. Western Somerset, April 1 1801: the route taken by the crowd.

similar affair between the farmers and the inhabitants of that parish' shows once again the importance of the magistracy's mediatory role, as well as the danger of their becoming over-stretched. The crowd's determination to speak with them is clear from their decision to march on, although they drew the line at continuing unnecessarily to Taunton. Magistrates now lay closer at hand in Bridgwater. The ensuing confrontation between Justice Noller and the crowd is fascinating. Their selection of deputies to approach the magistrate with a petition soliciting his support for the price reductions agreed at Stowey is typical of the legitimating forms adopted by them throughout. As Davis is keen to emphasise, they were unarmed and so orderly that 'I will not call them a mob'. But, secure in his urban stronghold and perhaps emboldened by the presence of soldiers, Noller's uncompromising and confrontational response dispensed with every unwritten rule of community polity and accommodation. His threatening language and behaviour was, quite simply, unacceptable, not only to the crowd's deputies, but to Davis as well. The presentation of grievances by petition was a right protected from all charges of unlawfulness by the 1689 Bill of Rights, and this was a constitutional knowledge embedded deeply into the residual memory of every 'freeborn Englishman' of the period. When Noller responded to the Symons's 'words' by punching him in the face, he betrayed the reciprocal rules that bound patricians to plebs and vice versa, and showed profound disrespect for popular constitutionalism. All deference lost and the rules abandoned, the unseemly scrap that followed was a symbolic enough struggle.

Noller's ineptitude is further amplified by Davis's critique of his subsequent actions. He confused reconciliatory gestures ('a tacit acknowledgement that he was in the fault'), with an attempted military dispersal; an ill-judged decision as it turned out. The mutinous disposition of the militia, together with the unasked for and potentially explosive intervention of armed sailors from the town quay left Noller in an extremely dangerous position, saved only, it seems, by the calm assurances of the crowd and their willingness to move on independently after regaining their property.

The contrast between Noller's interaction with the crowd and Justice Everard's is illustrative of the gulf between crass and effective policing. Everard, caught unawares on an isolated estate three miles from Stogursey, was certainly in no position to square up to the crowd as Noller had, but the language and gestures he chose to deploy brought about an immediate, if temporary, resolution to events. By the histrionic use of tears to express empathy with the sufferings of the poor, Everard revealed himself as a gentleman of feeling and sensibility, and by his promise of assistance sealed a compact with the crowd. It was a classic performance, pulled from a vast repertoire of theatrical responses and declarations, as familiar in its form to Everard as it was to Noller, Davis, Acland and the labouring poor who formed the appreciative audience. In practical terms, magistrates in Everard's position were often required to think fast and act in the here and now without too much regard for the future. As Davis was all too aware, the poor of the parish would probably hold Everard to his word, 'as his faith is pledged to them', and failure to deliver on his promises might provoke further disorder. To meet the crowd's demands, however, Everard and his brother magistrates would have to negotiate with the farmers either to reduce prices or increase pay, and these were precisely the sort of steps central government had warned the county Bench to avoid.

In such a set of circumstances, ministerial announcements about the death of the moral economy were premature. Within days of these events, the county Bench initiated a number of meetings with farmers and landowners and impressed upon them the need for price reductions and abundant markets. Prices were accordingly pegged for just long enough to see the crisis through, backed by a series of tough resolutions to use soldiers without recourse to the Riot Act in any repeat disturbances, and the vengeful decision of the Assize judges to capitally convict the Old Cleeve food 'rioters'. The Stogursey document makes a considerable contribution towards an historical understanding of the experience and drama of the eighteenth century social equipoise. Its record of the purposeful procession of up to a thousand labourers, few of whom could afford to abandon their work, upon a twenty-two mile, day-long odyssey for economic redress is remarkable enough on its own. But its timing, a few short years after the publication of Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, makes it more valuable still, for it offers us a glimpse of a passing social and economic order at a key moment of transformation, but in the throes also of a robust resistance to innovation.

FURTHER READING:

E. P. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', *Past and Present* 50 (1971) and *Customs in Common* (1994).

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