



Here is a parable of war, recession and class oppression. It is a Fenland tale of hard times which, one night nearly 200 years ago, on a mix of desperation and alcohol, saw things get badly out of hand. There were no deaths, at least not until five of the perpetrators got strung up when the forces of law and self-righteousness eventually regained control.

It was 1816. Napoleon had been beaten at Waterloo the previous year but men who then trudged home found little work and lots of inflation. In Fenland, the lucky ones got farm jobs at eight or nine shillings a week but for many - if they were up to it and could get taken on - there was only road building at a third of that, barely enough to survive, for the price of wheat, 52 shillings a quarter at the beginning of the year, was rising quickly and would double by the end.

Littleport, a town of about 2000 people, was probably as hard pushed as anywhere, though like many communities, it had a benefit club to which many belonged. Ironically, it was the benefit club where the trouble started, for things were so difficult that spring that when the club met on May the 22nd at the Globe Hotel in Main Street to decide who would need help, it was found that just about everyone would.

Emotions ran high among the 50 or 60 present, probably not helped by their having to pay a shilling of their benefit money for a quart of beer. And then they heard that a local farmer and magistrate, who was known to pay a guinea for each of his shirts, had just sacked three workers whose combined weekly wages amounted to barely that much.



As alcohol worked on empty stomachs, the talk turned to recent troubles across Suffolk and Norfolk, particularly at Downham and Southery down river. The meeting had half expected those villagers to attend in solidarity but when they didn't show, the Littleport men were anyway up for some action.

A man called Cornwall went looking for a horn with which to lead the way though he made a couple of false starts, opting first for a seed drill spout from the blacksmith out of which he failed to get a sound. Next he tried the baker's horn but it wasn't loud enough among all the shouting. Finally, he got the lighterman's horn used on pleasure trips to Downham Market fair and he went around town blowing it as hard as he could. By the time he returned to the Globe, he had several hundred people in tow. The riot had gained critical mass.

Armed with clubs, pitchforks and cleavers, they set off down Main Street and first attacked the grocer's shop at No 1, owned by Stephen Wiles. They broke windows and demanded £10 from Mrs. Wiles who offered them £1. Having clearly not yet honed their negotiating skills, they settled for a bank token worth 1/6d. They then moved on to Mr. Clarke's shop where they broke in and threw his wares into the street and from there they went to retired farmer, Josiah Dewey, and demanded

money. When he refused to give them £1, they knocked him and his wife down and wrecked the place. The local vicar, Reverend John Vachell, arrived and tried to read the Riot Act but they told him to go home and they would see to him later. They left Dewey's house with over 100 guineas in gold.

Moving on, smashing and looting, they reached the house of Mrs Waddelow who lived with her farmer grandson, Henry Martin - he, indeed, of the shirts. Even in the words of the subsequent Report of the Trials for Rioting at Ely and Littleport 1816* young Henry 'had become obnoxious to the prisoners from his conduct in the affairs of the parish'. He had in fact often said, as a parish officer, that the meagre parish allowance was more than enough for miserable peasants. Not surprisingly then, spotting chickens coming home to roost, Henry decided that discretion was the better part of valor and departed as they approached, leaving his grandmother and her friend, Mrs Cutlack, to fend for themselves. The mob smashed furniture and robbed Mrs Cutlack of £3 while issuing death threats against Henry. They then went after the vicar.



Reverend Vachell was also the magistrate of the town. When they arrived, he offered them two pounds which they took and then demanded ten. So he produced a pistol and in good pastoral fashion, threatened to shoot the first man to cross his threshold. But he was pushed aside and the pistol knocked out of his hand as the visitors went in, smashing and looting. In the chaos, he and his family slipped away and set out for Ely, on foot and in the dark, to get help. On the outskirts of Littleport, they met a carriage and persuaded the driver to take them.

Meanwhile, the mob continued around the town, at one point taking 14s from the occupants of a passing carriage which subsequently added highway robbery to the charge sheet. Eventually, they returned to the Globe where, elated at the fact that no-one had stopped them, they decided to give Ely the treatment.

Taking a wagon and horses from Mr Tansley at 7-11 Main Street, they fixed four punt guns on top and set off. By now though, they were sober again and aware of the penalties for what had already been done but most of them hadn't eaten for days and, as one said, they might 'as well be hanged as starved'.

But Ely was anyway expecting them. Reverend Vachell, getting to Ely about midnight, woke two other magistrates, Reverend William Metcalf and Reverend Sir Henry Bate Dudley, who sent a messenger to Bury St Edmunds for the First Royal Dragoon Guards and then swore in some Ely tradesmen as special constables. In the early hours, a party led by Metcalf went to meet the rioters whom they encountered outside Ely just after dawn.

Metcalf read the riot act and asked the rioters what they wanted. They replied 'the price of a stone of flour per day' and 'our children are starving, give us a living wage'. Metcalfe said they would have both. He would consult the other magistrates and in the meantime, they should return to Littleport. But the rioters had momentum

and weren't for turning. So Metcalf told them to go to the Market Place which many of them did, to be joined then by many disgruntled Ely people.

The magistrates met at the White Hart Inn just off Market Place and Metcalfe, addressing the crowd from an upstairs windows, announced that over-seers would henceforth pay to each family two shillings per head per week linked to the price of flour, starting at half-a-crown a stone. Labour meanwhile would be two shillings per day for both married and single men.

That seemed to appease the crowd but then the magistrates, apparently relieved at getting a result, gave everyone free beer, a bad mistake, for the re-fuelled mob, now mainly people of Ely and elsewhere rather than Littleport, gave Ely the treatment anyway.

The whole episode of course ended in tears. The dragoons duly arrived and met the rioters near the Lamb Hotel where their mere appearance restored order. The following day, the troops teamed up with local militia and, led by the Rev Bate Dudley, set out for Littleport where they found many of their quarry barricaded into the George & Dragon in what is now Station Road.



The pub wasn't much of a defensive structure but when ordered to come out, the rioters replied with a volley of shots, injuring one of the troopers in the arm (for which he received a pension of 12s a week for life). But more than 80 protesters were eventually arrested and one who tried to grab a trooper's rifle and failed was shot as he ran away. Some did escape into the marshes and didn't return for years or at all.



But then came the reckoning. The trial, starting on 17th June 1816 in the Ely courthouse, was presided over by three judges who passed 24 death sentences until a public outcry put them in fear of their own lives. So they changed that to five executions, nine deportations to Botany Bay and a year in Ely gaol for the rest.

Thus was the old order restored and by then the defendants clearly knew their places again, for one of them, John Dennis exhorted the crowd from the gallows 'to avoid drunkenness, Sabbath-breaking, whoremongery, and bad company'. Another said he died the death he expected while a third confessed that his case could not have been pardoned. One of them denied any intention of murdering Martin but was corrected by Dennis who said - "Yes, yes, he would have been murdered if he had been found".

And he probably would have. But at least a little bit of the old order died that night.

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