

## BATTLE AND WILLIAM COBBETT

This article explores William Cobbett's relationship with Battle, which he visited in 1822 and, famously, on 16 October 1830.

We look at this under the following headings:

- Who was Cobbett?
- Cobbett's first visit to Battle, 1822, his address in the George Hotel
- The meeting of 16 October 1830 and why it was nationally significant
- The Battle Declaration: who signed, and what the document tells us
- How the Government sought to "frame" Cobbett:
- Arising from his meeting at Battle, Cobbett's trial at the Guildhall 7 July 1831
- Sources and further reading
- An account of some of the personalities who emerged during the crisis of 1830-31- Charles Inskipp, John Pearson, James Gutsell, George Maule
- The political background of the "Captain Swing" riots
- What influence did the meeting have – how close was E Sussex to insurrection?

### Who was Cobbett?

William Cobbett (1763 -1835) straddled the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth, in lifespan as well as in attitudes. He was a farmer who believed in an old order of the countryside based on respect for all its parties: decently paid labourers helping reasonable landowners to produce food which should be available at affordable prices, while small government would reduce taxes and keep farmers comfortable. Cobbett saw reform of Parliament as the means by which politicians would be put back in touch with the real problems of the country and its poor. But he defies modern political categories: he opposed abolition of slavery as hypocritical and was arguably anti-semitic in his views on what he saw as usury.



*William Cobbett, reproduced with the kind permission of the Wardens and Fellows of Nuffield College, Oxford. See Acknowledgements A*

Nowadays his travel diaries *Rural Rides* – including visits to Battle in 1822 - have brought him a reputation as a quintessential Englishman, yet he spoke and wrote French fluently and spent time

living in France; he disapproved of the 1789 French revolution but supported the 1830 one. In a varied life he also served in the army and after exposing corruption there, lived in the United States for 8 years.

At the same time he was a political commentator and polemicist who for many years produced virulent criticisms of the government. His calumnies ( against Tories and Whigs alike) about greed, oppression , misuse of public funds, and incompetence in countryside policies, appeared in his weekly *Political Register*, the equivalent of *Private Eye*, but arguably couched in coarser, more insulting language. This is a sample: “more than half of you are loan mongers, tax gatherers, dead-weight people, stock-jobbers, shag-bag attorneys, bailiffs (mostly Scotch), and toad eating shopkeepers. “ He was prosecuted by the Government no less than eight times for what was then called “seditious libel”, spending two years in Newgate as a result of one trial. This was because in his articles and speeches, he trod a fine line between holding the Government to account for wrong policies, and encouraging protests against those policies, which might undermine order. His trial the year after his 1830 Battle speech arose because he came very close to crossing that line. But he was a natural contrarian and the Government found no way to shut him up. Cobbett even tried being an MP (for Oldham after the Great Reform Act) but found the business of Parliament regimented and tedious.

Even at the height of his political struggles in 1830-31 after his lecture at Battle, he continued to be involved in the running of his farm, his correspondence showing concern about his corn and his apple trees even while he was preparing for his trial at the Guildhall in 1831. He had agents selling “Cobbett’s Corn” (maize) on which he wrote a treatise in 1828: he hoped to encourage its growth by labourers to reduce what he saw as their dependence on the “infamous potato”.

### **Cobbett’s first visit to Battle: his speech in the George Hotel**

Cobbett spoke at 1pm on Thursday 3 January 1822 in the George Hotel to a meeting of some 300 persons, “principally landlords and farmers”, called to discuss “the distressed state of the agricultural interest”. He remarks that the small town was in a great bustle before noon, perhaps implying in anticipation of his meeting, although more likely due to the cattle market traditionally held on Thursdays.

The aim of the meeting was to agree a petition to Parliament “praying for relief”. Lord Ashburnham, principal local landowner; Mr Curteis MP; and no less than “Mad Jack” Fuller, were present, so this was a serious meeting [Mad Jack’s pyramid monument may be seen in Brightling churchyard; when alive he was an influential landowner and philanthropist]. Everyone was agreed there should be a petition but there was no consensus, according to Cobbett’s account, about specifics, and whether excessive taxation was to blame for the dire state of the Sussex agricultural economy.

After the meeting, Cobbett gave a speech at dinner in the George, criticising the Corn Laws, and in particular the idea of import controls for food, which had proved ineffective in halting the slide in the price of home produced cereal crops. The real economic problem stemmed from the Government’s “boundless issue of paper money”; and Peel’s raising of taxes.

Cobbett’s next visit to Battle – in October 1830 – found the town in a febrile state politically.

### **Cobbett’s second visit: the meeting of 16 October 1830 and why it was nationally significant**

In 1830, conditions for the agricultural labourers had not improved; if anything, they had worsened, exacerbated by innovations in agricultural machinery. There was considerable unrest in Kent and Sussex. Further information on the background to the Swing Riots – as this unrest is called - in general and the impact on Sussex in particular is provided in Annex 3 to this article.

Cobbett's lecture at Battle on 16 October 1830 was set up in the usual way. Cobbett, perhaps fearing that opponents, not least the Government, might try to disrupt his meetings, did not announce time and place but would say in the *Political Register* that he would be in a certain place on a certain day and that his friends would publicise the details locally. Whether they used leaflets or just word of mouth is hard to say- there is no evidence of leaflets calling meetings anywhere in Nuffield College's Cobbett Archive: they may simply have been throwaway items. It appears that John Pearson and James Gutsell were two of the local organisers. After finding that the Battle authorities refused a building for the lecture, they arranged a booth in the open air on the outskirts of Battle. We do not know which area of Battle outskirts was used, although Watch Oak near North Trade Road was sometimes used for controversial meetings. Pearson arranged a sail on supports to provide some partial cover; a platform of faggots and boards; a small table and two candles. Cobbett estimates that 500 people turned up, a third dressed in traditional smock frocks. Everyone had to stand but Cobbett arranged for 25 "pretty Sussex women" to be given seats in a row directly in front of him.

Cobbett described in the *Political Register* the following week, what happened. Rousing his audience to applause, laughter and anger, he condemned the burning and destroying but welcomed the gain in wages which had resulted in many local areas. He called for an alliance between aristocracy, farmers and labourers. The aim was to restore "the happy state in which our forefathers lived". Cobbett records that " I was really at home here: here were assembled a sample of that part of this honest, sincere, kind and once free and happy people, amongst whom I was born and bred up ".

Cobbett doubtless thought he had stopped just short of the incitement which would get him another seditious libel charge, but events proved otherwise. In early November 1830 there were arson incidents at Battle and two labourers, Bushby and Thomas Goodman (who had attended Cobbett's lecture) were sentenced to death for the crimes. The Government, determined to stop the disturbances by silencing Cobbett, stepped in and gave Goodman a plea bargain in which his sentence would be commuted to transportation in return for a statement implicating Cobbett in sedition at the 16 October meeting. After two insufficient versions of the statement, Goodman finally produced a third , the crucial part of which was his account of the Battle meeting on 16 October:

"..he had a great deal of discussion about the states of the people and the country, telling that they were verrey much impose upon and he would tell them how to get the better of it or they would soon be starved. He said it would be verrey Proper for every man to keep a gun in his house especially young men and that they might prepare themselves in readdyness to go with him When he called on them and he would show them the way to get their rights and liberals( liberties) and he said that the Farmers must expect there would be Firs ( fires) in susex and in Battel as well as other Places and is conversation was all as sutch to inflame Peopels minds , they thinking that he would be A friend to them which made a very great imprisonment upon me.and so inflame my mine and I from that time was determined to set stacks on fire and soon afterwards there was three firs in Battle and that same night the last fire was at the Corsbarn ..."

The authorities thought this version strong enough to implicate Cobbett; Goodman was promptly transported. His accomplice Bushby was hanged. The Government may have been anxious about the plausibility of the Goodman document, because they did not indict Cobbett immediately in November. Perhaps they were waiting for evidence from George Maule, who was sent to Battle covertly by the Attorney General's office to gather evidence against Cobbett. But in any event Cobbett played into their hands because in his 11 December *Political Register* he repeated what he had said on 16 October but with phrasing which the Government could interpret as incitement. Home Office public records show that Peel and his civil servants sidelined several phrases, especially those about burnings, in the following text from a Cobbett article entitled (provocatively one might think) "Rural War" :

“ ..but without entering at present into the motives of the working people, it is unquestionable that their acts have produced good , and great good too. They have always been told, and they are told now ....that their acts of violence and particularly the burnings, can do them no good, but add to their wants, by destroying the food that they would have to eat. Alas! They know better; they know that one threshing machine takes wages from ten men, and they also know that they should have none of this food; and that potatoes and salt do not burn! Therefore, this argument is not worth a straw. Besides, they see and feel that the food comes, and comes instantly too. They see that they do get some bread, in consequence of the destruction of part of the corn; and while they see this, you attempt in vain to persuade them, that that which they have done is wrong. And as to one effect, that of making the parsons reduce their tithes, it is hailed as a good by ninety nine hundredths even of men of considerable property; while there is not a single man in the country who does not clearly trace the reduction to the acts of the labourers, and especially to the fires; for it is the terror of them, and not the bodily force, that has prevailed.”

The indictment followed on 18 February 1831, claiming that Cobbett had been “wickedly seditiously falsely and maliciously contriving and intending to raise discontent amongst His Majesty’s subjects and to inflame the minds of the Labourers and working people in England and to incite them to acts of violence riot and disorder...and to the burning and destruction of corn grain machines and other property...”.

Cobbett’s preparation included the “Battle Declaration”, of which more below.

### **The Battle Declaration: who signed it and what can we infer from it**

One hundred and three farmers, craftsmen and labourers of Battle and the surrounding areas signed a declaration that on 16 October Cobbett had counselled only peaceful petitioning.

The undated Declaration is worded in characteristic Cobbett style with long convoluted sentences. A comparison of the original – on plain, A3 paper in the Nuffield College Cobbett archive, with Cobbett’s original letters, shows that the text of the Declaration up to the point where the signatures start, is in Cobbett’s handwriting. The introduction rehearses the Goodman accusations then goes on to declare:

“ that Mr Cobbett did not advise anybody to have a gun , and to be prepared to go with him; that he did not utter any words having a tendency to urge the people to set fire to property or to do any other act of violence; that he strongly recommended to the farmers in the several parishes, to call all the people together and get them to sign a petition to the Parliament praying for a reform of the Commons House and to tell them to wait with patience for the effects of that petition; and he said that he was convinced this was the most effectual way of quieting them , and of putting a stop to those fires , and other acts of violence, which were producing so much alarm and unhappiness in the country.”

*The front page of the Declaration is copied here on the next page by kind permission of the Warden and Fellows of Nuffield College, Oxford. See Acknowledgements B*

21/81

We, whose names are hereunto subscribed, have read, in the public prints, a paper purporting to be a confession of Thomas Goodman, late of the Parish of St. Peter, in the County of Sussex, and since condemned to death for setting fire to a Barn in the said Parish which confessed purports to have been made in the presence of the Justice Henry John Rush, Justice of the Peace in Sussex: That we have also read in the public prints another paper purporting to be another confession, made by the same Goodman in the presence of Walter Durrill, R. Readinge and Francis Seabrook Blunt, and certified by them, under date of 30<sup>th</sup> December, 1830: That, in the said papers, these confessions, or pretended confessions, the said Thomas Goodman says, that he never should have thought of doing any such thing if Mr. Cobden had never given any lectures, and that he believes that there never would have been any fires in either Bath or many other places if he never had given any lectures: That, in the aforesaid second confession, he says, that Mr. Cobden came to Bath, and that a great number of people came to hear him, and that he Goodman, says, and that Mr. Cobden told the people that they were very much impressed upon, and said that it would be very proper for every man to have a gun in his house, especially young men, and that they might prepare themselves in Readinge to go with him when he called them, and he would show them which way to go on, and that Mr. Cobden said that people might expect fires there as well as other places: That we were present at Mr. Cobden's lecture, delivered in the town of Bath on the 10<sup>th</sup> of October, 1830; and that we solemnly declare, that Mr. Cobden did not advise anybody to have a gun and to be prepared to go with him: That he did not utter any words having a tendency to urge the people to set fire to property, or to do any other act of violence: That he strongly recommended to the farmers, in the several parishes, to call all the people together and to get them to sign a petition to the Parliament praying for a reform of the Common's House, and to tell them to wait with patience for the effects of that petition, and he said that he was convinced that this was the most effectual way of quieting them, and of putting an end to those fires and other acts of violence, which were producing so much alarm and unhappiness in the County.

Witness

John Payne Burwash Shroemaker Richard Mankell Cabinet  
 Joseph Sawyer Burwash Grocer Wm Thompson Mason  
 Wm. Mason Shrover Green Tailor James Baker Shroemaker Burwash  
 Stephen Brown Burwash Saddler Anthony Baker Shoemaker Burwash  
 Samuel Newing Burwash Grocer John Sawyer Dunnington  
 John Neaker Burwash Grocer Wm Thompson Labourer  
 Burwash Justice

34 of the signatures are from Battle people, although the figure may be more as some signatures do not have place names alongside; the rest are from Burwash, Cranbrook, Crowhurst, Dallington, Ewhurst, Hurst Green, Sedlescombe, Udemore, Westfield and Whatlington, This spread might have been coincidence or deliberate to show that the whole Battle district understood what Cobbett had or had not, said. Of the 103 names, the breakdown by occupation is as follows, perhaps reflecting a shrewd tactical selection by Cobbett who would not wish to present at trial only a narrow band of uneducated supporters:

44	from trades as varied as: tanner, brewer, shoemaker, wheelwright, tailor, grocer, saddler
5	professional: auctioneer, druggist, schoolmaster etc
16	farmers
17	labourers
21	occupation unidentified

The signatures are in many different hands – there are a few crosses with names written in beside them but it would seem the vast majority could at least sign their own name. Pearson and Gutsell, the local organisers, were both tailors- some commentators have argued that this profession, and those of shoemaker and saddler, straddled social classes at the time, making such people useful for communicating news and news of meetings. Henry Alderton is a notable name on the document, because his was one of the farms subject to an arson attack, by none other than Goodman. Other farmers, mainly from Dallington and Burwash, signed. Charles Inskipp is listed as a cabinet maker, and *may* have been the Charles Inskipp, once a policeman, who later turned revolutionary.

*Further signatures can be seen on the following sheets, reproduced by kind permission of the Warden and Fellows of Nuffield College, Oxford. See Acknowledgements B*



21/8/13

Charles Murrells - Cabinetmaker Battle  
 Charles Murrells Carpenter do  
 William Dobell Battle Basketmaker  
 John Groves Senior Battle Cabinetmaker  
 Thomas Duly Battle do  
 Adam Walker Battle Blacksmith  
 William Coleman do do  
 Joseph Linden Catskill do  
 Richard Burton Shoemaker Battle  
 J. Taylor Baker do  
 J. Walker Bookbinder do  
 James Clayton Saddler do  
 Charles Godwin Brewer do  
 Comfort Palmer Gardner  
 Amy Alderton Farmer Battle  
 Richard Doughty Iron Dealer, Westbury  
 John Dobell Basket Maker Battle  
 Markleton Cabinetmaker Battle  
 Wm Crowder Carpenter do  
 Edward Peppan  
 Edward Dobell  
 Wm Phillips  
 James Jussell Tiler Battle

Miss Bates  
 do  
 do  
 do  
 do  
 do

This is the possession of Goodman,  
 whose farm Goodman owned.



A comparison has been made of the families whose members signed the Battle Declaration in 1831 and the families from Battle involved in the 1866 petition for women's suffrage. Only the Burgess family is common to both but without further research it is impossible to say if this is just a coincidence of name.

### **How the Government sought to “frame” Cobbett**

It is hard to say from the evidence whether the Government's pre-trial comments about Cobbett were orchestrated but their number and range would look like a PR campaign today.

Prime Minister Lord Grey set the tone in November 1830 when he said in the House that “it is my determined resolution, whenever outrages are perpetuated, or excesses committed, to suppress them with severity and vigour ...although we are most anxious to relieve the distress of the people who are suffering, let them be well assured they shall find no want of firm resolution on our part. “ He refers to “the instigation of a person whom that distress did not affect” (very likely a reference to Cobbett).

Above him even, William IV had frequent reports and discussions about the disturbances and encouraged Ministers to pursue Cobbett. Thomas Sanctuary, High Sheriff of Sussex, saw the King personally with Goodman's second confession and briefed him, on 31 December 1830. The King personally granted Goodman a stay of execution and then commutation of the death penalty

In the House of Commons, Arthur Hill-Trevor, MP for the rotten borough of New Romney, did the Government's work, raising on 23 December the offending *Political Register* article of the 11<sup>th</sup>. He called on the authorities to “adopt some measures” about Cobbett. The MP's second intervention was on the same day that Goodman signed his first statement- unlikely to be a coincidence one might think.

The Lord Chancellor Lord Brougham had strong connections with *The Times* which ran numerous anti Cobbett stories , for example one about a shabby genteel man “ of manners apparently above the ordinary class going round on horseback in areas of Battle “close to fires”. This was clearly designed to imply that the man of Rural Rides was behind the disturbances. More seriously the paper published Goodman's three confessions as they came out. Another story was that the first hay rick burned in Battle was Charles Emary's because he had refused Cobbett's agent a room for the 16 October meeting: in the end Cobbett was able to show that no such request had been made.

Home Office records researched by Roger Wells show that Peel and then Melbourne oversaw systematic efforts to get evidence against Cobbett. The commutation of Goodman's death sentence in return for his false confession implicating Cobbett was however a miscalculation as it provided Cobbett with ammunition about manipulation of process, at his trial.

At a more local level Lord Ashburnham wrote to Kent's Lord Lieutenant Camden: “there never was such rank treason uttered in any country, or at any age...he reprobated the labouring class in Sussex for not showing the example set them in Kent, where their fellow sufferers were asserting their rights by destroying the property of those who tyrannized over them”.

In local Crowhurst even, there seemed to be plotting against Cobbett: the Rev HT Bush, Canon there, went all the way to Lewes to take Goodman's first confession. He had links of some kind with *The Times*, which published it the next day.

Gossip over society dinner tables was clearly a problem for Cobbett: the Faithfull papers show , for example, his solicitor correcting the Marquis of Blandford and a Rev Slapp for statements they had authored to the effect that Cobbett had absconded when charged: it transpired they had heard this entirely incorrect rumour at dinner tables.

Unsurprisingly Cobbett was a little paranoid at these developments, writing that he believed Post Offices in the Battle area were being monitored in the hope of discovering evidence of correspondence between him and the rioters. He probably knew that George Maule, of the Treasury Solicitor's Department, was covertly in Battle trying to dig up evidence.

### **The trial at the Guildhall 7 July 1831**

Cobbett probably went into the trial with some anxiety because he had been convicted of seditious libel seven times previously. On the other hand his two sons were with him and had legal training; and he could afford to employ the solicitor Edward Faithfull of Staple Inn. Only a few of Faithfull's working papers survive in the Cobbett Archive at Nuffield College but they suggest the thorough preparation done for him. There is an analysis Faithfull did for Cobbett of the jurors (names notified to Faithfull in advance), indicating who was likely to be favourably inclined to his cause. Not many it would seem, as Cobbett knew none of them and disliked the preponderance of "merchants". Even so they identified a couple of jurors to be approached! Meanwhile Faithfull counsels Cobbett that they need to prepare in earnest as the indictment will not go away; and that care will be needed about the tenor of *Political Register* articles in the run up to the trial.

A sheet in the Cobbett Archive suggests that Cobbett and Faithfull wanted to use social analysis in their support. Probably about Hampshire, the sheet says that there are 49516 houses in 298 parishes with an "agricultural population" of 116,078. Some 504 individuals were in some way "victims" of the disturbances, one in 220. Cobbett, so the argument would go, had written his offending article in order to "prevent these things".

The trial lasted a day, with the jury retiring overnight to give their verdict the following morning. The prosecution was headed by Sir Thomas Denman, Attorney General, who deployed, amid interruptions from Cobbett, the Goodman statement and arguments about the impact of Cobbett's Battle speech on disturbances in Sussex and Kent.

Cobbett's defence speech lasted 6 hours. It was a substantive and tactical tour de force. According to Cobbett's account, his speech was frequently interrupted by applause of his points from the audience of 2-3000.

To begin with, some theatre: Cobbett had subpoenaed several leading members of the Government, so he could question them "about the grounds on which they had advised His Majesty in dealing with the rural disorders". In this way he turned a show trial for the benefit of the Government into one where *they* were on show. Some Ministers turned up and were uncomfortable and those who did not had their wretched excuses for not giving evidence read out, accompanied by withering commentary. Lord Tenterden refused to allow Cobbett to examine them, but Cobbett had the satisfaction of seeing Grey, Melbourne and Palmerston, and other Ministers "ranged in a row....on a bench in front of me".

Cobbett then deployed the (very modern we might think) argument that allegations about his guilt during the previous 8 months in the media and in the House of Commons had prejudiced his chances of a fair trial. This allowed him a long and savage attack on the Government's handling of the rural crisis.

Then a switch of attack from the general to the specific. Substantively the Government case was undermined by the fact, revealed by Cobbett, that Lord Brougham, Lord Chancellor, had written to Cobbett previously, asking permission to republish his 1817 "Letter to the Luddites" as a way of bringing sense to the rioters. It was evident that the Government had got itself into the ridiculous position where one part of the Government was putting Cobbett on trial for incitement yet another part of Government was at the same time using his writings to keep the peace! For Cobbett this triumph over Brougham must have had some personal element because previously Brougham

had tried to ruin him by seeking huge damages in a previous libel trial concerning Queen Caroline.

In addition to this bombshell, Cobbett then switched to the forensic. Somehow he produced a letter which Goodman had written to his brother in law from the transportation ship before it left Portsmouth: the handwriting and grammar, Cobbett pointed out, were different from the Goodman statement about what Cobbett had said at the Battle meeting.

The “Battle Declaration” was used as the other means for discrediting the Government case.

The jury told the presiding judge, Lord Tenterden, the following morning that they could not reach a verdict as they were split and two of their number were not going to change their minds. Under the procedure of the time, this meant that the case was dismissed.

### **Acknowledgements, sources and further reading**

1. The Library of Nuffield College Oxford has the Cobbett Special Archive and was most helpful to us in our researches for this article, and in authorising the use of photographs.

**A** Portrait of William Cobbett pg 1 Riley’s Life of William Cobbett: the Political Hercules of England Box V, Cobbett Archive

**B** the three photographs of the Battle Declaration in original manuscript are from the Cobbett Archive XI/8/1-3

2. Richard Ingrams has written an absorbing biography: The Life and Adventures of William Cobbett 2005
3. Anthony Burton: William Cobbett Englishman
4. Hobsbawm and Rude Captain Swing 1969
5. ML Pearl: William Cobbett – a bibliographical account of his life and times 1971
6. ML Pearl: lecture to Battle and District Historical Society 23 April 1954
7. William Cobbett: Rural Rides
8. William Cobbett: Political Register
9. John Rule and Roger Wells: Protest and Popular Politics in Southern England 1740-1850
10. Roger Wells in the Agricultural History review: Cobbett, Captain Swing, and King William IV
11. MJ Mason The Life of William Cobbett 1835
12. William Willis The Life of William Cobbett 1835
13. A Mann The Memoirs of William Cobbett 1835
14. G Spater William Cobbett: the Poor Man’s Friend 1982
15. Schweizer KW and Osborne JW Cobbett in his times 1990
16. Dyck I William Cobbett and Rural Popular Culture 1992
17. Grande J William Cobbett’s correspondence 1800-1835 . DPhil thesis 2011
18. Grande J William Cobbett, the Press and Rural England 2014

Adrian and Sarah Hall  
19/11/14

We, whose names are hereunto subscribed, have read in the public prints a paper purporting to be a confession of Thomas Goodman, late of the parish of Battle, in the county of Sussex, and since condemned to death for setting fire to a barn in the said parish, which confession purports to have been made in the presence of the Reverend Henry John Rush, curate of Crowhurst in Sussex: that we have also read in the public prints another paper purporting to be another confession, made by the same Goodman in the presence of Walter Burrell, H. Treadcroft, and Francis Scawen Blunt, and certified by them, under date of 30th December, 1830: that, in the first of these confessions, or pretended confessions, the said Thomas Goodman says, that he never should have thought of doing any such thing if Mr. Cobbett had never given any lectures, and that he believes that there never would have been any fires or mob in Battle, or many other places, if he never had given any lectures: that, in the aforesaid second confession, he says, that Mr. Cobbett came to Battle, and that a great number of people came to hear him, and that he, Goodman, went, and that Mr. Cobbett told the people that they were very much imposed upon, and said that it would be very proper for every man to have a gun in his house, especially young men, and that they might prepare themselves in readiness to go with him when he called them, and he would show them which way to go on, and that Mr. Cobbett said that people might expect fires there as well as other places: that we were present at Mr. Cobbett's lecture, delivered in the town of Battle on the 16th of October, 1830; and that we solemnly declare, that Mr. Cobbett did not advise any body to have a gun, and to be prepared to go with him; that he did not utter any words having a tendency to urge the people to set fire to property, or to do any other act of violence; that he strongly recommended to the farmers, in the several parishes, to call all the people together, and to get them to sign a petition to the Parliament praying for a reform of the Commons House, and to tell them to wait with patience for the effects of that petition; and he said that he was convinced that this was the most effectual way of quieting them, and of putting a stop to those fires, and other acts of violence, which were producing so much alarm and unhappiness in the country.

John Payne, Burwash, shoemaker.  
Joseph Sawyer, Burwash, grocer, &c.  
Wm. Moon, Hurst Green, tailor.  
Stephen Brown, Burwash, saddler.  
Samuel Newington, shoemaker, Burwash.  
John Noakes, Burwash, clock-maker.

Richard Manktelow, cabinet-maker.  
Wm. Thompson, mason.  
James Baker, shoemaker, Burwash.  
Anthony Baker, shoemaker, Burwash.  
Benjamin Wood, carpenter, Burwash, Sussex.  
John Sawyer, Dallington.  
Wm. Thompson, labourer, Burwash, Sussex.  
James Cane, farmer, Burwash.  
Samuel Cruttenden, farmer, Burwash.  
John Honeysett, farmer, ditto.  
John Groves, Cranbrook.  
George Cockett, druggist, Hurst Green.  
W. Lusted, farmer, Hurst Green.  
John Pearson, tailor, Battle.  
John Burgess, jun., Battle.  
Thomas Badcock, jun., Battle.  
William Saxby, labourer, Battle.  
Arthur Taylor, jun., Battle, farmer.  
Thomas Ransom, labourer, Crowhurst.  
James Martin, brick-maker, Battle.  
John White, labourer, Battle.  
William White, labourer, Battle.  
Samuel Parks, gardener, Battle.  
Joseph Ransom, schoolmaster, ditto.  
Levi Lemmon.  
John Weller, farmer, Westfield.  
Samuel Sinnock, shoemaker, Westfield.  
The mark  $\times$  of Chas. Kenward, labourer, do.  
The mark  $\times$  of Jesse Buss, ditto.  
The mark  $\times$  of Thomas Pearson, ditto.  
The mark  $\times$  of Henry Spears, tanner, Sedlescomb.  
Spencer Tolhurst, labourer, Udemore.  
George Booth, labourer, Westfield.  
James Pepper, wheelwright, Sedlescomb.  
Henry Grace, Sedlescomb.  
Thomas Wrench, Sedlescomb.  
Cornelius Golboy, ditto.  
Stephen Swadling, Sedlescomb.  
James Dennett, Sedlescomb.  
John Dennett, ditto.  
Thomas Dennett, blacksmith, ditto.  
Henry Noakes, carpenter, Sedlescomb.  
John Crisford, bricklayer, ditto.  
John Nash, tailor.  
John Austin.  
Stephen Young.  
Spencer Ades, sen.  
Wm. Reed, farmer.  
John Hosker, Battle.  
Philip Butler, Sedlescomb.  
Samuel Cook, Sedlescomb.  
Henry Heath, miller, Ewhurst.  
Jas. Bannister, Ewhurst.  
Thos. Richardson, farmer.  
John Funnell, blacksmith.  
Thos. Cook, Ewhurst, labourer.  
John Elliott, Dallington, farmer.  
William Daw, farmer, Dallington.  
John Trill, farmer, Dallington.  
John Honeysett, grocer, ditto.  
George Sands, smith, ditto.  
William Baxter, cordwainer, ditto.  
Simon Bates, wheelwright, ditto.  
W. T. Bartlett, farmer, ditto.  
James Haiselden, farmer, ditto.  
John Osness, farmer, ditto.  
Burford Jeakins, carrier, Battle.  
Thos. Badcock, auctioneer, ditto.  
Wm. Badcock, ditto.  
Edward Saxby, carpenter, ditto.  
John Cuthbert, druggist, ditto.  
John Collins, shoemaker, ditto.  
Henry Saxby, carpenter, ditto.  
Richard Pearson, ditto.  
Charles Inskepp, cabinet-maker, Battle.  
Charles Saxby, carpenter, ditto.  
William Dobell, Battle, basket-maker.  
John Groves, sen., Battle, carpenter.  
Thomas Dubs, Battle, ditto.  
Adam Walker, Battle, blacksmith.  
William Coleman, ditto, ditto.  
Joseph Sinden, Catsfield, ditto.  
Richard Burton, shoemaker, Battle.  
S. Taylor, baker, ditto.  
T. Walker, bricklayer, ditto.  
Jaaper Taylor, sandler, ditto.  
Charles Goodwin, brewer, ditto.  
Comfort Palmer, gardener.  
Henry Alderton, farmer, Battle.\*  
Richard Dowling, innkeeper, Watlington.  
Charles Dobell, basket-maker, Battle.  
E. Manktelow, cabinet-maker, Battle.  
William Crowder, carpenter, ditto.  
Edward Pepper.  
Edward Dobell.  
William Phillips.  
James Gutsell, tailor, Battle.

So far our research has identified the following interesting characters who have emerged from the Sussex disturbances of 1830:

#### Charles Inskipp

There are possibly inconsistent accounts of this individual. One account has him as a London constable, leaving London in 1814 and then, on the Battle Declaration of 1830, he appears (in the name of Charles Inskepp) as a cabinet maker - not impossible that he might have retrained or perhaps there was another person with the same name. Then there are accounts by the postmaster of him going round Battle pubs in 1830 preaching revolution and wearing the French tricolour in his hat. In late 1830 he is tried for incitement to riot and is jailed for two years. He then disappears from the radar. There is a Charles Inskipp, born in Battle in 1807, who was a portrait painter but it seems likely that these were two different people.

#### John Pearson

Born in 1803, he arranged the booth for Cobbett's 16 October speech and signed the Battle Declaration as a tailor. His death in Hastings on 27 February 1883 is headlined in his Hastings Chronicle obituary as "Death of Leading Liberal" "Mr Pearson was a reformer before the electoral reformation (of 1832).- an advocate for popular rights when peer, and priest and squire united to treat the poor as little better than serfs. He believed in the Divine rights of men, whilst Parliaments and Pulpits were upholding the Divine rights of Institutions. He held strongly that a working man must have a very scanty knowledge of the history of his class or his country to have any faith in Toryism, which has always upheld the monopolies of the landed aristocracy and the privileges of the rich, and has, with equal persistency. Refused the slightest concession to popular demands, or to the claims of religious freedom " More will clearly need to be found out about this man!

#### James Gutsell

A tailor, he organised the 16 October lecture and the 1830/31 Battle Declaration. After becoming estranged from his family, he was employed by Cobbett as his personal secretary and farm manager, an appointment which presumably ended with Cobbett's death in 1835. The 1841 census finds him at Hart Green House, Westfield with wife Hannah and children Robert, Harriet and James.

#### George Maule

A Treasury solicitor, George Maule was sent in to Battle by the Government to dig up evidence against Cobbett; and to ensure a tough approach by the special commissions which were judging "Swing" offenders in the Weald.

## THE POLITICAL BACKGROUND TO THE “CAPTAIN SWING” RIOTS by George Kiloh

ANNEX 3

The rural disturbances of 1830-31, known as the ‘Captain Swing’ riots, constitute the last major demonstration of dissent among agricultural labourers in England. (The name ‘Captain Swing’ derives from the signature used on several threatening letters to landowners.) The riots affected England as far north as Lancashire and Yorkshire, though at different times and to different extents. They began in Kent in the summer of 1830 and made their way westward and then northward, petering out before the next summer; they had their greatest impact in Wiltshire and Hampshire. As a result there were 19 executions and 481 transportations to Australia, quite apart from lesser sentences.

By its nature the agricultural population was difficult to organise into political action. It was widely dispersed; it had low levels of literacy and poor communications other than oral contact, and it had varying degrees of loyalty to its many employers. There is no evidence of any organisation whatever across more than one or two parishes. The extent to which the cause was taken up by the labourers is evidence of their desperation. To understand it one must know something of the historic organisation of the countryside and of the economic climate of the time.

1830-31 was exactly at the end of the old system of local government derived from the Norman model of the parish. The county was responsible for the judicial system above the level of the local magistrate, but everything else, such as there was, rested on the unelected parish council that had both ecclesiastical and civic duties. In association with the vicar it governed the church; in association with the lord of the manor and other major landowners it governed the town or village. Its specific duties were keeping the peace, by means of parish constables; maintaining those roads that were not turnpikes created by Act of Parliament in the previous decades; and implementing the poor law, which meant that many of them had their own workhouses. Education, of course, was privately or charitably run. The cost of this system was met by rates levied on property. This system was under attack – county police forces were being created and the poor law was due for major reconstruction in 1834 – but it remained in force during the Swing years. At this time the further routine outgoings were the tithes due to the vicar and the rents payable to landowners. There was no income tax, but there were duties on various commodities. The ‘corn laws’, dating from 1816, ensured that the price of wheat remained high.

At the beginning of the disturbances there was some doubt among the literate classes as to what the demands really were; *The Times* reported that wage levels were themselves not the problem but the inability of the farmers to pay them, <sup>i</sup> but given that shortfalls were supplemented by the Speenhamland poor law system then in force there were clearly bigger problems; that system provided only basic subsistence. It became clear very soon that the demands were for a reduction of tithes and taxes so that the farmers could afford the wages needed, and that (at least in some parishes) the implementation of the poor law was stern and inadequate. At Brede the overseer was to be forcibly removed from the parish early in November, but this was an exceptional proceeding. As to the farmers, it was clear that many were in as dire a position as their labourers, for the rents payable to their landlords had increased greatly after 1815. As if this were not bad enough, there was a great fear that Irish labour was being imported at the lowest possible cost <sup>ii</sup> and that men would be thrown out of work altogether by the increased use of threshing machines. Foodstuffs were much more expensive than previously, the price of wheat having risen sharply since the war.

The situation was set out well by a petition from the Ringmer area (clearly written by some literate hand):<sup>iii</sup>

We the labourers of Ringmer and surrounding villages have for a long period endured the most debasing treatment with the greatest resignation and forbearance in the hope that time and circumstance would bring about an amelioration of our condition, till, worn out by hope deferred and disappointed in our fond expectations, we have taken this method of assembling ourselves in one general body, for the purpose of making known our grievances and in a peaceable, quiet and orderly manner to ask redress...[we] ask whether 7d a day is sufficient for a working man, hale and hearty, to keep up the strength necessary to the execution of the labour he has to do? We ask, also, is 9s a week sufficient for a marry man with a family... [the] Overseer who, by the bye, is a stranger amongst us and, as in most instances where permanent Overseers are appointed, are men callous to the ties of nature, lost to every feeling of humanity, and deaf to the voice of reason... We therefore asked for married men 2s 3d per day to the first of March and from that period to the first of October 2s 6d a day: for single men 1s 9d a day to the first of March and 2s from that time to the first of October...

The Brede manifesto shows what the men there wanted. It was signed by labourers, farmers and a local cleric at the Red Lion there on 5 November:

Resolution 1. The gentlemen agree to give every able-bodied labourer with wife and two children 2s 3d per day from this day to the 1st of March next, and from the 1st of March to the 1st of Oct. 2s 6d per day, and to have 1s 3d per week with three children, and so on according to their family.

Resolution 2. The poor are determined to take the present [poor law] overseer, Mr Abell, out of the parish to any adjoining parish and to use him with civility.

It may be hard to believe now that Battle was one of the centres of the 'Captain Swing' disturbances of 1830-31 that led to almost 1500 recorded incidents of arson, machine-breaking, riots and strikes across England.

The first four local cases near Battle were of arson at the beginning of November; they included one at the George Inn where the landlord was also an overseer, and Battle became regarded as the local centre of the trouble, possibly because of the presence of William Cobbett. Its peace depended to some degree on the activities of Sir Godfrey Webster, who secured several agitators and sent them on to Lewes prison.<sup>iv</sup>

There had been disorderly demonstrations against the poorhouse at Brede and Fairlight on 4 November. The local villages then almost all joined in, mainly with demonstrations about wages and tithes. These demonstrations were at Robertsbridge, Sedlescombe, Northiam, Bodiam, Brede (again), Ewhurst, Frant, Mayfield, Salehurst, Ticehurst, Wadhurst and Rotherfield. The movement then tended to move westwards to the central parts of Sussex and then to the west, though activities continued locally: arson at Bexhill, meetings on wages and tithes at Battle and Hurstmonceux, a minor riot at Crowhurst, a petition against taxes at Dallington and so on. The incidence of arson picked up again from late in the month (Crowhurst Park), Battle and Bodiam) and again at Battle in early December. From then on the crisis was diminishing, partly under the influence of a military presence. During 1830-31, for all of Sussex, there were 52 prosecutions. They resulted in 18 acquittals, 16 jail sentences, 17 transportations to Tasmania and three death sentences (only one of which was carried out).<sup>v</sup> One of those transported was Thomas Goodman of Battle, originally sentenced to death for five acts of arson; awaiting the gallows he had written a letter incriminating Cobbett and no doubt there was a direct connection between his letter and his reprieve. Sussex was clearly one of the least affected of the counties: Wiltshire, the most, had 339 cases heard.

None of the Sussex cases involved machine-breaking, which may be a reflection of the earlier use of such machines in Kent; there were nine Swing letters (Kent had 11 and Hampshire 12.) All historians agree that with few exceptions there was no personal violence. One of these exceptions was when Webster was mildly beaten at Battle, reportedly being saved from worse by the parish constable and some others.<sup>vi</sup> Indeed, the word *riots* is generally an overstatement, and brings to mind more recent events in cities where there has been widespread arson and looting, destruction of property and even murder.

The authorities managed to contain the manifestations of rural dissent, but they did not disappear. Some improvement of the labourers' conditions took place, patchily, but sporadic attempts to form friendly societies to support their case were firmly suppressed – notoriously at Tolpuddle in Dorset in 1834. The Corn Laws were abandoned in 1846. Not until 1865 did positive movement towards trade unionism begin.

GK 2014

*How close was Sussex to revolution?*

The table below, researched by George Kiloh, shows the number of protests and allied incidents related to agricultural problems in Sussex in late 1830. It will be seen that one or two took place months before Cobbett's lecture in Battle but the great majority afterwards. The Government argued that this was largely due to Cobbett's Battle lecture; he argued that there was, in any event, widespread desperation about food prices and the level of rents and tithes, and that the disturbances were, to use a modern phrase, a problem waiting to happen.

Even today, historians disagree about the level of disturbance in Kent and Sussex, with some such as Roger Wells arguing that the total number of disturbances was far greater than that recorded and that the speed with which the disturbances spread suggest far more active protagonists were at work than originally supposed. Even this level of organisation is hard to substantiate because protest leaders were temporary and locally chosen and protests in a village might arise and subside very quickly, especially where the local squire and parson did an off-the-cuff deal with the protestors to reduce tithes and improve wages, as for example was done at Robertsbridge. At Burwash, Brede and Rye, disturbances were moderated by decisions to dismiss unpopular poor law overseers.

However, there are some clues that the level of disturbance was significant. Hobsbawm in his work on the Swing Riots, quotes a Sussex landowner who wrote to Peel in November 1830, about the speed with which the disturbances spread: "a message had been sent from the labourers assembled at Sedlescombe and to the labourers in other adjoining parishes, inviting them to join in organising a force for resisting the military which had just come down to Battle." That force (of cavalry) was headed by General Balbiac and was sent into the Weald by Peel in November 1830. He reported that the High Weald was "infected with assemblies". The military would not have been sent in unless the Government was seriously concerned.

AH/SH November 2014

Date	Where	Type
6 Apr 1830	Rye	Political demonstration
16 Oct	Battle	Political demonstration (Cobbett)
17 Oct	Hartfield	Arson
25 Oct	Sheffield Park	Threatening letter
Early Nov	Near Battle	Arson
3 Nov	Battle	Arson
4 Nov	Near Battle	Arson (three incidents)
4 Nov	Brede	Poorhouse riot



4 Nov	Fairlight	Poorhouse riot
8-9 Nov	Robertsbridge	Arson; wages meeting/riot
8-9 Nov	Sedlescombe	Wages meeting/riot
9 Nov	Northiam	Wages meeting/riot
9 Nov	Bodiam	Wages meeting/riot, tithe meeting/riot
9 Nov	Brede	Wages meeting/riot, tithe meeting/riot
9 Nov	Ewhurst	Wages meeting/riot, tithe meeting/riot
9 Nov	Frant	Wages meeting/riot, tithe meeting/riot
9 Nov	Mayfield	Wages meeting/riot, tithe meeting/riot
9 Nov	Salehurst	Wages meeting/riot, tithe meeting/riot
9 Nov	Ticehurst	Wages meeting/riot, tithe meeting/riot
9 Nov	Wadhurst	Wages meeting/riot, tithe meeting/riot
11 Nov	Rotherfield	Tithe meeting/riot
12 Nov	Warbleton	Poorhouse riot
12-16 Nov	Kent/Sussex border	Tithe meeting/riot
13 Nov	Bexhill	Arson
13 Nov	Lewes district	Threatening letter
15 Nov	Battle	Wages meeting/riot, tithe meeting/riot
15 Nov	Buxted	Wages meeting/riot, tithe meeting/riot
15 Nov	Crowborough	Wages meeting/riot, tithe meeting/riot
15 Nov	Hurstmonceux	Wages meeting/riot, tithe meeting/riot
15 Nov	Rotherfield	Wages meeting/riot, tithe meeting/riot
15 Nov	Withyham	Wages meeting/riot, tithe meeting/riot
15 Nov	Ringmer	Wages meeting/riot
15 Nov	Uckfield	Riot (assault, release of prisoners etc)
15 Nov	Maresfield	Threatening letter
15 Nov	Lewes	Meeting of farmers and labourers aimed at tithes
16 Nov	Fulking	Threatening letter
16 Nov	Hailsham	Meeting of farmers and labourers aimed at tithes
17-18 Nov	Crowhurst	Riot (assault, release of prisoners etc)
18 Nov	Dallington	Petition against taxes
18 Nov	Hellingly	Wages meeting/riot
18-19 Nov	Southover	Arson
19 Nov	Barcombe	Wages meeting/riot
19 Nov	Cooksbridge	Wages meeting/riot
19 Nov	Rotherfield	Wages meeting/riot
21 Nov	Crowhurst Park	Arson
22 Nov	Battle	Seditious speeches
22 Nov	Poynings	Tithe meeting/riot
22 Nov	Hickstead	Tithe meeting/riot
22 Nov	Hickstead	Arson
23 Nov	Bexhill	Arson
24 Nov	Framfield	Tithe meeting/riot, riot (assault, release of prisoners etc)
26 Nov	Barcombe	Tithe meeting/riot
26 Nov	Near Battle	Arson
26 Nov	Berwick	Arson
26 Nov	Brighton	Poorhouse riot
29 Nov	Denton	Arson (?)
30 Nov	Bodiam	Arson
1 Dec	Near Battle	Arson
2 Dec	Near Battle	Arson
3 Dec	Near Battle	Arson
4-6 Dec	Brighton	Poorhouse riot

14 Dec	Bolney	Arson
18 Dec	Chiddingly	Arson
19 Dec	Cuckfield	Arson
29 Apr 1831	Rye	Political demonstration
23 May	Battle	Arson
29 Oct	Rye	Labourers' joint wages meeting (expected)

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<sup>i</sup> 13 November 1830

<sup>ii</sup> Francis Williams: Magnificent journey: the rise of the trade unions (Odhams, 1954).

<sup>iii</sup> The Times, 25 November 1830

<sup>iv</sup> The Times, 12 November 1830.

<sup>v</sup> All of these statistics are from E J Hobsbawm and George Rudé: Captain Swing (Lawrence and Wishart 1969).

<sup>vi</sup> The Times, 22 November 1830