

The Corn Laws 1815-1846 and the Littleport Riots of 1816.

In 1815 the Government introduced high import duties and trade restrictions on imported food, particularly wheat and other cereals in an attempt to keep prices of grain high so as to favour British farmers. At this time America was beginning to produce more grain than it needed and so began to export its surplus which under-sold the British crop and therefore threatened the livelihood of British farmers. This soon affected employment of farm workers.

At the same time discharged soldiers were returning from the War with France and the lack of employment led to great hardship, particularly in rural areas. This was a big enough problem in itself, but government support of nationally farmed grain and the exclusion of cheaper foreign grain led to very large increases in the price of bread which affected working people whether they lived in the countryside or the towns and cities. Malnutrition and consequent ill-health were normal.

Littleport suffered in the same way as many places and discontent and anger led from one thing to another. In 1816 what began as pub talk about lack of work and the cost of bread became a protest against social conditions and demands for a minimum wage. One thing led to another and resulted in an orgy of theft and destruction. The riot spread to Ely and the Militia of Ely supported by the 1st. Royal Dragoons were ordered to arrest the rioters.

A Militia could be used under the orders of a Magistrate (JP) to enforce Public Order.

Several rioters went on the run and two were subsequently hidden in Lakenheath by 'a labourer' who later betrayed them and received a reward of £5 each, which would be around £345 today.

The assizes at Ely tried 82 people,

6 were acquitted, 10 were discharged, 36 bailed and 18 including one woman received the death sentence. Five were executed and the remainder transported.

Similar though less serious riots broke out in Brandon, Feltwell and Hockwold but not in Lakenheath.

The Corn Laws were finally repealed in 1846.