

IV

YOURS TRULY, SWING

By the autumn of 1830, the anonymous threatening letter had become an intrinsic element in the Swing uprising. Anonymity was an essential part of the movement, and without it Swing could not possibly have developed into a great rural rebellion. A band of night incendiaries would blacken their faces to make identification difficult, so that — unless individual gang members were captured — the civil powers found it frustratingly difficult trying to ‘pick off’ potential leading activists. After any major riot, the authorities’ main priority was to discover the identity of the ringleaders, knowing this was the best means of breaking the resistance of their followers.

Once what had been thought of as isolated attacks on property had been repeated often enough to justify the term ‘riot’, magistrates sat up and took notice, appreciating the urgent need to apprehend the leaders to help diffuse the unrest. Before a riot gained in strength and achieved mass support any small band of rioters would have felt particularly weak and vulnerable, causing them to seek, at all costs, to shield their identities behind the cloak of anonymity.

Mary Tylden, in her long letter to Sir Edward Knatchbull, wrote of her disenchantment with the initial response to the outbreaks:

And may we not ask where are the shepherds of the people? Why is ... the strong hand of protection disarmed? During so public and so fatal a calamity, not a single effective measure has been appraised.

Tylden was obviously deeply concerned about the riots at Frinthead but, like the authorities, she was stumbling around in the dark, clueless about how to uncover the names of those behind ‘these dark mischiefs’. She had dismissed any idea that ‘these base incendiaries’ were committed by a distressed or rising Kent peasantry, but had become convinced the ‘detestable banditti’ had travelled from outside the county:

The cloud that is charged with this pestilence is distinct and distinguishable. Strangers in all parts, in companies of two or three a time, lurking about in the villages and in the lanes and woods are daily to be seen like peddlers dealing in provisions. Some like peddlers go into the cottages but far from being intent on gain, they employ their time in asking strange questions.

E. P. Thompson considered that anonymity was absolutely vital to all early types of industrial or social protest; that the poor possessed weak means of organised defence, capable of providing only scant shelter to any identified rebel. Many of the early anonymous letters that showed up in rural England had a common thread to them: the explicit threat of incendiarism. Thompson found it hard to envisage what other forms of protest were left to rural workers when open and peaceful protests were met with execution and transportation: ‘in a situation in which the gentry and the employing farmers held a total control over the life of the labourer and his family.’²⁵

As Thompson’s research shows, rural incendiarism hardly ever resulted in the death of an individual and only rarely took the lives of farm stock. This conviction is supported by a *Times* article headed ‘Another Burning in Kent’, published in late October 1830. The article describes how a gang of arsonists had broken open a stable door in a yard at a farm at Ash, turning out more than a dozen horses into the high road. The gang, after being disturbed by the approach of two men on night watch, had immediately left the premises:

It is conjectured they intended to fire the buildings; but, commiserating the inevitable fate of the animals, in case their diabolical scheme had succeeded, with a feeling that does them credit, however ill-intentioned their design, they determined to set them loose.

Even in times of relative rural tranquillity, the receipt of an incendiary letter could have a devastating impact on a farmer’s peace of mind. When other fires were blazing fiercely, often in sight of his premises, receiving one of these ‘slaughter-breathing epistles’ could quickly develop into a waking nightmare, causing intense mental anguish and sometimes nerve-racking fear, perhaps partly relieved by an intake of alcohol or the heavy reinforcement of night patrols. But the reaction of farmers