



SWING RIOTS IN ALTON BARNES

The Swing Riots, so called because of the mythical leader Captain Swing, began in the Summer of 1830. Until early November these were confined mainly to Kent, Surrey and Sussex, but by late November they had spread to most of Southern England. The main cause of the uprising were low wages and lack of regular employment, the high price of bread and the introduction of threshing machines which took work away from the men. The riots took on several forms - rick burning and threatening letters - but some 400 machines were destroyed. The situation was soon brought under control and 500 people were transported, 19 people executed and many people imprisoned.

During this period the incumbent at Alton Barnes was Augustus Hare. The following extracts are taken from a published collection of the Hare Family correspondence. (Memorials of a Quiet Life).

November 24th 1830 -- About two o'clock we were summoned by two half drunken men who professed to be 'sent on'. They came to the door and asked for money, 'any trifle', announcing that two hundred were coming at their heels. After failing of their errand, they went down to Pile's House opposite, whither I followed them. He was gone to Marlborough, and there was none but the women in the house. As the only chance, I had the church bells rung, but none of the labourers came; perhaps they were too far off, and did not hear. About ten minutes after the troop arrived. The machine had been taken to pieces, but that did not satisfy them; they must break it. And breaking it they were, when Pile dashed in on horseback, and fired..... they dragged him down, and have nearly killed him. Then they burst into the house and broke everything to pieces, and for sometime I expected they would serve us in the same way; so irritated were they, and so mad with drink. Indeed they talked of coming back tonight and burning down all his ricks and barns..... The Yeomanry were here by six and I have just heard that they have surprised several of the rioters in the public house at Woodborough.

November 25th 1830 -- We have had no further alarm beyond the many reports, of which, if we believed one half, one could not have much rest..... Troops are at Devizes and Marlborough. We have our own special constables, patrols and fire engines and I trust are in a better state of preparation than we were. Poor Mr. Pile is not out of danger, I fear, though I hope he will do well. A large fireball was found in his field the morning after the attack. We hear of five great fires over the hills towards Calne, and at Salisbury dreadful

work is going on. Our ring leaders are chiefly taken and we had the pleasure of seeing some of them go past with the cavalry yesterday morning. All the villages round about us seemed to have contributed their fair share of men, and I fear there are some very bad ones amongst them. Our village had not one, and only two were from Great Alton (Alton Priors), but of course they all rejoice secretly at what is being done to bring them greater wages. At the same time some of them are frightened to death, and the wives come crying about their husbands, they are sure they will get their heads broken. At all hours people are coming - farmers to consult about what should be done, and with fresh stories. In short, we live in a strange nervous state; and if we do not make an example, and that speedily, of some of the worst, there will be no end to these outrages..... The greater part of our rioters are men who earn from twelve to twenty shillings a week at the wharf and spend it all in the beer shops.

November 26th 1830 -- The activity of the magistrates and yeomanry have struck a panic which will, I trust, spare us any further alarm. Yesterday a Bow Street Officer came to get information. He came out of Kent and says his own impression is certainly that the fires proceed from the people of the country. He hoped to have got a good clue to one of our incendiaries. The chiefs of our ring leaders are in custody and Augustus went this morning with Mr. Miller to identify some of the prisoners. He was doubtful about one, till the man put an end to his hesitation by saying, "You, Sir, can witness I was not breaking the machine, for I was talking to you."

I have written so confusedly before that I think you will have no clear idea of my share of the day, so I will tell you what I saw. On the approach of the troop, as they came over the bridge, Augustus said to me "Go home and keep in the house" and so amid the cook's entreaties that "master would come home too", which I knew was in vain, we betook ourselves to the house, locked and bolted the doors and windows, and had just retreated upstairs when a thundering knock came at the front door. Finding my plan of concealment would not do, I presented myself at the drawing room window and held a parley with them. "They wanted to do no harm". "What have you got those clubs and hammers for, then?". I refused money and went away, but the continued knocking, and threats of breaking doors and windows, soon made me pull out some shillings and throw to them, with which they went away content. Meanwhile I saw in the churchyard all the women and children collected; leaning over the wall of Mr. Pile's yard I could distinguish Augustus and one or two others; and in the farm yard and all round it were a mob, with shouts, hammering the machines to pieces. I suppose this had gone on for about twenty minutes of half an hour when we (the cook and myself, for the other servants were all gone nearer the scene of the action) heard a tremendous gallop, and in an instant saw Mr. Pile riding furiously amongst the mob, who gave way directly, and had he kept his ground there, all had been well. There was a confusion, and all I could distinguish was that the farmyard was cleared; a report of a gun came from the ricks behind the barns, there was a great scream set up, loud shouts, and to my horror I saw Augustus and those with his rush into the field amongst them. However, the alarm for him was not long; after a few minutes I distinguished him leaving the crowd, and making his way to the house, and never did my legs carry me more willingly than as I flew down the stairs to open him the door. When I again got to my station the mob were all come round and advancing upon the Pile's house, and the noise was terrible of breaking their windows and doors. As they had vowed vengeance against Augustus for having brought the gun out of the house, he kept out of sight, whilst I sent away the few who came for money, and who were

easily contented. After they had completed their destruction at Mr. Pile's, which was not till the poor mangled victim was brought downstairs again, and had given them £10, we had the satisfaction of seeing them file away across the fields to Great Alton. In about half an hour they returned to break the Crowe's machine which we had put in the field, and then we saw no more of them; but as they went off to Stanton, declaring of their intention of returning at night, it was an amazing relief when Mr. G. and some other men arrived, who said they had just left Devizes, and heard the troops ordered 'on Alton'. And so ended our siege, which it must be owned was as little resisted as ever enemy was; but the best labourers were all at a distance, and those near, far too frightened to give any help.

December 10th 1830 -- The odd thing about the riots is, that this is not a year of scarcity. There has been no hard winter and no uncommon pressure of any sort to raise this outcry. And when one sees half of the discontented, are men who spend their money at the beer shops, and who might get ample if they chose, it hardens one against sympathy with their distress, and inclines one to think the lenity and indulgence granted in return for their proceedings, not the best judged.

Taken from 3 letters written to C.S. The first letter was written by Augustus Hare and the other two and part of another written by his wife Maria.