

Wells Local History Group Newsletter

Free to members
£3.50 to
Non-members



*Official notice of Annual General Meeting
The Arctic Convoys of WW2
The “Swing” Riots of North Norfolk
Wells Agricultural Town (3) - New Farm*

Number 83 – Spring 2023

The last edition of this Newsletter contained details of our talks programme up to and including 3 May. However, this will not be our last meeting of the year because a week later on 10 May we will have our AGM. As in previous years we will endeavour to dispose of the formal business as quickly as possible, and this year will be showing a half-hour film of Norfolk Island off the coast of Australia. This is where the Bounty Mutineers and their descendants ended up after finding Pitcairn Island too small for them! It is a beautiful film of a beautiful island.

Our thanks to Susan Wagstaff who has offered to pay for a public address system for the Kiln Room in memory of her husband Donald. At present we are still working on this but hope to have something in place by the AGM – see notice!

Formal notice of Annual General Meeting

The AGM of the group will take place in the Kiln Room of Wells Maltings at 7.30pm on Wednesday 10 May 2023 and also on *Zoom*.

All paid-up members may attend and vote.

If you wish to nominate a member (including yourself) to serve on the committee, please advise the secretary by the end of April. The committee consists of seven members, who between themselves nominate the required officers of the group. At present there are two vacancies.

If you wish to raise any issue for discussion and/or voting, please advise the secretary by the end of April.

Keith Leesmith - secretary



This article started life as a talk to the Group in 2018. As I said then I had had no family connections with - or particular interest in - these convoys until I came across Frank Ward, who some of you may remember from his days at the fur factory and later at 'Arcadia', the Wheeler-Baker shop on Wells Quay. I met Frank at Heritage House, the Wells day care centre that he attended and where I was a volunteer. At the time I was also their PR man so when I heard that two men from the Russian Embassy in London had visited Frank in July 2016 and presented him with a medal my ears pricked up. What Frank was given was the Ushakov medal, a naval decoration that is awarded for "bravery and courage displayed while defending the Motherland". It was presented to him in recognition of his service as a young stoker on the cruiser *HMS Glasgow* during two Arctic convoys in early 1943.

Prior to 2013, the British Government had consistently refused Russian requests to present Arctic Convoy veterans with this medal and it is perhaps no coincidence that just before they relented - after a long campaign by the survivors - the British Arctic Star campaign medal made its appearance. However, whereas Arctic Stars are usually sent out by post, the Russians - keen to go the extra mile, literally - made it their mission to present the Ushakov Medal to each surviving veteran in person.

I interviewed Frank so that I could write an article about him for the EDP. He was easy to talk to but, as is often the case in the forces, although he knew what he was doing on a day-to-day basis, he didn't know a great deal about the wider picture. That's why I wanted to give the talk; to let Frank know what he was part of and why he was there. Sadly, that wasn't possible because he died the following year, but I'm pleased to say that his son Roddy was there, with his Dad's medals, and as you'll hear he's not the only person in Wells with a connection to the convoys.

SOME HISTORY

First a brief history lesson. Prior to World War 1 continental Europe was dominated by the Prussian or, as it became, the German Empire but in 1919 the map of Europe was fundamentally redrawn at the Treaty of Versailles. Germany became a smaller, more crowded country and Poland, a country that had been partitioned by Prussia and Russia 140 years before, regained its sovereignty.

Following the rise of the National Socialist (Nazi) Party and the appointment of Hitler as Chancellor in 1933, Germany underwent considerable change. Hitler's dream was to restore that 'Greater Germany' and create a '1,000-year Reich' so, in 1935, he withdrew from the Treaty of Versailles and began to rebuild his armed forces. Then, in 1936, he sent Panzer

divisions and Luftwaffe aircraft to Spain, where they gained nearly three years valuable operational experience supporting Franco during the civil war.

Two years later Germany began its land grab: first Austria and the Sudetenland, and then, in early 1939, Czechoslovakia. Later that year, as we all know, Hitler invaded Poland but a month before doing so Germany signed a non-aggression pact with Russia - the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact - which, among other things, would divide Poland between them.

Although it seems extraordinary that Hitler and Stalin, two leaders who despised and distrusted each other should make such an agreement, the advantages of doing so were obvious. In what was effectively a repeat of what had happened to Poland 160 years before both parties would recover territories they had lost in 1919: Germany would have a secure eastern border and Russia would gain a buffer zone - in the form of eastern Poland and the Baltic States - between itself and Nazi Germany.

Stalin knew very well that at some point Hitler would turn on Russia, but he thought that by agreeing to this - and a later trade pact - he would buy time to build up his own war machine and be ready to repulse the invasion he reckoned would come in 1943 or 1944. Thus prepared, in September 1939, first Germany and then Russia invaded their respective halves of Poland.

We all know what happened next: the so-called 'phoney war' followed by Germany rapidly occupying Denmark, Norway, The Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, and most of France. But Russia was still very much on Hitler's mind and in late 1940, long before Stalin expected it, Germany began planning its invasion. The first the Russians knew of 'Operation Barbarossa' was in June 1941 when German aircraft began attacking Russian cities and airfields and over 3 million German troops

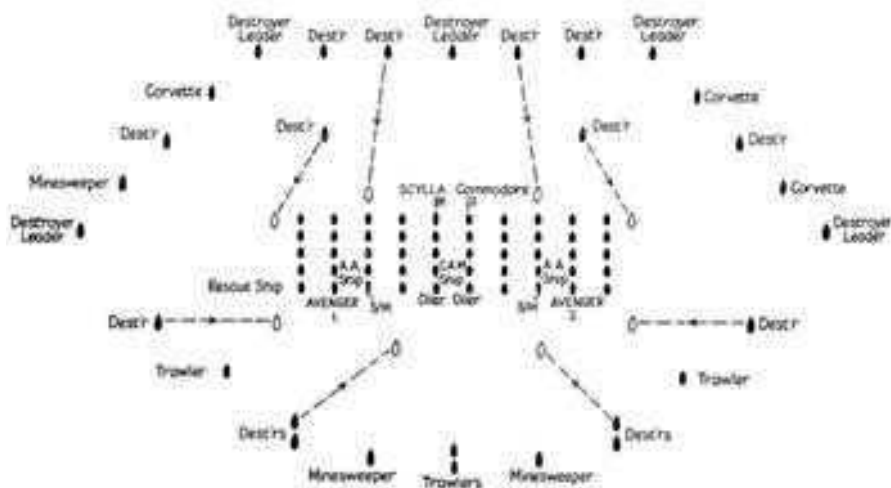
crossed into Soviet territory. In just a few days Russia lost 4,000 aircraft and hundreds of tanks, and over half a million of its troops were killed, wounded, or captured.

Stalin immediately appealed to Britain and the US for assistance. What he wanted was an immediate Allied invasion of western Europe to divert German attention away from Russia, but that was patently impossible: Britain, post-Dunkirk, was in no position to invade anyone and America had yet to enter the war. And although Churchill did immediately offer “all possible assistance to Russia against the common enemy” it must have been with some distaste given Russia's previous support of Nazi Germany. But give support they did.

America had recently signed lend-lease agreements with Britain and Free France and was supplying them with food, oil and weapons. That arrangement would eventually be extended to Russia but in the meantime Churchill and Roosevelt, both of whom were anxious to help Russia defend itself and, crucially, keep German troops tied down on an Eastern Front, agreed that some of these supplies could be sent on to Russia. And the quickest way to do that was by sea to northern Russia.

CONVOYS AND HOW THEY WORKED

Convoys weren't a new idea; they'd been around for hundreds if not thousands of years and were an obvious way of protecting a relatively large number of merchant ships with a limited number of escort vessels. The normal arrangement for WW2 convoys was that the merchant ships would form up in columns 1,000 yards apart with each ship 400 yards from the one ahead or astern of it. Because they could only travel at the speed of the slowest ship in the group convoys tended to be slow - 8 knots was about average - which meant that the trip to Northern Russia usually took between 10 and 12 days.

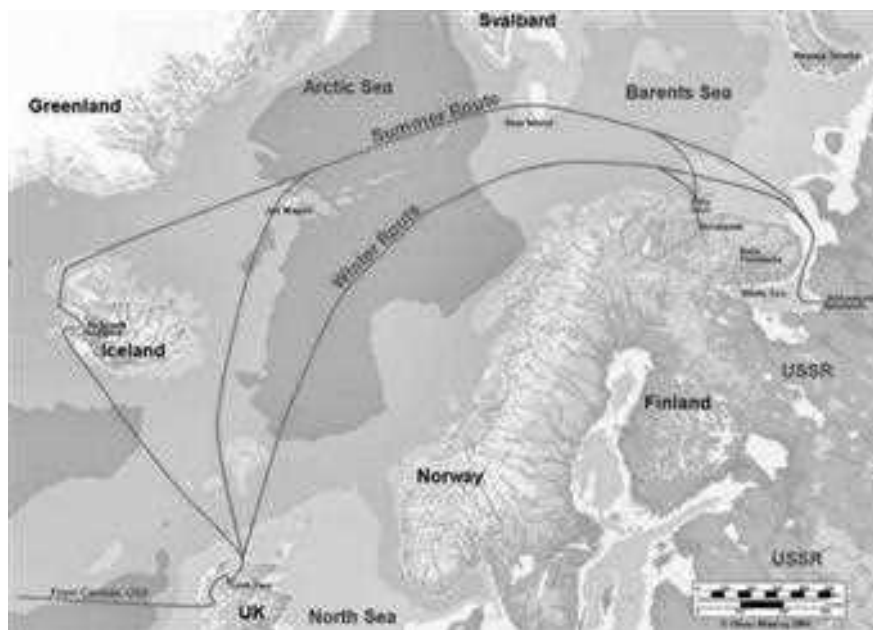


In amongst the convoy there would be auxiliary vessels - anti-aircraft ships, replenishment tankers, rescue ships and, until they were replaced by escort carriers, CAM (Catapult Aircraft Merchant) ships. These were freighters adapted to carry a single Hurricane fighter which, when needed, could make a rocket assisted take-off from a ramp on the foredeck. But it was a one-way trip: after his mission the pilot had to bail out or ditch near the convoy and hope to be picked up. Surrounding the convoy would be a 'close escort' of destroyers, corvettes, anti-submarine trawlers and minesweepers. Also, to address the threat posed by German warships based in northern Norway, convoys were shadowed by two or three cruisers, which sailed 50 miles astern of the convoy and by a 'distant cover' force of battleships and heavy cruisers sailing 100 miles out, between the convoy and the Norwegian coast.

The two Russian ports that could handle the convoys were Murmansk and Archangel. Of the two Archangel was considered the safest because it was furthest from the German

front line whereas Murmansk, although two days closer to the UK, was only 15 minutes flying time from the nearest German airfield and suffered almost continuous air raids. However, the big problem with Archangel was that the White Sea froze over in winter which meant that it could only be used during the summer and that brought its own danger - almost continuous daylight and vulnerability to air attack. But the main hazards the convoys faced were the German military and the Arctic environment.

The German threat - the largest concentrations of U-boats, surface raiders and aircraft anywhere in the world - was something that our Navy understood and was trained to tackle, but the elements were something else. Conditions in the Arctic were among the worst faced by any sailor. Extreme weather, below zero temperatures (inside ships as well as outside), driving rain, spray, sleet, and snow - many of these ships had open bridges remember - and, of course, ice. Build-ups of ice stopped things working and had to be removed. And ice was



also a threat to stability: too much of it topside and a small ship could capsize. Conditions inboard were also dire: bulkheads running with condensation, clothes, and bedding permanently wet or frozen, and hot meals a rare luxury. And of course, there was the water temperature. If your ship went down and you ended up in the water your chances of surviving for more than a few minutes were slim. Not for nothing did Churchill call it the “worst journey in the world”.

NOTABLE CONVOYS

Between 1941 and 1945 a total of 78 convoys sailed to and from northern Russia. The first of them left Iceland in late August 1941. Codenamed 'Dervish' it was an ad hoc group of six ships carrying, among other things, 15 crated Hurricane fighters. Also sailing with them was an old WW1 aircraft carrier, *HMS Argus*, with another 24 Hurricanes onboard, all of which were flown ashore when the convoy arrived safely in Archangel. Subsequent convoys were more organised. They sailed from Iceland and later Loch Ewe in NW Scotland at roughly fortnightly intervals and each one was numbered. Initially outbound convoys were prefixed PQ and returning convoys QP but at the end of 1942 this was changed to JW for the eastbound convoys and RA for the westbound convoys.

By the beginning of March 1942 about half a million tons of supplies had been delivered to Russia for the loss of just one merchant ship and one destroyer. However, this relatively good fortune wasn't to last because the Germans, realising the threat the convoys posed, had begun sending large numbers of warships, aircraft and U-boats to the Arctic. The first convoys to experience this were PQ 13, which lost five ships, and PQ 15 and QP 11 which were crossing paths when they were attacked by German aircraft and U-boats in May 1942. Three of PQ 15's ships were sunk and one from QP 11, but another casualty was the cruiser *HMS Edinburgh*, a sister ship to Frank Ward's *Glasgow* and a ship you'll hear about again. As well as

escorting QP 11 she was also carrying 4½ tons of Russian gold - part-payment for the war supplies provided by Britain and the US. Critically damaged by three U-boat torpedoes she eventually had to be torpedoed by one of her own escorts.

The next convoy of note - and you may have seen the documentary Jeremy Clarkson made about it for BBC4 - was PQ 17, which sailed in late June 1942. It was a large convoy, 41 ships and 43 escorts, and the first to involve American warships. Four days out it was spotted and attacked for several days in almost continuous daylight. Then word reached the Admiralty that the German battleship *Tirpitz* had sailed to intercept the convoy. The First Sea Lord, Admiral Pound, fearing the worst, ordered the escort groups to withdraw immediately and the convoy to scatter and proceed independently to Russian ports.

In the bloodbath that followed German bombers and U-boats sank 24 of the unprotected ships, 14 of them American. Of the survivors 13 ships reached Archangel and two made it to Murmansk. In fact none of the German ships had left Norwegian waters. Having already lost *Bismark* and the *Graf Spee* - and fearing an Allied invasion of Norway, Hitler had ordered that none of his big ships should engage enemy forces equal to or greater than their own, significantly reducing the threat to future convoys.

In the weeks that followed a lot of mud flew about. Pound's decision was heavily criticised, the Russians refused to believe that so many ships had been lost and Stalin openly accused the Allies of lying. The Americans too were furious and ended up withdrawing their warships from the Arctic. Shaken by the huge losses suffered by PQ 17, and despite loud protests from Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt postponed the sailing of the next outbound convoy until September 1942 and the beginning of the long Arctic nights.

PQ 18 was another large convoy. It comprised 48 ships, was the first to leave from Loch Ewe and had an extra-large escort of 66 warships including *HMS Avenger*, the first of the new escort carriers. Buoyed up by their successes against PQ 17 the Germans mounted a major offensive against PQ 18 and, despite the large escort, managed to sink 13 ships. However, it was at a cost, the Germans lost 44 aircraft and four U-boats.

After PQ 18 most of the remaining convoys sailed during the winter, when air attacks were much less likely, but in fact this was the last time that the Luftwaffe managed to deploy so many aircraft because two months later Göring sent all his torpedo bombers south to help counter the developing situation in the Mediterranean.

After another three month gap the next convoy to sail was JW 51 but, because there were so many ships, it was divided into two. JW 51A sailed in mid-December 1942, arriving safely in Murmansk on Christmas Day, and JW 51B, a 15-ship convoy, set off a week later. Two days out from Iceland the convoy ran into a severe gale and became scattered, and two days later, when all but two ships had re-joined the convoy, it was spotted by a U-boat. Once the position of the convoy was known the German heavy cruiser *Hipper* and the pocket battleship *Lützow*, each with three destroyers, sailed to intercept it. The battle that followed, the Battle of the Barents Sea, was conducted entirely in darkness and to this day it's considered to be a classic example of a successful destroyer action.

As soon as *Hipper* was spotted the escort commander, Captain Robert Sherwood in *HMS Onslow*, led his four destroyers to intercept her. A gunfight ensued during which the British ships landed a few shells on *Hipper* and then, when close enough, turned as if to launch torpedoes. This feint was enough to make *Hipper* retreat, but she later returned and inflicted severe damage on *Onslow*. Captain Sherwood was very badly wounded but remained at his post and was later awarded a VC.

Hipper and her destroyers went on to sink two of the British escorts before being attacked by the convoy's cruiser force. *Hipper* then withdrew but in the darkness and confusion two of her destroyers, thinking that *HMS Sheffield* was *Hipper*, attempted to join up with the British cruisers, which promptly fired on them sinking one.



Despite the loss of the two British warships JW 51B was successful in that all 15 merchant ships reached Murmansk safely. However, the failure of his capital ships to defeat an inferior force sent Hitler into a rage and, having finally lost all faith in his fleet, he ordered that the building of all large surface warships was to cease immediately and that shipyards were

Ice - a perennial problem

instead to concentrate on the construction and maintenance of U-boats. Also, with the eventual exception of *Tirpitz* and *Scharnhorst*, all existing battleships, battlecruisers, and cruisers were to be laid up and their guns used to reinforce the fortifications of the Atlantic Wall. This extraordinary, almost

hysterical decision meant that from January 1943 onwards the primary threat to the Arctic convoys - apart from the elements - was the U-boat and the U-boat war was one that the Allies were beginning to win.

The last convoy I'll mention is JW 55B, a 19-ship convoy that sailed in late December 1943 with a 26 strong escort which included the battleship *Duke of York*. Knowing that the German battleship *Scharnhorst* was in Altenfjord overall command of the convoy was, unusually, given to Admiral Fraser in the *Duke of York*. He was keen to draw *Scharnhorst* out and, on Christmas Day, come out she did. What followed became known as the Battle of North Cape and it's notable because it was the last naval action in WW2 involving British and German battleships. And again, it was fought in almost complete darkness.

Early on Boxing Day *Belfast* spotted *Scharnhorst* on her radar and *Norfolk* opened fire. Having disabled *Norfolk* and been hit several times herself, *Scharnhorst* eventually fled south pursued by *Belfast* and *Sheffield* - straight into the arms of Admiral Fraser. Illuminated by star shell from *Belfast*, *Scharnhorst* was fired on from the south by the *Duke of York* and *Jamaica* and from the north by *Belfast* and *Sheffield*. Severely damaged and with all her big guns out of action *Scharnhorst* was then sunk by torpedoes from Fraser's destroyers. Only 36 of her nearly 2,000 strong crew survived.

LOCAL CONNECTIONS

As I mentioned earlier, there are several Wells people whose fathers were involved with the convoys. Roddy Ward of course but also Helena Arguile, whose father Surgeon Lieutenant George Robinson was based at a makeshift military hospital just up the Kola Inlet from Murmansk for 15 months in 1942/1943.

There he had to deal with the sometimes horrific injuries suffered by the crewmen and women of the ships that ran the

gauntlet between the UK and Russia. Also, Maureen Dye's father Alfred Emerson, a Wells man all his life, who was serving on the battlecruiser *Renown* in 1942 when she was moved to Scapa Flow to provide distant cover for four Arctic convoys, and June Lynch, whose father, John Michael 'Chalky' White was a seaman on the heavy cruiser *HMS Norfolk* in 1942 and 1943



HMS Norfolk in the Kola Inlet

and may well have been onboard in December 1943 when *Norfolk* was attacked by *Scharnhorst* during the Battle of North Cape. And of course, there was Roy Francis of Wells narrow-gauge railway fame. Roy was a career naval officer, who joined up in 1939 and had the unenviable distinction of being torpedoed four times by the time he was 21 - the last few times as a young sub-lieutenant on *HMS Edinburgh* in 1942. In later life he became a leading campaigner against the Government's refusal to issue an Arctic campaign medal or allow British Arctic convoy veterans to accept Russia's Ushakov medals, both of which he did eventually receive before he died in 2015.

I said earlier that I'd had no particular interest in the Arctic convoys initially but in fact I do have a couple of peripheral links to them. The first is that one of my last jobs in the Navy was as the helicopter pilot on the frigate *Minerva*. During a visit to Tromsø in northern Norway, knowing that the remains of the *Tirpitz* were only a few minutes flying time away I went to take a look and, although most of the ship had been salvaged by scrap dealers in the 1950's, the outline of the hull on the seabed was still clearly visible from the air. Shortly afterwards we went on a spying trip along the north Russian coast, following very much the same route that the convoys had taken 25 years before, and on our way back we stopped and laid a wreath at the spot where the *Edinburgh* sank in 1942. But that wasn't to be my last involvement with the ship ...

Edinburgh is an official war grave but by the late 1970's the British Government had become anxious to recover the 4½ tons of gold still in the ship - not just because it was worth £40 odd million but also because there was growing concern that the wreck might be looted. At the time I was working for one of the big North Sea diving companies and one of my jobs was the chartering in of diving support vessels. One that we had on charter in the summer of 1981 was the German DSV *Stephaniturm* and although we weren't involved in the salvage operation itself - one of our competitors had the contract for that - we did have the ship they wanted so we arranged a sub-charter.

Books have been written about the gold salvage but, in a nutshell: *Edinburgh* sank in 800' of water 250 miles off Murmansk. By the time bad weather stopped the salvage operation in September 1981 over 90% of the gold had been recovered. Five years later the salvors went back and recovered a further 29 bars, which left five unaccounted for. And there are still some very interesting theories as to where they might have ended up!

THE OUTCOMES

But back to the convoys. Between August 1941 and May 1945 nearly 900 ships sailed to northern Russia and between them they transported over 4 million tons of supplies. As well as 5,000 tanks, more than 7,000 aircraft and countless tons of munitions and oil, they also carried such mundane but nonetheless vital items as trucks, tractors, railway locomotives, telephone wire and boots.

In all 92 merchant ships were lost and 16 Royal Navy warships were sunk. More than 3,000 Allied seamen lost their lives and probably just as many Germans. Although what they delivered was of great value, the most important contribution made by the Arctic convoys was political. They proved that the Allies were committed to helping Russia while deflecting Stalin's demands for a 'Second Front' in Western Europe until such a time as Britain and the US were ready. They were a heroic undertaking and should not be forgotten.

Nigel Dark

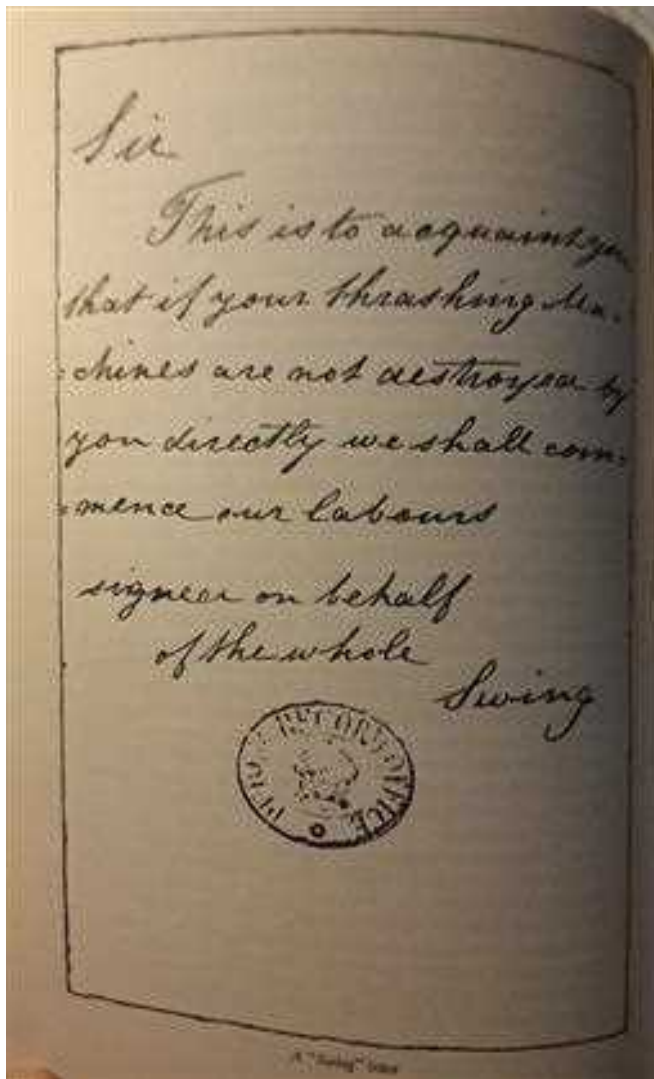


“Swing” Riots in North Norfolk - 1830

Global warming caused by fossil fuel and industrialisation since 1800 threatens the livelihood and survival of billions of people. In North Norfolk it already impacts on farming, its major industry after tourism. Will those dependent on farming protest or even riot, as farm labourers did here in 1830? What were the ‘Captain Swing Riots’? How did the forces of law and order respond? Are there any lessons for today’s global warming protest movements?

A major feature of farming in North and West Norfolk from 1800 onwards was its small number of very large landowners (Coke’s at Holkham, Walpole’s at Houghton, Townsend’s at Raynham) most of whose land was farmed by fairly large tenant-farmers, many employing more than six labourers. The Coke family at Holkham was the largest single landowner with 43,000 acres on 70 farms (in 1875), almost all rented to tenant-farmers. Few farm workers in Norfolk lived in after 1800. Cash, on a seasonal or piece-work basis, had replaced payment in kind. As rural population grew in the late eighteenth century, due to improved nutrition, migration to London absorbed most of the increase. This exodus slowed by 1831 with only 29% of the increase leaving Norfolk. This meant more mouths to feed and greater need for local employment. Unemployment rose as commercial agriculture, particularly of cereals, grew. Rural crime in Norfolk increased in the rural depression which followed the end of the Napoleonic Wars, as reflected by 30% more county jail commitments from Wymondham, Aylsham, and Walsingham Courts between 1824 and 1830. Poor relief for larger families in rural parishes became less generous but tenant farmers still paid higher rates. There was a disastrous harvest in 1829. By 1830 larger farms in North Norfolk began buying threshing machines, which would inevitably throw labourers out of work - well ahead of winter. In many parishes in Norfolk high cash tithe

charges were imposed by the local parson which were resented by both farmers and labourers.



A first threshing machine was destroyed by farm labourers in Kent in August 1830. The protest movement spread across South East England during the Autumn. Some farmers were sent anonymous threatening letters signed 'Swing', [see typical Swing letter] hence 'Captain Swing Riots' coined by historians. Protests spread to Norfolk. On 19 November seventy men

from neighbouring parishes marched to the North Walsham Magistrates Court demanding all threshing machines be destroyed or laid aside. Having delivered their ultimatum, they

took refreshment in a local beer house and then “marched back in the same order in which they came – the magistrates not thinking it advisable to interfere with them.” Over the following week machine breaking spread to Paston, Briston, Holt, Melton Constable & Hindolveston and then to Walcot, North Walsham, Honing and Southrepps and further to Foulsham, Field Dalling, Cawston and Whitwell. Unusually, the rioters at East Tuddenham included a woman, Jane Taylor, who was later brought to trial.

Wages riots and threshing machine breaking extended to North Norfolk including Binham, Docking, Southrepps, and Roughton. On 29 November 1830 some 100-150 farm labourers, some equipped with sledge hammers, protested by breaking a threshing machine in Burnham Thorpe and then doing the same in Burnham Overy. William Brett, a Holkham tenant farmer, owned the latter. They shouted: “Break it! don’t let him take it away, it keeps an honest man from getting work.”

Of interest is that many farmers ‘hastened to comply with the labourers’ wishes and destroyed their own machines at the mere rumour or prospect of impending riot.’ Although rioting was more frequent in wheat growing parts of the county, not all land owners were hit equally hard. Despite growing corn on much of their land, only one riot involved any part of Coke family land. Publicity given to the Burnham Overy riot may have discouraged others. All rioting in Norfolk had ended by mid-December 1830 although in 1831 Coke purchased two blood hounds to catch arsonists!

Francis Blaikie was Thomas William Coke’s highly efficient steward from 1816 until 1832. He maintained meticulous records. His account of the Burnham Overy incident gives an impression of a derring-do response led by courageous 77 years old Coke.

'Coke took decisive action. No sooner had the news arrived, then Coke rushed to horse and set out, leading a cavalcade consisting of Blaikie, B's assistant, the estate office clerk, the farm manager & the estate 'architect'. They were reinforced on the way by a few others, mostly tenants, until they were 15 or so in numbers before, they came upon 100 to 150 bludgeons in addition to their sledgehammers. In Blaikie's words: "They had a formidable appearance. They were halted with some difficulty, Mr Coke addressing them with kindness but without effect. The King's proclamation for the suppression of such assemblages was then read, but no better effect. The misguided men persisted in proceeding on their work of destruction & threatened the lives of all those who should venture to oppose them." Coke promptly charged the mob & scattered them. The ringleaders were picked out & Coke set the example in attack by seizing the first man by the collar. This man was the principal leader, but he was apparently soon released because of his previous good character. Four others, however, were seized, after a short scuffle and an attempt at rescue, and these four were bundled into Coke's carriage, which had been brought along in the rear of the forces of order. Blaikie commanded an escort of 4 horseman, and under their guard, the prisoners were safely delivered to the Bridewell at Walsingham. Coke & his other horsemen dispersed the remaining rioters before they left the scene of action.' [RAC Parker: Coke of Norfolk (1975) pp163-164]

Overall, there were 88 different 'disturbances' in Norfolk, with threshing machines the focus in a third. Farmers were directly targeted in 10 cases, but a larger number of parsons (13) were explicitly targeted, often supported by farmers, over the tithe, which impacted on the income of both groups. Arson is sometimes committed by individuals in profound poverty and in

agricultural context usually conveys a direct message to the

PUBLIC NOTICE.

THE Magistrates in the Hundreds of *Twinstead and Happier*, in the County of Norfolk, having taken into consideration the disturbed state of the said Hundreds and the Country in general, wish to make it generally known that it is *their opinion* that such disturbances principally arise from the use of Threshing Machines, and to the insufficient Wages of the Labourers. The Magistrates therefore beg to recommend to the Owners and Occupiers of Land in these Hundreds to *discontinue the use of Threshing Machines, and to increase the Wages of Labour to Ten Shillings a week* for able bodied men, and that when lark work is preferred, that it should be put out at such a rate as to enable an industrious man to earn Two Shillings per day.

The Magistrates are determined to enforce the Law against all tumultuous Rioters and Incendiaries, and they look for support to all the respectable and well disposed part of the Community: at the same time they feel a full Conviction, that no severe measures will be necessary if the proprietors of Land will give proper employment to the Poor at their own Occupations, and encourage their Tenants to do the same.

SIGNED,

JOHN WODEHOUSE.
W. R. ROUS.
J. PETRE.
GEORGE CUBITT.
WILLIAM GUNN.
W. F. WILKINSON.
BENJAMIN CUBITT.
H. ATKINSON.

North Walsham,
24th November 1830.

G. FLEMING, PRINTER, NORTH WALSHAM.

Printed and sold by Norfolk magistrates, November 1830

farmer. During this period in Norfolk there were 19 cases of arson, a fifth of all disturbances.

Local magistrates at North Walsham and Walsingham led the response to law breaking in North Norfolk whilst the Home Secretary, Lord Melbourne, urged a swift and punitive response. The chairman of the Bench at North Walsham assured him (27 Nov 1830) that “tranquillity” had been restored and thirty prisoners had been taken, some using mounted “specials” armed with cutlasses. However, these and other Norfolk justices displayed a degree of indulgence [see Public Notice issued by North Walsham magistrates]. A combined committee of Norfolk magistrates some days later agreed to firmly recommend “the general disuse of THRESHING MACHINES as a friendly concession on the part of the Proprietors to public opinion, and as proof of their anxiety to remove as far as possible every pretext for the violation of the law.” Underlining concern for the condition of farm labourers a magistrate from Holt wrote to Lord Melbourne:

‘If when the riots commenced on Monday the 22nd [Nov] at Beeston, the magistrates had remonstrated with the people, and told them that their wages would be increased, Rents and Tythes reduced, and Thrashing Machines laid aside, they would have quietly dispersed and committed no further violence.’ (2 Dec 1830)

The Home Secretary later rebuked Norfolk magistrates telling them the machines were ‘entitled to the Protection of the Law’ and that ‘recommending the Discontinuance of them is, in fact, to connive at, or rather to assist in the Establishment of a Tyranny of the most oppressive character.’ However, his response was not endorsed by one member of the London elite who wrote to The Times:

‘Threshing machines cannot be defended on the same principle as machinery in Manufactures, because the ability to supply the home or foreign market does not in any degree depend on them ... I can excuse the farmers giving low wages on the score of their own poverty, but can any excuse be offered for men who are so deaf to humanity & blind to their own *permanent* interest as to substitute Horse Power [machines] for manual labour & leave the population born on the soil to subsist on a miserable pittance in idleness or unproductively employed on the roads?’ (9 Dec 1830)

Throughout England 1,976 prisoners were tried by 90 courts across 34 counties. Most were young men or men of early-middle years. Overall, 40% were acquitted or bound over; 13% sentenced to death (although most were commuted) with just 19 (1%) executed. Transportation to Tasmania or New South Wales was the outcome for 481 individuals (25%) with the remaining third serving time in prison here. Only 129 cases were brought to trial in Norfolk. Overall, their six courts were more lenient, 43% being acquitted and just 10% being transported. Only one man, convicted of arson, was executed.

Despite the comparative leniency of magistrates and many positive relationships between farmers and agricultural labourers in North Norfolk, the punitive response dictated by Government in 1830/31 inevitably affected farming relationships in Norfolk for succeeding generations. Will we see climate change protests by workers from North Norfolk’s key industries (farming, hospitality, fishing) and how will law and order respond today, almost 200 years later?

Peter Jefferys

Primary Sources: EJ Hobsbawm & George Rude **Captain Swing** (1969) & RAC Parker: **Coke of Norfolk** A Financial & Agricultural Study 1707-1842 (1975)

Wells – an Agricultural Town (3) – New Farm



The relationship between the town of Wells and the country around it is largely lost. The idea that a flock of sheep might be driven up Standard Road as late as the 1980s beggars belief, except that there are pictures which prove it. In truth there are many stories about the farms around Wells and the animals kept in its streets in living memory. This is one of them.

New Farm on Warham Road began life in 1881 when the farmhouse was built by Holkham Estates. However, the Coe family, three brothers and families who all came to live in it had farmed in Wells for some years before that. William Coe who was born in 1801 was a joiner and wheelwright living in Church Street when in his late fifties he rented thirty-six acres from Holkham. Of his three adult sons, Thomas and Robert worked

the farm while William continued the carpentry business. William senior proceeded to add to his acreage. Aged now 70 he was by 1871 farming 108 acres and by the time his three sons took over the farm consisted of 311 acres. Of the three sons, Thomas alone married and had children. On his death sometime in the 1890s his widow, Susanna continued farming together with her brother-in-law Robert.

Few records exist as to how they farmed. It was most likely a mixed farm, with some arable and some pasture, dairy and beef cattle, sheep, pigs, and poultry. The only direct reference surviving is the report of the town's Medical Officer of Health whose responsibility it was to ensure that the dairies in the town and their milk were free from disease, that bakeries were clean and hygienic; that the several slaughterhouses supplied safe meat. Gordon Calthrop, who was MOH reported in 1925 that Robert Coe's cowshed was not fit for purpose as a dairy. Stone floors were lacking as was adequate drainage. In this respect his standards were typical.

Horses were the sole means of ploughing and would remain so until just before the Second World War. Coe bought his first



tractor in 1942 but it would be used almost entirely for ploughing and cultivating. Drills, both for grain and roots, reaper binders, grass cutters, hoes, harrows, and rakes would all be hauled by horses. The reaper binder had long ago displaced the hand scythe which however was still used to clear the field heads so that the machine could gain access., to be operated by two men rather than a dozen. Threshing machines likewise had long taken over from the arduous task of winnowing with a flail. A combine, so called because it combined the reaping and threshing processes was acquired the same year at Manor Farm, but the Coes never had one. Most jobs, whether stone picking, singling, weeding were done by hand, by many hands in fact casual labourers, mostly women drawn from the town.

Susanna remained an active partner with Robert into her 70s so that when he died unmarried around 1914 her son Thomas took over. He is recorded in the Kelly's Directory together with his mother as late as 1929, after which Thomas ran the farm with his maiden sister Ellen.

His tenancy came to a sudden end in 1950 when the County Agricultural Committee recommended its cessation due to poor farming methods. The committee was the successor to the War Agricultural Committee whose surveillance of farming practice had been driven by wartime scarcity. It was not known for being particularly directive so the condition of the farm must have been pretty poor. The farm sale in October that year was of everything down to the last deal kitchen table and hip bath. It included two tractors, four horses, a variety of implements and machines including a single furrow horse plough, a reaper binder, and various harrows. There was a dairy herd of twenty-three animals, a bull and fifty-nine steers and heifers. All were auctioned and what little produce there was on the farm was sold for £233.

The new tenant was James Temple who farmed with his son John at Copys Green, Wighton. Like Coe he had started in a



with thirty-four acres gradually expanding. By 1940 John not yet twenty years old had begun to take over the management of the farm, taking on more and more acres and more men. Now he undertook his greatest expansion, moving into the farmhouse in Wells. The task was huge. Everything needed to be done from cleaning out ditches in which animal skeletons were found to removing turkey muck from up to the window sills, in order to make the farm work and pay. He had to lay some 23,000 tile drains. Tom Coe was left with a single field behind the midden.

The land itself required improvement as it was prone to disease affecting corn crops for which reason John initially grew roots, beans and lucerne. Of the 414 acres which he leased, in 1953, 339 were arable. The property now consisted of everything east of Market Lane. The following year a further 100 acres became available. More was to follow. He would eventually farm over a thousand acres. He began egg production in the 1950s and by the early 1960s he was supplying Sainsbury's. It seems to have

ceased shortly thereafter. Changing markets demanded changing practice.

By 1962 his efforts had come to the attention of the Association of Agriculture whose Farm Study Scheme was intended to publicise good farming practice. As a member of the Association, he sent an annual update to its members describing his progress, noting early on that he had introduced what he called barley beef, feeding some of his barley crop for which prices were not good to fatten up cattle for sale and for his Friesian dairy herd. He grew wheat, barley, oats, sugar beet, carrots, brassicas, and peas. In 1967 he grew 650 tons of beet, mechanically lifted, and cleaned to be sent to the Kings Lynn factory. He imported kainite, a potash-based fertilizer which was reckoned very suitable for beet, via Wells harbour. Carrots were also big business. That year he grew 900 tons. Initially both carrots and sprouts were picked by hand by local casual workers, working six hours a day, a dozen or so of them. That year he also grew 5,500 two-stone nets of sprouts. More and more he attempted to get the packaging of vegetables done on site and in the case of beet and carrots to supply them in as clean and presentable as possible, thus increasing their value. The mainstay crop nevertheless was barley. His acreage grew steadily over the years from 1958 to 1975 so that in the last year of this series he grew over 400 acres. Likewise, his beef herd grew over the same period from 89 to 564.

More machinery, as he said, cut down on the need for manpower but enabled him to expand. It was though a bit of a vicious circle. The more machinery he bought the more tractors were needed to haul them. He had bought a new combine and baler, and a row crop tractor to deal with the hoeing of the beet. He employed fifteen men the following year. As he pointed out, the period after the corn harvest was busier than before and during it. The carrot and beet harvest came in October. At one time up to twenty-five local women had been employed lifting

carrots. But machinery brought that down to five. Farming on the reclaimed marshes presented its own problems. A wet winter could leave the new corn under water. New drains lowered the water table by two feet.

He decided in 1962 to start raising sheep. 159 lambs were born to 98 ewes that year but was a very labour-intensive kind of farming requiring as John noted, twenty-four-hour availability which was



provided in the early days by himself and his daughter Martha. The weaker lambs required a deal of hand rearing if they were to survive. By 1964 the flock had increased to over 200 ewes; the beef herd to 600 calves, the latter barley-fed some of which had to come from neighbouring farms. Percy Phillips, himself the son of a shepherd, one of his labourers, took on the growing flock, building temporary lambing shelters from hay bales. Early lambs would fetch a good price in the spring market but rearing them in snowy weather around Christmas was a difficult task. He undertook the shearing which he did largely by himself in June each year, a time when the hay harvest took up the time

of the farm. He would continue to look after the sheep until his retirement in 1995, driving them from Holkham marshes through the town even into the 1980s.

In 1972 a new carrot grading and washing plant had been built. The carrots went mostly for canning. More machinery included an automatic bale handler and a sugar beet harvester. The largest acreage by far was given over to the sugar beet. Barley went for seed, for malting and for fodder. He grew over seventy acres of brassicas, cabbages, and sprouts. In 1997 he marketed nearly a thousand cattle having got rid of the sheep.

Stephen, John's son, was destined to follow him into farming though, having read agriculture at Reading University he left England for Africa in 1975 returning in 1998. In his turn he gave up beef in 2002 and when his father died in 2005, he gave up New Farm altogether which then reverted to Holkham. He proceeded to concentrate his efforts on Copys Green which is another story altogether.

This account of 150 years of a farm gives only a slight clue as to its development. Mechanisation proceeded apace; there were always more machines to do the many jobs. Feed and fertilizer not to mention straw for animal bedding had to be bought in. The weather and the market remained uncertain. As John pointed out, a good harvest did not necessarily mean good profits and in bad years lower a quality crop might be sold for higher prices. Specialisation would become more pressing. As everywhere farming in 2000 was worlds away from the farming practice of the Coes even at their best; their worst of course presented John Temple with a challenge which he approached with vigour.

Roger Arguile

Sources: Censuses 1841-1911; Wells Directories 1854-1937.
Coe Farm Sale 1950; New Farm Records 1953-1998

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