

People's Histreh

Nottingham & Notts Radical History Group



***Damn his Charity,
we'll have the Cheese
for nought!***

**Nottingham's Great Cheese Riot
& other 1766 Food Riots**

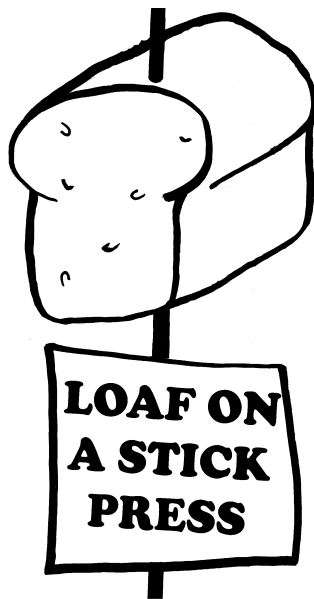
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Published by Loaf On A Stick Press
First published May 2011

ISBN 978-0-9569139-1-3



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Introduction

[In October 1766] Goose Fair was the occasion of a ‘great cheese riot’ [...]. Stalls were attacked and ransacked, and cheeses distributed to the crowd. Being barrel-shaped they could easily be rolled, and soon they were being propelled down Wheeler Gate and Peck Lane. The mayor, trying desperately to intervene, stood in the middle of Peck Lane, only to be knocked over by an accelerating cheese.¹

This tale of the Great Cheese Riot has been (re-)told in many accounts of Nottingham’s history² and caught my attention primarily as it conjures up entertaining images of current local politicians involved in such a classic slapstick scene.

Furthermore, members of the People’s Histreh group have on various occasions carried around a loaf of bread on a stick, thereby reviving what by the turn of the nineteenth century had become a well-established signal to start a Food Riot.³ Obviously we could not keep up this habit without examining Nottingham’s most famous Food Riot, although it quickly became apparent that no loaves on sticks were reported to have been carried aloft during any of the riots examined in this pamphlet.

When research began into the wider story behind the tale, there was no specific interest in the subject other than the intention to find further information. After the initial examination of a number of issues of *The Leicester and Nottingham Journal* (hereafter *Journal*) from 1766, two theses were sketched: firstly, it appeared that the riot in Nottingham was just one event in a series of Food Riots in September and October 1766, and secondly that these events were not only less jolly but also more complex than the standard references to the Great Cheese Riot imply, which usually depict the riot as an anti-social version of the popular sport of Cheese-Rolling.

In order to examine these theses I took a closer look at the Great Cheese Riot itself before contextualising it by identifying and discussing recurring patterns of (direct) action(s), and reactions as well as riot-related discourse reported in said newspaper. Therefore the deliberations in this pamphlet concern the question of whether the sources indicate recurring patterns in the rioters’ direct action and how their contemporaries responded to and interpreted them.

¹ Beckett (b); pp. 287-8.

² See e.g. Bryson; p. 129.

³ Thompson; p. 70.

Aside from the *Journal* issues, a number of standard volumes on the history of Nottingham, such as Deering's *The History of Nottingham* or the *Date Book*, were used to look into the research question. Among other works consulted were titles such as the *Cambridge Economic History* and Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*. One of the revelations of this research process was what rich treasure of information can be accessed using historical dictionaries, which were e.g. utilised to discuss the highly gendered depiction of the rioters.

A few deliberations regarding my attitude towards historical research, the used sources and my problematic bias of siding with rioters are followed in the second chapter by a description of the Great Cheese Riot. The events in Nottingham will be discussed in the third chapter, starting with my definition of Food Riots and some other general deliberations on the subject, before identifying and debating recurring patterns of rioters' direct action as well as the immediate response of their opponents. The fourth chapter focuses on attempts of preventative appeasement, which were made on a number of levels in order to stop further rioting. A chapter discussing recurring patterns of the depiction of rioters, as well as the scattered hints towards their identities is followed by a sixth chapter regarding interpretations of price developments and the rioters' motives.

1. Cake and Orwell

It is crucial to urge the reader to be critical of, and highly vigilant towards, any of the deliberations in this pamphlet. History is always written by people and people have preconceived ideas, political opinions etc. I cannot provide you with an objective and/or truthful account of events; indeed I strongly believe that no such thing can be done. Instead I offer an interpretation of other people's documentation of past events, whilst providing others with the information necessary to retrace the research process for themselves, an undertaking which could lead to very different results.

I can draw an analogy (always a dangerous thing to do) between the research process resulting in a pamphlet like this one and baking a cake. When wishing to munch a scrumptious cake, a baker has to decide which cake to bake and then to start rummaging in the kitchen, gathering utensils and ingredients deemed necessary for that specific cake, leaving other things you would need for other types of cake in the cupboards. Although it is the baker who will actually be baking the cake, the preconditions of that process require the involvement of many other persons. Bakers (as well as researchers), although weighing and mixing (analysing and interpreting) ingredients (sources/data) themselves, do so by utilising a recipe, scales of measurement and utensils (theoretical concepts/methodology) which usually do not originate from the bakers but are simply utilised by them. And just as bakers (usually) do not lay eggs or mill wheat, sources used by researchers are pieces of information which were recorded by other persons in certain ways for certain reasons. Any claims of objective accounts are ignoring not only the process of baking research, the outcome of which is based on numerous and variable decisions (which could have been taken otherwise, starting with the very decision to bake a cake), but also the complex and variable preconditions necessary to start such an undertaking. To be aware of and to admit this does not negate a scientific approach, but must be the basis of any such claim.

Despite these ramblings, it has to be admitted that this pamphlet does not contain even the attempt of a thorough theoretical discussion of its underlying assumptions, the approach to the subject matter and various terms and concepts utilised. To be able to do this is one of the perks of working outside a formal setting. However, the following superficially reflects on limitations and opportunities of the used sources and, to a lesser extent, the problem of me instinctively siding with the rioters.

As to the former: this pamphlet is primarily based on five issues of the *Journal*. Reverting to the cake analogy, working with these sources could be compared to using a pre-prepared cake mix rather than a number of

separate ingredients. The newspaper issues are edited compilations of articles from other papers, official proclamations, letters from a number of persons providing accounts of riots or explanations for the events, etc.

The advantage is that within a single source it is possible to find evidence from a number of very different persons, writing for different reasons, sometimes complementing, sometimes contradicting each other. However, it is crucial to remember that this information was edited according to the editors' agenda and it can be assumed that this was primarily determined by an interest to sell the paper. For example the prominence of the riots and the alarmist language used when reporting and commenting on them does not necessarily imply that the rioters were a real threat to power and production relations in Britain. It reflects, at least in part, an editorial choice based on the assumption that riots are exciting and that exciting news sells newspapers. Clive Emsley refers to a pattern of increased reports of crime in peacetime, an observation which is probably comparable to the reporting of riotous disturbances. The riots of 1766 happened in the aftermath of the Seven Years' War, i.e. at a time when '[...] newspapers found themselves with space to fill because of a decline in exciting [...] war news'.⁴ Indeed the *Journal* issues did feature not only many accounts of riots but also quite detailed stories about gruesome murders and, as news about domestic unrest became sparse in their issue of 1st November 1766, a lengthy report of the trial of rioters in New York.⁵ It is also likely that the reporting of the riots of autumn 1766 had been spiced up to a certain extent, making it necessary to be e.g. highly suspicious of information such as numbers of rioters or amounts of expropriated goods. Furthermore, although the *Journal* did report extensively on riotous disturbances, the documentation of the individual events is sometimes fragmentary and repeatedly based on second or even third hand information. Many deliberations in this pamphlet would therefore need to be validated by further research and/or are based on circumstantial evidence only.

In spite of these problems, making it necessary to treat the sources with great care, the *Journal* issues are wonderful sources, not least because of their language and amusing elements like notes advertising 'Powders for Disorders in Children'.⁶ Furthermore this pamphlet does not so much aim to reconstruct single events, aside from the Great Cheese Riot, but rather to identify and discuss patterns of (direct) action(s), reactions as well as riot-related discourse. The size of the body of information provided by the *Journal* alone makes it possible to initiate such an undertaking, though in a very cautious way.

⁴ Emsley; p. 35.

⁵ See *Journal*; 4th October 1766; p. 1; 1st November 1766; p. 4.

⁶ *Journal*; 4th October 1766; p. 2.

As to the problem of the researcher, i.e. me, consciously or unconsciously sympathising with certain historical protagonists, I have to admit that my immediate reaction to this or similar subject matters can be summed up with George Orwell's words:

'I have no particular love for the idealized 'worker' as he appears in the bourgeois Communist's mind, but when I see an actual flesh-and-blood worker in conflict with his natural enemy, the policeman, I do not have to ask myself which side I am on.'⁷

This is not only reflected by the chosen subject matter itself, but also in my approach to it and the language used. This is however less of a problem as long as I stay aware of the very real possibility that many rioters may have been bigoted, racist, homophobic chauvinists and I always remain vigilant not to glorify and/or idealise any social struggles, especially as the 'flesh-and-blood workers' engaged in them can turn out to be just as despicable as 'the policeman' they are fighting.

⁷ Orwell; p. 109.

2. Nottingham's Great Cheese Riot

Although still dominated by agriculture,⁸ by the year 1766 England was already in the early stages of what was to become known as the Industrial Revolution, the essence of which Eric Hobsbawm brilliantly condensed into the (still continuing) process by which 'revolutionary change became the norm'.⁹

Revolutionary changes, gathering pace at an increasing rate, therefore had already started to transform urban as well as rural areas¹⁰ and had also begun to take effect in Nottingham. The town's staple trades, the textile industries, were already well established. It has been estimated that by the early 1770s the number of merchant hosiers had doubled¹¹ since c. 1740.¹² Though the canal, vital to transform the town into a centre of mass production, was not opened until the end of the century,¹³ the rivers Trent and Leen already provided the town with a favourable infrastructure. Nottingham's population had steadily increased in the thirty years after 1739 from c. 10,000¹⁴ to c. 15,000; a significant though yet still slow rise compared to the explosive growth which was to occur by the end of the century.¹⁵ The scenery of the town, which had previously been described as 'Fair Nottingham with brilliant Beauty graced', a place full of 'Health, Plenty, Pleasure'¹⁶ was beginning to change. Although in the 1760s Nottingham resembled not yet what would later be described as a 'mighty prison of brick and mortar',¹⁷ the years between 1763-8 saw the first considerable building boom. Within the next two decades the town would

⁸ Pinchbeck; p. 7.

⁹ Hobsbawm (b); p. 29.

¹⁰ May; pp. 26-33. See Beckett (a); pp. 1-10: Beckett provides a partial summary of the debates whether or not these transformations amount to an agricultural revolution. See Brenner; p. 68; Rich/Wilson (a); pp. 275-9/299-301: A number of developments in the agricultural sector, e.g. enclosures, the decline of small landowners and small tenancies, innovations to increase production etc. can be traced into the seventeenth and earlier centuries. However, after 1750 these processes occurred on an unprecedented scale.

¹¹ Beckett (b); p. 317.

¹² Deering; p. 101: He estimated around 1,200 frames were in use in c. 1740.

¹³ Kayne; pp. 88-9. See Journal 25th October 1766; p. 1: Complex canal systems were already operational in other parts of Britain, such as in Manchester, which was said to have 'become a sort of a maritime town'.

¹⁴ Deering; pp. 12-3.

¹⁵ Beckett (b); p. 191: According to Beckett the town's population increase spiralled in the 1780s by more than forty per cent, i.e. the population grew from 17,200 to 24,400. See Yarnspinner; chapter 1.2.: By the beginning of the 1830s a staggering 50,000 lived on the same area where c. 10,000 had lived at the end of the 1730s as the town grew only in population, not in area.

¹⁶ Deering; p. 17.

¹⁷ Bryson; p. 84. For a more detailed depiction of living and working conditions of the industrial Nottingham see Yarnspinner; chapters 1.3./1.4.

no longer be dominated by the ‘fine houses’ of ‘gentlemen of great fortune’ but rather by slums consisting of the notorious back-to-back houses.¹⁸ Within less than two generations, the transformations of Nottingham would result in atrocious living and working conditions on an unprecedented scale for the vast majority of its inhabitants, also stirring a yet unknown level of radical dissent and riotous upheaval, earning the town a reputation for being inhabited by a ‘combustible’ populace.¹⁹

Thursday, the 2nd October 1766 saw the beginning of the annual Goose Fair in what is now known as Old Market Square. It is reported to have been ‘a fine day’ and the fair was well attended. Larger quantities of cheese than in the years before were on sale, priced between 24 and 36s per hundredweight, which was ‘deemed highly excessive’.²⁰ However, during the day trading is said to have commenced without disturbances. Events apparently became tense in the evening when ‘some rude lads’ engaged several Lincolnshire traders who had purchased up to ‘sixty hundred of cheese’. The traders were ‘threatened they should not stir a cheese till the town was first served’. According to the *Journal*, they applied for protection, ‘but it was not then to be had’. At about 7pm:

[...] the mob began to be outrageous, fell upon the heaps of cheese, and amidst loud shouts in a short time took and destroyed the whole parcel, which was chiefly carried off by women and boys.²¹

According to the *Date Book*:

‘The people were so exasperated that their violence broke loose like a torrent; cheeses were rolled down Wheeler-gate and Peck-lane in abundance, many others were carried away, and the Mayor, in endeavouring to restore peace, was knocked down with one in the open fair.’²²

Probably encouraged by the successful expropriations and the fun of bowling down gentlemen, an unknown number of people left the town centre and went down to the River Trent to search the warehouses situated near the bridges, before returning again after ‘finding no cheese’ there. Two or three persons were arrested and ‘carried before the Justices’, apparently in a ‘Coffee House’ in Peck Lane (an alleyway linking Market Square and St Peter’s Gate), which became the target of the crowds. The arrests had

¹⁸ Beckett (b); pp. 189/200-1.

¹⁹ See Yarnspinner; chapter 1.1.

²⁰ Field; Vol. 2; p. 69; *Journal*; 11th October 1766; p. 3.

²¹ *Ibid*.

²² Field; Vol. 2; p. 69. This indicates that contrary to the common tale of the Cheese Riot the mayor may not have been bowled over in Peck Lane but knocked down with a cheese on Market Square, which however is still quite funny.

‘redoubled their fury’ and the rioters were determined to liberate the prisoners:

[...] they broke the windows belonging to the house, tore the pavement and threatened destruction to all who opposed them: It was thought prudent to discharge the lads in custody and then [the crowds] retreated.²³

Later that night the effectively helpless ‘civil powers’ of Nottingham sent a messenger to Derby to request military support and in the early hours of the next morning, cavalry and infantry units arrived.²⁴ During the day the atmosphere was ‘very peaceable’ before a second riot broke out in the evening, ‘more dangerous than the former’. There were serious clashes between rioters and military ‘at the New-change’,²⁵ the latter allegedly acting with ‘great vigour in quelling the tumult, which was not fully subdued until blood had been shed’. The soldiers repeatedly discharged their firearms into the crowds. Their only victim known by name was William Egglestone, ‘a farmer, at Carcolston near Bingham’. He was shot through the calf of his right leg ‘as he was kneeling and leaning over a heap of cheese’. The wound infected and he died the following Sunday. An inquest into his death came to the conclusion of ‘Accidental Death, [caused] by a Person [...] unknown’.²⁶ This verdict is not as cynical as it first appears, as Egglestone apparently was not shot whilst trying to expropriate, but rather whilst ‘guarding’, the cheese, which makes the incident a case of friendly fire. Other persons are said to have been wounded by the soldiers’ fire, but neither of the used sources provide any further information on their injuries or whether they recovered from them.²⁷

Eventually the crowds dispersed, but a number of persons again went to Trent Bridge where they seized a boat ‘laden with cheese.’ On Saturday, people ‘behaved very insolently to the Magistrates’ who deemed it necessary to read the Riot Act. On Monday, a party of soldiers marched out of the town to confront rioters who were rumoured to have gathered near Derby to destroy a warehouse. The same evening the Great Cheese Riot came to an end after several hundred people tried to burn a windmill near Trent Bridge, but:

[...] they retreated from thence, without doing any considerable damage, on the report of the Magistrates and

²³ Journal; 11th October 1766; p. 3.

²⁴ Ibid. See Field; Vol. 2; pp. 69-70: The soldiers were part of a regiment called the ‘Fifteenth Dragoons (formed out of the Duke of Kingston’s Light Horse)’.

²⁵ Journal; 11th October 1766; p. 3. See Nottingham City Council: The New Change stood on the site where the Council House was built between 1927 and 1929.

²⁶ Journal; 11th October 1766; p. 3.

²⁷ Field; Vol. 2; p. 70.

soldiers coming to defend it, which they did soon after their departure.²⁸

²⁸ Journal; 11th October 1766; p. 3.

3. Patterns of direct action

For Thompson, Food Riots were the ‘most common example’ of what he called ‘more or less spontaneous popular direct action’,²⁹ as any ‘sharp’ increase in food prices ‘precipitated riot’. He assumed that Food Riots demonstrated ‘more sophisticated traditions than the word ‘riot’ suggests.’ Therefore an examination of the reports on the 1766 Food Riots should reveal recurring patterns indicating that the riots were indeed more than ‘a mere uproar which culminated in the breaking open of barns or the looting of shops.’³⁰

One of the first results of this examination was that usage of the term Food Riots can be misleading. Although some of these events included significant clashes with a number of fatalities, many can hardly be described as a riot, a term conjuring up images of pitched street battles. For instance, on Saturday, 4th October 1766 an ‘old woman’ in Ashby-de-la-Zouch ‘rubbed a pound of the butter all over [a farmer’s] face’ after she was greatly vexed by the price demanded. Afterwards an ‘inconsiderable mob’ searched a warehouse for cheese, but soon dispersed when none was found. About three weeks later, a small crowd stopped a waggon-load of flour in Northamptonshire, which however was ‘at length suffered to pass without receiving any damage’.³¹ These examples make it apparent that in many instances Food Riots were actually quite harmless. However, as it is not only quite catchy but also widely used, I decided to use the term in this pamphlet in a very broad sense. I describe as a Food Riot any event reported on in the *Journal* issues used, in which direct action (whether riotous or not) was taken by more than one person in order to procure food for personal consumption or for not-for-profit distribution, excluding those occurrences which fit the latter category but in which such items were procured by propertied persons/local officials to be distributed or sold at reduced rates as a measure of preventative appeasement (see 4.1).

Based on this definition, the used *Journal* issues report on a total of twenty-two Food Riots,³² which occurred in fourteen different counties³³ in

²⁹ Thompson; p. 67: As opposed to what is commonly understood as the actions of a ‘mob’; i.e. ‘the deliberate use of the crowd as an instrument of pressure, by persons above or apart from the crowd’. This understanding of ‘mob’ action has been used by historians, ‘too often [...] lazily, to evade further analysis, or (with the suggestion of criminal elements motivated by the desire for loot) as a gesture of prejudice.’ See also Yarnspinner; chapter 4.1.

³⁰ Thompson; pp. 67-8.

³¹ See *Journal*; 11th October 1766; p. 3; 18th October 1766; p. 1; 25th October 1766; p. 3.

³² See Appendix II. See *Journal*; 11th October 1766; p. 3; *Journal*; 18th October; p. 3: Two riots in Hinckley are not counted in this number of twenty-two, though they are referred to in this pamphlet. These broke out after a number of persons were arrested following a Food Riot in the town (on which no further information could be found). See also *Journal*; 1st November 1766; p. 3: This issue refers to rumours of another riot in Norwich but this information was yet

England,³⁴ between the 9th September and the 23rd October 1766.³⁵ Bearing in mind that information taken from the used *Journal* issues is often fragmentary and questionable; these numerous accounts of Food Riots allow a cautious debate of recurring patterns of rioters' direct actions as well as of the reactions by the rioters' diverse opponents.

3.1. Enforcement of price reductions

In a number of the Food Riots reported on in the *Journal* issues, crowds enforced price reductions, be it directly or indirectly.

Events on Saturday, 18th October 1766 in Gloucestershire, an area dominated by cloth production, are a distinct example of the former category in which people directly regulated prices deemed excessive. The *Journal* report was quite detailed on the events, depicting the rioters in a rather typical way:³⁶

[In the area live] a great number of desolate, idle fellows, that delight more in drinking than work: four of these sort of people being assembled together at Pitchcomb feast, and there getting drunk, were the first who kindled the flame of disturbance here; these incendiaries communicating their mad resolutions to others like themselves, and giving out that it was their intention to regulate the prices of victuals as well as drink, assumed to themselves the name of Regulators [...].³⁷

unconfirmed at the time of the publication and is therefore also not counted in the aforementioned number. Events in Nuneaton (see 3.1.) demonstrate that the definition above leaves a grey area. Prices were reduced on that occasion before any direct action had been taken, but unlike in other situations when this was done as a measure of preventative appeasement (see 4.1.) local persons of property acted in Nuneaton only when they were directly confronted with two hundred colliers who had taken measures into their own hands only the day before in Coventry and were ready to do so again. Therefore events in that town were counted as a Food Riot. See *Journal* 18th October 1766; p. 1: It is very likely that there were far more instances of Food Riots than reported in the *Journal* issues, there were e.g. reports of repeated 'riots and disturbances' in 'Oxford and Woodstock' the latter not being mentioned elsewhere in the *Journal* issues.

³³ See *Journal*; 4th/11th/18th/25th October; 4th November 1766: Buckinghamshire, Derbyshire, Gloucestershire, Leicestershire, Norfolk, North Yorkshire, Northamptonshire, Nottinghamshire, Oxfordshire, Somerset, Warwickshire, West Midlands, Wiltshire, Worcestershire.

³⁴ See *Journal*; 25th October 1766; p. 1: It can be assumed that at the same time Food Riots occurred in other parts of the British Isles. There were reports of serious crop failures as well as significant exports of wheat from Ireland, a volatile mixture which probably resulted in rioting (see chapters 3.3./4.1.).

³⁵ See *Journal*; 4th/11th/18th/25th October; 4th November 1766: For further information regarding the dating of the events see Appendix II.

³⁶ See chapter 5; Yarnspinner; chapter 4.

³⁷ *Journal*; 25th October 1766; p. 3.

Eventually, a number of ‘sturdy young fellows’, seized ‘several tons’ of cheese and sold it at a guinea a hundred weight, about two thirds of the original asking price. Furthermore:

‘[...] bacon, butter, and other commodities, were sold in like manner: by compulsion were the people obliged to part with their several commodities, at prices greatly beneath their real worth.’³⁸

On Friday, 26th September two hundred colliers took similar direct action in Coventry. After seizing it from a number of warehouses, cheese was brought into the market and ‘a good deal [...] sold by the lump’ for a price two to 2½d per pound. After the money was handed over to the former owners of the cheese there was a small ‘fray’ with ‘peace officers’, but no arrests or injuries were reported.³⁹

Crowds of people directly enforcing price reductions and passing the revenue on to the former owners of the commodities were a recurring pattern of direct action in the 1766 Food Riots. For Thompson, such examples were a sign of the rioters ‘self-discipline’.⁴⁰ However the sample of Food Riots examined indicates that this pattern of direct action should not be over-emphasised as it was reported in only four cases, i.e. less than a fifth of all riots. However, in a further fifth of the riots direct action or the mere threat of it was indirectly successful in enforcing price reductions which were organised by local officials.

One example for this occurred in Nuneaton, the aforementioned colliers’ target on the day after their successful direct action in Coventry. Their presence and possibly news of events in Coventry motivated local gentlemen to take pre-emptive action in order to prevent the colliers from taking matters into their own hands again. Therefore a Sir Roger Newdigate ordered ‘some hundred weight of his own cheese to be sold at the market there at two pence halfpenny per pound’ whilst several farmers brought wheat into the market, ‘a thing not seen there for several years past.’ In Oxford riots initiated action from local officials, who organised the collection and sale not only of foodstuffs like bread, bacon, cheese and butter, but also commodities like candles and soap, all sold at rates a quarter or even a third lower than the original asking price. Similar events

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Journal; 4th October 1766; p. 3. See Hobsbawm (a); p. 59: Apparently there are numerous examples of eighteenth century miners taking direct action ‘against high food-prices, and the profiteers believed to be responsible for them’.

⁴⁰ Thompson; pp. 69-71: This pattern of direct action is also key to Thompson’s interpretation of the riots. See chapter 6.

occurred in Birmingham and Norwich where, following serious rioting in September, in October the populace was ‘pacified’ in this manner.⁴¹

However, price reductions organised by local officials were not guaranteed to succeed in appeasing riotous or potentially riotous crowds. The strategy failed e.g. during Food Riots in Leicester⁴² or in Derbyshire, where a trader tried to appease a crowd of people who were busy expropriating cheese from a boat, following several days of intense fighting (see below):

‘Fifty-Pounds was offer’d by the owner of the cheese, if [the rioters] would suffer the cargo’s of the boats to remain untouch’d, and that a pair of scales should be erected, and the country supplied at 2d per lb. To which one of the ringleaders replied, Damn his Charity, we’ll have the Cheese for nought.’⁴³

3.2. Expropriations

Expropriations such as in Derbyshire were a far more common pattern of direct action than the enforcement of price reductions, being reported in three out of five accounts of Food Riots. Commodities were expropriated from boats, waggons and carts, market stalls, warehouses⁴⁴ or directly from production facilities, for instance a grain mill near Oxford:

‘Men, Woman, and Children [...] proceeded to Holiwell-mill, from whence [...] they removed one hundred and twenty sacks of flour; all which was [...] loaded upon the miller’s cart, and drawn by themselves from thence up to Carfax and there given away among the populace.’⁴⁵

In Leicester expropriations went on in spite of efforts to organise a controlled sale at reduced prices and a significant military presence. Rioting had erupted after a load of cheese was stopped from being carted out of town (see below) and the cheese on the wagon had been distributed ‘whole before the Magistrates received any Information of these proceedings’. Afterwards rioting quickly spread through town despite a large troop of infantry having been mobilised almost instantly. A large amount of cheese, which had been stashed in a pub, was expropriated and a number of stores and warehouses searched. In the evening, groups of rioters began systematically to search waggons going in and out of the town in order to discover further provisions, and were able to expropriate further

⁴¹ Journal; 4th October 1766; pp. 1/3; 11th October 1766; p. 4; 18th October 1766; p. 4.

⁴² Journal; 4th October 1766; p. 3.

⁴³ Journal; 11th October 1766; p. 3.

⁴⁴ Journal; 4th October 1766; p. 3; 11th October 1766; p. 3.

⁴⁵ Journal; 4th October 1766; p. 1.

commodities before the military could intervene. A number of rioters 'remain'd all night in the streets, watching the ends of the town for loaded carriages &c.'⁴⁶

3.3. Stopping the export of provisions

Another recurring pattern were attempts to stop provisions being removed from a market, a town or a county, e.g. when they were loaded on a boat or a waggon at the end of a market day. In the sample of Food Riots reported on in the *Journal* issues, this kind of direct action was repeatedly the trigger for the unrest. This indicates a strong conviction amongst rioters that the export of provisions e.g. from their village, would cause or increase scarcity and push up prices even further.⁴⁷ Even the suspicion of the export of provisions could spark riots, as reported from Coventry:

[The rioters'] principal design was to visit the cheese-factors, who, they were persuaded, by engrossing and sending out of the country that commodity, had occasioned it to be at the present exorbitant price.'⁴⁸

This appears to have been well known to traders like John Moore, from Sapcote near Hinckley, who published a note in the *Journal*:

I beg leave to assure the Publick, that I never in my Life Exported any Cheese or purchas'd any by Commission for that purpose.'⁴⁹

That the export of provisions could be the spark of serious rioting was also known to local authorities, who were on occasion keen to stop any such enterprise or at least to delay it, both on national (see chapter 4.) and local level. The waggon-load of cheese which started the Leicester riot had been bought by a cheese trader from Market Harborough who consulted the local magistrates as to whether they thought it prudent to move it. He eventually decided to go ahead with this contrary to their advice, triggering the riot as the waggon was stopped by 'several women', some of whom 'seiz'd the [...] horse by the head, whilst others got into the waggon' and started to distribute the cheese.⁵⁰ Other Food Riots started similarly, e.g. in Warwickshire,⁵¹ or in and around Oxford:

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*; p. 3.

⁴⁷ See Thompson; p. 68: This evidence contradicts Thompson's assumption that the laws of '[...] supply and demand, whereby scarcity inevitably led to soaring prices, had by no means won acceptance in the popular mind.'

⁴⁸ *Journal*; 4th October 1766; p. 3.

⁴⁹ *Journal*; 11th October 1766; p. 2.

⁵⁰ *Journal*; 4th October 1766; p. 3.

⁵¹ *Journal*; 18th October 1766; p. 1.

‘The Disorders occasioned by the late scandalous exportation of grain, at a time when bread as well as all other kind of provisions bear so exorbitant a price, have also broke out in this City. Late on Tuesday night last, an alarm being given that a Waggon load of wheat flour was loaded [...] in order to be privately removed in the Dead of night [...].’⁵²

Thompson refers to similar events, stating this as an indicator of ‘something in the nature of a war between the countryside and the town’ in which people in rural areas were afraid that after corn had been sent to supply towns and cities, they ‘would be left to starve’. This, along with farmers’ fears of transporting provisions in case they would be seized, and attempts by local authorities trying to becalm their populace by maintaining a local stock of grains, apparently repeatedly led to situations in which the transport of supplies within the island could scarcely be maintained.⁵³

3.4. *Smashing up property*

Apart from acquiring provisions, it apparently was a priority of many rioters to vent anger against those perceived as contributing to, and/or to be the profiteers of high prices. For Thompson this pattern of direct action showed that even in those ‘uproarious’ riots, motives were ‘more complex than hunger’. Though there are no accounts of crowds attacking e.g. merchants, grocers, bakers or millers themselves, unless they had been actively involved in fights with rioters (see below), there are a number of accounts of the destruction of their property in what must have often been quite ferocious attacks. Although in Nottingham the attempt to destroy the mill was aborted before considerable damage had been done,⁵⁴ on other occasions, for instance in Norwich, rioters were far more successful in targeting producers’ property:

‘The new mill (a very large and expensive building) is almost entirely down, the flour sack after sack, thrown into the river, and the Proprietors books, receipts, and some money, all stolen or destroyed. At night every baker in town had his windows broke, and many had their furniture demolished in the streets. [...] A large malt house is now actually in flames, several houses [torn] down [...].’⁵⁵

⁵² Journal; 4th October 1766; p. 1.

⁵³ Thompson; p. 71-2.

⁵⁴ Journal; 11th October 1766; p. 3.

⁵⁵ Journal; 4th October 1766; p. 3.

The account of flour being spoiled shows that the destruction of property could even take priority over procuring provisions.

The *Journal's* report of the riots in Bradford and Towbridge recounts further attacks on the property of traders. There, crowds were 'not only showing their resentment to the dealers in corn and flour [as well as] cheese and other provisions' by smashing up and expropriating property, but also by 'laying them under injunctions not to deal in those articles for the future.'⁵⁶

Rioters often acted in an organised and coordinated way, as e.g. recorded in the accounts of rioters systematically searching the traffic going in and out of Leicester. This could also be the case in attacks on property, such as in the riot in Gloucester where rioters organised themselves in small groups and targeted a number of houses where they were 'extorting money or taking away whatever they thought proper'. The rioters coordinated their actions using horn signals and called for reinforcements when they met resistance, apparently causing significant damage:

[...] some [traders in provisions] have had their houses pulled down to the ground, their furniture broke to pieces, and the bedding cut to-bits; some have had nothing left but the clothes on their backs'.⁵⁷

Threats were also directed against the property of local officials, e.g. in Norwich where an anonymous letter was:

[...] sent to our worthy Mayor, threatening to lay his house in ashes if he don't immediately regulate the price of flour, and set the rioters under confinement at liberty.'⁵⁸

3.5. Clashes with constables, soldiers, gentlemen '&c.'

Although any distinction regarding the severity of the riots is difficult and to an extent arbitrary, roughly half of the accounts of Food Riots reported on significant clashes, attacks on property (other than expropriations of provisions), the involvement of soldiers and/or on fatalities. The latter two factors, each reported in about a fifth of the riots, did not necessarily correlate with each other as a number of persons were not killed by the military, but by other, often self-appointed, law enforcers.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*; p. 4.

⁵⁷ *Journal*; 25th October 1766; p. 3.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*; p. 4.

⁵⁹ See *Journal*; 4th/11th/18th/25th October; 1st November 1766.

During the Food Riot in Gloucester one rioter was shot 'at a shopkeeper's' house, possibly whilst trying to expropriate goods. This 'so enraged the rest' of the rioters that the shopkeeper's house was destroyed whilst the shooter, 'by favour of the night, escaped [and] for fear of their vengeance, will not dare to return his family'. In the aftermath of the riot the local authorities were pressurised to prosecute the shopkeeper:

'The mobs obliged the coroner and his jury to bring in the shopkeeper guilty of wilful murder otherwise they threatened to murder them, threatening vengeance to them and all other who would not comply with their unjust demands.'⁶⁰

Whereas it is likely that this death was not the result of organised but spontaneous resistance to the rioters, on a number of occasions local officials called upon unofficial law enforcers to quell riots when there were neither adequate numbers of constables nor military forces available. This occurred for instance in Norwich, where the 'court [...] summoned every house keeper to take a staff and oppose the rioters.'⁶¹

On other occasions not only the rioters, but also their opponents organised themselves. This apparently was the case in Chippenham, where during a Food Riot 'the gentlemen [...] interposed, took possession of the mill, and bidding [the rioters] defiance, saved it from destruction.'⁶² Another example is the case of a riot in Somerset which escalated into a full scale battle:

'[A] large mob of poor people, consisting of near 2000, went to North Bradley mill, and pulled down part of it [...]. From whence they set out for Beekington mill, [where they] were met by [...] Thomas Prowse [MP] and several other gentlemen [who] laid before them the dangerous consequences of such proceedings, desiring them to disperse, and assured them of his best endeavours for their relief. To this they replied, they had not eaten a morsel of bread for three days, but had subsisted on grains, &c, and that their wives and families were in the same miserable condition. They then resolutely proceeded forward to the mill. The miller, having assistance and fire-arms, discharged them among the mob. On this a battle ensued, in which many of the rioters were wounded; one is since dead; and 'tis said others cannot recover. Their ammunition being expended, the mob set fire to a faggot pile,

⁶⁰ Journal; 25th October 1766; p. 3.

⁶¹ Journal; 4th October 1766; p. 3: The report did not contain information about the outcome of the confrontation.

⁶² Journal; 11th October 1766; p. 3.

a mow of hay of twelve tons, a stable, the dwelling house and mill. The people within narrowly escaped their fury.⁶³

An astounding Food Riot on the border of Derbyshire and Leicestershire is not only another example of self-organisation on both sides but is also interesting as local officials repeatedly refused to become involved in what soon became serious fighting. After having received ‘intelligence’ of a sizeable stash of cheese being lodged in a warehouse adjacent to the river Trent ‘a mob of people not exceeding 100, principally women and children’ expropriated allegedly as much as twenty hundredweights of cheese⁶⁴ before returning to their nearby village of Donington (nowadays known as Castle Donington). As they were retreating, they were pursued by ‘a person concerned in part of the property thus taken away’ who had ‘collected together a few men [...] taking from all they overtook what cheese they were loaded with and nine of the rioters prisoners.’ The prisoners had to be released after their captors failed to persuade Donington’s Justice of the Peace to issue warrants ‘either for want of sufficient informations, or perhaps, not chusing to meddle in the matter’.⁶⁵ The following day a rather ugly battle ensued as rioters returned to the warehouse:

‘[...] a mob, more formidable in numbers [...] were fir’d upon by a guard of about 18 men, planted in the warehouse purposely to defend it; notwithstanding the fire-arms the mob assaulted the warehouse with great fury; but the people within keeping a continual fire of grape and small shot, and being besides assisted by some flanking parties who fir’d whenever the back part of the warehouse was assaulted in about two hours they dispersed: About 4 o’clock in the morning, they return’d again, some of them with fire-arms, but the people within keeping a continual fire as before, about six o’clock they thought proper to retreat.’⁶⁶

Nothing is known about casualties on either side. The day after saw further fierce clashes, to which I will refer hereafter simply as the Battle of Donington. The ‘owners of the cheese, joined by several farmers and others on horseback, about 30 in number, with a considerable number of footmen’ decided to go to the offensive and marched towards the village ‘in search of the rioters’. However, they failed again in gaining the cooperation of the Justice of the Peace who did not grant the ‘General Search Warrants’,

⁶³ Journal; 4th October 1766; p. 4: The fires could be extinguished after the rioters had retreated.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Journal; 11th October 1766; p. 3.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

‘rather [choosing] to avoid acting at all surrounded with a numerous mob, in a village distant from any assistance’ which apparently greatly vexed the company:

[...] it is said some menaces, and other ill language were used by some of the company, not altogether so respectful as might have been expected to a gentleman in the commission of the peace. Finding they could not procure the warrants, they [decided] to seize upon the most suspected persons, concern’d in the late riots, and carry them before some other magistrate; they [...] rode up to the justices house, and (‘tis said, but we hope is not true) broke open his outer gates, struck at his doors and windows with great violence, and used many unbecoming expressions.⁶⁷

Apparently at this point ‘the town’s people were exasperated’ and:

[...] joined the mob, who began the assault upon the cheese-factors and their attendants, by discharging a great number of brick bats, stones, &c. The horsemen being thus attacked in front and flank, the people shouting, and volleys of stones falling from the hills, (where the women and children were planted in rows five or six deep;) the horses became ungovernable, and falling back upon their footmen, a scene follow’d of inconceivable confusion; both horse and foot fled with the utmost precipitation, pursued by the victorious mob who followed them quite down to the bridge, where a faint attempt was made to replace the guard in the warehouse, but the panic was so great, that the men refus’d to stand to their arms, and the mob were suffer’d to enter without any molestation. One of the cheese-factors, in his fright, is said to have forc’d his horse into the river, and swam the Trent.⁶⁸

In the wake of the attackers’ hasty retreat, the warehouse was ‘soon emptied [...] of about two ton of cheese’. Although most of the cheese had been removed earlier on the river, both boats were seized and their cargo expropriated, the rioters rejecting the owner’s offer of selling the cheese at reduced rates (see above).⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid. See Journal; 18th October 1766; p. 3: Some of the cheese was later ‘restor’d back to the owners’ by ‘the poor people’, probably in support of those which were later arrested or to prevent further arrests.

‘The bells rang at Donington, as if a signal victory had been obtain’d, and a hogshead of ale is said to have been given to the populace.’⁷⁰

On the following day further boats and warehouses were targeted and large amounts of cheese seized. The tide only changed with the arrival of cavalry troopers in the area almost a week after the first expropriations had taken place. On the 9th October 32 or 43 persons were arrested as they attempted to empty another warehouse. But this was not yet the end of the affair as the arrival of the prisoners in Derby incited yet another riot:

[‘The rioters] have been brought in a carriage [...] to our goal: which has greatly exasperated our mob, who insulted the Magistrates, till they were oblig’d to read the Riot Act; and the soldiers were now driving, with sword in hand, all such as have not dispersed: The officer who commanded ‘em I am inform’d has been terribly wounded, by stones &c. thrown at him, and some of the soldiers, two of which are at my door, bleed shockingly. I have just been out, and find very few remaining, but am afraid we shall have a very dreadful night.’⁷¹

In the end rioting and expropriations in the vicinity were not quelled until further military contingents arrived. According to a commentator in Derby it would have been ‘impossible to keep the mob in any bounds, but from the fear they show to the military power.’⁷²

The *Journal’s* reports account of the ferocity and determination with which people on both sides did fight in Food Riots. A full picture cannot be established from only this one source and it is very possible that the newspaper’s editors and its informants may have spiced up this very dramatic story. However it seems convincing that, confronted with and feeling abandoned by the weakness of the official law enforcers, some of the local traders and producers of provisions decided to act themselves and were willing to kill in order to stop people obtaining cheese. It is also believable that, in the absence of any forces to enforce his orders or even to ensure his own safety, the local Justice of the Peace had decided not to act, which apparently lead to the unusual situation that he was rescued by the crowds when these attacked the cheese-owners and their associates.

In all these examples the weakness of the British regime at the time and its inability to quell the riots without having to rely on local gentlemen and those ‘associates’ like e.g. farm labourers they could muster, is striking. But

⁷⁰ *Journal*; 11th October 1766; p. 3.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

on many occasions only professional soldiers were able to repress rioters and this repeatedly took some time as troops apparently were spread pretty thin in the East Midlands.⁷³

The used *Journal* issues contain limited details on those riots in which soldiers were deployed. However, it is apparent that the presence of soldiers did not automatically lead to deaths. One factor which influenced the level of violence perpetrated by the military was the attitude of local officials. In the riot in Leicester a contingent of infantry was available and ‘almost instantly upon the spot, and form’d into a square, with bayonets fix’d, and in about twenty minutes were join’d by the whole regiment, who form’d as they came up, and soon clear’d the street.’ Despite this, probably quite intimidating, display of military force the crowds did not disperse but ‘continued assembling in greater numbers, and behav’d with great insolence’. However, the Magistrate was ‘desirous if possible to restore peace without proceeding to extremities’ and tried instead to ‘appease the mob’ by organising the sale of cheese at reduced rates.⁷⁴

On other occasions military forces did act with the utmost brutality against rioters. The *Journal* reports on a massacre in Warwickshire which left eight persons dead after a riot had broken out when prices soared following the export of grain to Bristol. No more details were reported but this riot stood out as it resulted by far in the greatest (reported) number of deaths.⁷⁵

3.6. Arrests and liberation attempts

On a number of occasions rioters had successfully enforced price reductions or expropriated large quantities of provisions, often meeting only little or no resistance by official and unofficial law enforcers. The rioters’ success, as well as the sheer number of events and the ferocity of some riots did spark anxiety as ‘Trade and Business cannot be carried on with safety’⁷⁶ and successful rioting in one area seemed to lead to similar action in nearby towns and villages.⁷⁷ Therefore, harsh measures of repression were ordered, e.g. in local quarter sessions:

⁷³ See *Journal*; 4th October 1766; p. 3; 11th October 1766; p. 3: For some information regarding troop movements. See *Journal* 18th October 1766; p. 1: Apparently this was not only the case in the Midlands, as there were reports to the Lord Lieutenant of Oxford regarding ‘the many applications from a great variety of places’ on ‘his Majesty’s troops being’ which were ‘now almost entirely disposed in, or as near as possible in the neighbourhood of the places chiefly infested with these disorders.’

⁷⁴ *Journal*; 4th October 1766; p. 3.

⁷⁵ *Journal*; 18th October 1766; p. 1.

⁷⁶ *Journal*; 11th October 1766; p. 4.

⁷⁷ See e.g. *Journal*; 4th October; p. 3; 18th October; p. 1.

'[...] these disorders have rather increased than diminished, and [...] the mob [has] become daily more numerous and more insolent. [...] [Therefore it was] unanimously agreed [at the quarter sessions in Oxford] to use the most vigorous measures for suppressing all future outrages [...].'⁷⁸

Official resolutions like this were mirrored by private statements, e.g. by a commentator from Gloucester, demanding prosecutions to discourage further disturbances as well as continued military presence:

'If some examples are not made of the ringleaders [...] in order to prevent these insurrections, no man's life or property can be secure [...].'⁷⁹

Making examples of so called ringleaders first required arrests, which were reported in about a third of the examined Food Riots. This repeatedly triggered very determined liberation attempts, not only in Nottingham and Derby but also in Birmingham and Leicester where 'Four women behaving with great insolence to the Magistrates were taken and committed to gaol'. One of the women was 'instantly' 'rescued from the Constables' before an attempt was made to liberate the others:⁸⁰

'[...] the mob assembled in great numbers at the gaol, determin'd to rescue the prisoners, and with brickbats and stones entirely destroy'd every pane of glass fronting the streets; they also forced open the outer door of the gaol [...], from whence the prisoners had been just removed.'⁸¹

Unfortunately the crowds not only failed to liberate the prisoners, but five so called 'ringleaders' were arrested when the attack on the goal was eventually repelled. On the next day the gaol was guarded by up to a hundred soldiers, each issued with fifteen rounds and ordered to open fire onto any crowd trying 'to rescue the prisoners'.⁸²

Arrests repeatedly happened after the actual riots had ended. At the quarter sessions in Oxford warrants were issued 'against upwards of thirty [...] who have committed outrages in that neighbourhood'.⁸³ Following the

⁷⁸ Ibid. See Emsley; pp. 13-4: 'Offenders were brought before one of three principal kinds [of courts] during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: petty sessions, quarter sessions or assizes. [...] The courts of quarter sessions heard more serious offences that were prosecuted on indictment. [...] The verdicts at quarter sessions were decided by juries but the magistrates decided upon the sentence.'

⁷⁹ Journal; 25th October 1766; p. 3.

⁸⁰ Journal; 4th October 1766; p. 4; 11th October 1766; p. 4.

⁸¹ Journal; 4th October 1766; p. 3.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Journal; 18th October 1766; p. 1.

Battle of Donington and the aforementioned arrest of over thirty persons, seven more were arrested and brought to Derby.⁸⁴ A troop of Dragoons ‘quartered in Gloucester, have had full employ’ in rounding up alleged rioters:

‘The number now in that goal is upwards of 60; but those who have fled the country upon this occasion, we are told, exceed 400; many of whom have left wives and large families to be maintained by their parishes.’⁸⁵

On occasion, also these subsequent arrests were resisted. After the quarter sessions in Leicestershire, warrants were issued to arrest a number of persons deemed to be ringleaders in a riot in Hinckley. But after two persons had been apprehended, a large crowd not only refused to disperse when the riot act was read but ‘forced themselves into the room where the prisoners were confin’d, and in open violation of all law and authority set them at liberty.’ This resulted in a sizeable military operation involving ‘a troop of dragoons’ and militia who arrested a further four persons. This time there was no such determined liberation attempt although a few stones were hurled and a shot was taken at the jailor.⁸⁶

From the *Journal* issues used little is known of what happened to those arrested during or after riots and not liberated by crowds. Following the riots in Norwich ‘twelve or more’ were in custody, ‘charged with capital offences’.⁸⁷ However, not all prosecuted would have faced the scaffold as demonstrated by the sentences for William Derby and Thomas Russ. Both were ‘ordered to be publicly whipped, and to give security for their good

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*; p. 3.

⁸⁵ *Journal*; 1st November 1766; p. 3. See *Journal*; 25th October 1766; p. 3: Apparently it was not unusual that suspected rioters fled their homes. After the rioting in Hinckley ‘upwards of eighty people were said to have disappeared.

⁸⁶ *Journal*; 4th October 1766; p. 4; 18th October 1766; p. 3. See *Journal*; 1st November 1766; p. 4: The names of ‘Thomas Grimes, Sarah Bonner, John Langham, John Blower, John Grondridge, William Hawey, Abraham Pettiser And Thomas Langham, all of Hinkley. William Halford of Desford. Will. Bull and Tho. Bull of Burbage’ were published who were charged with assembling in: ‘[a] Riotous and Tumultuous Manner, committing divers Outrages and Violences, [...] and forcing themselves into the Room, where the Constables had two Persons in Custody for Felony, and feloniously rescuing and setting them at Liberty. Notice is hereby Given, That if any Person will apprehend or give Notice [...], so that any of the Offenders may be brought to Justice, they shall be handsomly Rewarded. And all Persons are caution’d not to harbour or relive them, as they will be deemed Accessary to their Crimes.’

⁸⁷ *Journal*; 18th October 1766; p. 4. See Field; p. 14: A passage from the Date Book, describing law enforcement in mid seventeenth century Nottingham demonstrates the ubiquity of capital punishment: “‘Guilty - Death,” were familiar words in the criminal courts. It was death to steal mutton – death requited the industry of the burglar, the shoplifter, and the coiner – death attended all, and was regarded as the great conservator of social security. [...] The murderer feared little worse than the robber of a hen-roost. Thrust alike into an underground cell, they were led forth at the appointed hour, to expiate their crime on Gallows-hill.’

behaviour for six months, and to remain in goal till such security is given' by the general quarter sessions. That five others rioters 'were ordered to remain till the assizes'⁸⁸ might indicate that these were condemned to more brutal punishments.

⁸⁸ Journal; 25th October 1766; p. 1.

4. Preventative appeasement

Aside from reports of the riots themselves, the *Journal* issues printed a number of official proclamations and articles providing information on how the rioters' better off contemporaries, state and local officials as well as propertied private citizens, sought to prevent further unrest. In communicating such measures to a wider audience, media like the *Journal* may have played a vital role.⁸⁹

4.1. Measures to cap prices

The number of riots in which attempts were made to stop the export of provisions from a particular area implies that the real or presumed scarcity of provisions in an area was perceived by many rioters as one of the primary reasons for the 'dearness of provisions'. Therefore the issue of international exports of wheat had the potential of further fuelling social tensions. According to the *Journal* the 1766 Food Riots occurred in a year which saw considerable crop failures all over Europe, notable exceptions including Spain and England, allegedly enabling exports of English wheat to 'foreign markets' at almost 'unlimited prices'.⁹⁰ Whether or not these could really have resulted in a situation where the 'Majesty's subjects would be in danger of want, whilst foreigners are supplied from this country', soaring prices and anxieties about an increase in popular unrest appear to have been very real, especially as the price of wheat was 'upon the strongest ground presum'd to be still rising'. As Parliament was not to sit before November the king was urged in late September stop exports of wheat:

⁸⁹ See *Journal*; 4th October; p. 3; 11th October 1766; p. 2. Without further information it is difficult to ascertain who this audience consisted of, but it is always possible to take a (more or less) educated guess. One repeatedly reprinted proclamation was entitled 'To the Rioters', warning them of the consequences of their actions. It is possible that this and similar proclamations were not so much directed at rioters themselves but rather at 'respectable' readers, reassuring them that the law enforcers were set on prosecuting any rioters. See *Yarnspinner*; chapter 4.3; *Journal*; 11th October 1766; p. 3; 25th October 1766; p. 1: However, given that political issues like export embargos were discussed in public houses it can be assumed that the practise of reading and debating newspapers to/with each other was well established in all social classes before the nineteenth century, which might indicate that also quite a few rioters were aware of 'To the Rioters' and similar messages. See *Journal*; 11th October 1766; p. 2: Among further evidence that papers like the *Journal* were read by the rioters are messages like the one by the cheese trader who was trying to reassure readers that he was not involved in the export of provisions.

⁹⁰ *Journal*; 4th October 1766; pp. 1/4. See Beckett (a); pp. 31/64-5: Britain had been a net exporter of grain for quite some time, subsidised and promoted by the government to stop prices collapsing as production increased. However, the net surplus of wheat production had begun to 'even out' by the mid-1760s and even turned into deficits in the 1770s which had to be balanced by imports.

[His Majesty has] to stop the progress of a mischief daily encreasing, and which if not immediately provided against, might be productive of calamities past of possibility of remedy. It is therefore upon the grounds of the above urgent necessity now impending, and for the safety, benefit, and sustenance of his Majesty's subjects, that his Majesty, with the advice of his Privy-Council, doth order [...] That an Embargo be forthwith laid upon all ships and vessels, laden or to be laden [...] with Wheat or Wheat-Flour to be exported to foreign parts [...].⁹¹

Exports had repeatedly been suspended 'in years of dearth' during the eighteenth century, e.g. in 1707, 1740 and 1757.⁹² Also in 1766 an embargo was ordered, along with instructions to 'his Majesty's Customs' to enforce it. In Bristol, monetary incentives were promised to hasten the return of ships laden with wheat so that 'the poor about that city [could be] provided with bread.' It is however questionable how efficiently such a temporary embargo was and could be enforced. Apparently it was quite common to simply stash large quantities of wheat aboard boats on rivers, thereby keeping significant reserves in expectation of the embargo being lifted by November. Another measure ordered on a national level was the prohibition of 'the making, extracting or distilling, of any kind of Low-Wines, or Spirits, from any Wheat, Wheat Meal, Wheat Flour, or Wheat Barn, or any Mixture therewith'.⁹³

Although the *Journal* did report that prices fell in a number of counties after the proclamation of these policies,⁹⁴ it is impossible without further research to validate either the claim of such price reductions or whether these were connected to the embargo and the prohibition of distilling. It seems however more likely that the effects of both policies would rather have been of a psychological rather than of an economic nature. They also had the dangerous potential to backfire. The prohibition of distilling alcohol from wheat, in previous decades officially supported in order to stabilise wheat prices during times of growing output,⁹⁵ may have resulted in a price increase for alcohol which, as can be assumed with ample surety, would not have been very popular. Furthermore the embargo on wheat resulted in increased exports of other crops, which in turn was feared to result in 'wheat as well as every other kind of grain, [becoming] much dearer':

⁹¹ *Journal*; 4th October 1766; p. 1. See *Journal* 25th October 1766; p. 4: There were demands to pass legislation automatically enforcing an embargo whenever a certain domestic price of wheat was to be exceeded.

⁹² Beckett (a); p. 31.

⁹³ *Journal*; 4th October 1766; pp. 1/3-4; *Journal*; 1st November 1766; p. 1.

⁹⁴ *Journal*; 4th October 1766; p. 4; 18th October 1766; p. 1.

⁹⁵ Beckett (a); p. 31.

[...] for, between the exporting factors and the distillers, every handful of beans, peas and barley, are bought up almost at any price that is asked for them which must add to the distress of the poor as well as greatly diminish the revenue arising from the duties on malt and beer.⁹⁶

Aside from these policies on a national level, local authorities tried to increase the quantities of wheat on offer at the local markets. In Loughborough a number of officials and ‘principal gentlemen’ gave ‘all due Encouragement to their Tenants, to Trash their Grain of all kinds’ and promised ‘all possible protection’ to ‘their Persons and Properties’ when transporting provisions to markets as well promising to secure ‘the peaceable sale of all Commodities that shall be brought to Market’.⁹⁷

The *Journal* also repeatedly reported on attempts of preventative appeasement by charity, explicitly initiated to have ‘the dersir’d effect’ of keeping ‘all things [...] perfectly quiet.’ There are a number of references of gentlemen engaging in charitable collections and donations in order to ‘relieve the truly necessitous’. In Leicester ‘20 gentlemen had subscrib’d together a fund [and] directed the money be laid out in cheese to be sold all winter at a low price for the benefit of the poor.’ Similarly at Coventry an ‘old farmer’ made ‘experimental proof [...] of relieving their poor, and preserving peace, at this time of want and confusion [...] and it would be well for the public if all who can afford it would imitate him.’ His plan was to sell beef, cheese and wheat at cheap rates, thereby proving ‘how easy any town may be kept in peace, and the poor supplied with provisions; especially if the rich will but open their purses’.⁹⁸ Such charitable efforts were commented on very positively in the *Journal* issues, for instance stating that:

[...] many of [the industrious poor] would starve for want of bread, were it not that some worthy and public-spirited gentlemen have had, and continue to have, bread privately conveyed from this city and other distant places to the several villages, where it is distributed to the poor at the same price that is given for it.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ *Journal*; 18th October; p. 4.

⁹⁷ *Journal*; 25th October 1766; p. 4.

⁹⁸ *Journal*; 18th October 1766; p. 3; 1st November 1766; p. 1: Amusingly this particular ‘Old farmer’s’ plan was said to really be a vile popish plot to which the accused allegedly responded that ‘those of C[Coventry], who have so long been accustomed to do evil, [cannot] of sudden learn to do well, until some other towns have shamed them into it.’

⁹⁹ *Journal*; 25th October 1766; p. 3.

The recurring attacks on the property of traders and producers of provisions indicate that many people thought these groups contributed to or at least profited from the high level of prices, or as Thompson wrote:

‘In the popular mind, [forestalling] encompassed any exploitative action calculated to raise the price of provisions, and in particular the activities of factors, millers, bakers, and all middlemen.’¹⁰⁰

Accordingly, commentators and officials were busy blaming and taking action against ‘all Forestallers, Engrossers and Regrators’:¹⁰¹

‘Whereas there has been divers Riots and Tumultuous Meetings [...], and it being alleged that these Disturbances arise from the present high price of Provisions, and that certain Individuals by Forestalling, Ingrossing and Regrating of the Necessaries of Life, and selling them again at their own price add greatly to the present apparent Scarcity,’¹⁰²

A number of proclamations stated the intent to prosecute anyone engaged in such activities and demanded the denunciation of ‘any Offender of Offenders therein’. Such actions of local officials e.g. in Leicester or Derby were initiated following a royal proclamation to ‘preserve the Peace of the County, and Redress as much as possible the Complaints, of the Poor’, making such offences punishable by fines.

Imposing ‘strict orders’ to stop trading outside ‘public markets’ was another attempt to counteract forestalling. The *Journal* reported on and printed proclamations to that end e.g. from Warwick and Leicester, where the ‘Mayor, Recorder and Justices of this Borough’ gave ‘Public Notice’ that all persons were required to ‘produce their respective Provisions in open Market’ at set times and that no ‘Person will be allowed to purchase any Provisions till they have been produced in the open Market.’¹⁰³

Although the *Journal* mentions cases of persons prosecuted and fined for forestalling, e.g. eleven persons in Glasgow and fourteen persons in Leeds,¹⁰⁴ without further research it is not possible to assess to what extent people were prosecuted for such offences and whether this had any effect in

¹⁰⁰ Thompson; p. 72.

¹⁰¹ *Journal*; 17th October 1766; p. 3. See Walker; pp. 182/218/444: In this context all three terms mean essentially the same. One of the meanings of ‘To Engross’ is defined as: ‘to purchase the whole of any commodity for the sake of selling at a high price.’ ‘Forestaller’ is defined as: ‘One that anticipates the market, one that purchases before others to raise the price.’ The entry for ‘To Regrate’ refers to the other two terms.

¹⁰² *Journal*; 11th October; p. 4.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*; *Journal*; 18th October 1766; p. 3; 25th October 1766; p. 1; 1st November 1766; p. 3.

¹⁰⁴ *Journal*; 25th October 1766; p. 1; 1st November 1766; p. 3.

the development of prices. Again it seems far more likely that the action against forestalling was designed to have a psychological effect on the population rather than measurable economic consequences. Prosecutions of true or alleged forestallers were very popular among large parts of the general populace as well as ‘some Tory paternalists’, for Thompson further evidence of prevailing notions of an ‘old paternalist moral economy’ (see chapter 6.). However, by the end of the century, most of the old legislation against forestalling had been ‘repealed or abrogated.’¹⁰⁵

4.2. Threats and blame

Aside from promoting attempts to cap prices, the proclamations printed in the *Journal* contain many threats as to the consequences of rioting, thereby not only waving a carrot, but also a big stick at the rioters in order to discourage further direct action. These threats were two-fold: firstly regarding the personal consequences for those involved in direct action, and secondly claiming that the rioting would spoil measures to relieve economic distress.

A proclamation by a number of local officials and gentlemen in Derby is a good example of the structure of these statements. It starts by listing measures passed in order to cap prices, and states the intent to prosecute all ‘Forestallers, Engrossers and Reqrators’ to the ‘utmost of their power’. The proclamation then states that all possible resources will be used ‘to quell all riots’. Interestingly this proclamation also contains a threat aimed at ‘all Constables and Persons charged to aid and assist them’ who are to face prosecution if they should ‘neglect their Duty’ of repressing disturbances. This indicates that events in Donington, when the local Justice of the Peace had chosen not to interfere, were not isolated cases, but occurred regularly enough that it was deemed necessary to specifically threaten repercussions to anyone neglecting their ‘duty’ in this or a similar way.¹⁰⁶

A report from Newbury on charitable efforts to supply the ‘industrious poor’ with affordable bread was similarly ended with the threat that, should a ‘tumultuous assembly’ of ‘any disorderly persons’ gather, the riot act would be read immediately.¹⁰⁷ Elsewhere people were assured that, whilst anything was being done to relive the plight of the ‘truly necessitous’:

¹⁰⁵ Thompson; pp. 72-3.

¹⁰⁶ *Journal*; 18th October 1766; p. 3.

¹⁰⁷ *Journal*; 4th October 1766; p. 4. See *Journal*; 11th October 1766; p. 4; 25th October; p. 2: The relevant passages of the Riot Act were repeatedly printed in the *Journal*: Our Sovereign Lord the King, Chargeth and Commandeth, all Persons being Assembled, immediately to Disperse themselves, and peaceably to depart to their Habitations, to their lawful Business, upon the

[...] the powers of government will upon all occasions be exerted with the utmost vigour and force against every individual who shall dare to insult the execution of law and justice, or by unlawful [assembly] disturb the peace of that society of which they themselves are a part.¹⁰⁸

The proclamations contained not only threats towards rioters, but also blamed them for prolonging the price crises, for instance by stating that the ‘people alone must take blame upon themselves, if they prevent the salutary measures taken for their relief answering the purpos’d intention.’¹⁰⁹ Frequently reprinted was a proclamation entitled ‘To the rioters’:

‘The Consequences of your late Riots are Terrible: Thousands of you have been guilty of Felony; many already imprison’d, the Magistrates will do their Duty; what must be the Event to yourselves; without this necessary exertion of their Power you’ll be all Starv’d; Think before its too late. Every Thing that can be thought of has been done for your Benefit. The Exportation of Wheat is at an End; the Distillery is stopp’d; the Laws against Regrating and Forestalling are order’d to be put in Execution; Farmers have been requir’d to bring Provisions to Market. And nothing but your own Indiscretion can prevent your reaping the Benefit.’¹¹⁰

In other passages rioters were blamed for causing the problems in the first place, i.e. ‘introducing that very scarcity they pretend to remedy’.¹¹¹ Rioters were said to:

[...] commit all sorts of enormities, which must occasion, where-ever these riots are, a local scarcity; and consequently make provisions dearer.¹¹²

Pains in the Act made in the First Year of King George the First, for preventing Tumults and Riotous Assemblies.’

¹⁰⁸ *Journal*; 18th October 1766; p. 3. See *Journal*; 11th October 1766; p. 4; 25th October; p. 2: One repeatedly reprinted proclamation threatened that anyone attempting to stop the Riot Act being read, not to disperse after it had been read, or attempting to ‘Demolish or pull Down’ any building ‘shall be guilty of Felony without Benefit of Clergy’. Apparently the passage ‘without the Benefit of the Clergy’ means in this context that e.g. first-time offenders could not expect any lenience from the courts.

¹⁰⁹ *Journal*; 18th October 1766; p. 3.

¹¹⁰ *Journal*; 4th October 1766; p. 3.

¹¹¹ *Journal*; 25th October 1766; p. 1.

¹¹² *Ibid.*; p. 4. See *ibid.*; p. 3: There is some evidence in the used *Journal* issues to support these claims, e.g. in the report on the Gloucester Food Riot which stated that because the ‘land here being chiefly in pasture, [it] raises not corn enough for its people; it depends on the neighbouring county for a support, which now being retarded by these riotous proceedings’.

Rather than obstructing ‘the common channels of Justice’,¹¹³ people were urged to stay put, to rely on and trust in charitable gentlemen and policymakers, as well as repaying their wise leadership and the generous support of the truly needy by cooperation in preventing riots and persecuting rioters. This message was very elegantly communicated in a message to ‘the Industrious Poor’ of Leicester:

‘You cannot but conceive that the better sort of People in this place, have some feeling for your Distress. We have always our Hearts as well as Purses open for your Relief. Whenever the Times require it. You’ve had many Instances to convince you of this Truth. There are many amongst you who conceal their Grievances, who are proper objects of our Benevolence; it is such as you that we Address. We have raised a capital Sum and purchased a quantity of Cheese to supply you during the winter season at a moderate price, and it will be disposed of to those Families at a low rate. All that is desired or expected from you, is a grateful return for the Care and Esteem we have of you. That you’ll use your best endeavours to prevent Riots, and if possible to discover the Rioters, that they may be brought to justice. They are the bane of Society; the destruction of Property: and injurious to yourselves: none would be concerned in it but the Saucy and idle Poor, who wou’d live without labour. Of such as these severe Examples must be made; they must be cut off as proper Warnings to this and the next Generation.’¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Journal; 25th October 1766; p. 1.

¹¹⁴ Journal; 18th October 1766; p. 3.

5. The depiction of and hints to rioters' identities

Although the *Journal* articles contain many colourful descriptions of the rioters, there is little concrete evidence regarding their identities. Although a number of persons arrested for their alleged involvement in the riots were named, the used sources do not provide any further information about them. Therefore the only information which can be derived from the names is the gender of these persons. All but one appear to have been male, a ratio which is unusual regarding many other accounts in the used sources. Women were frequently mentioned in the reports of the riots, being e.g. described to have been involved in expropriations, stopping exports and irritating as well as actively fighting law enforcers. Women also became targets of repression, reported as having been arrested both during riots and in their aftermath.¹¹⁵

The fact that women did play a significant role in all aspects of Food Riots is hardly surprising as women were always involved in organising and fighting social struggles.¹¹⁶ Astounding is the very fact that women's involvement in Food Riots is so explicitly mentioned. This can be interpreted as an attempt to reaffirm women's confinement to the domestic sphere. Joan O'Brien criticised historians who were/are downplaying or altogether ignoring women's involvement in all struggles but Food Riots, thinking it 'acceptable for women to act over food prices because this accords with the idea that they are, and always have been, domestic centred'.¹¹⁷ Assuming that this argument is also valid for the women rioters' contemporaries,¹¹⁸ it appears as if the latter also tried to re-embed the anomaly of women rioters in the gender regime by reporting on it on those occasions when the women's direct action was related to the reproductive sphere.

Furthermore focussing on the activities of women rioters may have also been motivated by the attempt to systematically depict the rioters as being

¹¹⁵ *Journal*; 4th October 1766; pp. 3/4; 25th October 1766; pp. 1/3; *Journal*; 1st November 1766; p. 4: After arrests in Gloucester the number of male and female prisoners was stated to have been almost equal 'seven men and six women'.

¹¹⁶ See *Yarnspinner*; chapter 1.1.

¹¹⁷ O'Brien; pp. 4/8-10.

¹¹⁸ See *Yarnspinner*; chapters 1.1/4.2.; Although O'Brien's argument referred to historiography, it appears to be just as valid for the women rioters' contemporaries. Other research by our group has already highlighted how women's involvement in the 1831 Reform Riots was largely ignored, not only by historiography but also by contemporary commentators of the riots, e.g. newspaper editors. So far our research into Luddism indicates a similar pattern. However, I am aware that the claim that the *Journal* ignored or downplayed women's involvement in struggles other than Food Riots has to be validated by further research.

the antithesis of masculinity or ‘Manishness’, i.e. ‘male [...] behaviour’.¹¹⁹ A dominant concept of masculinity at the time appears to have been constructed based on the concept of rationality. A dictionary from 1835 defines some trademarks of a man as him being an ‘Individual [...] Not a beast’ stating that when ‘a person is out of his senses, we say, he is not his own man.’ Manliness appears to have primarily been defined in that source by what it is not, e.g. such behaviour that was not ‘womanish’ and ‘childish’.¹²⁰ Therefore a man was not supposed to act according to what was constructed as ‘womanish’, i.e. being a ‘gentle, domestic brute’.¹²¹

When Wollstonecraft first published these often quoted words in 1792, other meanings than the predominant modern understanding of the term ‘brute’ (as describing a ‘brutal person’) were communicated as well:

‘Brute [...] Senseless. [...] Savage. [...] Bestial. [...] Rough; ferocious [...] An irrational creature; a savage.’¹²²

Whereas a man was supposed to be in control of his senses, irrationality appears to have been central to one predominant concept of femininity. According to this a woman would have never stopped being perceived as a ‘brute’, also defined in a dictionary from 1768 as a ‘creature without reason’.¹²³ Even when a woman was engaged in rioting, thereby ceasing to be ‘gentle’, although not necessarily ceasing to be ‘domestic’ (see above), she did not cease being a ‘brute’, instead becoming a ‘savage’ or ‘ferocious’ ‘brute’, but in any case she would have been perceived as being unable to shed the trait of irrationality.

Adding to this picture in which rioting was equated with irrationality is a striking pattern in the depiction of women rioters. They are repeatedly described as acting alongside children, e.g. when a crowd was described as ‘principally [consisting of] women and children’, or when provisions were being ‘chiefly carried off by women and boys.’ Also the report of the Battle of Donington mentions ‘women and children’ fighting alongside.¹²⁴ The constructs of childish and womanish behaviour are similar. Wollstonecraft reflects on the idea of women’s intellects being childlike¹²⁵ and in the aforementioned dictionary from 1768 ‘childish’ was, among others things, also defined as ‘ignorant’.¹²⁶

¹¹⁹ Worcester; column MAS.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*; column MAN.

¹²¹ Wollstonecraft; p. 29.

¹²² Worcester; column BUB.

¹²³ Johnson; column BRY.

¹²⁴ *Journal*; 4th October 1766; p. 3; 11th October 1766; p. 3.

¹²⁵ Wollstonecraft; p. 29.

¹²⁶ Johnson; column CHI.

According to this both women and children engaging in direct action during Food Riots were ‘out of their senses’, irrational ‘brutes’. This also fits with the depiction of the male rioters, who are depicted as ‘desolate, idle fellows, that delight more in drinking than work’, etc. They were described as being ‘led on by ignorance and madness’,¹²⁷ i.e. behaving out of their senses. Therefore it appears that all rioters, men, women and children, were constructed as being unmanly in the aforementioned sense, the former by choice, the latter simply had no choice, their behaviour perceived to be determined by age and/or gender. It appears that this depiction would have delegitimized as well as explained the rioters’ actions for/to many readers of the *Journal*.

The descriptions of rioters offer more information about those describing than those described, but there are some scattered hints to rioters’ occupations and levels of prosperity/poverty. In the Food Riot in Scarborough it was reported that the rioters were ‘fishermen, fisherwomen, &c.’¹²⁸ indicating that those rioters were in employment, though in a trade which was subject to seasonal changes and probably did not offer the prospect of prosperity. Whereas one article mentions a ‘large mob of poor people’,¹²⁹ another one reporting on a Food Riot in Gloucester states that the rioters were not the ‘very poorest of the people, who can earn but seven, eight, or nine shillings a week’. These ‘poorest’ persons are reported to have ‘in general behaved soberly, and kept themselves industriously to their several callings, except some who were pressed away by the mobs, and several of those, the first opportunities they had, returned to their homes again.’ The majority of rioters in this region were described as:

[...] sturdy young fellows, chiefly weavers, scribblers, and shearers, and could have earned from nine to near thirty shillings a week, as several of the gentlemen, their employers, have declared if they would have kept to their work.¹³⁰

These claims have to be treated with the utmost care, not least because this description of the rioters ties in very neatly with the claim of drunkards being more interested in the price of booze than whether they can afford bare necessities like bread. However it is quite possible that the group of workers with a very small income played only a minor role in this and other

¹²⁷ *Journal*; 25th October 1766; pp. 1/3.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*; p. 1.

¹²⁹ *Journal*; 4th October 1766; p. 3.

¹³⁰ *Journal*; 25th October 1766; p. 3. See *ibid.*; p. 4: ‘the rioters will be found to consist not of the industrious poor with large families, but are made up of the idle [...]’. See *Rudé*; pp. 137-8: He identified ‘wage earners, craftsmen, and small tradesmen’ as taking a lead in Food Riots where they enforced ‘a rough and ready kind of natural justice by breaking windows, burning their enemies of the moment in effigy, or ‘pulling down’ their dwelling-houses, pubs, or mills.’

riots, whilst better paid workers did take a lead, simply because for such low paid workers losing a day's pay possibly meant the difference between just about getting by and starvation. It can also be assumed that in this region it was still possible to survive on weekly rates of 7-9s, whereas in other regions, e.g. Somerset where rioters were reported not to having eaten a 'morsel in three days'¹³¹ it seems likely that the rioters were also drawn from the group of the 'poorest' workers.

¹³¹ Journal; 4th October 1766; p. 4.

6. (Silly) explanations for price developments and rioting

Depicting and debating the development of prices in general and especially short term fluctuations is a complex and imprecise undertaking.¹³² However, some of these difficulties derive from, as well as hint towards, an important aspect of the development of prices: even in a situation like in autumn 1766 where the majority of the accounts printed in the *Journal* indicate soaring prices, the picture is diverse with prices fluctuating significantly, not only over time but also in different regions. In a report from Lancaster the price of cheese is not only described to have been 'reasonable', but even cheaper than 'it has been for several preceding years', whereas a report from London stated a price of wheat which had almost doubled¹³³ to what had been described in the *Date Book* as the 'general rate' in the year 1750.¹³⁴ Whereas this evidence can be described as fragmentary at best, the numerous accounts in the *Journal* from various regions as well as the occurrence of the riots themselves do show that food prices on many local markets were perceived to have greatly exceeded 'customary' (see below) rates in autumn 1766. To determine whether or not this was an anomaly of the general development of prices in the mid-1760s would require further research, which however is thankfully not necessary for the purpose of this pamphlet.

Far more interesting are a number of articles printed in the *Journal* issues debating causes of the price developments and the outbreak of rioting, though some of them primarily for reasons of entertainment. One of the latter examples was printed in the *Journal's* first October issue and it is a strange but most alarming tale written by 'a gentlemen in Paris' who exposes high prices to be the consequence of a devilish French plot. Although being utter nonsense, this report is well worth to be quoted at length:

¹³² See Rich/Wilson (a); pp. 374-8: They provide an introduction regarding various methodological challenges to any accounts of the development of prices. See Rich/Wilson (b); pp. 57-104 for a shedload of data regarding the European developments in agrarian output over c. 300 years (1500-1800). See Beckett (a); p. 54 for a very brief description of developments in agricultural output in England. See Rich/Wilson (a); pp. 391-407/464/470/478/482-3 for figures regarding trends in the development of prices. Although these provide invaluable information about long term developments, it has to be remembered that they are mathematical abstractions of massive amounts of raw data, which are themselves abstractions from various sources documenting highly complex social relations. On an individual level these figures do at best not necessarily reflect the experiences of people who were living through these periods and often they will contradict them.

¹³³ *Journal*; 4th October 1766; p. 1; 1st November 1766; p. 1.

¹³⁴ Field; p. 10.

‘I find this court is very intent of putting two plans into execution, calculated for depopulating and starving the industrious poor of Great Britain, on one hand, and on the other, for making a plentiful provisions for, and multiplying the inhabitants of this already populous country; to effect both which at once, it has been resolved, to grant the vast forests and wastes in this kingdom to such, foreigners as shall chose to cultivate them; and, at the same time to buy up corn enough in Great Britain for their support, which, they imagine, will create such a dearth there as must force the inhabitants to leave it; in consequence of which, they think numbers of them will chose to follow their native food to France, rather than take a long hazardous voyage to cultivate the inhospitable wilds of North America [...]. But [...] preventing the exportation of corn will be a great means of ruining this politic scheme [...].’¹³⁵

Luckily these most cunning and devious plans were foiled by the wise king and the Privy Council when they prohibited exports, thereby saving Britain once again from the vile French.

Less amusing but far more conclusive is an article from the final *Journal* issue in October. Its unknown author is trying to ‘discover the cause’ of the ‘general distress’ without ‘pretend[ing] to know the antidote.’ Although it has to be criticised, the article is striking as it shows an unusual level of reflection on the larger political and socioeconomic context of the events.¹³⁶

The article discusses and criticises the focus on the issue of exports as well as the ‘outcry [...] loudly raised against forestallers and regrators’. Although stating that the latter were a ‘very bad sort of people’, the author asks whether it is ‘possible, is it probable, that their influence can extend to articles of general consumption, uniformly through all the markets in the nation’, concluding that ‘the evil lies deeper than this; and hunting these persons out is at best, but a wild goose chase’. Regarding the issue of wheat exportation it is argued that the very fact of the exports demonstrates that England was ‘better provided than our neighbours’, whilst the ‘continuance of our complaints’ is taken as an indication ‘that the high price of the necessaries of life springs from a deeper source still.’¹³⁷

The author identifies instead two policies which triggered the ‘malady’, namely the rise of duties and taxes ‘which not only distress us at home, but

¹³⁵ *Journal*; 4th October 1766; p. 4.

¹³⁶ *Journal*; 25th October 1766; p. 3. See *ibid.*; p. 4: In the same *Journal* issue another article was printed with a very different outlook on the causes of the development of prices, which partly argued along Malthusian lines.

¹³⁷ *Journal* 25th October 1766; p. 3.

must ruin us at foreign markets'. These were allegedly caused by the level of the national debt which rocketed during the recent Seven Years' War, this 'dance in Germany' by 'which we were to conquer America'. However, the author identifies the 'deeper source' of the price developments in the transformations taking place in the agricultural sector. The critique focuses on great landowners, living in 'greater luxury and profusion' than ever before 'in so expensive a place as London'. Tenants' rents were said to have been constantly raised, resulting in small tenancies being replaced by 'as large farms as tenants can be found to engage in':

'By this means a quantity of land [...] on which by careful cultivation [...] many industrious families might subsist in a decent independence, is engrossed by a wholesale undertaker, under whom those individuals who would form such families, are forced to work as servants.'¹³⁸

The disappearance of small tenancies was also supposed to lead to the depopulation of rural areas, resulting in an increasing number of persons taking up trades outside the agricultural sector:

'[...] there springs up a greater number of artisans than is proportionate to the quantity of commodities to be wrought; and a greater number of traders than the quantity of goods to be transferred will maintain.'¹³⁹

The author assumed that both depopulation and urbanisation would have fatal consequences for the development of prices:

'The fewer hands any commodity is in, the more is the price of that commodity in their power. We have seen that land is held in large quantities and in few hands, which necessarily renders the produce of the land dear at the first hand; and the competition of the numbers which throng into every branch of manufactures, tends to reduce the price of labour, and lessen the profits of the articles wrought and dealt in; so that at the same time that the prices of goods are extravagantly raised, the artisan and trader can scarcely live.'¹⁴⁰

The article finishes with a gloomy outlook on the consequences of these developments:

'[...] property is seized by their creditors, and their business goes to their more successful neighbours. For as considerable

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

dealers can afford to sell for less profit than their poorer neighbours, they therefore undersell them until they break them, when they swallow up their trade. Thus does a monopoly of land necessarily lead to a monopoly of trade; and both to a general poverty, and a slavish dependence of the many on the few.¹⁴¹

This article is an astounding analysis of the 1766 events by one of its contemporaries. The author demonstrates for instance, although using the terminology of the time, in a few lines rather elegantly the popular conviction of ‘evil’ forestallers significantly influencing the general development of prices to be a myth. Rather than focusing on these trading practices of ‘evil’ individuals or short term economic policies the author examines changing production and property relations. However, by failing to explain the defining structure of English agrarian capitalism of ‘landlord – capitalist tenant – wage labourer’¹⁴² and ignoring the self-perpetuating development of the productive forces as a consequence of the primitive accumulation,¹⁴³ the author simply identifies the greed of the landlords to be at the root of the problems, failing to criticise the structure of social relations. The error of focussing on ‘evil’ forestallers is thereby repeated, although this time it is the landlords which are depicted to be ‘evil’. The author’s utopia, a society of semi-subsistent farmers living merrily on less greedy landowners’ lands is not only reactionary in the very sense of the word, but also flawed as it is contradicted by the predominant mode of production. It ignores that the post-feudal form of surplus extraction in form of tenants’ rents rather than peasants’ labour initiated a process whereby farmers either became capitalist tenants or landless labourers. Though the emerging new agrarian class structure was the result of persons’ interactions and therefore could have been changed, any viable critique would need to go beyond blaming the actions and behaviour of specific individuals and have to target these specific social relations. Despite these and other errors of the unknown author, such as the denial of the massive increase in productivity which accompanied the changes in agriculture,¹⁴⁴ the article is not only a most interesting example for the

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Brenner; p. 63.

¹⁴³ See Marx; pp. 659-707.

¹⁴⁴ See Brenner; pp. 31/61-75: ‘[...] most significant for English agricultural development was the particularly productive use of the agricultural surplus promoted by the special character of its rural class relations; in particular, [...] by an emergent landlord-tenant symbiosis which brought mutual co-operation in investment and improvement.’

continuities in the debates on agricultural transformations,¹⁴⁵ but reflects surprisingly far-sightedly a number of developments, such the massive increase of workers in textile industries, which were to result in atrocious living and working conditions, especially for nineteenth century framework knitters.¹⁴⁶

Aside from the reasons for price developments, the outbreak of the riots and the motivation of the rioters were debated in a number of *Journal* articles. The assumption that rioters acted ‘on account of the dearness of provisions’ was frequently challenged. A number of statements printed in the *Journal* state in some form or another that the riots occurred only ‘under pretence of distress from the high price of wheat, and other provisions’ whereas it is instead ‘well known, from their whole conduct, that [the rioters’] desire hath been more for liquor and plunder, than to redress grievances’.¹⁴⁷ However, judging ‘from their whole conduct’ the accusation of the rioters embarking on a plundering rampage can be dismissed with ample surety. Although expropriations were the most common feature of the riots, the rioters mostly expropriated basic foodstuffs whilst seizing other goods or money is rarely mentioned.

One of the *Journal* articles explains the riots by recounting the common tale of the mysterious stranger stirring up trouble:

‘The principal ringleader of all these riots is a stranger in this country; [...] he is said to have been bred a Lawyer and tells the people they have an authority to commit outrages of this kind, under pretence that the goods they take away have been Engrossed, and are forfeited by Law, which he pretends to justify by some fallacious Arguments drawn from the Kings-proclamation. This fellow is not yet taken.’¹⁴⁸

Despite the ludicrousness of the tale of a vile stranger roaming the Midlands and giving legal lectures, the actions of the rioters do indeed indicate that many thought their actions to be justified as actions correcting what was perceived to be immoral and not customary. Thompson described Food Riots as being:

[...] legitimized by the assumptions of an older moral economy, which taught the immorality of any unfair method of

¹⁴⁵ See Halhead: This mid-seventeenth century critique of agricultural transformation is not only a brilliant read but also shows that the vast majority of the arguments stressed by the unknown *Journal* author had been around for a very long time.

¹⁴⁶ See Yarnspinner; chapters 1.3./1.4.

¹⁴⁷ *Journal* 18th October 1766; p. 1; 25th October 1766; p. 3/4.

¹⁴⁸ *Journal* 18th October 1766; p. 3.

forcing up the price of provisions by profiteering upon the necessities of the people.¹⁴⁹

Reports like the one of the ‘old woman’ unimpressed by what she thought to be an ‘extraordinary’ price for butter or of those persons declaring themselves ‘regulators’ fit into this interpretation as do the reports of punitive direct action against ‘forestalling’ traders and producers. For Thompson this indicated that a ‘consumer-consciousness preceded other forms of political or industrial antagonism’ and that in these early days of the Industrial Revolutions ‘not wages, but the cost of bread, was the most sensitive indicator of popular discontent.’¹⁵⁰

Thompson refers to examples of broad opposition against repressive measures to support his argument of Food Riots being backed as ‘acts of justice’.¹⁵¹ Examples of this were also plentiful in the examined sample of Food Riots, for instance in the account of the Battle of Donington, when apparently a whole village rose up, or when in the aftermath of these events inhabitants of Derby rioted as prisoners arrived at the town’s goal, demonstrating a willingness to engage in practical acts of solidarity.

The rioters’ reported ‘conduct’ strongly indicates that their aims were the procurement of provisions by one way or another, to correct what was deemed not customary¹⁵² as well as punishing those perceived to cause, worsen or profit from the high prices. It appears unlikely that the majority of rioters did have a wider political or economic agenda. The riots of autumn 1766 therefore appear to have been ‘direct action on [a] particular grievance’ but they did not develop into one of ‘the great political risings of the ‘mob’’.¹⁵³

The Food Riot, at least in the form debated in this pamphlet, appears to have been a specific phenomenon of popular protest in the early Industrial Revolution. Both Thompson and Rudé state that it ‘did not long survive the arrival of the new industrial age’. Although it had been the ‘prevailing form’ of popular protest in the eighteenth and well into the nineteenth centuries,¹⁵⁴ and examples occurred well until the 1850s,¹⁵⁵ the Food Riot soon became a less frequent event:¹⁵⁶

¹⁴⁹ Thompson; pp. 67-8. See *ibid.*; p. 73: ‘[...] behind every such form of popular direct action some legitimizing notion of right is to be found.’

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*; p. 68.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*; p. 70.

¹⁵² See Rudé; p. 237: He calls this rather more dramatic ‘natural justice’.

¹⁵³ Thompson; pp. 66-7: He lists a number of examples where this did happen, e.g. the Gordon Riots of 1780 or the mobbing of the King in the London streets in 1795 and 1820.

¹⁵⁴ Rudé; p. 237; Thompson; p. 67.

¹⁵⁵ See Field; p. 491; Beckett (b); p. 289.

¹⁵⁶ Rudé; pp. 237-8.

‘With the growth of urban population and the dawn of the factory system at the end of the century, trade unions became more frequent and more stable, and direct conflicts between wage-earners and employers a more common feature of industrial and urban communities. From the 1780’s onwards strikes were beginning to eclipse food riots [...].’¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.; p. 238.

Conclusions

'In considering [this] form of 'mob' action we have come upon unsuspected complexities [...]'.¹⁵⁸

The Great Cheese Riot has indeed proven to be more than just an entertaining footnote in the turbulent history of social struggles in Nottingham. It was one in a series of riots, that grew out of similar grievances and in which recurring patterns of rioters' direct actions and their opponents' reactions were clearly identifiable, as well as patterns in the depiction of the rioters and their motivations. The Food Riots were an example of a specific form of 'collective bargaining by riot'¹⁵⁹ in a time of fundamental socioeconomic transformation, bargaining by riot which in these instances did not take place in the places of production, but on the market places of villages, towns and cities, and which not (yet) focussed on wages but on prices.

Examining the sample of riots, a number of recurring patterns in the rioters' direct action could be identified. Examples were found for the direct enforcement of price reductions, which had also featured prominently in Thompson's depiction of Food Riots, though it seems crucial not to overestimate the importance of such events, as they were only reported on a few occasions.¹⁶⁰ In the majority of examples where prices were directly or indirectly reduced, the bargaining by riot (or by the threat of riot) resulted in a compromise. For the rioters' opponents it usually meant a swift end to the disturbances with the status quo not being challenged but only some of its terms temporarily renegotiated. But the examined examples were also successes for the rioters who could satisfy their immediate grievance without suffering casualties and whilst avoiding (or reversing) arrests. Although the status quo prevailed when prices were renegotiated by direct action, in the examined cases all the rioters went home alive as well.

However, expropriations of goods were by far the most common feature of the sample of Food Riots, indicating that, on most occasions, rioters were not so much bothering with regulating prices to re-establish local customary terms of trade, but rather taking what they could, often demonstrating considerable levels of coordination and organisation in the course of their actions.

The perception of the price rises being caused by scarcity and caused or worsened by 'evil' forestallers and producers motivated the attacks on

¹⁵⁸ Thompson; p. 73.

¹⁵⁹ Hobsbawm (a); p. 59.

¹⁶⁰ See Thompson; p. 70: In other Food Riots this did happen in Nottingham as well, such as in 1795 when women 'went from one baker's shop to another, set their own price on the stock therein, and putting down the money, took it away.'

property as well as the attempts to stop the removal of provisions from the rioters' vicinities. The tendency to focus on individual 'evil' persons rather than social relations was shared by the unknown commentator of price developments and also influenced the measures of preventative appeasement taken at local and national levels.

With regards to the attempts to quell the riots, a number of aspects have been interesting; prominently the fact that not only the rioters but also their opponents organised themselves, the latter doing so repeatedly as there simply were only little or no official law enforcers around.

As to the measures of preventative appeasement, they appear to have had little or no actual effects aside from psychosocial ones, with officials on local as well as national levels desperately trying to demonstrate decisiveness in tackling grievances, whilst at the same time announcing harsh action against anyone who would not repay such wise leadership with patient endurance. What can be assumed to have a real effect was not only the repression of riots and the threat thereof, but the actions of local propertied persons to subsidise prices and thereby prevent the outbreak of further rioting. That probably did more than anything else to stop further riots, the quelling of which apparently immensely strained the surprisingly weak repressive resources.

That it was possible to prevent Food Riots by granting subsidised prices makes it quite clear that the 1766 Food Riots were no insurrectionist or revolutionary movement, but simply direct action caused by the particular grievance of soaring food prices. The majority of the rioters apparently did not strive for more than to satisfy that grievance and punish those perceived to be at its cause, i.e. producers demanding high prices, traders suspected of forestalling or exporting of provisions etc. Although the laws of the propertied were temporarily defied by the rioters' direct action, most poignant in the episode when charitable compromise was rejected by rioters who preferred straightforward expropriation, the principles of the property and production relations were never endangered in that autumn of 1766.

Although the identity of the rioters remains very vague, their depiction by their contemporaries was highly informative. That rioting women were not ignored but their actions highlighted in the *Journal*, something that first struck me as an anomaly, actually reflected the gender regime of the time as those commentating on the riots in the *Journal* were not only trying to incorporate the existence of women rioters in their worldview, but also using women's direct action to delegitimise the rioters. The depiction of women engaged in rioting is a subject matter that calls for more detailed research.

In hindsight, Nottingham's Great Cheese Riot appears as little more than a prelude for struggles which were to come, be it Luddism, the Reform Riots, Chartism, the General Strike or the Miners' Strike (to name just a few). Nevertheless it is an intriguing story which on closer inspection offers a lot of insight into the development of social relations in industrialising Britain.

The long tradition of Food Riots also needs to be remembered for its failures, such as rioters punishing 'evil' individuals rather than tackling the wider context of their grievances. However, this is no reason for People's Histreh to stop upholding the brilliant symbol of a loaf on a stick.

In the end it has to be admitted that the deliberations in this pamphlet regarding this highly complex form of popular protest are very much insufficient. The specific form of the Food Riots in 1766 was rooted in the changing social relations of the English¹⁶¹ society during the early days of the Industrial Revolution, which are not even roughly sketched, let alone sufficiently debated in this pamphlet. Referring to (i.e. pinching a catchy phrase from) a fascinating debate regarding economic development in late medieval and (very) early modern Europe, I have to admit that I merely described aspects of Food Riots, but my deliberations are in no way sufficient to explain them.¹⁶²

Furthermore, I was unable to find an answer to one of the most vexing questions on this subject matter: what type of cheese was rolled down Wheeler Gate?

¹⁶¹ Rudé; pp. 235-6: It has to be stated that the discussed form of the Food Riot was specific for a particular period in the development of modern bourgeois-capitalist societies and not specific to a certain area or country. Rudé refers to similarities of Food Riots in England and France.

¹⁶² Brenner; p. 36.

Appendix

I. Weights and Money

The following has been taken from Macdonald; pp. 174-5. Only those imperial measurements and coins in circulation are listed which are mentioned in this pamphlet.

	Imperial (lb.)	Metric (kg.)
1 ton	2240	1016.96
1 hundredweight (cwt.)	112	50.848
1 pound (lb.)	1	0.454

A bushel is 'a dry measure of volume containing 8 gallons', which would come up to something like a volume that can hold about 36 litres (if I have done my maths correctly/understood this odd measurement). Therefore a container that can hold 36 litres of water could hold one bushel of e.g. grain.

	shillings (s)	pennies (d)	halfpence ($\frac{1}{2}$ d)	farthings ($\frac{1}{4}$ d)
1 pound sterling (£1)	20	240	480	960

One Guinea was worth £1.1s.0d (one pound and one shilling or twenty-one shillings or 252 pence).

Prices were often written in formats such as e.g. £1.5s.8d (one pound, five shillings and 8 pence), or 6/3 (six shillings and three pence) or 4/- (four shillings).

II. Summary of the Food Riots

This is a summary of the examined sample of Food Riots. Please keep in mind that this table has been compiled on the basis of the information provided by the sources used. Therefore this is a summary of what was reported in the *Journal* and not of what actually happened.

The vast majority of Food Riots could only be dated indirectly, often based on phrases such as ‘Saturday last’. Five could not be dated at all; although three of those were reported in the issue dated 4th October and the other two in the issue dated 18th October and must therefore have occurred prior to these dates. Another riot, reported in the issue dated 25th October could only be dated approximately based on the description that it happened ‘last week’.

The counties are stated referring to modern county borders. Place names are stated in their modern forms.

Date(s)	County/Countries	Place(s)	price reductions (directly enforced)	price reductions (indirectly enforced)	(attempted) expropriations	(attempted) stopping of exports	attacks on property	clashes of rioters and (self-appointed) law enforcers	military deployed	fatal injuries/fatalities	arrests	(attempted) liberation of prisoners	Journal issue	Notes
09.-11. Sept	Oxfordshire	Oxford		✓	✓	✓							4 th Oct; p. 1.	-
24. Sept	Worcestershire	Worcester											4 th Oct; p. 4.	details of direct action unknown
26. Sept	West Midlands	Coventry	✓			✓							4 th Oct; p. 3.	same rioters as in Nuneaton
27. Sept	Warwickshire	Nuneaton		✓									4 th Oct; p. 3.	same rioters as in Coventry
27.-28. Sept	Norfolk	Norwich			✓		✓	✓					4 th Oct; p. 3.	-

28. Sept	Buckinghamshire	Great Barlow	✓		✓			✓			7-8		18 th Oct; p. 4.	-
29.-30. Sept	West Midlands	Birmingham		✓							✓	✓	11 th Oct; p. 4.	number of those arrested not stated
30. Sept-02. Oct	Leicestershire	Leicester		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		9	✓	4 th Oct; p. 3.	-
02.-05. Oct	Nottinghamshire	Nottingham			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	1	2-3	✓	11 th Oct; p. 3.	Great Cheese Riot
04. Oct	Leicestershire	Ashby-de-la-Zouch											11 th Oct; p. 3.	minor disturbance
04.-09. Oct	Derbyshire/Leicestershire	in/near Castle Donington			✓	✓	✓	✓			41-43		11 th Oct; p. 3.	Battle of Donington
07. Oct	Nottinghamshire	Barton			✓								11 th Oct; p. 3.	-
09. Oct	Wiltshire	Chippenham					✓	✓					18 th Oct; p. 3.	date estimated
13. Oct	Leicestershire	Leicester			✓	✓		✓					18 th Oct; p. 3.	-
23. Oct	North Yorkshire	Scarborough			✓								25 th Oct; p. 1.	-
before 18. Oct	Gloucestershire	Pitchcombe	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	1	13		25 th Oct; p. 3.	-
between 13 th and 19 th Oct	Northamptonshire	Desborough				✓							25 th Oct; p. 3.	-
N/A	Somerset	near Frome			✓		✓	✓		1			4 th Oct; p. 4.	'others cannot recover'
N/A	Wiltshire	Bradford-on-Avon			✓								4 th Oct; p. 4.	-
N/A	Wiltshire	Trowbridge			✓								4 th Oct; p. 4.	-
N/A	Warwickshire	N/A				✓		✓	✓	8			18 th Oct; p. 1.	-
N/A	Warwickshire	near/in Stratford-Upon-Avon	✓										18 th Oct; p. 1.	-

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In 1766 a riot broke out during Nottingham's Goose Fair. Large cheeses were snatched and rolled down Wheeler Gate and Peck Lane, apparently bowling over the mayor.

This pamphlet looks into the story behind this tale and places the Great Cheese Riot within the context of the wave of Food Riots which took place that autumn.

This Loaf On A Stick Press publication is a 'People's Histreh' pamphlet. We are a group of people with different political backgrounds, interested in what has been called 'history from below', 'grass-roots history' or 'social history'. As Nottingham and Nottinghamshire have such a long and turbulent history of socioeconomic transformation, disturbance and conflict, there is a lot to be unearthed. In fact, the most amazing, inspiring, shocking and outrageous stories leap out wherever one scratches the surface.

ISBN 978-0-9569139-1-3



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