

‘The Mystery of the Fires’: ‘Captain Swing’ as Incendiarist¹

Carl J. Griffin

The most suggestive – and most analysed – part of Hobsbawm and Rudé’s *Captain Swing* is not a chapter but an appendix: namely, appendix III. Their tabulation of Swing protests not only eloquently attests to the nature, diffusion and intensity of protest but also offers a more certain definition of what defined a Swing incident than the rather impressionistic regional treatments of the ‘movement’ offered in chapters five to eight. Seventeen protest types are delineated, from incendiarism (number one) to ‘sedition’ (number seventeen). Using this schema, Hobsbawm and Rudé suggest that the first protests were the sending of threatening letters at Mildenhall and Brandon (both Suffolk) and Chipping Camden (Gloucestershire) in February, March and April 1830 respectively. These events were followed by the destruction on 10 April of the mills used to employ the poor by the Orpington overseer and a political demonstration at Rye on 28 May. But these incidents are not discussed in the main text of *Captain Swing*. The first incident Hobsbawm and Rudé analyse occurred at Orpington (again) on 1 June when farmer Mosyer’s ricks were subjected to an incendiary fire.²

Mosyer’s fire marked the start of the first of Hobsbawm and Rudé’s five phases of Kentish protest in 1830, the ‘Sevenoaks fires’. As Kent was the county acknowledged to be the birthplace of Swing, the fifteen incendiary fires that occurred near Sevenoaks therefore represent Hobsbawm and Rudé’s *de facto* start of Swing. Yet, their text suggests a certain ambivalence as to the role incendiarism played in the events of 1830. It was a protest form, they claimed, that had ‘been practiced’ before, ‘even in this part of England’, but it was not the ‘characteristic form of unrest’ of either the period before Swing or Swing itself. Only after 1830

1 The quotation is taken from: Centre for Kentish Studies [hereafter CKS], Maidstone, U840 C250 10/3 Sir Robert Peel to Lord Camden, 22 October 1830.

2 E. Hobsbawm and G. Rudé, *Captain Swing* (London, 1969), p. 312.

did incendiarism become 'the characteristic form of rural unrest'.³ Whilst to many contemporary observers incendiary attacks on farmers' property were 'the most notable and memorable of "Swing" activities', to Hobsbawm and Rudé 'an element of mystery' surrounded incendiarism in Swing. 'Was it', they asked, 'an integral part, or was it a largely intrusive or alien element?' In attempting to answer these questions they concluded that arson played a different role from place to place, only in East Kent was it closely associated with machine-breaking. 'It lay at the fringe rather than at the core of the movement'.⁴

Hobsbawm and Rudé are not alone in being uncertain as to what role incendiarism played in Swing. John and Barbara Hammond were similarly equivocal. In analysing the Sevenoaks fires they posited that 'it was impossible to say' how 'far' the fires were 'connected with later events'.⁵ The relationship between incendiarism (and other 'covert' protest forms) and the various forms of, to use Hobsbawm's phrase, 'collective bargaining by riot',⁶ was also central to the so-called Wells-Charlesworth debate. In essence, the debate centred on whether 'overt' or 'covert' protest forms were the most important expression of plebeian discontent in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century English countryside.⁷ Subsequent systematic research has highlighted the elasticity of these concepts when applied to the archive. John Archer has shown that incendiary fires could act as the focus for open, collective protest, plebeian communities joyously gathering by the light of the flames and refusing to assist extinguishing them.⁸ Roger Wells has also shown that in the food crises of 1740, 1766, 1795 and (especially) 1800, incendiarism was used alongside food rioting to 'enforce' the 'moral economy'. Notwithstanding this dovetailing of protest forms, incendiarism remained, Wells asserted, 'largely the tactic of

3 Ibid., pp. 12, 98.

4 Ibid., pp. 200, 203.

5 B. Hammond and J. Hammond, *The Village Labourer 1760-1832* (London, 1911/1978), p. 179.

6 E. Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men* (London, 1968), pp. 5-22.

7 The two papers which started the debate were: R. Wells, 'The Development of the English Rural Proletariat and Social Protest, 1700-1850', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 6 (1979), 115-39; A. Charlesworth, 'The Development of the English Rural Proletariat and Social Protest, 1700-1850: A Comment', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 8 (1980), 101-11. These papers, and several responses also first published in the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, were later collected, with new contributions by Mick Reed and Roger Wells as: M. Reed and R. Wells (eds), *Class, Conflict and Protest in the English Countryside, 1700-1880* (London, 1990).

8 J. Archer, *By a Flash and a Scare: Incendiarism, Animal Maiming, and Poaching in East Anglia 1815-1870* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 160-61.

the individual', a response to 'deprivation', a way in which the poor could set 'things right'.⁹

As Steve Poole has recently noted, the debate foundered on unsatisfactory definitions of overt and covert. '[A]rson *might* be used against unpopular tithe collectors, rampaging landlords or the advocates of enclosure, and it *might* then enjoy a positive association with strikes, marches and riots and permit analysis of the relative timings of their use'.¹⁰ In short, there could be much that was furtive about collective protest, and much that was collective, even open, about incendiarism. Our understanding of the relationship between incendiarism and protest 'movements' is thus wracked with uncertainty. Indeed, Peter Jones in his survey of moral economy values in Swing has stated, 'the question of the relationship between arson and overt protest during Swing is complex, and requires a lengthy and ... nuanced treatment'.¹¹ Was it, as a protest practice, integral to Swing? Or was incendiarism merely incidental to the machine-breaking episodes, the wages demonstrations, and the levying of monies? This essay addresses these questions. The focus is the southern counties of Berkshire, Dorset, Hampshire, Kent, Surrey, Sussex and Somerset, though most of the material drawn upon relates to the four south-eastern counties. The essay is structured as follows. Firstly, it examines the use of incendiarism, as protest practice and as threat, by Swing groups, before, secondly, examining Hobsbawm and Rudé's contention that incendiarism was used as a 'softening up' tactic. Before concluding, the final section explores both the attitudes and responses of both Swing activists and the authorities to incendiarism. Before these analyses, it is necessary to consider what defined a Swing incident.

I Swing's repertoire of resistance

Swing's many historians are unanimous in agreeing that what united all the movement's manifestations was an attempt to improve the rural worker's standard of living. Swing might take multifarious forms – tithe demonstrations, incendiarism, anti-enclosure riots and so on – but these were all united by the universal desire to improve the field workers' lot. That the destruction of threshing machines later assumed the mantle of

- 9 R. Wells, 'Social Protest, Class, Conflict and Consciousness, in the English Countryside', in Reed and Wells (eds), *Class, Conflict and Protest*, pp. 158, 164, 170, 173.
- 10 S. Poole, '"A lasting and salutary warning": Incendiarism, Rural Order and England's Last Scene of Crime Execution', *Rural History* 19 (2008), 164.
- 11 P. Jones, 'Swing, Speenhamland and Rural Social Relations: the 'Moral Economy' of the English Crowd in the Nineteenth Century', *Social History* 32 (2007), 271, note 1.

Swing's 'iconic' form is therefore immaterial. In much of Dorset, north west Kent, Somerset, east Sussex, and Surrey, threshing machine-breaking was not even resorted to. Instead, in such locales protests – for protests there were in all these counties – took different forms.

So, could incendiarism be a Swing incident? Elsewhere I have suggested, using social movement theory, that to be a Swing protest, as opposed to an isolated incident separate from any wider movement, the act had to occur in relation to other protest acts. Such a perspective tallies with the understanding deployed by Hobsbawm and Rudé.¹² In part, the number of incendiary fires reported to have occurred in 1830 compared to previous years is therefore telling. Notwithstanding evidential concerns surrounding the reporting of fires,¹³ for Hampshire, Kent, Surrey, and Sussex, I have identified 40, 100, 37 and 58 fires respectively for 1830. Of which 38 in Hampshire, 88 (Kent), 35 (Surrey) and 55 (Sussex) occurred in the final five months of the year. This compares to one, two, five and zero fires in 1828, and seven, nine, zero and seven fires respectively in 1829.¹⁴ There can be little doubt then that the level of incendiarism is not only a useful proxy for social tensions but also that it mirrors the resort to forms of collective protest. Or rather, perhaps, that there is a positive correlation between the rise in incendiarism and in less equivocal forms of protest.

To be a movement episode the incident has to be the protest of (an) activist(s) who not only has/have the same broad goal(s) but also recognise that they share the same objectives.¹⁵ Therefore an act of machine-breaking in one parish might inspire a wages gathering in a neighbouring parish, which in turn might inspire an individual elsewhere to fire an overseer's stacks. Thus the difference between any given attack during the heightened atmosphere of late 1830 and, say, two years previously is that the author of the 1830 fire may at least in part be inspired by other activists. The example of a spate of incendiary fires in Bridport is telling. At least 13 incendiary fires occurred in the west Dorset town between the winter of 1829–1830 and early November 1830.¹⁶ By

12 C. Griffin, 'Swing, Swing Redivivus, or Something After Swing? On the Death Throes of a Protest Movement, December 1830 – December 1833', *International Review of Social History* 54 (2009), 464–65; Hobsbawm and Rudé, *Captain Swing*, esp. 195–220.

13 For these problems see C. Griffin, 'Knowable geographies? The reporting of incendiarism in the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century English provincial press', *Journal of Historical Geography* 32 (2006), 38–56.

14 For a more detailed analysis – and an explanation of method – of these fires see C. Griffin, *The Rural War: Captain Swing and the Politics of Rural Protest* (forthcoming).

15 Griffin, 'Swing, Swing Redivivus, or Something After Swing?', *passim*.

16 *Sherborne Journal*, 4 March 1830, 13 May 1830; *Dorset County Chronicle*, 20 May, 3 and 10 June 1830; *Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette*, 20 May 1830; *Southampton Mercury*, 20 August 1830; *Western Flying Post*, 15 November 1830.

the time of the seventh fire on 16 May, the *Dorset County Chronicle* noted that the 'large rewards' offered by the Fire Office had proved ineffectual in stopping what was now a 'demonic rage for incendiarism, which prevails amongst some miscreants in this town'.¹⁷ One case of incendiarism could, potentially then, encourage others to vent their frustrations.

Some commentators clearly believed this to be true. Incendiarism, fanned by the flames of Swing's open protests, spread like a contagion. When farmer Westmore's barns and stacks were fired at Gosport on the night of 11 November in an act that predated the spread of collective protests in Hampshire by a week, one reporter noted that 'incendiarism is spreading'.¹⁸ It was this fear of contagion that was particularly potent in the public mind in those locales beyond Swing's initial protest centres, not least because of the frequent reports in the southern provincial press of the fires and machine-breaking in Kent. As the *Southampton Mercury* put it in early October, Kent was 'in a very agitated state by an organized system of stack-burning and machine breaking'.¹⁹ Through such reports incendiarism became associated in the public mind with rebellion, with open revolt. Thus when on 5 November the barn of farmer Butt of Thurlbear, near Taunton, was fired, connections were quickly made to the Kent protests. According to the *Western Flying Post*:

The conflagrations in Kent had produced such an excitement on the public mind, that a report very currently prevailed of the Somersetshire men being about to follow the example, by destroying a threshing machine, which Mr. Butt, the occupier of the farm, had in his possession.

The paper continued, 'We are happy to contradict this report'. The fire was 'an accident caused by a man having imprudently left a pipe near some combustible matter which spread to the teasals'. The *Dorset County Chronicle* and *Sherborne Journal* – the *Post*'s fiercely competitive Sherborne-based rival – denied this series of events. The fire had been deliberately set. 'Great alarm is felt lest the example of Kent should be followed here'. Presumably also with the recent events at nearby Kenn in mind, the hope was that the fire was the product of a 'deluded individual' rather than that of 'a combination'.²⁰ When an early Wiltshire Swing fire broke out on the Knook farm of Mr. White on 15 November, the *Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette* made this connection explicit. '[P]eople' needed to

17 *Dorset County Chronicle*, 20 May 1830.

18 *Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette*, 18 November 1830.

19 *Southampton Mercury*, 9 October 1830.

20 *Dorset County Chronicle*, 11 November 1830; *Sherborne Journal*, 11 November 1830; *Western Flying Post*, 15 November 1830.

be reminded that at the last Somerset Assizes three men were executed and two men transported for incendiarism. The paper also reminded its readers that John Rowley, one of the executed men, had implored of those gathered at the gallows 'I hope others will take warning by us'.²¹

II Incendiarism as 'overt' tactic

Much of the uncertainty surrounding the connection between incendiarism and the open, collective protests of late 1830 relate not to whether it was possible for incendiarism to be part of Swing's repertoire of resistance but rather what the link was, if any, between covert fire-setting and the 'mobbings'. Some rulers of rural England, as will be shown in the final section, believed there was no connection, either in terms of personnel or in terms of motive. Sir Edward Knatchbull, Tory knight of the shire, east Kent landowner and chairman of the East Kent Quarter Sessions, was of this mind. When sentencing the machine-breakers of Elham at the first Swing trial he asserted that 'it was a species of consolation, that the great number, and a great number there were, Heaven knew, who had engaged in the breaking of machines, felt the same abhorrence as [himself] of the burnings'.²² Yet of these men – and others in his domain – this was palpably untrue. The primary motive of the Elham gang was to stop the use of threshing machines. This had been twice effected through incendiarism, once at Elham in 1817 and once in neighbouring Lyminge in 1829. The first fire is particularly instructive. 'For some time previous to the fire ... [the] country people in the neighbourhood had shown a great dislike to the use of the threshing machine which had been lately introduced to the parish'. Farmer Fowler had signalled his intention of hiring the machine to thresh some oats and on the morning of 11 October 1817 his oat barn was set on fire and destroyed. Open threats combined with covert terror in setting an important local precedent.²³

This precedent was also followed directly during the early stages of Swing. After the arrest of several machine-breakers on 27 September and the voluntary surrender on 2 October of a further 50 Elham machine-breakers, the tactics of the gang necessarily had to change.²⁴ On

21 *Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette*, 18 November 1830.

22 *Cobbett's Political Register*, 30 November 1830.

23 *The Times*, 18 March 1819; *Kentish Gazette*, 29 May; *Kent & Essex Mercury*, 9 June 1829.

24 CKS, U951 C177/18 and 13 Rev. Price, Lyminge, to Knatchbull, 27 September, and, List of persons entered into recognizances (n.d. but 2 October); CKS, U951 C14/9, Mary Tylden to Knatchbull, 1 November 1830.

5 October Revd Price's Lyminge farm buildings were set on fire, Price being targeted due to his magisterial involvement in the arrests.²⁵ On the following day, the very first 'Swing' letters were received by post by two individuals near Dover. Both threatened incendiary attacks. Two days later farmer Pepper of Hougham and Dover also received a 'Swing' letter warning that her threshing machine was to be destroyed and as such she should remove it to an adjoining field immediately. She complied, and that evening the machine was duly broken and set on fire. A reporter for the *Times* was under no illusions as to who the incendiarists were. Now that nearly all the threshing machines had been destroyed or put out of use, the 'labourers have begun to fire [the] barns and stacks of those who retain their machines'.²⁶ Here the culture of fire-setting, pseudonymous threats, and open, collective protest were intertwined and inseparable in the gang's strategy. Moreover, one of Knatchbull's correspondents in November 1830 – reporting that three fires had occurred the previous night – claimed that the protestors 'assemble by [the] light of the fires', creating the likelihood of 'insurrection by example'.²⁷

The next two Swing centres also deployed incendiarism (and incendiary threats) with machine-breaking and attempts to increase wages. On the night before the trial of the Elham machine-breakers Borden overseer Knight had his farm set on fire. A few days later a piece of chilling graffiti was scrawled on a nearby wall: 'Down with machines. Death to informers'.²⁸ More telling and more important than the graffiti was the fact that the next evening a group of 50 men, many with blackened faces, marched from nearby Newington to Hartlip where they destroyed a threshing machine. Their actions were the result of a concerted plan. Some of the party had been drinking with the local assistant overseer and two farmers at 'one of these abominable nuisances, a new Beershop' in an attempt to divert them until the machine had been destroyed.²⁹

25 CKS, U951 C177/31 Deposition of John Wakefield, bailiff, n.d. (probably 6 October); The National Archives, London [hereafter TNA], HO 52/8, ff. 276–77, 281–82 Knatchbull, Mersham, to Peel, 6 October 1830 (twice). For a full treatment of the events surrounding Price's fire, see C. Griffin, 'Policy on the Hoof: Sir Robert Peel, Sir Edward Knatchbull and the Trial of the Elham Machine Breakers, 1830', *Rural History* 15 (2004), 1–22.

26 *Kentish Gazette*, 8 and 15 October 1830; *The Times*, 9 and 10 October 1830.

27 CKS, U951 C14/9 Mary Tylden to Knatchbull, 1 November 1830.

28 *Maidstone Journal*, 26 October 1830; TNA, HO 52/8, ff. 300–1 Rev. Poore, Murston - Peel, 23 October 1830; *The Times*, 30 October 1830; *Maidstone Gazette*, 9 November 1830.

29 TNA, HO 52/8, ff. 300–1 Rev. Poore, Murston, to Peel, 23 October 1830; CKS, U951 C177/35 Poore to Knatchbull, 24 October 1830.

At Ash-next-Sandwich overseer Becker had his stacks set on fire on the same night as Revd Price's fire, rockets supposedly being fired in a line between Ash and Lyminge as some form of signal. This fire predated machine-breaking at Ash by twenty days, in the meantime the parish surveyor also had his stacks set on fire. The following night he was again visited, this time by a 'gang of men' who broke open the stable door and turned 14–15 horses into the road. The men were disturbed though by two persons who had been placed on watch, *The Times* reported, conjecturing that they were attempting to set fire to the farm buildings.³⁰ On the 25th, upon the machine-breakers being admonished for going about the parish in armed gangs, they sarcastically responded that 'they could not sleep quietly in their beds for fear of the fires' and as such 'were going to break all the threshing machines ... then there would be no more fires'. In conversation, two of the machine-breakers also admitted that they had been machine-breaking the previous day at Sandwich and had also been at a fire on a farmer's premises in the same town who had refused to 'lay down his machine'. Subsequently one of the machine-breakers was also charged with firing Becker's stacks.³¹

These early Swing fires were not simply coincident with machine-breaking, they were integral to the achieving of the machine-breakers' goals. So too was incendiarism a vital component of campaigns for higher wages and more generous poor relief payments. The two poles of Swing protests in the Weald were typical. At Brede on the night of the expulsion of assistant overseer Abell, a farmhouse was destroyed by an incendiary fire in the parish. At the beginning of November in nearby Battle, the parish poor struck work, demanding that all men should be paid at least 12/- a week. A few days later, overseer Emary and assistant overseer Lincer received letters – the latter signed 'Swing' – threatening that if the labourers' demands were not made good their premises would be fired. The threats were carried out on the night of 3 November when Emary's farm was set on fire. On the following day Lincer quit Battle, farmer Quaife had one of his barns set on fire at 4pm, six hours later farmer Farncomb's stacks were set alight at nearby Icklesham, and at 11pm a mass gathering at the George Inn prompted the authorities to send an express to Hastings for military assistance. Nothing transpired, but threats were openly made that the town would be burnt down that night.

30 TNA, HO 52/8, fff. 216–18 Camden, Canterbury, 22 October, 359–60 Rev. Gleig, Ash, 25 October, to Peel; *The Times*, 23 and 27 October 1830; *Kentish Gazette*, 26 October 1830; *Kent Herald*, 28 October 1830.

31 *The Times*, 27 October 1830; *Kentish Gazette*, 29 October 1830; CKS, U951 C177/36 George Gipps, to Knatchbull, 24 October; TNA, HO 52/8, ff. 359–60 Revd Gleig, Ash, to Peel, 25 October 1830.

Although this did not occur, farmer Watts' farm was set on fire.³² In both places incendiarism was integral to sustaining *pressure*; the lone protestor's tool of revenge.

In parts of Hampshire the connection between incendiarism and 'mobbing' was even more explicit. On 22 November a group of machine-breakers who had been active that day in the parishes of the Test Valley to the north of Romsey, on returning to East Tytherley that night proceeded to 'take down' the tollhouses on the Broughton and Romsey Turnpike at East Dean and Tytherley. This can only have been partially successful for the following night they were again visited. This time the families were 'dragged out' and the buildings set on fire.³³ Similarly, a group initially emboldened at Leckford to demand an increase of wages proceeded to Stockbridge to levy money. At the house of vicar Hutton their demand for a reduction in tithes and two sovereigns was refused. Instead, the group chanced their luck with Revd Cutler, resolving to demand 25 sovereigns from the clergyman: one for every year he had been 'connected with the parish' and four as 'remuneration for their day's work'. As he resided at some distance from the town, the group compelled the post agent to send an express to the clergyman. If he refused, the agent was warned, Cutler would have his stacks and property set on fire. As the *Hampshire Chronicle* relayed, 'their menaces were too successful'.³⁴

Occasionally threats were carried out instantaneously. In the early hours of Sunday 21 November a group, reportedly 200 strong, assembled at Shoddesden in the parish of Kimpton. After levying money and victuals of farmer Barnes his threshing machine was destroyed and his barn fired. A cottage on his farm, occupied by an 'old woman' who was given 20 minutes to get dressed and collect her effects, was also fired. This tactic of combining assembly with incendiarism (and threats of incendiarism) was also deployed later that day by another 'mob' at Fyfield where threats were made to burn Mr. Bishop and other individuals'

32 TNA, HO 52/10, ff. 359-60, 361-62, 363-64, 364-66, Barton, Battle, 4 and 5 November and Ticknall, Battle, Thomas Quaife, Battle both 5 November, to Peel; *The Times*, 8 November 1830.

33 *Dorset County Chronicle*, 25 November 1830; *Berkshire Chronicle*, 27 November 1830; *Hampshire Advertiser*, 27 November 1830; *Southampton Mercury*, 27 November 1830; *Portsmouth, Portsea and Gosport Herald*, 28 November 1830; *Hampshire Telegraph*, 29 November 1830; *The Times*, 29 December 1830; TNA, HO 52/7, ff. 65-67, 93-94 Mr. W. Hay, Romsey to Mr Lockhart, nr Abingdon, 23 November, and, Isaac Goldsmith, Dulwich Hill House, Camberwell to Phillips, 24 November 1830-).

34 *Hampshire Chronicle*, 29 November 1830; *The Times*, 31 December 1830; TNA, HO 130/1 Calendar of the Winchester Special Commission case numbers 216 and 217 (Leckford).

property, and at Weyhill where it was declared they intended to burn the booths of the famous sheep fair.³⁵

Elsewhere in Hampshire, as at Battle, open, collective protests during the day were often followed by incendiary fires at night. On 19 November alone, fires at Barton Stacey and St. Mary Bourne followed demonstrations in the day, and in the case of a Whitchurch fire only two days after a wages protest in that parish. On the 20th an assemblage at Andover was followed by the near demolition of Tasker's Iron Foundry at Upper Clatford. Only when darkness descended did the men quit Tasker's and return to Andover. During the night some men 'loitered' in the streets of Andover, whilst the corn barn of South Park Farm in Andover was set on fire causing some £2,000 of damage. The very number of such occasions suggests the improbability that these were coincidences.³⁶ An examination of the Barton Stacey fire shows they were not. On the evening of the 19th a small group of men visited the Newton Stacey farm of William Courtney. Claiming that there were 1,600 other men behind them and that the farmer should 'look over at the hills at Barton Stacey for a light' – a blatant threat of incendiarism – they managed to levy fifteen shillings as well as bread, cheese and beer from Courtney. Less than two and a half hours later the Barton Stacey farm of Sir Henry Wright Wilson Bt. was ablaze.³⁷

This tactic was even deployed in the penultimate machine-breaking episode in Kent in 1830. On catching farmer Hannam of Alland Grange and his specially assembled force of 30 special constables off-guard, the men quickly started destroying one threshing machine. A *mêlée* ensued and blows were exchanged, Hannam threatening to shoot the men if they persisted. This threat was met by another threat: if Hannam fired they would fire his stacks. Fearlessly, the gang continued their destruction. A second machine, the wheels of a chaff cutter, a bean mill, malt mill, and a wheat mill were all dispatched. They then demanded the keys to a barn, again threatening to set fire to the premises if resisted. Instead, they broke

35 TNA, HO 52/7, ff. 46–47 Sir L. Curteis Cart, Ramridge, nr Andover to Peel, 21 November 1830; *Hampshire Advertiser*, 27 November 1830; TNA, HO 130/1 Calendar of the Winchester Special Commission case numbers 98 and 154 (Kimpton).

36 TNA, HO 52/7, ff. 42–43 Andover Bench, 20 November to Peel; *Hampshire Advertiser*, 20 and 27 November 1830; *Portsmouth, Portsea and Gosport Herald*, 21 November 1830; *Hampshire Chronicle*, 22 and 29 November 1830; *The Times*, 25 November, 23 and 24 December 1830; TNA, HO 130/1 Calendar of the Winchester Special Commission case numbers 263–265 (Barton Stacey).

37 *Hampshire Advertiser*, 20 November 1830; *Hampshire Chronicle*, 22 November 1830; *The Times*, 23 November, 23 and 31 December 1830; Hampshire County Record Office, Winchester, 92M95/F2/9/1 Memorandum regarding prisoners whose cases have not been fully settled, December 1830.

the down the barn doors to find another two threshing machines. These were soon in pieces, the men victoriously giving three cheers before departing across the fields.³⁸

Even farmers used the threat of fire. On 20 November at Nether Wallop in west Hampshire the 'agricultural population' rose and successfully demanded from the farmers an increase in their wages from eight to ten shillings a week. In turn the farmers went to demand an immediate 30 per cent reduction in their tithes, threatening tithe holder James Blunt that his house would be set on fire if they were refused.³⁹

Another tactic, initially deployed in East Kent but more frequently deployed in Swing's fringe, was the openly setting on fire of threshing machines.⁴⁰ On 1 December on the Somerset-Dorset border 'a body of rioters' assembled at Henstridge and set fire to Mr. Grey's threshing machine. They then physically destroyed Mr. Davis' machine at Yenston, before proceeding to Tomer where a further two threshing machines were set on fire.⁴¹ Similarly, a group of threshing machine and hay-making machine-breakers active at Baverstone, Newnton and Chavenage on the Wiltshire-Gloucestershire border also set one threshing machine on fire near Tetbury.⁴²

III Incendiarism as a 'softening-up' tactic?

As Hobsbawm and Rudé noted, incendiarism heralded the start of open, collective protests in all counties west of East Sussex. Writing about Wiltshire, they claim that 'there had been the usual preparatory "softening-up" by threatening letters and incendiary fires'.⁴³ But to what extent did these fires actually directly relate to other forms of movement activity? Were they simply coincident precursors? What evidence do we

38 TNA, HO 52/8, ff. 33-34, 97-99 John Boys, clerk to Margate Bench to Maule, 23 November; R. Cobb Esq, Solicitor, Margate to Melbourne, enclosing deposition of William Liley, waggoner, both 28 November. TNA, TS 11/943 Prosecution Briefs for the King vs. George Moore, James Dunk, James Pointer and George Hollands, Kent Winter Assizes 1830; Evidence of George Hannam Esq, John Forster, James Pointer, and George Hollands.

39 TNA HO 52/7, ff.46-47 Sir L. Curteis Cart, Ramridge, nr Andover to Peel, 21 November; *Southampton Mercury*, 27 November 1830; *Hampshire Chronicle*, 29 November 1830.

40 The first recorded example of this tactic during the autumn and winter of 1830 occurred at Hougham near Dover. Widow Pepper after receiving one of the first 'Swing' letters removed, as instructed, her threshing machine to an adjoining field where it was subsequently broken and then set on fire. *Kentish Gazette*, 15 October 1830.

41 *Western Flying Post*, 6 December 1830.

42 *Keene's Bath Journal*, 6 December 1830.

43 Hobsbawm and Rudé, *Captain Swing*, p. 122.

have of incendiarism being used to 'soften-up' farmers and the rulers of rural England?

The first incendiary fire in West Sussex after the spread of protests into neighbouring East Sussex occurred at Coldwaltham on the night of 12 November. The next day the first 'rising' to occur in West Sussex happened at Kirdford, some 40 miles distant from Mayfield, the previous most westerly parish to rise. But this is crude geography, for there was no discernible connection between the events at Coldwaltham and twenty mile distant Kirdford.⁴⁴ In Hampshire a flurry of incendiary letters were received at Gosport around the 11 November – at least one of which was signed 'Swing' – 'asking' the farmers to remove their threshing machines. The threats were carried out on the aforementioned farmer Westmore on the 11th. The subject and pseudonym of the letters were obviously a direct reference to the events in Kent, the Hampshire press hoping that the fire was not 'a prelude to the outrages which have for some time disgraced several neighbouring counties'.⁴⁵ These fears were well-founded but there was no connection between this localised conflagration and the sustained start of protests around Havant on 18 November. Nor was there any obvious connection between a fire at Longparish on 13 November and the start of open protests in that area on 18 November.⁴⁶ That no clear connection existed suggests that the incendiarists, notwithstanding that they might have been inspired by events to the east, or were potentially attempting to provoke others into collective action, were not part of any coordinated action to 'soften up' farmers as a prelude to the 'real' protests.

Nor was there any concurrence between 'early' incendiarism and open protests in Berkshire. As Gash originally demonstrated, and Hobsbawm and Rudé later confirmed, most of the early fires in that county occurred in the heavily forested and wooded eastern areas which largely remained free from collective protests that winter.⁴⁷ Evaluating evidence from neighbouring Wiltshire is less straightforward. Hobsbawm and Rudé note that 'Swing' letters were received at Codford St. Peter and Horton on or about 15 November, whilst fires occurred at Knook on the 15th, Collingbourne and Ludgershall on the 18th, Oare on the 19th and

44 TNA, Ho 52/8, ff. 621–22 Earl of Egremont, Petworth to Peel, 13 November 1830; West Sussex County Record Office QR/Q 51 Indictment of John Champion and Thomas Champion, labourers, West Sussex Epiphany Sessions 1831.

45 *Southampton Mercury*, 13 November 1830; *Hampshire Chronicle*, 15 November 1830; *The Times*, 16 November 1830; *Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette*, 18 November 1830; *London Gazette*, 23 November 1830.

46 *Hampshire Chronicle*, 22 November 1830.

47 N. Gash, *The Rural Unrest in England in 1830 with Special Reference to Berkshire* unpublished BLitt thesis, University of Oxford (1934), pp. 56–58; Hobsbawm and Rudé, *Captain Swing*, p. 134 and appendix 3.

Stanton St. Bernard on the 20th. Threshing machine-breaking started on the 21st at All Cannings and Hippenscombe.⁴⁸ Mapping these early Wiltshire protests demonstrates an extraordinary overlap between covert protests – excluding the fires to the south of Wilton – and machine-breaking. The machine-breaking on the Wiltshire-Hampshire border might have in part been inspired by the aforementioned events around Andover on the previous two days but the fires predated these Hampshire protests. The exact link here will be forever obscure, but the timing and geography are – if nothing else – highly suggestive of a connection.

In the counties of Berkshire, Hampshire and Wiltshire, where Swing as a movement flared with extraordinary intensity but was very short-lived, there was little opportunity beyond the opening skirmishes to 'soften up' farmers in any preconceived way. Instead, Swing was established both as 'contagion' – at Havant and Petersfield in Hampshire, at Hippenscombe in Wiltshire – and as indigent but coincident poles of protest – Thatcham in Berkshire, Whitchurch and the Dever Valley in Hampshire, and All Cannings in Wiltshire. Once these initial protests occurred, protests diffused in a matter of days to cover most of their respective counties. There was, in short, not enough time to develop complex *plans* that deployed multiple protest forms.

Most fires that occurred were either attempts to consolidate the message (or even gains) from other forms of protest, as at Barton Stacey and Andover, or were the work of opportunist individuals. Indeed, many of the 'protest' forms deployed by Swing's multifarious activists disavowed the attainment of public and symbolic goals and instead, influenced and emboldened by the urgency and confidence of the surrounding overt actions, sought to right personal wrongs. When on 9 November 1830 Elizabeth Studdam, a young single-woman, fired a hay stack in the grounds of the poor house at Birchington in the Isle of Thanet, this was in revenge for *her* treatment at the hands of the parish poor law officials.⁴⁹ The atmosphere engendered by Swing not only emboldened some individuals to give a more public life to specific grudges but also to make more generic public statements. Brothers Henry and William Packman were found guilty of firing the farm of William Wraight at Hernhill on 20 November but their initial plan was to fire a faggot stack of Mr. Paven. Upon leaving the public house that Saturday night, the would-be incendiaries changed their minds. They would now fire Wraight's

48 Ibid., pp. 122–23 and appendix 3.

49 TNA, TS 11/943 Prosecution Brief prepared by the Treasury Solicitor in the case of the King vs. Elizabeth Studdam for arson, Kent Winter Assizes 1830.

premises 'as it would not be so much trouble'.⁵⁰ Yet notwithstanding these very personal motivations, their actions, and those of many other fire raisers, may nevertheless have been toasted in public houses and beershops throughout southern England.

IV Incendiarism in the Public Mind

Knatchbull's belief that the Elham machine-breakers viewed incendiarism with the same 'horror' that the rulers of rural England did might have betrayed a profound misreading of his local charges, but how true was it of other Swing activists? Such an understanding is hard to directly assess. The resort to open incendiary threats suggests a willingness – at least on behalf of some Swing groups – to embrace fire raising. Further evidence is derived from support for incendiarism from Swing activists in mobile groups. Robert Price, a 48 year-old politically-active Maidstone shoe maker who led a group active in the area south of the Kent county town, was one such individual. In a parley with Mrs. Stacey of Stockbury, Price launched into a tirade about the state of the poor, to which Stacey suggested they wait for the new Parliament to see what the King did, the expectation being that he was going to 'take off five millions in taxes'. Price exploded: 'King, we have no King ... Five millions of heads will be taken off before that is done'. The 'burnings' were therefore:

[N]ecessary to bring people to their senses, it is your dandy Houses and your dandy habits and your sinecure places that have brought the Country to this state ... you are all too high and must come down from the Head. If you go to Church you only go to look at the ... fashions ... Now we have righted this Parish we are going thro' every other Village and Parish to do the same thing.⁵¹

Further evidence is provided by the refusal of plebeian parishioners to help extinguish incendiary fires. A Sevenoaks correspondent to the *Rochester Gazette* reported in relation to the wave of fires in the vicinity:

The expressions of the mob are dreadful: they said 'Damn it, let it burn, I only wish it was a house: We can warm ourselves now: We only want some potatoes, there is a nice fire to cook them by!'

50 TNA, TS 11/943 Prosecution brief prepared by the Treasury Solicitor in the case of the King vs. Henry and William Packman for Arson, Kent Winter Assizes 1830.

51 CKS, Q/SBw/124/7,8 and 9 Defence of Robert Price, Depositions of Daniel Green, farmer, and Charlotte Stacey, wife of Courtney Stacey, all 19 November; CKS, U951 C14/6 Poore, Murston, to Knatchbull, 29 October 1830.

At a fire on Mrs. Minet's farm in early September the pipes of the attendant fire engines were so badly cut that they were rendered useless, pails having to be passed along a half-mile human chain.⁵² 'The most disgusting feature', wrote one Kentish correspondent, 'is to see the sangfroid with which the lower orders speak of their 'Bonfires' and still more the exultation evinced by the Mob present at them'.⁵³

Elsewhere in Kent other labouring communities made similarly defiant displays at farmyard fires. Lord Darnley's farm at Cobham was fired on 24 October. Some 200 labourers gathered but, in the words of the *Maidstone Journal*, showed 'total apathy'. A fire on Lord Sondes' Selling farm attracted the assistance of the dredgers from nearby Faversham but not the local labourers who 'just looked on'. A week later a similar fate befell farmer Catt's farm in neighbouring Chartham. When Mr. Dawson's Stockbury farm was set ablaze on 24 October a large number of labourers flocked to the scene but very few helped. Those who simply watched the flames not only 'scoffed' at those who did help but also later proceeded through the village carrying a black flag. As Archer has shown in his study of East Anglian arson, the actual conflagration at incendiary fires offered a focus for displays of open dissent.⁵⁴

Such hard heartedness was not always – or even usually – the case. Many fires during late 1830 attracted large numbers of local labourers and artisans who were potentially prepared to risk their own safety to save the property of the farmer. The example of a fire on the Fareham farmer Merrett's premises on 17 November is instructive. The 'inhabitants' of Fareham were soon on the spot of the fire and helped confine the flames to a hay stack. Within days not only had a massive £500 reward for information leading to a successful prosecution been offered, but further subscriptions were raised to 'distribute' money to those who helped put out the fire and to pay £100 to any 'labourer' over the next twelve months who detected an incendiary. Such payments were an attempt to buy loyalty, to perform community solidarity in the face of the coming storm from Kent and Sussex.⁵⁵

52 TNA, HO 52/8, ff. 259–60, 313 and Managing Director of the County Fire Office, Regent Street, 31 August, and, Mr. Manning, New Bank Buildings, 3 September, to Peel; *Rochester Gazette*, 14 and 21 September 1830.

53 TNA, HO 52/8, ff. 203–5 B. Sandford, Farningham and Dartford to John Irving M.P., 8 October 1830.

54 TNA, HO 52/8, ff. 361–62, 365–66 Post Office Deputy Sharp, Faversham, to Sir Francis Freeling, General Post Office, 26 October, and Rev. Poore, Murston to Peel, 25 October; *Kent Herald*, 28 October 1830; *The Times*, 30 October 1830; *Maidstone Journal*, 26 October and 9 November; Revd Poore, Murston to Peel, 25 October 1830; *Kentish Gazette*, 5 November 1830.

55 *Hampshire Advertiser*, 20 November 1830; *Portsmouth, Portsea and Gosport Herald*, 21 November 1830.

Notwithstanding the offer of a huge reward – invariably a move that was more symbolic than effective – the strategy adopted at Fareham also intimated that ‘strangers’ rather than local labourers were the authors of the fires. This relationship between loyal local labourers and strange shadowy fire setters was also tested at Whitelackington in Somerset. On the evening of Sunday 12 December the dairy house of Messrs T. and W. Stephens was set on fire. It contained, one assumes not coincidentally, a threshing machine. The local labourers ‘made great exertions’ in extinguishing the fire. They were not the supposed culprits. Instead, ‘an unknown person’ had been seen on the premises an hour or so before the fire was suspected.⁵⁶

Sightings of strangers – with the emphasis often on the *strange* – were extraordinarily common before fires in late 1830. Farmer Quaife at Battle reported to the Home Office that ‘incendiaries’, ‘gentlemen in appearance’, were travelling about the county in gigs. One such alleged incendiary was seen at Quaife’s farm at noon in the day of the fire, but his ‘respectable appearance’ had prevented any initial suspicion. Quaife’s father also went to the trouble of writing to Home Secretary Sir Robert Peel to inform him of his profound belief that the fires at Battle were not the product of local labourers but were instead caused by a ‘very different class’.⁵⁷ In the area between Dartford and Reigate the strangers supposedly ‘traversing’ the parishes were reported to be ‘above the description of common labourers’.⁵⁸ Similarly when a threshing machine on the Silton Estate at Bourton was set on fire of the night of 3 December it was reported in the Dorset press that the culprits were thought to be ‘two men on horseback’ who had been there during the day asking questions about the rate of wages.⁵⁹ Even the duke of Wellington was not immune from strange fire setters. When his Strathfieldsaye farm was targeted in December two strangers were reported to have been seen in the vicinity at dusk. The correspondent of the *Hampshire Advertiser* even went as far as to the claim that they were ‘political incendiaries’ whose work was to ‘harass the Government’.⁶⁰

These ‘strangers’, invariably deemed to be incendiaries, were represented as working in small cells as part of some broader shadowy organisation. In early December at Axminster a large number of special

56 *Sherborne Journal*, 16 December 1830.

57 TNA, HO 52/10, ff. 359–60, 364–66 Thomas Quaife, Marley Farm, Battle to Peel, 5 November, James Quaife, Hackney Coach Office, Essex to Peel, 8 November 1830.

58 TNA, HO 52/8, ff. 318–19 Rev. Sir C. Farnaley, Wickham Rectory, Bromley to Melbourne, 29 November 1830.

59 *Western Flying Post*, 6 December 1830.

60 *Hampshire Advertiser*, 18 December 1830.

constables were sworn in to 'scour the neighbouring countryside by day to look out for the incendiaries' it being believed that 'several' were 'lurking about the neighbourhood'. Elsewhere in Somerset, a 'sharp lookout' was kept at Taunton for all strangers and 'revolutionary incendiaries'. Around Lewes in early November it was thought that 'incendiarists' were travelling about the countryside in groups of three or four dressed in smock frocks to evade detection.⁶¹ Even Home Secretary Peel was convinced that there was some sinister plan afoot. Treasury Solicitor Maule's dispatch to help the Kentish judiciary was primarily precipitated by Peel's belief that the fires had not been caused by 'the resident population of the county' but had 'been devised by other hands, and executed by other hands', thus making them 'a national, not a local matter'.⁶²

All such pronouncements attest to the genuine fear amongst rural communities of fire. As a Canterbury resident later recalled:

Scarcely a night passed without the citizens of Canterbury being startled by messengers riding into the place at full speed to summon the assistance of the fire-engines ... I have gone up the Mount of Dane John, for several nights in succession, and have seen three and four, sometimes five, farms blazing away at one time.⁶³

Even those sympathetic to the plight of the machine-breakers – 'their crying wants would never have reached the unfeeling hearts of [the farmers] otherwise' – were quick to claim to the Home Office that incendiarists were:

[In the] purses & influence of radical scoundrels who think they can produce revolution by the anarchy and confusion which they expect to arise from ... [the] destruction of the common means of subsistence.⁶⁴

The two grand old radicals that were inculcated in the movement, William Cobbett and Henry Hunt, were at pains to disassociate themselves from the fires. 'There was very little danger', Cobbett

61 *Brighton Gazette*, 11 November 1830; *Dorset County Chronicle*, 2 December 1830; *Western Flying Post*, 6 December 1830.

62 TNA, HO 41/8, pp. 24–25 Under Secretary Phillips, Home Office to Maule, Maidstone, 31 October; TNA, HO 40/27, ff. 54–55 Maule, Maidstone, to Phillips, 1 November 1830. For a detailed examination of Maule's deployment see R. Wells, 'Mr. William Cobbett, Captain Swing, and King William IV', *Agricultural History Review* 45 (1997), 37–38.

63 R. Stanley (ed.), *Passage from The Autobiography of a 'Man of Kent'* (Paris, 1866), p. 53.

64 TNA, HO 52/7, ff. 14–15 John Pearce, Chilton Lodge, Hungerford to Melbourne, 5 December 1830.

proclaimed, 'in the machine-breaking, and the sturdy begging, or rioting and robbing ... but as to the fires it was quite another matter'. Hunt, addressing an audience at Taunton, stated that the only 'panacea for the distress of the country' was parliamentary reform. Incendiarism, which he 'deprecated in the strongest terms' as not 'manly, peaceable and Englishman like in manner', was 'not the way to right their grievances'.⁶⁵

V Conclusions

Was Captain Swing an incendiarist? The answer is simple. Yes, whenever he – and occasionally she – needed to be. Many individuals drawn up by the euphoria of Swing, or pressed against their will into the movement, no doubt abhorred the actions of incendiaries. As many commentators were quick to point out, the political economy of rick firing was absurd. It would act, albeit nominally, to force up food prices and would reduce the farmers' capital and hence their ability to employ labour. Yet to many Swing activists the landlords and farmers were their tormentors, the reason their families' bellies were empty. There might then be little economic 'logic' in firing the means and results of production but there was a certain logic in intimidating farmers in the hope of increasing wages. And occasionally it worked, as the actions of the Foulmere (Cambridgeshire) vestry as reported to the 'Rural Queries of the Poor Law Commission' attested.⁶⁶ Besides, protest does not always have to have a particular end in mind, its aims can be diffuse, its purpose psychological.

Swing's aim – a universal attempt to improve the fieldworkers' lot – could partly be achieved through an appeal to magistrates', landowners', farmers' and clergymen's sense of humanity. But fifteen years of patient appeals had got labourers (and rural artisans, mechanics and operatives) nowhere. As Jones has recently reiterated, it is extraordinary then that Swing was so often reliant on deferential forms.⁶⁷ Yet for every mannered request for higher wages there was an equally confident performance, again often backed by customary ritual, which did not shy from deliberately engendering fear. Incendiarism and threats of incendiarism represented one such strategy. If it is impossible to judge what proportion of fires that occurred in the autumn and winter of 1830 were deliberately set to effect broader social goals and what proportion were set to settle an individual score, it is telling that the level of incendiarism was far in

65 William Cobbett, *Two-Penny Trash*, issue 8, February 1831; *Dorset County Chronicle*, 9 December 1830.

66 *Report from His Majesty's Commissioners for Inquiring into the Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws*, 1834, British Parliamentary Papers, Appendix B1, 10, 3.

67 Jones, 'Swing, Speenhamland and Rural Social Relations', *passim*.

excess of anything hitherto witnessed in southern England. As Kevin Bawn has shown for Dorset, even if one excludes 'Swing' fires, 1830 was a record year for fire setting.⁶⁸

Beyond asking whether 'Captain Swing' was an incendiarist and whether he supported incendiarism we can also answer, with a reasonable degree of confidence, whether arson was integral to Swing as a movement. In the public mind the answer is undoubtedly yes. Of the eight 'instant histories' I have identified as written in the final weeks of 1830 and the early months of 1831, only one focuses on machine-breaking whereas five explicitly address incendiarism.⁶⁹ In a practical and political sense too incendiarism was integral to the movement. It was deployed (and threatened) in tandem with other protest forms to achieve specific objectives. Nowhere was this connection made more explicit than at Barton Stacey in the Dever Valley. The parish hosted multiple 'risings' between 18 and 20 November, that of the 19th, as noted above, followed by a fire on the farm of Sir Henry Wright Wilson. Two nights later the cart house and stable, the only buildings to escape the previous conflagration, were set on fire and destroyed. Thomas Berriman and Henry Hunt were found guilty of the first fire and executed at Winchester in March 1832. Fourteen months earlier Thomas' father had been transported by the Hampshire Special Commission for his involvement in the Dever Valley mobilisations.⁷⁰

The example of the Berrimans serves to remind us that incendiarism was not something understood and practiced only by revolutionaries or the 'mad' (the judgement often returned by juries against alleged incendiaries). Rather, fire setting was as much a part of labouring culture as hunger, cramped housing and inadequate wages. By 1830 there were

68 K. Bawn, 'Social Protest, Popular Disturbances and Public Order in Dorset, 1790–1838' unpublished PhD thesis, University of Reading (1984), appendix II.

69 C.Z. Barnett, "Swing!" A Farce, in *One Act* (London, 1830); R. Taylor, *Swing: or, Who are the Incendiaries? A Tragedy [in Five Acts, in Prose and in Verse]* (London, 1831); 'Francis Swing' (pseud.), *The History of Swing, the Noted Kent Rick Burner. Written by Himself* (London, 1830); G.W. (Gibbon Wakefield: pseud.), *A Short Account of the Life and Death of Swing, the Rick-Burner; Written by One Well Acquainted With Him* (London, 1831); Francis Swing, *The Genuine Life of Mr. Francis Swing* (London, 1831); Anon. ('Swing'), *A Letter from Swing to the People of England* (Lichfield, 1830); E. Wakefield, *Swing Unmasked; or, the Causes of Rural Incendiarism* (London, 1831); J. Parker, *Machine-breaking and the Changes Occasioned by it in the Village of Turvey Down. A Tale of the Times* (Oxford, 1831).

70 *Hampshire Advertiser*, 20 November 1830; *Hampshire Chronicle*, 22 November 1830; *Portsmouth, Portsea and Gosport Herald*, 28 November 1830; TNA, HO 130/1 Calendar of the Winchester Special Commission case number 271 (East Stratton). For Thomas Berriman's prosecution, see *The Times*, 5 March 1832; *Hampshire Chronicle*, 19 March 1832.

few southern parishes that had not either hosted an incendiary fire or were next to a parish that had. The rural poor understood the power and the meaning of incendiarism. Archer's analysis of the ages of East Anglian incendiaries suggests that it was a young man's practice, the fire setters typically being in their early 20s. But elsewhere I have shown that plant maimers – those individuals who maliciously cut flora as a form of protest – had a remarkably similar demographic. Indeed, Hobsbawm and Rudé's analysis of those Swing activists tried shows that they were also overwhelmingly in their 20s and early 30s.⁷¹ There was, therefore, nothing different about incendiaries. They were the same people as the machine-breakers, the money leviers and the vestry lobbyists. Protest was a young man's game.

Rural workers had a wide variety of protest tools at their disposal and often deployed multiple weapons at once. As Archer has suggested they were 'selective in their choice of tactics', combining 'open' and clandestine forms at will.⁷² Quite how all protest tactics were learnt is perhaps forever lost to the archive but some points of brief speculation are worth considering. Bushaway, Pettit and, most recently, Jones have all noted the marked similarity between rural 'processing' and 'quête' customs and Swing's door-to-door demanding of monies and parading the parish to call for higher wages.⁷³ Machine-breaking was rather more novel, an adaptation – both literally and in a social Darwinian sense – of other collective forms for the age of the machine. All such forms were relatively infrequently deployed in most of the south after the last major wave of food rioting in 1800–1801. As noted, incendiarism and other 'covert' protest forms were rather more commonly deployed. Not only was fire setting an important weapon of the weak it was also an integral part of plebeian rural culture. To set a fire was an important life skill. Through cooking and providing heat it was perhaps the most important everyday practice of the rural poor. It was an essential skill for survival. And in Swing it was so deployed. The many fires that lit up the night skies of southern England were attempts to forge a new agrarian equipoise, to find a new way of surviving.

71 Archer, *By a Flash and a Scare*, pp. 165–97; Hobsbawm and Rudé, *Captain Swing*, p. 257; C. Griffin, "'Cut Down by Some Cowardly Miscreants": Plant Maiming, or the Malicious Cutting of Plants as an Act of Protest in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth Century Rural England', *Rural History* 19 (2008), 29–54.

72 J. Archer, 'The Wells-Charlesworth Debate: A Personal Comment on Arson in Norfolk and Suffolk 1830–1870', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 9 (1982), 281.

73 B. Bushaway, *By Rite: Custom, Ceremony and Community in England 1700–1880*, (London, 1983); T. Pettitt, "Here Comes I, Jack Straw": English Folk Drama and Social Revolt', *Folklore* 95 (1984), 11–12; Jones, 'Swing, Speenhamland and Rural Social Relations', 285.