

GENERAL REPORT ON THE DISTURBED DISTRICTS OF EAST SUSSEX

1833

Beer-Shops

The beer-shops are considered as most mischievous. They allow of secret meetings beyond any places previously existing, being generally in obscure situations, kept by the lowest class of persons. They are receiving houses for stolen goods, and frequently brothels; they are resorted to by the most abandoned characters—poachers, smugglers, and night depredators, who pass their time in playing at cards for the expenses of the night, in raffling for game and poultry, and concocting plans for future mischief. They are never without a scout, and are not interrupted by the observation of any person of respectability; no information can be obtained from the masters, who are in the power of their guests, spirits being usually sold without licence, and not one in ten sell home-brewed beer. Similar representations are made in East Kent. A magistrate expressed his opinion that no single measure ever caused so much mischief in so short a time, in demoralising the labourers....

Rural Police

A more efficient police is a matter of the greatest importance. All classes—proprietors and occupiers, magistrates, overseers—all require it. Concession to paupers can hardly be avoided under the present insufficient police; and the magistrates consider the calling in the military very objectionable, unless in the last extremity. As to yeomanry, there is so much distress among farmers, and consequently so much discontent, that they are unwilling to enroll themselves. Those who, in the good times of farming, had horses fit for yeomanry service, now make use of a cart-horse, or go on foot.

The few who are more opulent hang back; as, from living in isolated situations, their property is completely at the mercy of their own labourers....

The common constables are usually village artisans, competent perhaps to the forms of civil process, and putting down a village broil, but totally unacquainted with the business of police, and in case of great mobs, quite inefficient; they are changed every year, and are seldom willing to serve a second time.

Smuggling

Since the establishment of the preventive service, smuggling is much diminished. This diminution has had the effect of increasing the poor-rate, or, as was expressed by an overseer, who is supposed to have had formerly a very accurate acquaintance with the business, “the putting down smuggling is the ruin of the coast.” The labourers of Bexhill, and of the villages proceeding eastward towards Kent, used to have plenty of work in the summer, and had no difficulty in finding employment in smuggling during the winter.

The smugglers are divided into two classes, the carriers or bearers, who receive from five shillings per night and upwards, according to the number of tubs they secure, and the batmen. The batmen, so called from the provincial term of bat, for a bludgeon, which they use, consider themselves as of a superior class: they go out in disguise, frequently with their faces blackened, and now with fire-arms; they confine their services to the protection of the others, and are paid 20s or more per night; and many, perhaps most of them, are at the same time in the receipt of parish relief.

Large capitals have been invested in this business, particularly at Bexhill. Many of the small farmers, if they do not participate, certainly connive at these practices; those who do not directly profit by smuggling consider that it is advantageous as finding employ to many who otherwise would be thrown on their parishes. The smugglers are now much more ferocious since the use of fire-arms is more constant...

Beyond all doubt the practice of smuggling has been a main cause of the riots and fires in Sussex and East Kent: labourers have acquired the habit of acting in large gangs by night, and of systematic resistance to authority. High living is become essential to them, and they cannot reconcile themselves to the moderate pay of lawful industry.

Riots

The riots in the north-east parts of the Rape of Hastings commenced simultaneously on the 5th and 6th of November 1830. The farmers observed, that their labourers all at once left their work: they were taken away by night by a systematic arrangement; no leader could be identified, but bills were run up at the public-houses in the evening, and in the morning a stranger came and paid.

The mobs generally had written forms containing their demands, they varied a little in the amount of wages, but all agreed in the amount of 'allowance' of 1s 6d for every child above two; that there should be no assistant-overseer; that they should be paid full wages, wet or dry; that they would pay their own rents. There were nine cases of incendiarism that winter at Battle. The mob which assembled there, on the day of the magistrates' meeting, amounted to nearly 700: all the principal magistrates of the division, nineteen in number, assembled; the arrival of a troop of horse established order....

A permanent Bench of Magistrates was established at Battle, at which Mr. Courthorpe presided, at their particular request, and directed by day and night the measures, which were requisite for public tranquility.

This harassing duty continued during a month; but from that period, a certain degree of intimidation has prevailed in this district. The assistant-overseers having been then ill-treated by the mobs, are reluctant to make complaints for neglect of work, lest they should become marked men and their lives rendered uncomfortable or even unsafe. Farmers permit their labourers to receive relief, founded on a calculation of a rate of wages lower than that actually paid: they are unwilling to put themselves in collision with the labourers, and will not give an account of earnings, or if they do, beg that their names may not be mentioned. A similar feeling prevails in East Kent: at Westwell, the farmers are afraid to express, at vestry-meetings, their opinions against a pauper who applies for relief, for fear their premises should be set fire to. Two of the fires immediately followed such a resistance; one of them happened to a most respectable farmer, a kind and liberal master, and a promoter of cottage allotments.

The allowance system is represented to be so established, that without some legislative enactment, neither overseers, vestries, nor magistrates, can make any effectual change; and that if local regulations were attempted, a repetition of the outrages of 1830 may be expected. Day-wages seem to be fixed at 2s to 2s 3d; which are not thought too high, were it not for the rates, but the farmers state that the present relief, coupled with that rate of wages, is exhausting their capital. The relief is in great measure compulsory; but it is also considered unnecessary—for on an accurate examination of the population, the quantity of acres and the numbers requisite for the cultivation of the land in its present state, it is calculated that the money expended for labour, within the Rape of Hastings, is sufficient for the maintenance of nearly the whole of the able-bodied agricultural labourers and families without assistance from the rates....

Report of His Majesty's Commissioners into the Administration and Operation of the Poor Laws. (1833):24–27.