

THE BARDNEY BREAD RIOT, FRIDAY AND SATURDAY 5 AND 6 MAY 1815

and the death of Richard Meanwell,
Parish Constable of Horncastle

by

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The Witham Navigation Act of 1812 initiated long overdue improvements to make the River Witham fully navigable between the city of Lincoln and the port of Boston. The scheme was designed to open up the markets of the Midlands and Yorkshire for Lincolnshire farmers and traders in the glory days of the nation's canal system, and it gave employment to hundreds of labourers.

A new lock, and a cut to by-pass a tortuous bend in the river, were commissioned near the village of Bardney. During the process there was great excitement among local historians when at this location the bankers (the canal diggers, or 'navvies') dug up an oak canoe dating from the Bronze Age and an axe head from the Viking period.^[1]

For all the worthy outcomes of the scheme, life was hard for the manual labourers involved. Wages were low and the cost of food was rising nationally because of the high price of bread, the staple diet of the working class. In March 1815 there was rioting against the Corn Laws outside the House of Commons. The Importation Act of 1815 prohibited the entry of foreign corn into Britain until home grown and colonial wheat reached certain levels. Public unrest against the restrictions to Free Trade was to continue until the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846.



Bread Riot at the entrance to the House of Commons, 1815. © Bridgeman Images and Mary Evans

This was the background for a riot involving about fifty of the bankers working on the River Witham at Bardney which lasted from Friday 5 until Saturday 6 May 1815.

The *Rutland, Lincoln and Stamford Mercury* Friday 12 May 1815 :

'On Saturday last the inhabitants of Bardney and neighbouring villages were thrown into serious alarm on account of the riotous conduct of about 500 bankers who are employed on the works now executing in the river Witham. It appears that they had entered several dwelling houses, broken the windows, demanded provisions, and committed various disorderly acts, so that it was found necessary to call in the Spilsby and Louth troops of cavalry on Sunday by whose prompt assistance, about 40 of the desperadoes were taken into custody, and examined at Horncastle before magistrates, who committed nine of them to the house of correction at Louth'.

The instigator was William Buck, also known as William Ludd, a labourer from Bardney, who read out a paper declaring that the price of bread and other necessary articles, including beer, should be reduced. This public declaration stimulated 'divers outrages and breaches of the peace'. [2]

The *Bury and Norwich Post* Wednesday 24 May 1815 :

Wm. Buck was last week committed to the House of Correction at Louth, Lincolnshire, charged with having, on the 5th inst. with about 500 other persons, chiefly labouring bankers, assembled in the parish of Bardney, for the purpose of exciting a riot, reading a paper declaring that the prices of bread and other necessaries should be reduced, and for having committed divers outrages and breaches of the peace. Eight others, concerned in these riotous proceedings, were at the same time committed for trial at the Sessions.

The sources from which we can piece together what happened, are the records of the trial of the rioters at the Lindsey Quarter Sessions held at Spilsby; newspaper reports, and the account published by J. S. Padley, County Surveyor for Lincolnshire, some sixty-six years afterwards. [3] Padley lived from 1792 until 1881, and so it is possible that he had his own recollection of the incident, but he claimed in any case to have heard about the course of events from an eye witness at the time.

The *Lincoln, Rutland and Stamford Mercury* and *The Bury and Norwich Post* seem to have exaggerated the number of active rioters involved, by giving a figure of 500, in contrast to the fifty accounted for in the Quarter Sessions file. However, Padley, as an expert engineer, must have been right when he said that about 900 navvies were employed on this section of river.

This is Padley's account, on page fifty-eight of his book *The Fens and Floods of Mid-Lincolnshire; with a description of the River Witham, in its neglected state before 1762, and its Improvements up to 1826* which was published in Lincoln in 1882 :

'In carrying out the Act of 1812, a great riot took place at Bardney, by the navvies; they were at work on that part of the river from the village of Southrey by Bardney to opposite Longwood, including the new line which cut off the corner of the Witham in the parish of Branston; Mr James Townsend being the Resident Engineer. About nine hundred men were employed on this section.'

A dispute arose on a particular Friday between the navvies and a baker named Edmonds, from Wragby, who supplied them with bread: the riot began on the west side of the river, at a public-house with the sign of The Plough, — they drove the landlord away from the house, took out his barrels, and drank the beer; having taken his sign down, they also took the baker's basket and bread, and, crossing the river, proceeded up to the village of Bardney, one man carrying another cross-legged on his shoulders, the rider carrying the captured sign, holding it up in his hands, and being surrounded by a mob armed with their plank-hooks and other tools. They pelted the baker with his bread, and hung his basket on the top of a tree in the village; they then attacked the "Bottle and Glass" public-house, — fetched the barrels of beer out of the house, knocked the ends out and drank the ale; Mr. Benson, a person who was then the landlord of the Angel Inn, to prevent them entering his premises, brought or rolled out his barrels of beer himself, and by this means saved himself and his house.

During the time they entered the houses in Bardney, the people were so frightened that they gave them anything they asked for; the navvies went about to the inhabitants of proclaiming their own prices for provisions for the future; John Edmonds, now living (1881), gave them five shillings'.

Padley then provides details of the incidents which are not found in the court records : 'The constable of the village was called out, but he alone was of no use, as they would have attacked him at once; he made his escape with difficulty, and was obliged to hide himself in the almshouses; thirteen constables were sent for from Horncastle, they also were useless, and had to go home again, one of them so much injured that he died from the effects afterwards; the cavalry were then sent for, and came as soon as possible (either on Saturday or Sunday morning,) with the magistrate, the Rev. Mr. Mounsey, of Gautby, who read the Riot Act. The rioters (several of whom secreted themselves) were immediately surrounded by the cavalry, who drove them up together and examined them, afterwards they filled three carts and a waggon with the rioters, whom they carried away with them to Horncastle and Spilsby, in due course these disturbers were prosecuted and imprisoned'.

The court records mention a total of three constables: Joseph Key, constable of Bardney; and Isaac Beecham and Richard Meanwell, both constables of Horncastle. Several other townsmen from Horncastle were named as assisting the constables in attempting to quell the disturbance. Certainly only two constables, Isaac Beecham and Richard Meanwell were annually appointed as the constables of Horncastle by the parish vestry. ^[4]

A search of the court records and newspapers has not revealed any additional charges relating to the immediate death of a constable at this time, but it is clear that the riot was terrifyingly violent. It appears that the rioting ostensibly caused by the price of bread issue, was exacerbated by a separate incident relating to the attempted break-out of a felon in the custody of the constables.

The court records show William Buck as the only person held accountable for causing the assembly of many persons on Friday 5 May in a riotous and disorderly manner 'to give great terror to the inhabitants of this parish'. ^[5] Separate charges were brought against Robert Cook, John Kitchen, Michael Hart, Thomas Ward, William Parker, William Stringer, George Waite and Thomas Dunkley for assembly and riotous behaviour on Saturday 6 May in connection with their 'forcible rescue of Isaac Slater, alias Black Isaac, who was then in the custody of Richard Meanwell and Isaac Beecham, constables of Horncastle, on a charge of felony'. The circumstances of Isaac Slater's arrest were not recorded, but the charge was highway robbery. Perhaps it can be assumed that Isaac Slater took advantage

of the lawless situation to commit a crime in Bardney, but that he was apprehended by the constables from Horncastle.

Recognizances for the appearance of witnesses at the trial were issued on the evidence of Richard Meanwell, and they refer explicitly to the charges of riot, assault and battery which were brought against Robert Cook, John Kitchen, Michael Hart, Thomas Ward, William Parker, George Waite, William Stringer and Thomas Dunkley. They were accused with 'having violently assaulted the said constables in the due execution of their office'. ^[6]

Those arrested at Bardney were committed for trial at Lindsey Quarter Sessions at the market town of Spilsby on Monday 8 May. At the Quarter Sessions at Kirton in Lindsey in the following July, four of the accused were discharged. On the charge of riot and assault, John Kitchen and William Parker were sentenced to six months in the Bridewell, and William Stringer and George Waite were sentenced to twelve months. William Buck, on the separate charge of riot, was sentenced to six months in the Bridewell (at Kirton in Lindsey).

Nothing more is recorded about the fate of the constable whom J. S. Padley noted had afterwards died from the effects of the violence. However, one of the two constables ^[7] from Horncastle, Richard Meanwell, died on Sunday 7 April 1816, eleven months after the riot. He was still a young man and left a widow of thirty-one years of age and four children under the age of nine. He wrote his will on Tuesday 10 October 1815, ^[8] which indicates that he was aware then that he may not have had long to live. The signature certainly implies that he had less control over his hand when compared with previous versions on surviving parish records. Perhaps he was the parish constable who suffered a terrible battering at the hands of unknown rioters against whom charges could not be brought. Unfortunately there is no coroner's or newspaper report relating to his death.

The court documents always place Richard Meanwell first in the list of the constables and other men who were trying to put a stop to the disturbance. For example, the perpetrators did :

'make an assault [on] them the said Richard Meanwell, Isaac Beecham, Partridge Dixon, Richard Harrison, John Brown, Edward Leesin, Thomas Brown, James Robinson, John Carter, John Ramplin and Thomas Folley ... and there beat wound and ill treat so that their lives were greatly despaired of
and also :

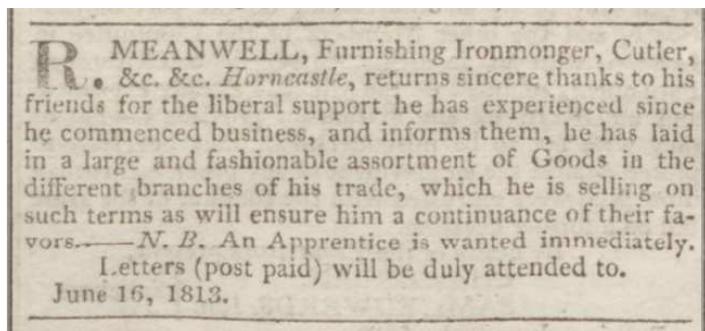
'and riotously did to the great damage of the said Richard Meanwell, Isaac Beecham, Partridge Dixon... ...' ^[9]

Richard Meanwell was buried in the churchyard of Horncastle Saint Mary on Thursday 11 April 1816. The burial register recorded his age as thirty-two years. However, the only index reference to a baptism of a Richard Meanwell in Lincolnshire appears on Sunday 31 January 1779 at Asterby, being the son of Thomas and Elizabeth Meanwell. Asterby is about ten miles north of Horncastle. If this is the baptism of Richard Meanwell, constable, then he was thirty-seven when he died, unless he was baptised as a child.

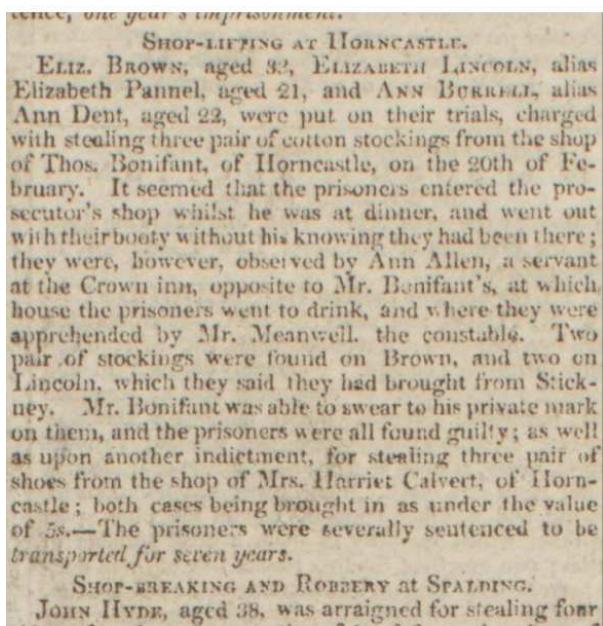
When he married Rebecca Hewson in Lincoln in 1804, Richard Meanwell's age was given as over twenty-one on the marriage bond. ^[10] Rebecca was actually twenty-one years of age, as her birth date appears to have been 1783.

In his will he described himself as an ironmonger and left his property in trust for his 'dear wife Rebecca' and their children. When their daughter Elizabeth, who was born in 1814, died many years later in 1864, the newspaper notice described her (by then married with the surname Broadgate and living at Nettleton Manor) as the daughter of the late Richard Meanwell of Horncastle, ironmonger. It appears, therefore, that he had earned a durable reputation in the locality. Richard Meanwell had set up his business in

Horncastle in 1813, as shown in a notice in the *Stamford Mercury* newspaper on Friday 2 July 1813.



Only two months before the Bardney Riot, Richard Meanwell had been carrying out his duty as constable by apprehending three women for stealing stockings from a shop in Horncastle. They were then brought before the Assizes at Lincoln and sentenced to be transported - The *Stamford Mercury* Friday 17 March 1815 :



The signature on Richard Meanwell's will is close in style to the signature in the Vestry Minute Book of the parish church of Horncastle Saint Mary when Richard Meanwell was appointed one of the two constables. His first appointment was in 1810 and his final appointment was recorded for a year from Thursday 28 March 1816. However, when the constables were appointed for the following year, Richard Meanwell was not included.

Richard Meanwell's widow, Rebecca, and their children, were no doubt supported financially by her father, Jared Hewson of Lincoln, a builder, who was one of the trustees of her husband's estate.^[11] However, within three years she had married Adlard Spiking of Teford, a draper. For whatever reason, Adlard Spiking became a bankrupt in the 1820s and ended up on a charge of theft at the Lindsey Quarter Sessions at Louth in July 1831.

Strangely, it appears that Spiking's victim was the widow of Isaac Beecham, former parish constable of Horncastle who served with Richard Meanwell. He was found guilty of

stealing a silver spoon and two pewter measures, the property of Mrs Susanna Beecham of the *New King's Head* Inn. Isaac Beecham had married Susanna Gay in 1806. ^[12]

Adlard Spiking was sentenced to be transported to Australia for seven years. He was moved to the gaol at Lincoln Castle and in September 1831 he was conveyed to the Retribution hulk at Sheerness. ^[13] He sailed to New South Wales on the transport ship, *Mangles*, in December 1832, arriving in April 1833, but his death is recorded at Port Macquarie in July 1835. ^[14]

Richard Meanwell's widow, Rebecca Spiking, moved back to Lincoln and ended her days aged eighty-five in 1869. The census records show that she was of independent means and the proprietor of houses – no doubt property left to her by her first husband and also by her father, who made provision in his will that what he left to his daughter, the wife of Adlard Spiking, would not be used to cover Spiking's debts. Rebecca's only child by Adlard Spiking, Eliza, died an infant in 1826.

Rebecca outlived all her children by Richard Meanwell. One son, Joseph, had died at the age of two before the death of his father in 1808, Jared died aged nine in 1821 and Henry died aged twenty-one in 1830. Hewson died, aged fifty-six, in 1862 at the house of his sister, Elizabeth who died in 1864 in Nettleton. Hewson Meanwell was a much respected draper with premises in the High Street, Lincoln. Coincidentally, he acted as surveyor of the highways for the Lincoln parish of Saint Benedict at the same time as J.S. Padley, the author of the account of the Bardney Riot, represented the parish of Saint Mary Magdalene. ^[15] Perhaps the story of Richard Meanwell's death became a family legend and this was how J. S. Padley came to hear of it.

REFERENCES :

- 1 Historic Environment Record references: 51162, 51163. Account of the discovery of the canoe, in WHEELER, W. H. *A History of the Fens of South Lincolnshire* (Boston 1868) p58
 - 2 Lincolnshire Archives. Lindsey Quarter Sessions A/1/410/81.
 - 3 PADLEY, J. S. *The Fens and Floods of Mid-Lincolnshire; with a description of the River Witham, In its neglected state before 1762, and its Improvements up to 1826* (Lincoln 1882)
and also on website : <https://archive.org/details/fensfloodsofmid100padl>
 - 4 Lincolnshire Archives. Horncastle Vestry minute book 1782-1844, Horncastle Par 10/2.
 - 5 Lincolnshire Archives. Lindsey Quarter Sessions A/1/410/80
 - 6 Lincolnshire Archives. Lindsey Quarter Sessions A/1/410/71
 - 7 Isaac Beecham died in Horncastle in 1828, aged 43. Lincolnshire Archives, Horncastle Saint Mary burial register.
 - 8 Will of Richard Meanwell, Lincolnshire Archives, LCC Will 1816/138.
 - 9 Lincolnshire Archives. Lindsey Quarter Sessions A/1/410/107
 - 10 Marriage bond of Richard Meanwell. Lincolnshire Archives, MB 1804/623 624.
 - 11 Will of Jared Hewson. Lincolnshire Archives. LCC Will 1834/131.
 - 12 Gautby Marriage Register. They were married by the Reverend J. Mounsey, the same magistrate who read the Riot Act at Bardney in 1815.
 - 13 The *Stamford Mercury* 1831.
 - 14 New South Wales State records online.
 - 15 The *Lincolnshire Chronicle*, Friday 21 April 1848.
- Useful websites :
- <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/humanrights/1815-1848/default.htm>
<http://www.bridgemanart.com.en-GB/asset/583086/english-school-19th-century/bread-riot-at-the-entrance-to-the-house-of-commons-1815-engraving>