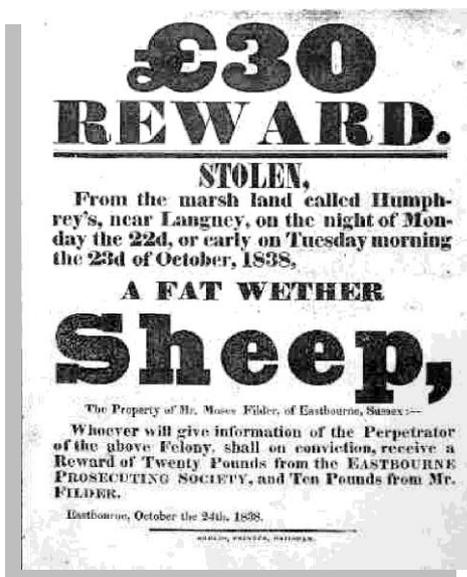


The East-Bourne Prosecuting Society

Some twenty years ago I was fortunate to be given a number of copies of old posters dating from the 1830s concerning the East-Bourne Prosecuting Society. These were of particular interest to me as some were in connection with my maternal grandfather's family, the Filders, who were farmers at Susan's Farm and Colstocks in Meads.

In 1830 the rural workers of the arable south and east of England rose in what was called the 'Swing Riots'. Kent and Sussex were two of the worst affected counties as the social and financial gulf between farmer and labourer had widened over the first three decades of the 19th century. Labourers demanded higher wages and an end to the unpopular threshing machines, which had destroyed their winter employment causing greater poverty for the rural working classes. Hiring for less than a year meant the unemployed could not claim on the Poor Rates, thus poverty increased and with it crime. Their demands were reinforced by direct action especially in the form of arson; rick burning, the destruction of the threshing machines and even cattle maiming and slaughter. These posters record the theft of animals and the increasing problem of arson.



The East-Bourne Society for Prosecuting Thieves, Felons, and Receivers of Stolen Goods. etc was originally formed at a meeting held on Thursday 16 December 1800 in the New Inn. Articles were drawn up and those who formed and subscribed to the Society were the local gentry, landowners, farmers and clergy. The Society offered what were very substantial rewards to anyone providing information leading to the prosecution of arsonists, thieves and receivers of stolen goods. It was the policy for The Society to put up a sum from its funds and the owner of the property concerned normally matched the amount.

One example of arson in Eastbourne at the height of the Swing Riots was reported as the '*The most extensive and destructive fire that has taken place in the County of Sussex*'. This occurred at Colstocks Farm Meads, occupied, by Mr Moses Filder.

On the evening of Thursday 10 February 1831 at about 6.45pm the whole of the property save the farmhouse was discovered to be on fire. The large farmhouse itself was put at great risk due to the intense heat and was only saved by the workers greatest exertions. It was reported in several newspapers, including The Times, that a stack of straw in the rickyard was

'feloniously and maliciously' set on fire together with one wheat stack, one oat stack, six hay-ricks, two straw stacks, a double barn containing a barley mow, sixteen quarters of threshed wheat in sacks and about thirty quarters of unthreshed barley, a fattening-lodge, a wagon lodge with granary above containing barley and malt etc and an outhouse containing about one thousand bushels of potatoes all of which were destroyed. All that remained from the general wreckage was part of one wheat stack.

A reward of Fifty pounds was offered by Moses Filder and a further Fifty pounds by the East-Bourne Prosecuting Society 'to any person who shall discover the said offender or offenders, so that he, she or they may be apprehended and convicted of the said Offence'. This considerable sum is put in perspective when one realises the average wage for an agricultural labourer at this time was approximately 8 shillings a week for a ten hour day..

So determined were the authorities to apprehend the person responsible that a notice was published from Whitehall on February 22 1831, stating that in order to bring the person or persons to justice His Majesty would graciously pardon anyone of the persons involved, who would give information, except the person who actually set the fire. This was signed by the Home Secretary Viscount Melbourne.



Later on New Year's Eve the same year there followed another large rick fire on Joseph Filder's farm, 'The Susan's'. The ricks were on the site where Holy Trinity Church now stands. The same night a wheat stack was set alight at James Pagden's farm in the Meads. There were many similar incidents in the local parishes.

One poster records a meeting at the Lamb Inn Eastbourne dated April 1840. The Society members all well known figures in Eastbourne and the surrounding parishes are listed as follows: Charles Ade, George Ashley, Robert Boys, Joseph Filder, Moses Filder, John D Gilbert Esq., Rev Henry Grace, William Harvey, Thomas Hurst, Thomas Noakes, James Pagden, John Pagden, John Putland, Nicholas Willard Esq. and George Winter who also held the positions of secretary and treasurer. Membership changed from time to time and Inigo Thomas of Ratton is recorded as a member in 1838. A table of Rewards for information leading to prosecution showed that Fifty Pounds, the highest sum, was offered for murder, attempted murder or injury of any of the Society members or members of their families and also for any act of arson; Twenty and Ten

Pounds was offered for stealing or killing of cattle & sheep, Five Guineas for cutting down trees or tillings and stealing poultry, rabbits, coal, wood, iron etc. Finally One Guinea was offered for the stealing of any garden stuff, turnips, furze faggots and fruit. These sums were then matched by the member.

The 'Swing' riots did influence the passing of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act and the 1836 Tithe Commutation Act, but wages and conditions did not improve and the agitation, and unrest continued.