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The college that thou holdest
shall be fired very shortly,
how shall we further from me
when it is in flames.

What caused the 'Swing Riots' in the 1830s?

Political and social reform in 19th century Britain

Key Stages 4-5 | Empire & Industry 1750-1850

Lesson



Head Quarters

Introduction

In the eighteenth century, one of the main autumn and winter jobs for farm workers was threshing. This meant separating the grain from the stalks of corn by beating it. In the late 1820s and early 1830s, farmers began to introduce threshing machines to do this work. This put large numbers of labourers out of work and without enough money to support themselves during the winter months.

Low wages and unemployment, plus poor harvests in 1829 and 1830, resulted in hunger, protests and disturbances in the countryside, especially in the east and south of England. Farmers were sent threatening letters demanding that wages increase or at least stay the same. These letters often demanded farmers not to use threshing machines. Farmers and landowners also had their hayricks and farm buildings burnt.

The protesters used the name 'Captain Swing'. This made-up name was intended to spread fear among landowners and protect the protesters from discovery. Use the original documents in this lesson to find out more about the 'Captain Swing' disturbances in the 1830s.

Suitable for:

KS 4-5

Time period:

Empire & Industry
1750-1850

Connections to curriculum:

Key Stage Four

- Edexcel GCSE: Crime and punishment in eighteenth- and nineteenth century Britain
- OCR's GCSE: (History B Schools History Project) Crime and Punishment, c.1250 to present

Key Stage Five

- AQA GCE History: The impact of industrialisation: Britain, c1783–1832: Economic developments: continuing industrialisation and developments in key industries; agricultural change; economic policies and free trade.
- Edexcel GCE History: Industrialisation and protest, c1785–c1870: the Swing Riots;
- OCR GCE History: British Period Study: British Government in the Age of Revolution 1783–1832: extent of popular discontent 1830–1832

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Teacher's notes

This lesson uses sources from The National Archives to examine the 'Captain Swing' protests in 1830. These protests included acts of arson, machine breaking and the sending of threatening letters. Disturbances in the countryside were caused by the fall in the price for agricultural produce, wages and the introduction of threshing machines.

Students start the activity by exploring an extract from a letter from Hadlow in Kent to the Home Office, 1830, about a suspicious fire at a barn. Can this be seen as an example of rural protest?

Next, they examine a reward poster from Kent, probably posted in 1830, to find the persons(s) responsible for the burning of buildings and stock at a farm in Kent.

The third source is a letter about the destruction of threshing machines in east Kent. Why would these be attacked by rural workers? The fourth source for consideration is a poster about a fire in Pampisford, Cambridge, and offers students the opportunity to find out how the authorities attempted to catch those responsible. The next source is an unusual form of poster distributed in Surrey in December 1830. The poster is written in the form of a 'Conversation between two labourers' and infers possible reasons for agricultural distress. The sixth source is a notice from magistrates in Dorking, Surrey, warning labourers against handbills circulated in the area aimed at exciting discontent and warned them from being drawn into crimes. Students could investigate a possible connection between sources 5 and 6.

Finally, students look at two very short notes, signed 'Swing' and sent to the University of Cambridge, which threaten to burn down two colleges. What is the significance of these sources in the context of the rural protest? Were they linked to the wider demand for political reform in the form of the Great Reform Bill? Were the notes an example of an attack on class privilege? Or were they threatening letters attempting to settle old scores or part of a picture of general discontent in 1830s Britain? The answer is not clear.

Please note that content in this lesson has been redeveloped from content in our [Power, Politics & Protest](#) focussed topic website, which has been archived as the interactive parts no longer work.

Teacher's notes

Sources:

Illustration image: A Swing' letter, sent to Kings College, University of Cambridge, 8 December 1830. Catalogue ref: HO 52/6

Source 1: Extract from a letter from Hadlow in Kent to the Home Office about a suspicious fire, 1830. Catalogue ref: HO 52/8 folios 87& 88

Source 2: A reward poster from Kent, probably posted in August or September 1830. Catalogue ref: HO 52/8

Source 3: A letter about the destruction of threshing machines in Kent, 22 September, 1830. Catalogue ref: HO 52/8

Source 4: A poster about a fire in Pampisford, Cambridge, December 1830. Catalogue ref: HO 52/6

Source 5: A poster distributed in Surrey in December 1830. Catalogue ref: HO 52/10 f.284

Source 6: Extract from a poster produced in Dorking, Surrey, in December 1830. Catalogue ref: HO 52/10 f.285

Source 7: 'Swing' letters, sent to two colleges at the University of Cambridge and forwarded to Lord Melbourne, 'Secretary for the Home Department', 8 December 1830. Catalogue ref: HO 52/6

Background

The 1830s began badly for the government with numerous acts of arson, machine breaking and the sending of threatening letters. Popularly known as the 'Swing Riots', this series of disturbances engulfed parts of rural England in the second half of 1830. Prompted by a decline in the prices of agricultural produce and wages, the introduction of threshing machines, and an influx of Irish labour, the rioters wished to restore their standard of living.

Most of the 'Swing Riots' took place in rural south and south east England, but some took place elsewhere. Some were aimed at industrial rather than agricultural targets, such as the attacks on Buckinghamshire paper mills. Most 'Swing' activity was not overtly political but was phrased in terms of a defence of 'traditional rights' of the past.

The reaction of the government to the Swing disturbances was harsh. Following riots, 19 people were executed, 505 transported to Australia and 644 imprisoned. The story of individual incidents can often be put together, as in this lesson, from handbills and posters that offered rewards for the capture of rioters (and pardons for those who helped in their arrest). The labourers gained little from their protest.

It is helpful to see the riots in the context of a government under pressure to extend political rights. Although in early November 1830, Tory Prime Minister Duke of Wellington declared against parliamentary reform, the government was defeated a few weeks later. This led to his resignation and the formation of a new administration under the Whig, Earl Grey. Over the next 14 months, campaigns inside and outside Parliament were waged. Their aims were to increase the numbers of people entitled to vote and to redistribute some seats from the poorly populated 'rotten boroughs' to the new urban centres such as Birmingham, Bradford and Manchester.

Tasks

Task 1

Two pages from a letter from Hadlow in Kent to the Home Office about a suspicious fire, 1830, Catalogue ref: HO 52/8 folios 87& 88

An incendiary was a person who deliberately sets fire to property or a person who stirs up political quarrels.

Read Source 1a and 1b.

- What was reported in this letter to the Home Office?
- Why do you think some agricultural labourers decided to set farms on fire?
- How did local labourers react to the fire?
- Why do you think this letter is a Home Office record?

Task 2

A reward poster from Kent, probably posted in August or September 1830, Catalogue ref: HO 52/8

- How many times was Jonathan Thompson's property set on fire?
- What was the job of the County Fire Office?
- Why do you think these fires were started?
- What do you think was the purpose of this poster?
- How does the creator of the poster try to make it demand attention?
- Is there a connection between this source and source 1?

Task 3

A letter about the destruction of threshing machines in Kent, 22 September, 1830, Catalogue ref: HO 52/8

A 'thrashing machine' was invented in the later years of the eighteenth century to separate grain from the stalks and husks of corn- threshing machine in modern spelling.

Read source 3a and 3b.

- Why did the Clerk to the Magistrates write to the Secretary of State?
- How does the writer describe the disturbances?

Tasks

- Why was it difficult to find out who was involved in these activities?
- What impression does this letter give you about the situation in East Kent?

Task 4

A poster about a fire in Pampisford, Cambridge, December 1830, Catalogue ref: HO 52/6

- What was the cause of the fire described in the poster?
- Who was found responsible for starting the fire?
- What do you think was the purpose of this poster?
- What does the poster reveal about the methods of criminal detection in the 1830s?

Task 5

A poster distributed in Surrey in December 1830, Catalogue ref: HO 52/10 f.284

- Do you think the poster was produced by the magistrates or by the labourers?
- What form does the poster take?
- Why do you think it has been written this way?
- What audience do you think this poster is aimed at?
- How much do the labourers claim to be earning each day?
- How healthy was their basic diet do you think?
- If a labourer were unemployed, he and his family would have to go to the workhouse. What were the conditions like in the workhouse, according to this conversation?
- How does labourer B explain the fact that farmers cannot afford to pay higher wages?
- How does labourer B expect the disturbances to end?

Task 6

Extract from a poster produced in Dorking, Surrey, in December 1830. Catalogue ref: HO 52/10 f.285

- Do you think this 'Notice' poster was produced by the magistrates?
- Who was blamed for the disturbances?
- What reasons does this poster give to explain why ordinary labourers have become involved in the disturbances?
- Who was the intended audience of this poster?

Tasks

Task 7

'Swing' letters, sent to two colleges at the University of Cambridge and forwarded to Lord Melbourne, 'Secretary for the Home Department', 8 December 1830, Catalogue ref: HO 52/6

- 'Swing' letters were often sent to farmers demanding that they increased wages for farm workers. Farmers were warned if they did comply, their property would be damaged or burnt.
- What was Dr Lamb's reaction to the 'threatening letters' mentioned in source 7a?
- Can you explain his reaction to the letters?
- What does his letter infer about the Government's response to this matter?
- Why might someone send 'Swing letters' to these university colleges in 1830?

Source 1: Pages from a letter from Hadlow in Kent to the Home Office about a suspicious fire, 1830. Catalogue ref: HO 52/8 folios 87 & 88

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My Lord

I regret much, that, after the report which was directed to be sent to your Lordship from the bench at Tonbridge on Wednesday last stating that this part of the country was perfectly quiet, I am obliged to inform you that about 3 o'clock this morning a fire supposed to have been the work of an incendiary was discovered in a barn at North Peth in this parish, on the property of Mr. Idle and in the occupation of Mr. George Barton, which

Source 1: Pages from a letter from Hadlow in Kent to the Home Office about a suspicious fire, 1830. Catalogue ref: HO 52/8 folios 87 & 88

together with a coach house and lodge was entirely consumed. The loss to Mr. Barton in corn &c. is computed at about £300. He is however insured to a large amount. I have been on the spot and I cannot discover the least suspicion attaching to any individual.

I am happy to inform your Lordship that Mr. Barton speaks in very high terms of the assistance afforded by the labouring class on the occasion, by whose active exertions, in some instances at great personal risk, the fire was prevented becoming much more destructive.

I have thought it my duty to make this

Transcript: Source 1

My Lord,

I regret much, that, after the report which was directed to be sent to your Lordship from the bench [magistrate or judge in a law court] at Tonbridge on Wednesday last stating that this part of the country was perfectly quiet, I am obliged to inform you that about 3 o'clock this morning a fire (supposed to have been the work of an incendiary) was discovered in a barn at North Firth in this parish, on the property of Mr. Idle and in the occupation of Mr. George Barton, which together with a coach house and lodge, was entirely consumed. The loss to Mr. Barton in corn &c is computed [valued] at about £300. He is however insured to a larger amount. I have been on the spot and I cannot discover the least suspicion attaching to any individual.

I am happy to inform your Lordship that Mr. Barton speaks in very high terms of the assistance afforded by the labouring chaps on the occasion, by whose active exertions, in some instances at great personal risk, the fire was prevented becoming much more destructive.

...

Source 2: A reward poster from Kent, probably posted in August or September 1830. Catalogue ref: HO 52/8

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FIRE!

£120 Reward

WHEREAS on TUESDAY, Aug. 3, about 12 o'Clock in the Day, and on the following FRIDAY, about 6 o'Clock in the Evening, and on MONDAY, Aug. 9, about 7 o'Clock in the Evening, and again on SATURDAY, the 28th August, about 7 o'Clock in the Evening, the Premises of Mr. JONATHAN THOMPSON, at Counter Corner, and Hendon, near Seven Oaks, Kent, were WILFULLY FIRED, by which BUILDINGS and STOCK have been destroyed of considerable Value, £100 REWARD is therefore offered by the

COUNTY FIRE OFFICE

(where the Property was insured) for the Discovery of the Incendiary, or Incendiaries, and will be paid on Conviction by the above Office, in Addition to £20, offered by Mr. THOMPSON, and any other Rewards offered by Act of Parliament and otherwise.

Any Accomplice giving Evidence that may lead to Conviction may receive the above Rewards, and His Majesty's Pardon will be applied for in his Favor.

J. A. BEAUMONT,
Secretary, County Fire Office, Regent Street, London.

W. GLINDON, Printer, Rupert Street, Haymarket, London.

Transcript: Source 2

FIRE!

£120 Reward

WHEREAS on TUESDAY, Aug. 3, about 12 o' Clock in the Day, and on the following FRIDAY, about 6 o' Clock in the Evening, and on MONDAY, Aug. 9, about 7 o' Clock in the Evening, and again on SATURDAY, the 28th August, about 7 o' Clock in the Evening, the Premises of Mr. JONATHAN THOMPSON, at Counter Corner, and Hendon, near Seven Oaks, Kent, were WILFULLY FIRED, by which BUILDINGS and STOCK have been destroyed of considerable Value, £100 REWARD is therefore offered by the

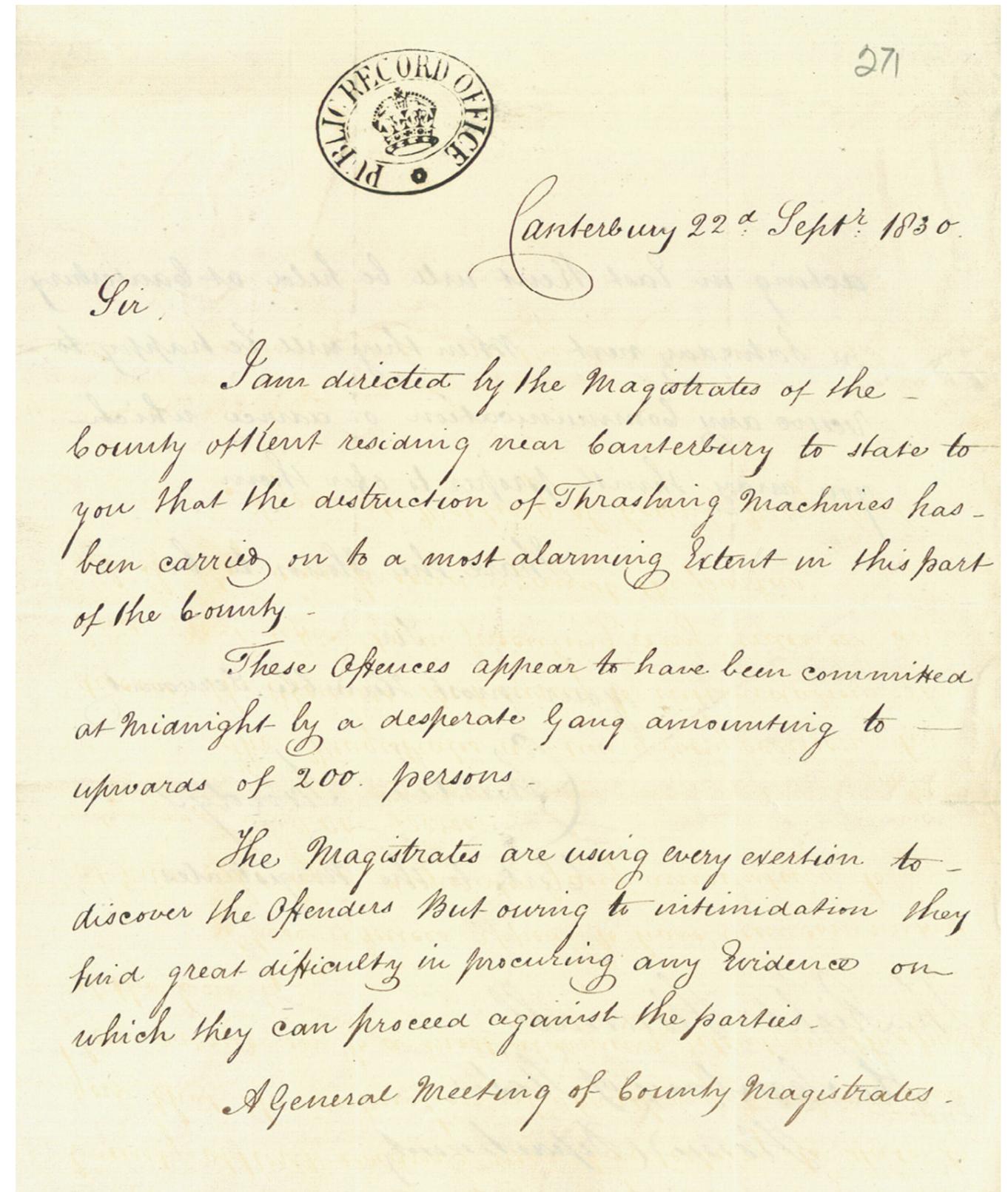
COUNTY FIRE OFFICE

(where the Property was insured) for the Discovery of the Incendiary, or Incendiaries, and will be paid on Conviction by the above Office, in Addition to £20, offered by Mr. THOMPSON, and any other Rewards offered by Act of Parliament and otherwise.

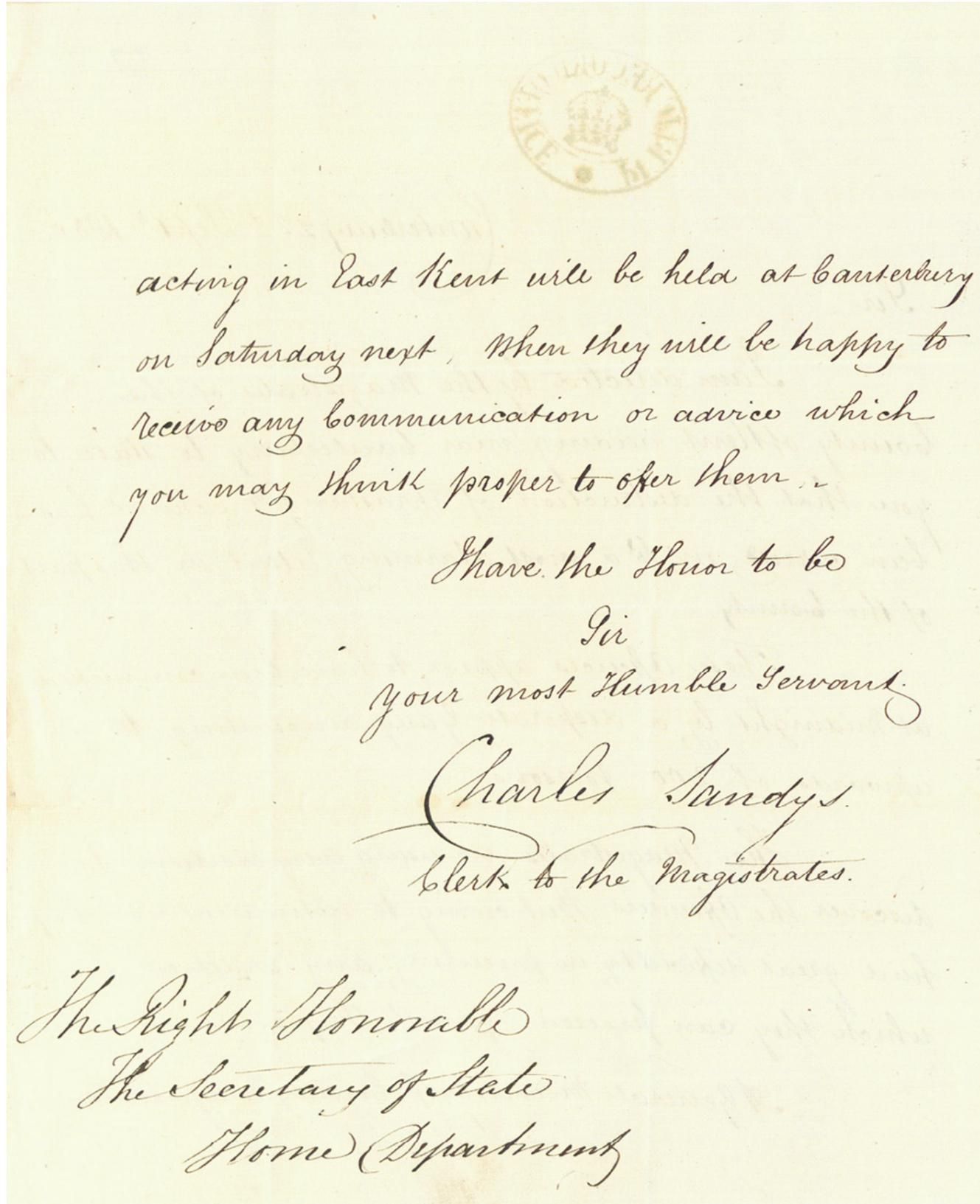
Any Accomplice giving Evidence that may lead to Conviction may receive the above Rewards, and His Majesty's Pardon will be applied for in his Favor.

J. A. BEAUMONT,
Secretary, County Fire Office, Regent Street, London.

Source 3: A letter about the destruction of threshing machines in Kent, 22 September, 1830. Catalogue Ref: HO 52/8



Source 3: A letter about the destruction of threshing machines in Kent, 22 September, 1830. Catalogue Ref: HO 52/8



Transcript: Source 3

Canterbury 22nd September 1830

Sir,

I am directed by the magistrates of the County of Kent residing near Canterbury to state to you that the destruction of thrashing machines has been carried on to a most alarming extent in this part of the county.

These offences appear to have been committed at midnight by a desperate gang amounting to upwards of 200 persons.

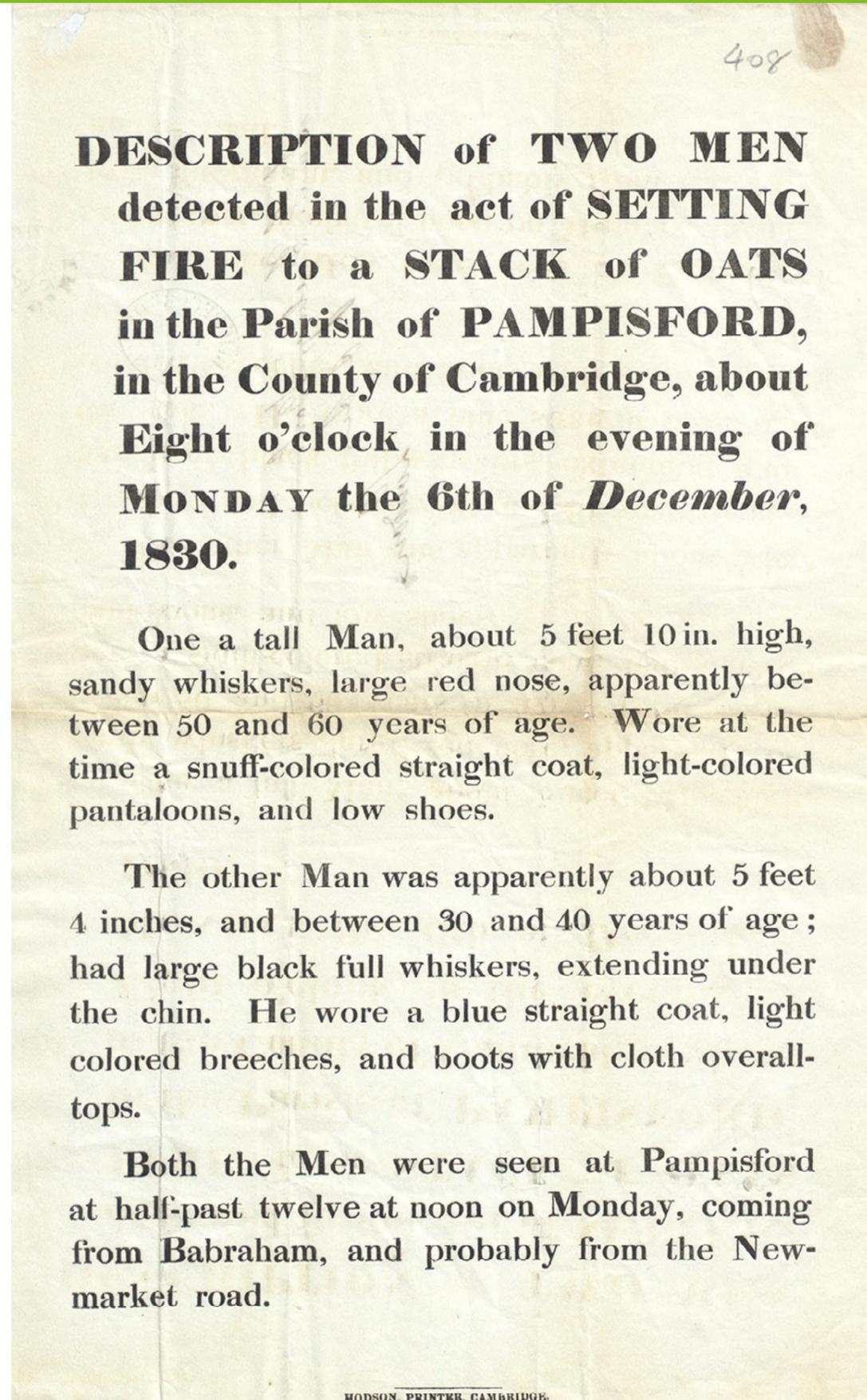
The magistrates are using every exertion to discover the offenders, but owing to intimidation they find great difficulty in procuring [getting] any evidence on which they can proceed against the parties.

A general meeting of county magistrates acting in East Kent will be held at Canterbury on Saturday next, when they will be happy to receive any communication or advice which you may think proper to offer them.

I have the honor to be,
Sir,
Your most humble servant
Charles Sandys
Clerk to the Magistrates

The Right Honorable
The Secretary of State
Home Department.

Source 4: A poster about a fire in Pampisford, Cambridge, December 1830. Catalogue Ref: HO 52/6



Transcript: Source 4

DESCRIPTION of TWO MEN detected in the act of SETTING FIRE to a STACK of OATS in the Parish of PAMPISFORD, in the County of Cambridge, about Eight o'clock in the evening of MONDAY the 6th of December, 1830.

One a tall Man, about 5 feet 10in. high, sandy whiskers, large red nose, apparently between 50 and 60 years of age. Wore at the time a snuff-coloured [yellow/brown colour] straight coat, light-coloured pantaloons [trousers], and low shoes.

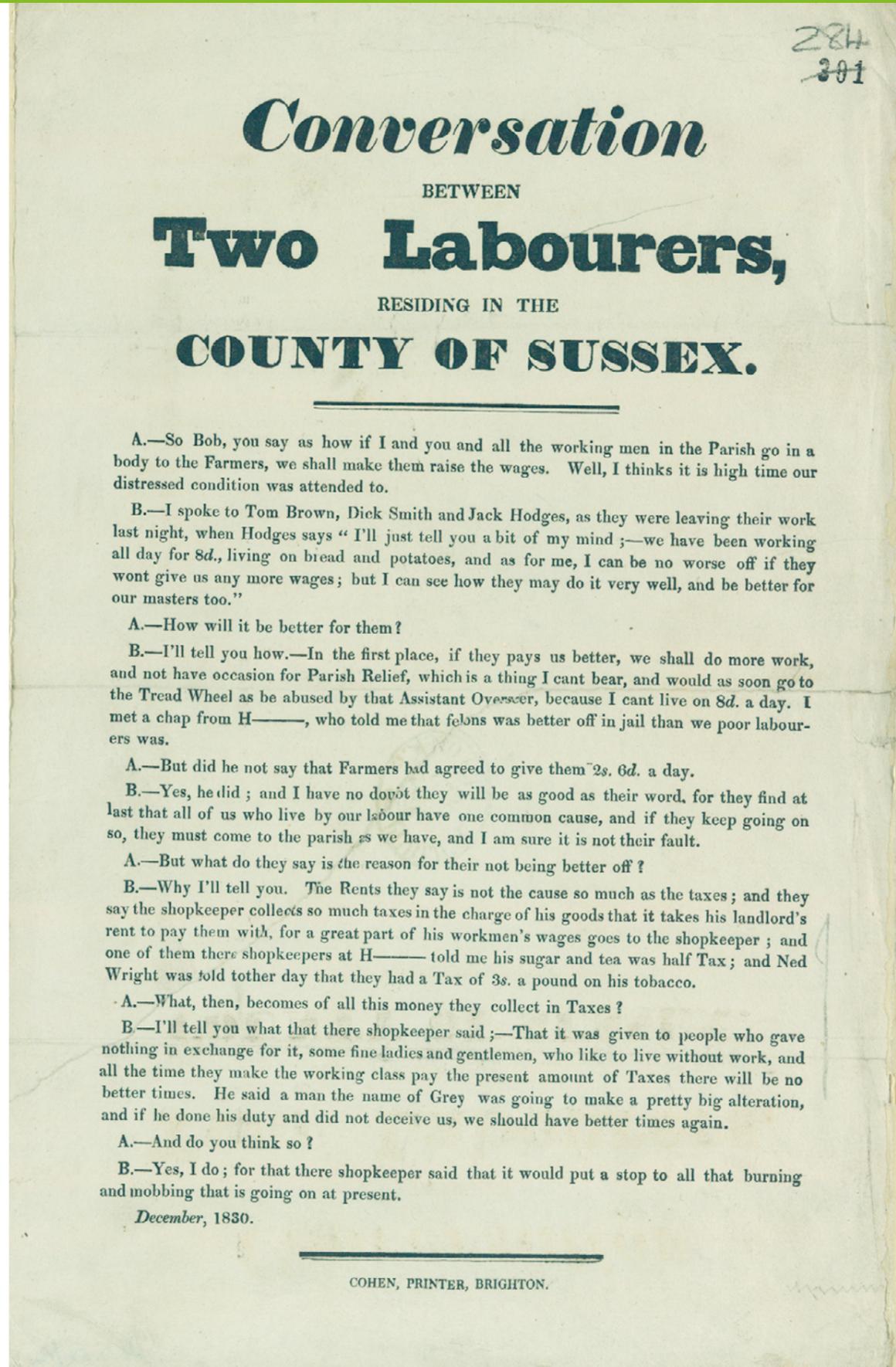
The other Man was apparently about 5 feet 4 inches, and between 30 and 40 years of age; had large black full whiskers, extending under the chin. He wore a blue straight coat, light coloured breeches, and boots with cloth overall-tops.

Both the Men were seen at Pampisford at half-past twelve at noon on Monday, coming from Babraham, and probably from the Newmarket road

HODSON, PRINTER, CAMBRIDGE.

Source 5: A poster distributed in Surrey in December 1830. Catalogue

Ref: HO 52/10 f.284



Transcript: Source 5

Tread wheel: a punishment used in prisons. It was a wheel turned by a person treading, climbing, or pushing with their feet.

Parish Relief: Each parish was responsible for giving help to poor people in their area and for raising the taxes to do this. Overseers collected this tax. This system was sometimes abused and the able-bodied poor had to work very hard for the help they received.

Transcript

Conversation
BETWEEN
Two Labourers,
RESIDING IN THE
COUNTY OF SUSSEX.

A. – So Bob, you say as how if I and you and all the working men in the Parish go in a body to the Farmers, we shall make them raise the wages. Well, I thinks it is high time our distressed condition was attended to.

B. – I spoke to Tom Brown, Dick Smith and Jack Hodges, as they were leaving their work last night, when Hodges says “I’ll just tell you a bit of my mind ; – we have been working all day for 8d., living on bread and potatoes, and as for me, I can be no worse off if they won’t give us any more wages; but I can see how they may do it very well, and be better for our masters too.”

A. – How will it be better for them?

B. – I’ll tell you how. – In the first place, if they pays us better, we shall do more work, and not have occasion for Parish Relief, which is a thing I can’t bear, and would as soon go to the Tread Wheel as be abused by that Assistant Overseer, because I can’t live on 8d (pennies) a day. I met a chap from H-----, who told me that felons was better off in jail than we poor labourers was.

A. – But did he not say that Farmers had agreed to give them 2 shillings 6 pennies. a day.

B. – Yes, he did; and I have no doubt they will be as good as their word, for they find at last

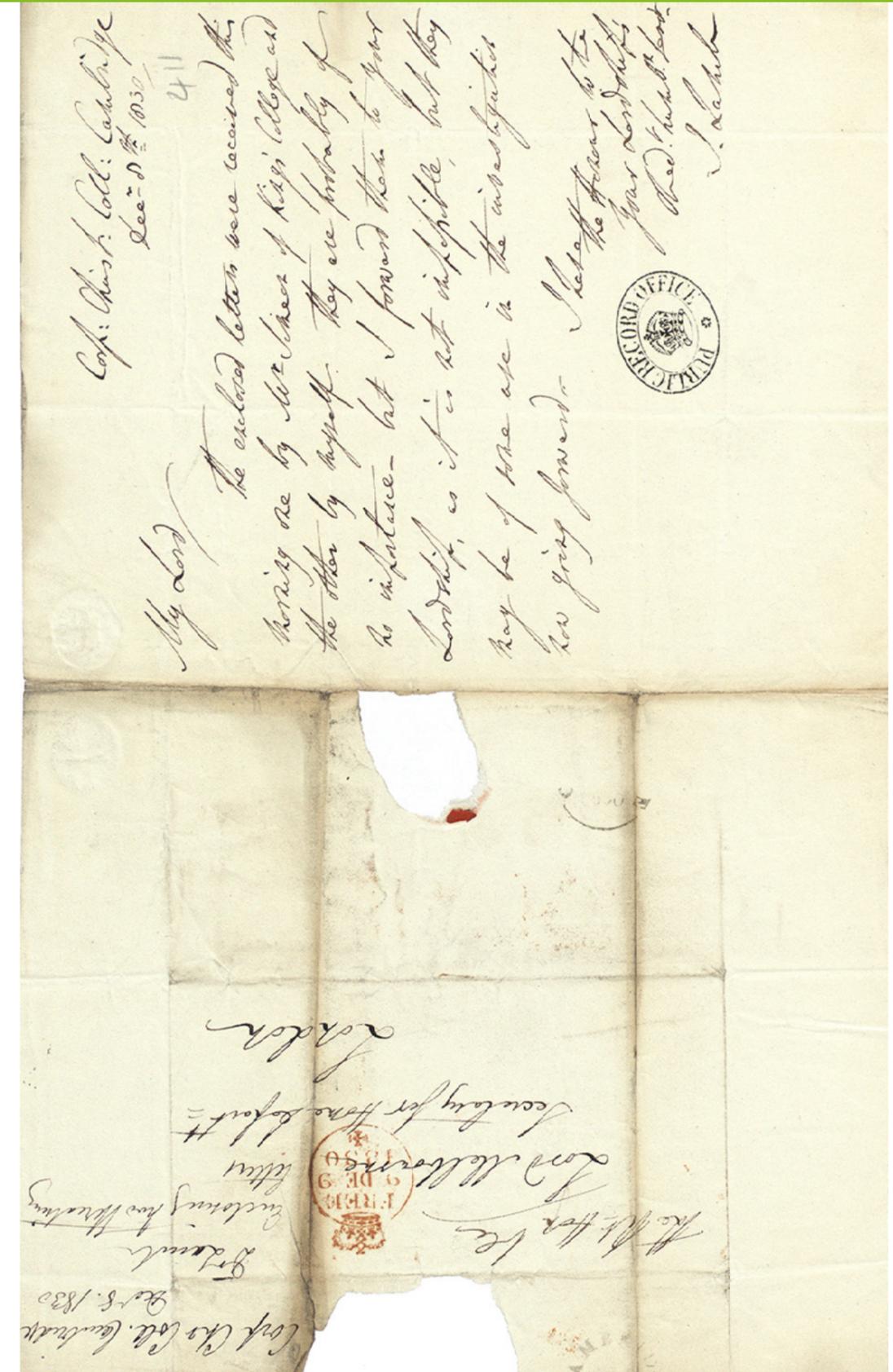
Transcript: Source 6

Notice.

It has been made to appear to the Magistrates acting for the Hundred [division of land] of Wotton, that Hand-bills [small posters] have been circulated and stuck up in three of the Parishes of this Hundred, tending to excite discontent in the minds of the labouring Classes, and to create dissatisfaction and ill-will towards the Government, through the means of deception and misrepresentation, the Magistrates, - with a view to protect the honest labourer from the mischievous designs of men, known in this case to be strangers to the county, and to have no common interest with those whom they would mislead, - feel themselves called upon, in their characters of conservators of the public peace, and as the true friends of the labourers amongst whom they live, to warn them against the objects of these strangers, who, if they should excite them into violations of the law, would, as has been done on so many recent occasions, leave them to suffer the consequences of crime, which, but for such influence, they might never have thought of committing.

...

Source 7a: 'Swing' letter sent to two colleges at the University of Cambridge and forwarded to Lord Melbourne, 'Secretary for the Home Department', 8 December 1830. Catalogue Ref: HO 52/6



Transcript: Source 7a

Corp. Chr. Coll. Cambridge [Corpus Christi College]
Dec 8. 1830

Dr Lamb
Enclosing two threatening letters

The Rt. Hon'ble [Right Honourable]
Lord Melbourne
Secretary for Home Dept.
London

Corp. Christ. Coll. Cambridge
Dec 8th 1830

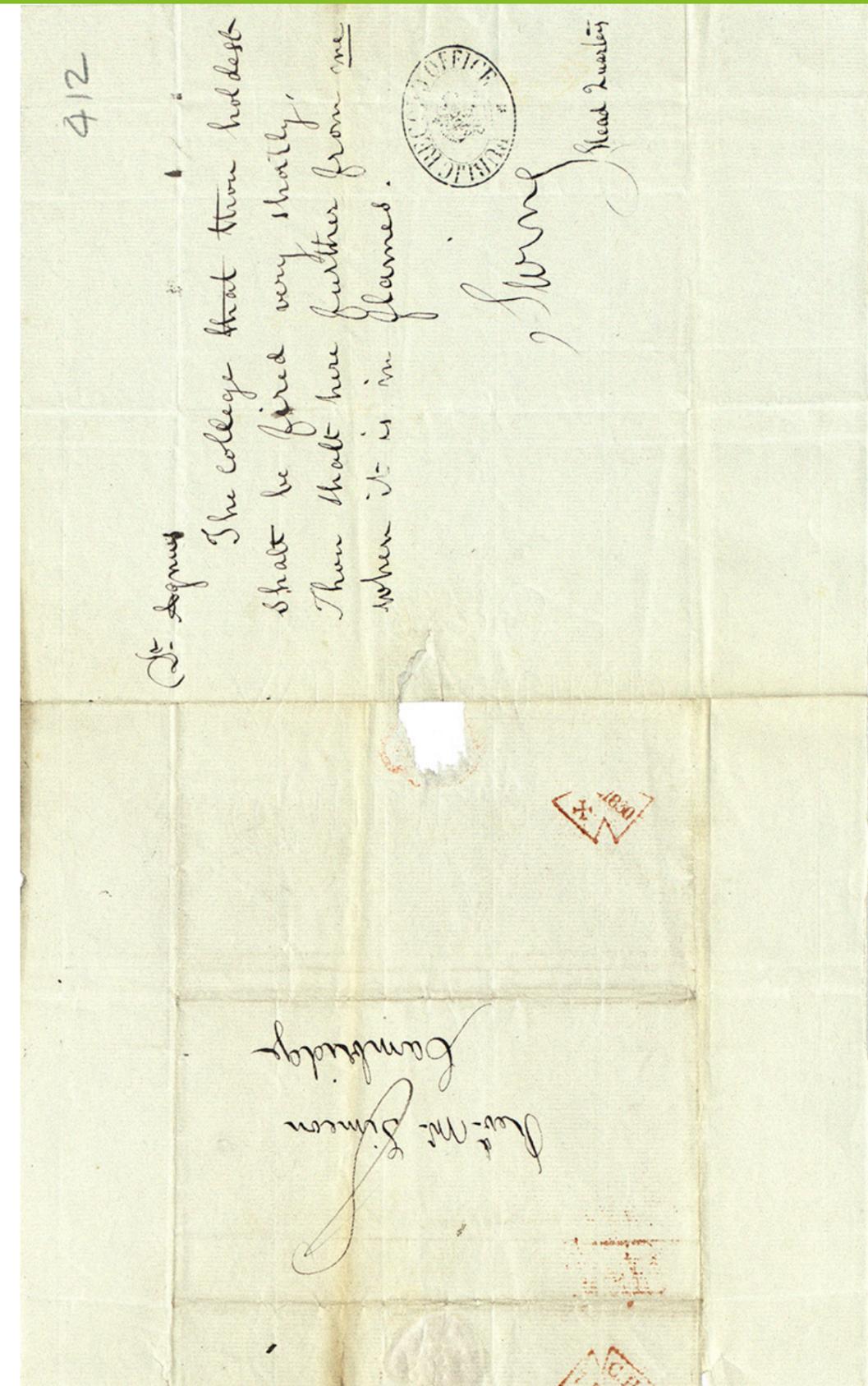
My Lord

The enclosed letters were received this morning one by Mr Simeon of King's College and the other by myself. They are probably of no importance - but I forward them to your Lordship, as it is not impossible but they may be of some use in the investigations now going forwards.

I have
the Honour to be
Your Lordship's obedient
humble servant

J. Lamb

Source 7b: 'Swing' letter sent to two colleges at the University of Cambridge and forwarded to Lord Melbourne, 'Secretary for the Home Department', 8 December 1830. Catalogue Ref: HO 52/6



Transcript: Source 7c

Revd. Sir,

Thou wilt soon see, that I have not forgot thee, nor the college that thou belongist to.

Thou shalt hear further from me when Kinngs College is in flames.

Swing
Head Quarters

External links

More sources and information on the Swing riots from the [Hampshire History website](https://www.hampshire-history.com/the-swing-riots).¹

[Tolpuddle Martyrs and Captain Swing](https://www.tolpuddlemartyrs.org.uk/story/swing-rebellion).²

LSE blog post with [maps showing 'Swing Riots'](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2020/09/28/rage-against-the-machine-lessons-from-the-swing-riots-in-england) link to threshing machines.³

Connections to curriculum

Key stage 4

Edexcel GCSE: Crime and punishment in eighteenth- and nineteenth century Britain

OCR's GCSE: (History B Schools History Project) Crime and Punishment, c.1250 to present

Key stage 5

AQA GCE History: The impact of industrialisation: Britain, c1783–1832: Economic developments: continuing industrialisation and developments in key industries; agricultural change; economic policies and free trade.

Edexcel GCE History: Industrialisation and protest, c1785–c1870: the Swing Riots;

OCR GCE History: British Period Study: British Government in the Age of Revolution 1783–1832: extent of popular discontent 1830–1832

¹ <https://www.hampshire-history.com/the-swing-riots>

² <https://www.tolpuddlemartyrs.org.uk/story/swing-rebellion>

³ <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2020/09/28/rage-against-the-machine-lessons-from-the-swing-riots-in-england>



Why do our hyperlinks come with footnotes?

Our resources are designed to be printed and used in classrooms, which means hyperlinks aren't always accessible digitally. We include the full link at the bottom of the page so that you can type in the address without distracting from the main text of the lesson materials.

Did you know?

The National Archives Education Service also offers free workshops onsite in Kew and online in your classroom.

Our [Onsite Workshops](#) are available for free here at The National Archives and allow students to experience genuine original documents reflecting over 1000 years of history. From Elizabeth I's signature to the telegrams of the sinking Titanic, students love the wow-factor of being able to see real history on the desk in front of them.

Our [Online Workshops](#) allow our Education Officers to teach through your projector, leading discussions and guiding students through activities based around original documents. All you need is a computer with a projector, webcam and microphone. We'll arrange a test call before your session to check the tech is working.

Find out more:

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