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The Sherborne Riots of October 1831

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List of abbreviations

APP	Association for the Protection of Property
b.	Year of birth
c.	circa
d.	Year of death
DCC	<i>Dorset County Chronicle</i>
DHC	Dorset History Centre
DNV	Did not vote
DRYC	Dorset Regiment of Yeomanry Cavalry
ext.	extortion
Fh	Freeholder
J.P.	Justice of the Peace (magistrate)
N/A	Not applicable
N/K	Not known
Obj.	Vote objected to
OPC	Online Parish Clerks
ret.	Retired
SJ	<i>Sherborne Journal</i>
SM	<i>Sherborne Mercury</i>
Te	Tenant
TNA	The National Archive
UKDA	United Kingdom Data Archive

Thornford, 38 Beer-Hacket, Caundle-Bishop and Caundle-Wake, 43A-B Lillington, 44 Lewston, 45 Longburton, 46 Folke, 47 Caundle Marsh, 96 Holnest.⁶

In 1831, the Division of Sherborne had a combined population of 6,878, of which almost 60 per cent (4,075) were living in the parish of Sherborne. Of the 1,809 males (44 per cent) in the parish population only 945 of these (52 per cent) were aged 20 or over, showing that there was a large population of children and teenagers. This correlates with the size of families in the period, with more than four children being common. Of the 985 family units in the parish, 18 per cent were primarily involved in agriculture (180), 57 per cent in trades, manufacturing or handicrafts (559) with the remaining 25 per cent unclassified (246).⁷

Table 1 gives a more detailed breakdown of the occupations of 945 males of 20 years of age or older in the parish of Sherborne.⁸ The only figures quoted for female workers from this source were the considerable number of household servants (172), though it can be inferred from the figures on families that large numbers of female workers were being employed in occupations involving trades, manufacturing or handicrafts. It should also be remembered that child-labour was common in this period, particularly in textile mills and similar early industrial processes, though no exact figures are provided in the statistics from 1831.

Occupation	No.	%	Details
Labourers employed in agriculture	177	19	Includes Graziers, Cowkeepers, Shepherds, Farm Servants, Gardeners and Nurserymen
Land occupiers not employing labour	10	1	Occupiers of land who employ no labourer other than of their own family
Land occupiers employing labour	19	2	Occupiers of land who constantly employ and pay one or more than one labourer or farm servant in husbandry
Labourers employed outside of agriculture	103	11	Includes Miners, Fishermen, Boatmen, Excavators of canals, Roadmakers and Toll Collectors
Employed in manufacture or in making manufacturing machinery	35	4	Does <i>not</i> include labourers in warehouses, porters or messengers
Employed in retail trade or in handicraft as masters or workmen	446	47	Includes Masters, Shopmen, Journeyman, Apprentices or in any capacity requiring skill in the business
Capitalists, bankers, professional and other educated men	59	6	Includes Wholesale Merchants, Bankers, Capitalists, Professional Persons, Artists, Architects, Teachers, Clerks, Surveyors and other educated men
Male servants	12	1	Includes waiters and attendants in Inns
Other males	84	9	Includes retired Tradesmen, Superannuated Labourers, and males diseased or disabled in body or mind
Total	945	100	

Table 1: Occupations of men aged 20 years or over in the parish of Sherborne in 1831

1.2 Economics and industry

The large numbers of residents of Sherborne involved in the skilled work of “handicrafts” in 1831 shown in Table 1 provides evidence of the influence of specific industries within Sherborne or nearby. These included the production of silk, gloves, shirt buttons, haberdashery wares and bone lace. This work was divided between manufactories with high concentrations of workers in the town and ‘putting out work’ to households dispersed across the parish. Both types of

⁶ Lydlinch and Up-Cerne do not appear as they were displaced parishes from the Sherborne Hundred.

⁷ Rickman, *Abstract of the Answers and Returns Made Pursuant* pp. 158.

⁸ *Ibid* pp. 156-160.

production were undertaken by adults and minors, with children as young as six being involved in button making.⁹ By the late eighteenth century, the gloving industry in Yeovil, Somerset, had far outstripped traditional woollen textile manufacture in the town. The labour-intensive processes of skinning, tanning and gloving involved thousands of workers in a twenty-mile radius around Yeovil.¹⁰ So although Sherborne had no glove manufactories, the proximity of the two towns, only six miles apart, meant that ‘putting out’ the final stage of the process to mainly female (adult and child) workers in the town and its environs became an important source of employment.

Sherborne’s industrial growth in the late eighteenth Century also relied on a switch from wool and linen textile production, though in this case to silk throwing. This intermediate process, involved drawing the filaments out over 20-30 metres, followed by cleaning and twisting, to make them strong enough for the latter process of weaving (see Figure 2). In 1753 John Sharrer, a London silk-thrower leased Westbury Mill in Sherborne, built a new mill house and converted it from grinding corn to silk throwing. After Sharrer’s death in the 1760s his nephew William Willmott took over the Westbury Mill and ran two other mills at Cerne Abbas and Stalbridge. William both expanded the business and its infra-structure before his death in 1787, whereupon his wife Mary took over the management. In 1800 Thomas Willmott (b. 1778), William's second son, was taken into partnership by his mother, and he would go on to become the predominant ‘silk master’ in the town.¹¹ Along with Westbury Mill, the Castle or East Mill (1809) and the Middle Mill (1814), by 1831 Thomas Willmott and his family were running three major concerns on the periphery of the town. The fourth, their main rival, the central Abbey Mill was owned by John Gouger having been in operation since about 1740 (see).¹²

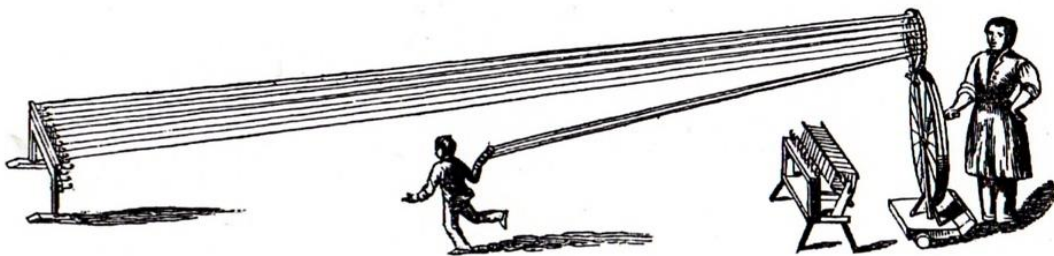


Figure 2: Silk throwing (c.1843)

The early part of the nineteenth Century saw the apogee of silk throwing in Sherborne with the Willmott family running 8,000 spindles and employing 600 workers alone. However, in 1826 restrictions and duties on foreign imports of silk were lifted and the market price of silk began to fall. Over the following few years Thomas Willmott responded by cutting silk workers’ wages, eventually by more than 30 per cent, and from 1829 reducing overall production and laying off

⁹ Cooke, G. A. *Topography of Great Britain or, British Travellers Pocket Directory; being an accurate and comprehensive topographical and statistical description of all the counties in England, Scotland and Wales with adjacent Islands: illustrated with maps of the counties, which form a complete British Atlas. Vol. II containing Somersetshire and Dorsetshire* (London: Sherwood, Neely, and Jones, 1820) p. 49, 116.

¹⁰ Osborn, Bob “Leather and Gloving in Yeovil” *Yeovil’s Virtual Museum, the A-to-Z of Yeovil’s History*. Retrieved from <http://www.yeovilhistory.info/gloving-intro.htm>.

¹¹ TNA Willmott of Sherborne, Silk Throwers. Retrieved from:

<https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/2c826b42-697c-4bf8-ad0f-34ac3156bc4a>

¹² Davey, John (edit. Bellamy, Peter) *Dorset Historic Towns Survey: Sherborne* (Dorset County Council, 2011) Part 5.5 p. 51; Percy, Edward Thomas *Numerical Terrier (to accompany the plan) of the Parish of Sherborne in the County of Dorset* (1834) [DHC PH 767-1] items 695a, 707, 810 and 497b.

hundreds of workers.¹³ The effect upon the working-class of Sherborne was severe, with the *Sherborne Mercury* commenting in April 1829:

We shall not be suspected of exaggeration when we state that one [silk] throwster in this neighbourhood [Thomas Willmott] has already discharged four hundred hands, and that others are daily losing the only employment by which they can have any hope of keeping themselves from the poor-rate.¹⁴

The silk workers were divided into a third who were waged and employed in the mills throwing silk, with the remaining two thirds of the workforce working at home winding silk as piece work. Most of the workers were women, many were 'young girls' and 'young children'. In 1832 those who toiled in the mills for 63 hours a week were earning 4s. 6d. as mill hands on a sliding scale down to 1s. for 'children'. Even more severe was the collapse in piece-rates for the 'putting out' winding work, falling by half, from 2s per pound in 1829 to 1s by 1832. Willmott estimated that an 'undistracted girl' working at home would produce two and a half to three pounds of hand wound silk a week.¹⁵ By 1832, Willmott's mills had diminished in size to 3,000 spindles and 150 employees, about a quarter of the workforce compared to when the silk trade was booming. His main competitors had withdrawn from the business and had closed the Abbey Mill.

The effect of 'free trade' legislation on the silk throwing industry in the late 1820s and early 1830s was matched in the gloving trade, exacerbating the deteriorating situation in Sherborne. In 1826, bans on the entry of foreign-made gloves were also lifted, with devastating effect on Yeovil's glove manufacturing.¹⁶ In 1829, the *Sherborne & Taunton Journal* reported:

The situation of our neighbouring poor who used to find employment in the glove manufactory in the town of Yeovil and all the adjoining districts, is, we regret to say, very distressing.¹⁷

Thomas Willmott stated to a government inquiry in 1832 that the 'given out' work in Sherborne from glove manufactories in Yeovil and nearby Milborne Port had almost completely dried up. This 'putting out' work of the Yeovil gloving trade, as with silk, involved in the main the labour of women and girls, so the incomes of working-class families in Sherborne and its environs were doubly affected by the depression in silk and glove manufacture. The distress caused by this economic decline was reflected in the annual bill for poor relief in the parish of Sherborne (see Figure 3). According to Willmott this had increased by £1,000 to £2,450 over the period 1823 to 1832.¹⁸ There is also evidence that separate poor relief payments were made from January to October 1829 "on account of Failure of Silk". Subsequent sums were made on the more general basis "of failure of work".¹⁹ The employment figures for 1831 in Table 1 thus need to be read with an eye to the large numbers of male workers who may have been unemployed despite their claimed 'occupation' and the fact that large numbers of female and child/teenage silk and gloving workers are not included in the survey.

¹³ Mr Thomas Willmott 9 May 1832 *Report from Select Committee on the Silk Trade: With the Minutes of Evidence, an Appendix, and Index* (United Kingdom: House of commons, 1832) p. 279.

¹⁴ *Sherborne Mercury* 06 April 1829.

¹⁵ Willmott, *Report from Select Committee on the Silk Trade* pp. 279-280.

¹⁶ Osborn, "Leather and Gloving in Yeovil".

¹⁷ *Sherborne & Taunton Journal* 21 May 1829.

¹⁸ Willmott, *Report from Select Committee on the Silk Trade* pp. 278.

¹⁹ Bartlett and Sons of Sherborne, Solicitors, Sherborne Overseers of the Poor monthly accounts 1818-1836 DHC D-BSS/4.

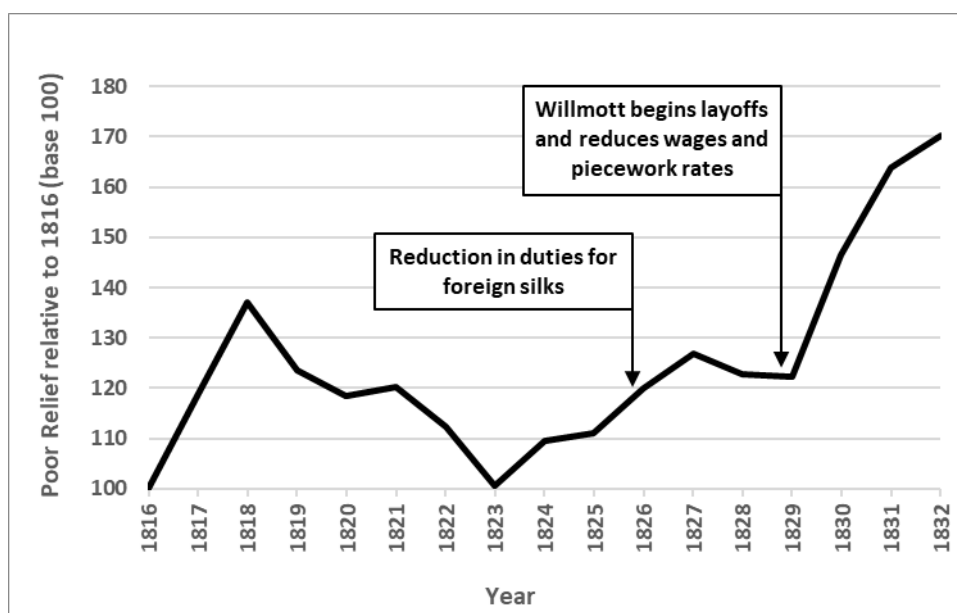


Figure 3: Poor relief bill for the parish of Sherborne (1816-1832)²⁰

Outside of these textile trades in Sherborne the main manufacturing employers in the town were Brewers and Maltsters. In 1831, at least two major concerns were operating, the Dorsetshire Brewery (established in 1796) on Long Street and owned by John Mills Thorne and the Old Bridewell gaol on Duck Street was converted to brewing after its closure in 1793.²¹ A number of other brewers and maltsters on Cheap Street and Trendle Street employed smaller numbers of workers. Figure 4 shows the locations of the major mills and breweries in Sherborne.

It is well documented that the introduction of mechanisation into arable agriculture during the Napoleonic Wars, particularly in southern England, began to have serious effects upon levels of employment and wages amongst agricultural labourers through the 1820s.²² Dorset was particularly hard hit with the wages of agricultural labourers some of the lowest in southern England. Table 2 gives average weekly wages in 1833 for male farm labourers in a selection of southern counties, all of which experienced Swing riots in 1830-31.²³

County	Weekly wage (Shillings and Pence)	Per cent of mean
Dorset	8s 8d	79%
Hampshire	10s 4d	95%
Kent	13s 7d	124%
Somerset	9s 10d	89%
Surrey	12s 9d	117%
Sussex	12s 6d	114%
Wiltshire	9s 5d	86%

Table 2: Average weekly wages of male agricultural labourers in a selection of southern English counties in 1833

²⁰ Data taken from Willmott, *Report from Select Committee on the Silk Trade* p. 279.

²¹ Davey & (Bellamy) *Dorset Historic Towns Survey: Sherborne* Part 5.5 p. 51.

²² Hobsbawm, Eric, and George Rudé *Captain Swing* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1970) Chap. 1.

²³ The data is quoted from Shave, Samantha Anne "Poor Law Reform and Policy Innovation in Rural Southern England, c.1780-1850" Unpublished PhD. (University of Southampton, 2010) p. 49, 55.

The irony of Dorset's position at the lower end of the wages scale was that there had been attempts, initiated by the famines of the 1790s, to support through parish relief the growing body of under- and unemployed labouring families. These policies which ranged from Speenhamland scales for outdoor relief maintenance payments to employment schemes in the winter months, had helped produce *lower* wages for agricultural labourers. This was because landowning employers took the opportunity, in the situation of an excess supply of labour, to refuse to increase or even decrease wages on the basis that the parish would take up the slack in supporting labourers' families. As the ratepayers' bill for poor relief grew in the eighteenth century and was ratcheted up again by the schemes introduced during the famines, a change in the philosophy of poor relief became apparent:

Dorothy Marshall has noted that the poor laws in the sixteenth century operated to maintain the subsistence of the poor. This concern with what she termed 'the prevention of poverty' was gradually abandoned and during the eighteenth century, the poor law authorities became concerned 'to prevent a rise in the rates'²⁴

Consequently, in the early nineteenth century agricultural labourers were caught between increasing pressure by rate payers to reduce the bill for poor relief and a relief system which encouraged employers to depress wages, leaving them and their families hardly able to subsist. In 1830, Dorset magistrate D. O. P. Okeden wrote a letter to Parliament which was published and widely distributed in Dorset.²⁵ Entitled *Poor-Relief and Labourers' wages* it explained the problematic relationship between wages and poor relief and, albeit through a bourgeois lens, the effect on the agricultural worker:

It is impolitic, because where all are paid alike, skill and zeal become annihilated, and the result must be a race of lazy inefficient workmen. So far the farmer suffers; the sufferings of the Labourer himself are more heavy. His skill unappreciated, his zeal unrewarded, the strong and intelligent Labourer sinks to the lowest point in his class; his pride of pleasing ceases, his still greater pride of independence is crushed. The inevitable consequence must be that finding advancement hopeless, he consents to fall, until at last he is degraded to a Parish slave, and passes his days in cheerless endurance of the present, and in sullen recklessness of the future.²⁶

This reading of the "crushed" agricultural labourer was complimented by other reports that emphasised a loss in productivity of rural workers and focused on their de-'moralisation', in the sense of a loss of morals. The reduction in productivity can be understood differently if we take the position of the agricultural labourer. It is obvious that it was not in the collective interest of farm labourers to work too hard in a long period of a dearth in employment and low wages, as it was counterproductive for all. This change in behaviour, which had been dated to the end of the eighteenth century based upon some dubious paradigm of a 'golden age', was perceived by the landowning and propertied as due to a loss of morals and directly connected to poor relief policy. Flame notes some of their responses to Parliamentary Commissions in the early 1830s:

²⁴ Flame, Michael John. "Reconstruction of social and political identities by the Dorset gentry, c. 1790-c.1834" Unpublished PhD. (University of Warwick, 1997) p. 146.

²⁵ It is noted on the frontispiece that the letter was "printed and sold by John Shipp" of Blandford and "sold by Penny, Sherborne", though it is unclear to which of the Penny family it is referring. See section 1.5.

²⁶ Okedean, D. O. P. *A Letter to the Members in Parliament for Dorsetshire on the subject of Poor-Relief and Labourers' Wages*. Second edition (Blandford, John Shipp, 1830) p. 10.

He [James Frampton] associated a host of 'evils' with poor relief: improvident marriages and increased population; reduced wages and diminished industry, disrespect for authority, discontent and incivility. Commenting on the 'moral character of the labouring classes...supported from the parish rates', the Select Committee on Criminal Convictions and Commitments remarked: 'The wretchedness of their condition, the want of regular habits, and the due subordination of the labourer to his employer, all tend greatly to the promotion of crime'. In the answers to the queries circulated by the Commission of Inquiry in 1832, witness after witness drew invidious contrast between the moral state of the independent labourer and his demoralised brother the parish paid pauper. The same litany was repeated in Dorset. Demoralised labourers were: 'Loose and lazy characters'. They had: 'the most desperate dispositions'. They were 'daring fellows ... poaching whilst in receipt of (their) weekly allowance'. They possessed 'a rebellious and unreasonable spirit'²⁷

We might instead read these behaviours as a response to poverty through social crime, to under- and unemployment by a 'go slow' and to their employers, landlords and the propertied with "disrespect, discontent and incivility" driven by class anger.

To a certain extent the problems of unemployment and underemployment facing the rural labourer and his family in the environs of Sherborne in the early nineteenth century had been offset by the emerging manufacturing industries in the town, particularly silk throwing. The attraction of mill-work and associated putting-out work from silk and gloving had led to a significant growth in population in the town, shown in Table 3.²⁸ This move from the rural to the urban, coerced by economic circumstance, was reflected in the early nineteenth century with around a seven per cent or greater increase every decade.

Year	Population	Per cent increase
1801	3,159	-
1811	3,370	7%
1821	3,622	7%
1831	4,075	12%
1841	4,758	17%

Table 3: Population of Sherborne.

Despite the wages and employment problems in arable farming, the data in Table 1 demonstrates that nearly a fifth of adult male workers and a similar fraction of family units in Sherborne parish were reliant on agricultural labour in 1831. It also shows that the number of landowners employing agricultural labourers (19) was small relative to the size of the parish and its population. By 1831 many farm labourers and their families in Sherborne and its environs were caught in a double bind, reducing wages and employment opportunities in the limited number of arable farms and a continuing depression in the local silk and regional gloving industries.

²⁷ Flame, "Reconstruction of social and political identities by the Dorset gentry" p. 163.

²⁸ Geo. T. Clark, *Superintending Inspector Report to the General Board of Health on a preliminary inquiry into the sewerage, drainage, and supply of water, and the sanitary condition of the inhabitants of the parish of Sherborne* (London: W. Clowes & sons, Stamford Street, for Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1850) Para. 11.

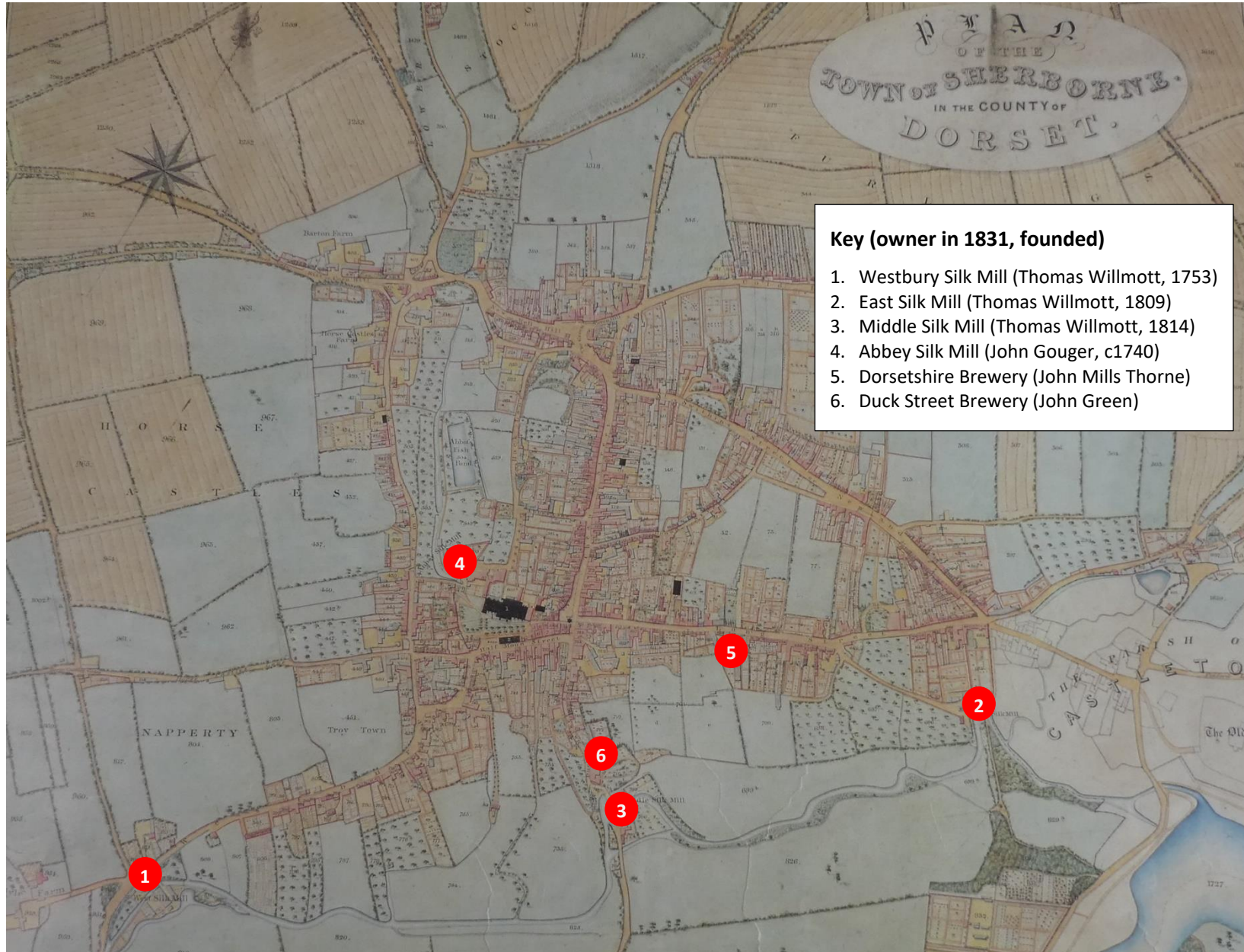


Figure 4: Sherborne with locations of major manufacturers and employers in 1831 (Percy 1834)

1.3 Land ownership

Sherborne was the largest parish in the Hundred (4,900 acres) and the Digby family based at Sherborne Castle were the largest landholders in the Division with 13,500 acres. A cursory survey of the 1834 Sherborne parish map apportionment shows that there were seven major landholders, though they all leased their land from the Digby estate.²⁹ These are listed in Table 4 with estimates of their holdings, which amount to more than half the available land in the parish. Most of these larger landowners were described as occupiers, with few sub-lets, and their principal land-usage being farming. It is these farms that provided the majority of the employment opportunities for agricultural labourers in the parish.

Landholder	Holding (acres) ³⁰	Content	Vote in County Election in 1831
John Symes	622	Mostly Digby leases	NK
Thomas Ensor	527	Mostly Digby leases	Ponsonby (objected to)
Elizabeth Hoddinott	353	Some freehold	DNV
Robert Stiby	345	All Digby leases	Ashley (objected to)
Samuel Blake	330	All Digby leases	NK
Elizabeth Miller	329	Mostly Digby leases	DNV
John Board Crocker	273	Some tenancies	Ponsonby (objected to)
Total	2759	56% of parish land	

Table 4: Major landholders in the parish of Sherborne in 1834

Although there were a number of freeholdings in the parish, these were generally small plots of land, gardens or buildings. Table 5 gives a list of the eleven freeholders (excluding Almshouse leases) owning ten or more plots.³¹ Although the freeholdings may have been more valuable land in the town, they are far less significant in terms of size than those held by the leading Digby leaseholders.

The hierarchy of ownership of land in the parish of Sherborne was based upon the land possessed by the Digby family. The majority of this was rented to the Digby lease holders, a select group of large farmers and landowners. This group sublet at a higher rent, pieces of land to smaller farmers, businesses and finally tenants. The freeholders ostensibly stood outside this chain of accumulation, though they too acted in many cases as landlords renting out their properties to tenants.

As a prospective tenant there was only one other route to housing outside of these two options, the alms-houses. There were over 80 of these properties in small clusters in the town, providing significant accommodation, mainly for the elderly. However, it is important to note that prospective alms-houses residents were subject to election by the 'brethren', respectable gentlemen of Sherborne who administrated the affairs and finances of the charity. There was no security of tenure as such, other than the 'goodwill' of these men. Surveys of land holdings by agricultural labourers in the parish demonstrate that very few if any owned or leased land, and certainly not in the quantities required to sustain a family. The majority were thus tenants of one sort or another, along with most of the artisans in Sherborne.

²⁹ The data in Table 4 was derived from Percy, *Numerical Terrier*.

³⁰ The land areas in this table were calculated to the nearest acre by adding acres and roods (to the nearest acre). Perches were ignored, so these figures are slightly conservative.

³¹ The data in Table 5 was derived from Percy, *Numerical Terrier*.

Freeholder	Freehold Plots	Holding (Acres) ³²	Tenants (households) ³³	Vote in 1831 county byelection
Robert Gordon	15	61	14	Ponsonby
William Chaffey	23	43	25	DNV
Samuel Whitty	24	20	29	Ponsonby
Thomas Fooks	11	13	10	Ashley (objected to)
Samuel Pretor (includes Samuel Pretor & Company)	15	13	19	Ponsonby
Samuel Scott	14	12	13	Ponsonby
Peter Batson	12	5	22	Ponsonby
Charles Brook	13	5	13	Ponsonby
George Warry	10	3	3	DNV
Champion Thomas	14	1	13	Ponsonby
Thomas Warr	23	0.7	23	Ashley

Table 5: Freeholders with more than ten plots in the parish of Sherborne in 1834

1.4 Housing, public health and the ‘dark village’

The housing and living conditions for the working-classes in Sherborne were generally grim. A report on sanitation published twenty years after the period of interest in 1850 by the Superintending Inspector to the General Board of Health stated:

the poorer classes almost everywhere throughout the town are forced to live in a state of filth and discomfort, the effect of which is almost equally injurious to their moral and physical condition.³⁴

The report noted a plethora of open sewers, privies (if they existed) being shared by numerous households and difficulties in obtaining clean water from a limited number of pumps and fountains several of which were privately owned, and thus access was at the whim of their owners.

One reoccurring feature of the report was the reference to ‘rookeries’ or ‘drains’ as they were colloquially known.³⁵ These were clusters of tiny cottages in courtyards behind the houses facing the street, called ‘courts’ and typically named after their landlord owners (see Figure 5 for examples). Living conditions were particularly bad in the ‘drains’. In a court action in 1847 over unpaid rent in ‘The Rookery’, Newland:

The defendant said the cottage he occupied was one of sixteen in The Rookery, which were without any necessary conveniences and were filthy beyond description, saying ‘they were not fit for dogs to live in’.³⁶

According to the report the courts (“drains”) and poor cottages had no sewerage systems, only cesspits and on average six families shared each privy.³⁷

³² The land areas in this table were calculated from summing acres, roods and perches to the nearest acre.

³³ This includes freeholds and Digby leases. It should be noted that a ‘tenant’ should be read as a (head of) household rather than just an individual.

³⁴ Clark, *Report to the General Board of Health* Para. 30.

³⁵ In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries ‘rookery’ referred to a slum occupied by poor people and frequently also by criminals and prostitutes. Such areas were overcrowded, with low-quality housing and little or no sanitation. The term also had a social meaning in that it referred to the supposed criminal activities of the residents.

³⁶ “1850 Board of Health Report on Sherborne” Note [xlii] *The Old Shirburnian Society* Retrieved from: <https://oldshirburnian.org.uk/1850-board-of-health-report-on-sherborne/>.

³⁷ Clark, *Report to the General Board of Health* Para. 24.

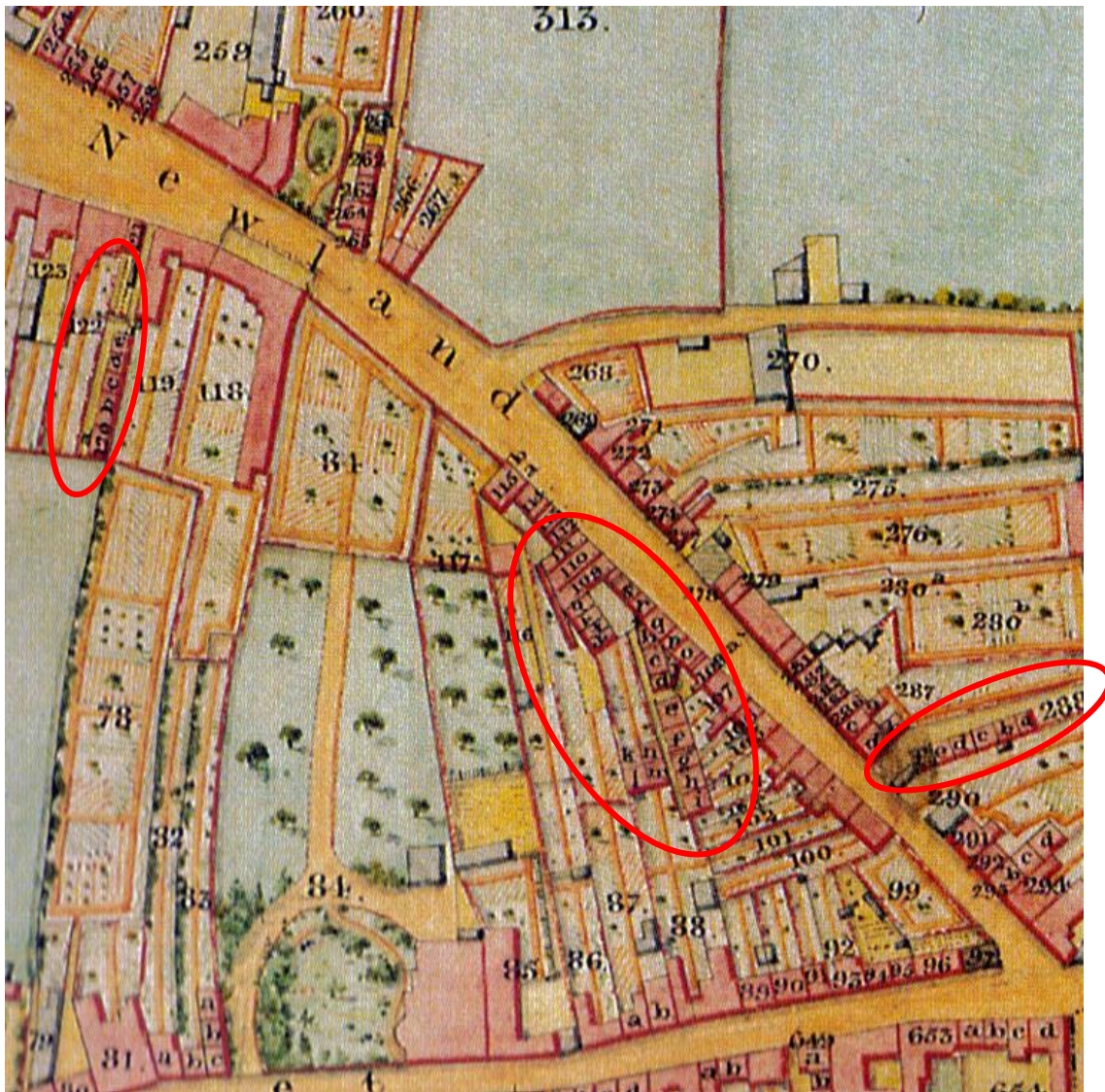


Figure 5: Example of 'court' developments on lower Newland in 1834³⁸

As far as housing the poorer working classes went, the 'drains' were not the exception but the rule, the inspector reported that "there were Rookeries in all town" suffering from similar problems of sanitation and overcrowding. Examples in 1850 included Warr's Court, Thomas's Court (Table 5), Fook's and Miles's Courts and the Ellis Rookery on Newland, the courts on the west side of Acreman Street, in Newman's Court and other locations in Westbury on the Dorchester Road, Cornhill Row and George Yard (George Street). Although the prevalence of courts may have increased after 1831 there is significant evidence of their presence in the town map of 1834. Table 6 gives some examples of the larger courts and their landlord owners. It should be noted that the average area of a property plot includes any land external to buildings, so internal living space could be considerably smaller and that a family household typically included six members or more.³⁹

³⁸ Extract courtesy of George Tatham from DHC PH.949 1W/D30. Percy, Edward Thomas *Plan of the Town of Sherborne in the County of Dorset* (1834).

³⁹ The overcrowding in the courts is palpable if we compare it to current standards that state that the minimum area of a one storey house for one occupant is 37m² and that the UK has the smallest homes by floor area in comparison with all the countries in the European Union. "Minimum space standards" *Designing buildings the construction wiki*. Retrieved from: https://www.designingbuildings.co.uk/wiki/Minimum_space_standards.

Percy 1834 Map Ref.	Location	No. properties	Average area of each property (m ²)	Landlord owner	Notes
108 a-y	Newland	25	28	Thomas Warr	See Table 5 and Figure 5. Warr's Court
120 a-e	Newland	5	30	James Penny	See Figure 5
288 a-f	Newland	6	38	Richard Sturges	See Figure 5
233 a-h	Newland	8	110	William Vowell	
150 a-h	Newland	8	104	Champion Thomas	Thomas Court See Table 5
212-216a-b	Newland	7	151	Thomas Fooks	Fooks Court See Table 5
416 a-g	Acreman Street	7	43	William Thorne	
471 a-d	Acreman Street	4	63	George Hammond	
639 a-e	Long Street	5	61	Amy Ellis	Ellis Court
31 a-d	Hound Street	4	76	Samuel Whitty	See Table 5
750 a-g	Westbury	6	55	Richard Percy	

Table 6: Examples of housing arranged in 'courts' in Sherborne in 1834⁴⁰

The prevalence of 'courts' in 1830s Sherborne, their class composition and spatial arrangement, hidden behind the facade of more respectable looking cottages, with 'entries' rarely crossed by anyone except the residents, leading to the filthy living conditions of the 'rookeries' and 'drains', provides physical evidence of the 'dark village'. Hobsbawm and Rudé in *Captain Swing* describe the concept:

What they [the upper classes] did was to create an order in which the poor were pauperised and rightless, and rank and wealth became caste superiority, and the labourers' silence and humility in the face of their "betters" hid sentiments similar to those of Mississippi Negroes in the face of the whites. Each village increasingly hid two villages: the official parish, whose citizens the new County Directories recorded – the landowners, resident gentry, farmers, publicans, etc – and the dark village, whose members did not.⁴¹

In Sherborne, the 'dark village' was principally comprised of the influx of pauperised farm labourers and their families who had migrated to the town to find work in the mills in the 1820s or earlier. Many had come from the Vale of Blackmore, itself described as a 'dark area' because of its lack of conventional religion:

There was a large triangle with apexes at Dorchester, Blandford and Sherborne which had no important road running through it. Much of the Blackmore Vale lay in this triangle, sandwiched between chalk hills and roadless grasslands. In the 1830s the Vale was one of the 'dark areas' which drew the attention of the Home Missionary Society.⁴²

Unlike other remote areas in Britain where dissenting religion had come to prevail in the absence of the Church of England, in 1823 a Sherborne Methodist wrote:

⁴⁰ Percy, *Numerical Terrier*.

⁴¹ Hobsbawm and Rudé *Captain Swing* pp. 61-62.

⁴² Bawn, Kevin P. "Social protest, popular disturbances and public order in Dorset, 1790-1838". Unpublished PhD (University of Reading, 1984) p. 151.

Within ten miles of Sherborne there are no, less than, 70 towns, and villages and, comprising a-population of fifty thousand souls most of whom have little more knowledge of God than the Hottentots [sic] of South Africa.⁴³

The 1850 sanitation report is interesting in that it also provides an analysis of why improvements in housing and sanitation in Sherborne had failed over the preceding decades. The large landowners (see Table 4), of which 11 were delineated in the report, refused to fund improvements to the town through rates as they did not directly benefit them. They could not be compelled to pay because there was “no corporation, local commissioners, or Improvement Act” and “the parish has no power to make a town district, which should be exclusively rated for town purposes”.⁴⁴ Within the town, the freeholding landlords who had constructed the overcrowded and unhealthy housing in the form of ‘courts’ and cheap cottages had been reluctant to provide even the basic requirements for living in their properties. The inspector made it clear that, in his opinion, this was down to disdain by the landlords for those who were trapped in the social relation of household rent:

the landlord who persists, as many do, in refusing to his cottage tenant the ordinary appendages of a cleanly-paved backyard, a proper privy, or water closet, a well arranged drainage, and a sufficient supply of water, is as deficient in attention to his own pecuniary interests as he is wanting in feeling for those persons who have the misfortune to be in a great degree in his power.⁴⁵

In addition, the inspector reported that attempts to spend existing monies to make public improvements had been stymied by the lack of democracy:

During the course of the inquiry I heard much concerning the self-election and non-responsibility of the administrators of funds held in trust for certain purposes in the town of Sherborne⁴⁶

Despite the fears of cholera, which originated in the outbreaks of the early 1830s and had motivated many municipal authorities to act, the public health situation in Sherborne had not improved in 20 years. The report concluded by outlining three policy changes that were required for the situation to improve:

a definite town boundary, a local government elected by the rate payers...and of compelling the landlords of cottage tenements to provide them with sufficient accommodation.⁴⁷

It is to the first and second of these, the governance of Sherborne, that we now turn.

1.5 Governance, media and politics

Although the constituent parts of what became Sherborne town in the nineteenth century, such as Newland, Westbury and Castleton, had been granted the status of boroughs at various points in the medieval period, Sherborne was ruled as two manors, one belonging to the bishop and the other to the monks of Sherborne Abbey.⁴⁸ The dissolution of the Abbey in 1539 marked the beginning of the creation of Sherborne as a unitary body (barring the tiny parish of Castleton), though under the auspices of the

⁴³ Ibid. pp. 190-191.

⁴⁴ Clark, *Report to the General Board of Health* Para. 9.

⁴⁵ Ibid. Para. 61.

⁴⁶ Ibid. Para. 51.

⁴⁷ Clark, *Report to the General Board of Health* Para. 48.

⁴⁸ A borough was a town or part of a town upon which a degree of self-governance had been conferred through the granting of a charter. Boroughs held their own courts, markets and were often subdivided in to burghage plots held by burgesses (freemen of the borough) for cash rent rather than by feudal service. Davey & (Bellamy) *Dorset Historic Towns Survey: Sherborne* Part 5.3 and 5.4.

Digby family. John Digby became Lord of the Manor in 1619-20, and the family line remains until today, with their ancestral home being Sherborne Castle less than a mile to the east of the town centre.

In the 1830s some of the vestiges of manorial rule were still in place. Sherborne had no corporation as such. Instead, Lord Digby would appoint a steward of the liberty, effectively his chief official, a de facto Mayor, who oversaw on his behalf the Court Leet. This was a feudal vestige consisting of officers and a jury of freeholders that met biannually on Lady Day (25 March) and Michaelmas (29 September).⁴⁹ The officers of the Court Leet consisted of tithingmen and town constables, elected annually, to ensure public order, a bailiff who performed arrests, affeerers who set the level of fines and a series of professional inspectors who were responsible for food, drink and commodity quality, weights and measures, roads and waterways, basic hygiene and collection and distribution of alms to the poor.

Members of the Court Leet, such as the Steward and Bailiff of the Liberty, the constables and tithingmen also had ceremonial roles to play in public. For example, in July 1830 the formal celebrations of King William the Fourth's accession to the throne consisted of a street parade and pageant centred on the entourage of the Court Leet:

About half past twelve o'clock the procession was put in motion—the guns firing a royal salute, the band playing, and the trumpets sounding. The line of march was from the Town Hall, through the churchyard, into Half Moon-street. At the great southern porch of the church an open carriage, with four horses and two postillions, awaited the arrival of the Steward of the Liberty, Thomas Fooks, Esq., who had the care of and was to read the Proclamation; he there entered the carriage, accompanied by Dr. Pew, Peter Batson and Samuel Whitty.⁵⁰

The carriage was led by the Bailiff and some trumpeters and surrounded by the constables, with the tithingmen following after. The three 'gentlemen' riding with Fooks the Steward were the major freeholders and landlords in Sherborne, Whitty and Batson (see Table 5 and Table 6) and the surgeon and banker Richard Pew.⁵¹

The Court Leet system was challenged over the eighteenth century by the increasing power of magistrates who, dominated by the landed gentry and the clergy, effectively created a situation of dual power, before slowly usurping the older system. This was exemplified on a county level in Dorset by the prominence of the Commission of the Peace, a body of magistrates who effectively ruled the county from the mid-eighteenth and into the early nineteenth century. Flame notes:

A system of local government that had broadly represented the interests of a relatively wide cross section of Dorset society had been gradually dismantled or displaced by one rooted in a much narrower constituency. From the beginning of the eighteenth century, therefore, the history of the Commission of the Peace in Dorset was a process of the gradual concentration of power into the hands of the gentry whose economic fortunes were closely tied to the fortunes of Dorset agriculture. Their power had been aggregated by a process of usurpation, attenuation and attrition from a plethora of parish and county bodies such as the vestry, the manor and leet courts, and the offices of Sheriff and parish constable, each of which came to be practically superseded or controlled by magistrates sitting at general and petty sessions.⁵²

⁴⁹ Cooke, G. A. *Topography of Great Britain* p. 119.

⁵⁰ *Sherborne Mercury* 26 July 1830.

⁵¹ Pew along with Samuel Pretor (see Tables 5 and 7) and Benjamin Chandler owned the Sherborne & Dorsetshire Bank. "Pretor, Pew & Co", *Nat West Group: Heritage Hub*. Retrieved from <https://www.natwestgroup.com/heritage/companies/pretor-pew-and-co.html>.

⁵² Flame, "Reconstruction of social and political identities by the Dorset gentry" pp. 32-33.

As Flame recognises, the fusion of legal and civic power in the form of the magistrate and its exercise through bodies such as the Commission of the Peace did not disempower the large landowners, in fact quite the opposite. The Quarter Sessions provided regular general meetings of the Commission for the magistrates of the four county Divisions (Blandford, Sherborne, Shaftesbury and Bridport) and local meetings at the Petty Sessions of the nine sub-divisions, which included Sherborne.⁵³

The Lord Lieutenant of the county determined the composition of the Commission of the Peace. From 1790 to 1835 four major landowners dominated this position, two of whom (the Digbys) were directly connected to the Division of Sherborne: Henry, Earl Digby (1771-1793); George, Lord Rivers (1793-1803); George, Earl of Dorchester (1803-1808) and Edward, Earl Digby (1808-1846). In 1831, the Clerk to the Commission was Thomas Fooks who is described by Flame as:

one of the premier solicitors in the county and represented [Lord] Digby's personal and estate interests. He enjoyed the complete confidence of Digby and was influential in securing the appointment of individuals to the Commission of the Peace.⁵⁴

Fooks, a significant freeholder and landlord in Sherborne (see Table 5) was also Lord Digby's choice for Steward of the Liberty, so straddling the remnants of the feudal system of local government in Sherborne as well as the fully emerged government of the county in the form of the Commission of the Peace.⁵⁵ Fooks' role as merely Clerk to the Commission belied its importance. In the absence of Lord Lieutenant Digby from the Commission (a regular occurrence according to Flame), it was Fooks who acted as 'gatekeeper' for those magistrates who wished to enter the governing body of Dorset.⁵⁶ And, as Clerk to the Commission, he was also the county's (and the Lord Lieutenant's) chief legal advisor.

Entry into the Commission of the Peace also gave the magistrate access to a series of fixed committees that effectively governed Dorset, these covered accounting for the county, the treasurer and the gaol as well as bridges, building and finance committees.⁵⁷ Temporary committees to deal with setting the rates, the principal source of municipal finance for the county, took the power away from the hundreds and parishes who had historically set their own taxes. Populating the Commission and its various committees were groups of magistrates from each Division who could lobby for their home areas.

The Commission also had an important role in determining the legal basis of relief to the poor in Dorset. Although the parishes carried out the day-to-day decisions concerning eligibility and distribution of the various forms of relief through the vestry, overseers and churchwardens, effectively the parochial authorities, the Commission carried out a supervisory role. This involved ensuring that parish officials had been elected fairly and that relief provision was operating within the confines of the law.⁵⁸ Also, in times of social crisis, such as those driven by the famines and associated high prices of 1794-96 and 1799-1801, the Commission had stepped in to enforce food and wage subsidies, the quality of bread and introduce child relief allowances.⁵⁹

⁵³ The nine petty-session sub-divisions were "Blandford North, centred on the town of Blandford; Blandford South administered from the borough of Wareham; Dorchester, where sessions were held in rotation at Dorchester and Weymouth; Shaftesbury East where sessions were rotated between the towns of Wimborne and Cranborne; Shaftesbury West administered from the borough of Shaftesbury itself, and the divisions of Bridport, Sherborne, Cerne and Sturminster Newton". Flame, "Reconstruction of social and political identities by the Dorset gentry" p. 34.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* p. 51.

⁵⁵ *Sherborne Mercury* 26 July 1830.

⁵⁶ Flame, "Reconstruction of social and political identities by the Dorset gentry" p. 41.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 337-338.

⁵⁸ Shave "Poor Law Reform and Policy Innovation in Rural Southern England" p. 2.

⁵⁹ Flame, "Reconstruction of social and political identities by the Dorset gentry" pp. 201-204.

From 1820-1835 the active magistrates in the petty sessions of the Sherborne Division of the county were Rev. John Parsons, Rev. Edward Walter West, John Goodden, Samuel Pretor and John White. These sessions took place in the town of Sherborne. At the Quarter sessions for the whole county, held in Dorchester after 1825, the location of the general meetings of the Commission of the Peace, these magistrates were joined by Lord Digby, the head of the Commission. Table 7 provides some additional details about the Sherborne magistrates. Three of the magistrates for the division -- Parsons, West and Pretor -- lived in the immediate vicinity of Sherborne, with the former occupying the Vicarage adjacent to the Abbey. Although West lived in Castleton this was effectively a suburb of Sherborne, less than half a mile from the centre of the town. Goodden and White lived in Over Compton about three and a half miles to the west. Parsons, probably because of the longevity of his role as a law enforcer, was considered to be the 'Chief Magistrate'.⁶⁰ The significant proportion of clergy-magistrates (2) amongst the group (5) was not unusual. A snapshot of the Michaelmas Quarter Sessions in Dorchester in 1831 shows that of the 30 magistrates present, 13 (43 per cent) were clerics.⁶¹ This was also reflected in the Commission of the Peace where they made up the largest single occupational grouping by a significant margin, until about 1830.⁶²

Name	Residence in 1831	Profession	University	Active as magistrate ⁶³	Notes
John Parsons	Sherborne	Cleric (Rev.)	Oxford	1810-1835	'Chief Magistrate'
Edward West	Castleton	Cleric (Rev.)	Oxford	1810-1829	
John Goodden	Over Compton	Lawyer	Oxford	1830-1835	Captain of Sherborne troop Dorset Yeomanry Cavalry
Samuel Pretor	Sherborne	Banker	-	1830-1835	See Table 4; Cornet in Dorset Yeomanry Cavalry
John White	Over Compton	Lawyer	-	1810-1829	

Table 7: Active magistrates for Sherborne Division (1810-1835)

The political views of the wider clergy in the Sherborne Division and their adherence to Anglican church doctrine were important in their role as influential mouthpieces for the state church. Saunders in his study of the Reform period (1831-1832) notes that:

The Anglican clergy were political actors, as well as spiritual authorities. They chaired the parish vestries, held powers of appointment over schools and charitable bodies, and supplied more than a quarter of the county magistracy in 1831. Clergy sat on turnpike trusts, health boards, and justices' accounts committees, and were disproportionately represented on the Quarter Sessions. They were also active in county elections, where they nominated candidates, preached at the hustings, and canvassed parishioners. Like Parliament, the church recruited heavily from the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, creating a network of personal relationships between the clergy and the Houses of Parliament. Preaching at county elections and the Quarter Sessions gave a religious sanction to the law and the constitution, while

⁶⁰ *The Sherborne Register 1550-1950* 4th Edition Edt. B. Pickering Pick (Winchester: Warren & Son, 1950) p. 19.

⁶¹ *Dorset County Chronicle* 20 October 1831.

⁶² Flame, "Reconstruction of social and political identities by the Dorset gentry" p. 45 and Table B5.1.

⁶³ This includes activity in both Sherborne Petty Sessions and County Quarter Sessions. Based on the time ranges in Flame, "Reconstruction of social and political identities by the Dorset gentry" Appendix B.

sermons for the coronation, the assizes, and the feast of Charles the Martyr invited spiritual reflection on public affairs.⁶⁴

In the situation of 1831 where a large section of the rural population was illiterate or semi-literate and access to printed media was limited by its cost and availability, the spoken word was of great consequence, particularly with the supposed authority of 'God' backing it up. Saunders argues that the "sermon constituted one of the most pervasive forms of oratory and a crucial point of contact between 'high' and 'low' political culture". He continues:

In pulpits across the country, Anglicans deployed a powerful theological case against reform. They mobilized against their opponents an array of scriptural authorities, pitting the principles of the reform movement against the moral law of God...The Church of England possessed both an intellectual authority and a capacity to speak directly to the public that few other institutions could match.⁶⁵

Despite the lack of surviving transcripts of sermons in the period in general (and specifically in Sherborne) it is possible to survey the clergy in the Sherborne Division for their political stances in the hotly contested (and open ballot) Dorset County Election in autumn 1831. This election, which was widely seen as a microcosm of the national struggle for reform, pitted the pro-reform candidate William Francis Spencer Ponsonby, Whig Member of Parliament for Poole against the anti-reform zealot Anthony Ashley Cooper elder, son of Cropley Ashley, the Sixth Earl of Shaftesbury. Table 8 provides a list of the votes recorded by the parish priests in the Division of Sherborne.⁶⁶ It is clear from the table that anti-reform sentiment amongst the Sherborne clergy was dominant with Lord Ashley taking almost 90 percent of the votes cast (17/19). The only exceptions were Rev. Robert Grant in Bradford Abbas and Rev. Edward Strangways in Melbury Osmond. This overwhelming support for anti-reform candidates had already been present in the wider county results for the spring election of 1831 when "out of 200 clergymen, 12 only voted for the reform candidate".⁶⁷

Ponsonby was certainly aware of the overwhelming bias amongst the Dorset clergy when he stated in an address to the freeholders of the county that he regretted seeing "the Clergy acting in the character of Partizans". This provoked an angry response from one Rector who claimed in a letter to the *Dorset County Chronicle* that the Reform Bill was tantamount to revolution and had a more sinister strategy behind it:

The enemies of the Established Church of every denomination, - Atheists, Deists, Independents, Catholics (with a few bright exceptions,) all were eager for the measure – and why? Because they saw, or thought they saw, that one result at least of that Bill would be, the overthrow of the Established Church.⁶⁸

This dramatic statement provides some insight into the perceptions and fears of the clergy in Dorset (and elsewhere) and perhaps why they were so united in their opposition to reform.

⁶⁴ Saunders, Robert "God and the Great Reform Act: Preaching against Reform, 1831-32" *Journal of British Studies* 53 (April 2014) pp. 381-382.

⁶⁵ Ibid. p. 380.

⁶⁶ This table was constructed using Flame, "Reconstruction of social and political identities by the Dorset gentry" Table D11.1; *Dorset election, September and October, 1831. The poll.* (Dorchester: Weston, Simonds and Sydenham, 1832); Clergy of the Church of England Database 1540-1835 (CCEd).

⁶⁷ Scriven, Thomas, "The Dorchester labourers and Swing's aftermath in Dorset, 1830-1838" *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 82, no. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) p. 12.

⁶⁸ *Dorset County Chronicle* 27 October 1831.

Name	Tithing/Parish (Dorset)	Residence of Freeholder (Dorset)	Year took post as Cleric	Vote in 1831 county byelection	Notes
Robert Froome	Alweston cum Folke	Folke	1777	Ashley	
Hugh Helyar	Beerhackett and Lillington	Sutton Bingham	1825	Ashley	
Robert Grant	Bradford Abbas	Bradford Abbas	1828	Ponsonby	
Charles Digby	Bishop's Caundle	Bishop's Caundle	1810	Ashley	Lieutenant in the Sherborne Troop of the DRYC
R. Messiter	Caundle Marsh and Purse Caundle	Stourton Caundle	1828	Ashley	
C. Playdell Bragge	Chelborough, East and West	Sadborough	1822	Ashley	
Wyndham Jeane Goodden	Nether Compton	Nether Compton	1824	Ashley	Magistrate, brother of John Goodden
Edward Walter West	Haydon	Sherborne	1812	Ashley	Magistrate, Stipendiary Curate (Bradford Abbas)
George Stone	Longburton	Longburton	1826	Ashley	
Edward Strangways	Melbury Osmond	Melbury Osmond	1830	Ponsonby	
John Blennerhasset	Ryme Intrinica	Mappowder	1830	Ashley	
John Parsons	Sherborne/Oborne/Castleton	Sherborne	1806/1811/1811	Ashley	Magistrate, Vicar of Sherborne 1830
Joseph Fayrer	Thornford	Chard, Somerset		Ashley	
George H. Templer	Thornford	Shapwick	1808	Ashley	
Blakley Cooper	Yetminster	Yetminster	1809	Ashley	
G. Fort Cooper	Yetminster	Yetminster	1831	Ashley	
W. Black	Lillington		1797	DNV	
Thomas Hobson	Lydlinch	Lydlinch	1818	Ashley	
Townsend Selwyn	Melbury Bubb	Kilmington, Devon	1810	Ashley	Brother-in-law of Lord Ashley
R. Broadley	Melbury Osmond	Bridport	1823	Ashley	
R. W. White	Up Cerne		1828	Unsure	

Table 8: Pro and anti-reform voting amongst parish priests of the Sherborne Division.

Having considered the propagandising role played by the parish priest it is now worth exploring the public media available in Sherborne in 1831. There were two newspapers being produced in the town, the *Mercury* and the *Journal*. The former, founded in 1737, was purchased by William Webb Penny in 1829 and had a Whig leaning tradition. The latter had been launched in 1764 expressly to counter the *Mercury's* politics. However, by the time William Penny's brother John acquired the *Journal* in 1828 it was considered to be a more reformist paper than the *Mercury*.⁶⁹ Both papers were weekly with the *Mercury* published on a Monday and the *Journal* on a Thursday. The principal alternative to these rationalist, Whig leaning newspapers was the county-wide *Dorset County Chronicle* which was established in 1821. A weekly, published on a Thursday in Dorchester, the *Chronicle* was edited by the staunchly conservative John Sydenham who penned many influential and strongly anti-reform articles.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ The full title of the paper in 1831 was the *Sherborne, Dorchester, & Taunton Journal, and Wells, Bridgewater, and Tiverton Gazette*. Mayo, C. H. *Bibliotheca Dorsetsiensis* (1885) pp. 74-78.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* p. 79. The full title of the paper in 1831 was the *Dorset County Chronicle and Somerset Gazette*.

The paper “never strayed from a High Tory line, it was vehemently anti-Catholic” and professed “loyal attachment to the office and person of the King [and] zealous devotion to the Constitution in Church and State”.⁷¹

In contrast, the *Sherborne Chronicle* provided a platform for owner and editor John Penny to critique both the magistrates of the Commission of the Peace and the generalised power and dominance of the gentry over rural life. Penny employed class analysis to expose the interests of the gentry and he:

drew a distinction between the power in law of the landed ruling class as magistrates and their practical exercise of those powers which they implemented selfishly and illegally to protect the interests of landowners.⁷²

Examples of the practices Penny was referring to included the suppression of ‘seditious publications’ such as Paine’s *Rights of Man* and *Common Sense* and denying defendants access to juries at Quarter Sessions. The latter practice was rife in Dorset and had been for decades, though it was not fully exposed in parliament until 1842. Similarly, Flame notes that in 1831, it was the gentry packed juries in the Special Assizes in Dorset that condemned the agricultural labourers who took part in the Swing Riots.⁷³ It is likely that these practices would have been common knowledge in Sherborne by the time of the reform crisis of October 1831. In 1832 John Penny went beyond his critical articles in the pages of the *Chronicle* by publishing two scathing political pamphlets *Practical Retrenchment - the Legitimate Object of Political Reform* and *Dorsetshire Emancipated from Tory Dominion* which explicitly criticised the Tory gentry as a class.⁷⁴

There is some evidence that the radical press had influence in Dorset in the 1820 and 30s. Richard Hassall, the son of a Cerne Abbas carter, and a printer by trade promulgated republican and utilitarian ideas through Richard Carlile’s *The Republican* newspaper (1819-1825), suggesting that the paper was available in Dorset.⁷⁵ This may have been down to the fact that Carlile was imprisoned for six years in Dorchester gaol for blasphemy and seditious libel. Regular visits by his wife Jane (before she too was imprisoned), who helped produce *The Republican*, may have facilitated the clandestine networks of agents required to distribute the paper in the provinces.⁷⁶ It is likely Hassall carried out this role whilst also contributing to the paper with articles critiquing the landowning class through the Labour Theory of Value and advocating for education for the working classes so they could “know the sovereignty of the people, and to preserve amongst themselves, for their consumption, the substance produced by their labour”. Interestingly, Hassall drew a clear distinction between the gentry landowners who were the “real enemies of the people” rather than the “capitalist urban middle classes”.⁷⁷ This class division became apparent as a political antagonism during the reform crises of the early 1830s, particularly in rural areas. Other radical papers that may have penetrated rural Dorset in the period include *Cobbett’s Weekly Political Register* (1802-1836) and Henry Heatherington’s *Penny Papers for the People* (1830-31) followed by the *Poor Man’s Guardian* (1831-1835).

One important question is how much access did labourers and artisans have to either the mainstream or the radical press? The first limiting factor was, of course, literacy. However, Hobsbawm and Rudé, noted that the rate of illiteracy in Dorset in 1838-39 was the lowest out of 20 counties experiencing

⁷¹ Bawn, “Social protest, popular disturbances and public order in Dorset” p. 222.

⁷² Flame, “Reconstruction of social and political identities by the Dorset gentry” pp. 79-80.

⁷³ *Ibid.* p. 80.

⁷⁴ Penny, J. *Practical Retrenchment - the Legitimate Object of Political Reform* (Sherborne, 1832) and *Dorsetshire Emancipated from Tory Dominion* (Sherborne, 1832).

⁷⁵ Cerne Abbas is approximately ten miles south of Sherborne.

⁷⁶ Joel Wiener, “Richard Carlile and ‘The Republican’” *Victorian Periodicals Review*, Fall, 1980, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Fall, 1980), pp. 81-82.

⁷⁷ Flame, “Reconstruction of social and political identities by the Dorset gentry” p. 82, 270.

Swing Riots, with about 20 per cent of men and 40 per cent of women unable to read or write. They also pointed out that these were probably underestimates, since they were based on marriage certificates where “the ability to scrawl one’s own name is no effective test of literacy”.⁷⁸ Even with this caveat, it appears there would have been significant numbers of the working-classes in Sherborne that would have been able to read newspapers and pamphlets.

So what evidence is there for places in Sherborne where the working classes might access these publications and transmit their contents? Elias Penny, father of William Webb Penny the editor of the *Sherborne Mercury*, ran a bookshop, library and reading room with another relative, William Simon Penny, on Half Moon Street. Similarly, nearby on Cheap Street, Thomas Toll ran a similar business and public service.⁷⁹ Outside of these ‘respectable establishments’ lay the Beer shops which were central to a ‘moral panic’ during and after the Swing events of 1830-31. It was claimed that these new gathering places for the ‘lower classes’ were hot beds of sedition, where inflammatory radical newspapers and pamphlets were read aloud by the ‘ill disposed’ to the illiterate. They were also considered to be organisational nodes for labourers involved in the Swing disturbances, as one cleric from the adjacent county of Hampshire pointed out:

the excitement caused by the beer-shops, and giving them a point to meet in every village to discuss their grievances, and to hear them aggravated by the reading; or hearing there, low and dangerous pamphlets.⁸⁰

Prior to the 1830 Beer Act, local magistrates had complete control over the licensing of brewers and publicans. The new law allowed any rate-paying household, for an annual licence fee of two guineas, to brew beer and open a beer shop, or beer house in their own residence. It is claimed that “within six months of the Beer Act’s taking effect, over 24,000 beer houses had sprung up throughout England and Wales”.⁸¹ In Dorset it has been estimated that by 1840 there were 826 similar outlets selling alcohol.⁸² Sherborne was no exception, despite a plethora of existing Taverns and Inns (19), by 1834 there were at least six Beer houses operating in the town. These are listed in Table 9. It is noticeable that these cheaper establishments, due to a relaxation of tax, were opened amongst the poorer housing and ‘courts’ of the town.

Percy 1834 Map Ref.	Name	Street	Tenant - Proprietor	Owner/Leaser	Notes
768c	Not Known	Westbury	Hannah Newman	Richard Tuffin	
324a	Not Known	Cold Harbour	Charles Bull	Hannah King	
351b	Not Known	Green Hill	Charles Crew	Elizabeth Percy	
41	The Lamb	Hound Street	William Ings	Samuel Scott and Samuel Whitty	See Table 4
107	The Fountain	Newland	Richard Sharwell	John Loader	
1524	The Golden Ball	Bristol Road	James Mandfield	Richard Sturges	See Table 5

Table 9: Beer houses in Sherborne in 1834

⁷⁸ Hobsbawm and Rudé *Captain Swing* p. 64.

⁷⁹ *Sherborne 1823 Directory* Transcribed by Sheila Carr, Dorset Online Parish Clerks (OPC): Sherborne including Castleton. Retrieved from: <http://www.opcdorset.org/SherborneFiles/Sherborne.htm>; “Sherborne: Entries from the 1835 Robson’s Directory” *West Country Genealogy: The Blackmore Vale Towns and Villages*. Retrieved from: http://www.westcountrygenealogy.com/blackmore/sherborne/robsons_1835.htm; *Pigot’s Directory 1842*.

⁸⁰ Afton, Bethanie “‘A Want of Good Feeling’: A Reassessment of the economic and political causes of the rural unrest in Hampshire, 1830” *Proceedings of the Hampshire Field Club Archaeology Society* 43, 1987 pp. 241-242.

⁸¹ Mason, Nicholas “‘The sovereign people are in a beastly state’: The Beer Act of 1830 and Victorian discourse on working-class drunkenness.” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 29, no. 1 (2001) p. 109.

⁸² Flame, “Reconstruction of social and political identities by the Dorset gentry” p. 57.



Figure 7: Dorset in 1830 (Moule)

2 The Sherborne riots

2.1 Wednesday 19 October - Day 1

2.1.1 Public reform meeting

Although there had been no apparent public indication of discontent when the news of Ponsonby's defeat arrived in Sherborne on the Monday evening (or at least it was unreported), this did not mean that the reformers in the town remained inactive. The following day a poster appeared on the streets of Sherborne announcing a public meeting at the Town Hall at 11.00am on Wednesday 19 October (see Figure 8). The meeting drew direct reference to the cause of reform, rather than merely the Ashley-Ponsonby contest, and proposed uniting with other "Divisions of the County, to carry the Proceedings of the above Election before a committee of the House of Commons".⁸⁷ This demand was a response to the large number of votes that had remained undecided due to objections and the suggestion made by Ponsonby that this had been a premeditated tactic by the Ashley camp. It also demonstrates that the perception that the election was corrupted was prevalent amongst at least some of the population of Sherborne, and after the poster had been disseminated, considerably more.

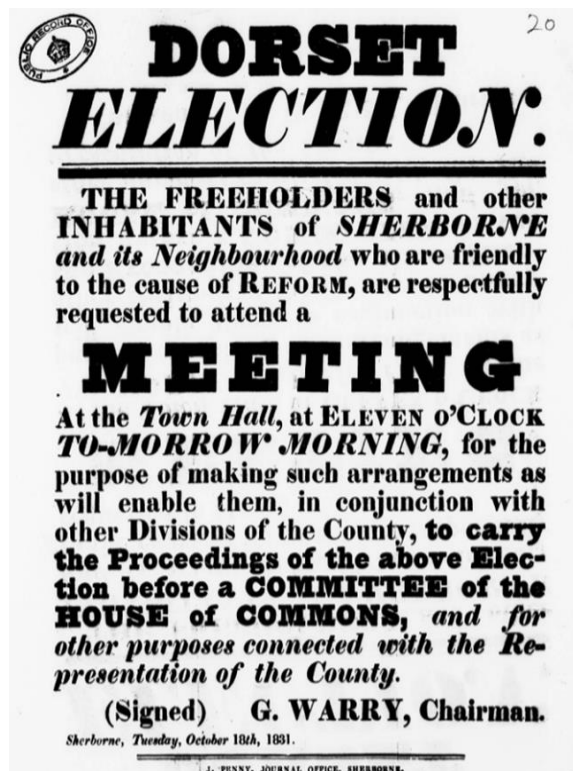


Figure 8: Poster for meeting in Sherborne protesting at the result of the County By-election in October 1831

The call for the meeting was signed by 'the chairman' George Warry, the lawyer and landlord, who had presided over the meeting in April to endorse Edward Portman as the pro-reform candidate. The poster was printed by John Penny at the *Sherborne Journal* office, another pro-reform activist. Unlike the meeting in January, where a requisition for a gathering at the Town Hall had been made to the decidedly reluctant Steward of the Liberty and anti-reformer,

⁸⁷ TNA HO 52/12 Counties Correspondence Berks – Gloucester [ff: 18-20] Letter (with poster) from Daniel Penny to Sir Francis Freeling (Secretary of the General Post Office) 20 October 1831.

Thomas Fooks, in this case it appears that no such appeal was made. Instead, the organisers forged ahead by advertising the meeting to their supporters, whilst signalling to the rest of the residents of the town that there was something ‘rotten’ about the by-election, and that they were not alone in Dorset in drawing this conclusion. Clearly the divisions between the two camps, pro and anti-reform, had hardened since the ‘open’ meetings earlier in the year, which is reflected in the language. The pro-Ponsonby elements were now describing themselves as the *friends of reform* or more concretely, the *Reformers of Sherborne* and referring to the opposition as *anti-reformers* rather than merely *Ashley supporters*. They were also situating themselves as part of a county-wide and, arguably, national movement.

The meeting itself was an interesting affair which drew national attention via *The Times* which had reported on the Dorset by-election in detail. Chaired by local banker Benjamin Chandler, a leading reformer, unlike some of the previous pro-reform meetings in Sherborne the composition of the attendees appears to have been considerably more diverse from a class and gender perspective.⁸⁸ Quoting from the *Sherborne Journal*, *The Times* reported:

A meeting of the freeholders and inhabitants of Sherborne and its neighbourhood was held on Wednesday, with a view of adopting means to carry the proceedings at the late election before a Committee of the House of Commons. The resolutions, which were adopted unanimously, show the spirit with which the freeholders themselves are determined to prosecute the inquiry into the proceedings adopted during the polling, by the anti-reform party, to procure a colourable majority for their candidate. Subscriptions with this object in view were entered into, and so ardent was the desire to come forward that ... *“the artisans formed themselves into small committees, and volunteered to raise subscriptions amongst their friends; and many females threw their donations on the table, so that before the day has closed, we shall have [£]200l at the disposal of a committee, for carrying Mr. Ponsonby’s cause to the House of Commons”*.⁸⁹

The involvement of significant numbers of ‘artisans’ and women, suggests that the effect of the by-election, the news of Ashley’s dubious victory and perhaps the recent defeat of the Reform Bill in the House of Lords had widened participation in the reform campaign in Sherborne. The meeting discussed the process of the election, the large number of objected votes and the failure of the Sherriff and Assessor to deal with the issue. In response to reports that threats had been made by anti-reformers to those who had voted for Ponsonby, a resolution was passed unanimously:

That in the event of their being put in practice, and any acts of injustice or oppression being committed, to expose the same, and that we will do our best to support the oppressed.⁹⁰

It is also important to note that the discussion and resolutions were not merely limited to protest over the operation of the Ashley-Ponsonby byelection. There was a direct connection made to the national issue of reform in the meeting’s final statement:

That the Reformers of Sherborne and its neighbourhood view with the deepest regret the opposition which has been offered to the Reform Measure in the House of Lords, and that we deem it our duty to frame a respectful and humble address to his Majesty, tendering our thanks for his

⁸⁸ *Sherborne Mercury* 24 October 1831.

⁸⁹ *The Times* 22 October 1831. Our emphasis in italics.

⁹⁰ *Sherborne Mercury* 24 October 1831.

protecting influence over our rights, and praying for him to retain his present Ministers.⁹¹

An editorial in the *Sherborne Journal* in the aftermath of the ‘rioting’ in the town drew reference to several articles in the anti-reform press that directly connected the meeting in the Town Hall to the outbreak of violence later that evening. John Penny, the editor of the *Journal*, who wrote the piece and would have been present at the meeting, strongly rejected this claim and instead suggested a quite different course of events:

It has also been attempted to impute the cause of the riots to a Constitutional Meeting, which was held in Sherborne on Wednesday, for assisting in carrying the Dorset election before a Committee of the House of Commons, and this report has been most industriously circulated, - but we conscientiously believe that no individual who attended the Meeting took any part in the riots, except that of putting them down. From the circumstances which we have been enabled to collect, we understand the following to be correct:- It was intended, by the depredators that they should commence their unlawful proceedings on the Tuesday night: but in consequence of the attractive exhibition of a show which had been at the [Pack Monday] fair, their forces could not be rallied.

This narrative was backed up by a letter to the *Journal* in the same issue from a writer with the pseudonym “A LOVER OF GOOD ORDER” who described the beginning of the ‘riot’ on the Wednesday night:

at this instant three strange persons appeared with a drum, fife, and a small flag, and cried “Reform” *as they had done before during the [Pack Monday] fair, without being able to effect an uprising*⁹²

Although we might expect, for political reasons, a ‘respectable’ reformer such as John Penny to deny that protestors who attended the reform meeting were involved in subsequent rioting, it is interesting that these two sources concur over a less obvious narrative. They allude to a different social group from themselves (“strange”, “depredators”), perhaps from Sherborne’s ‘dark village’, as actors. They suggest pre-planning by those people to gather their “forces” at a specific time and place within the remaining Pack Monday sideshows in order to create an “uprising” or to ransack and plunder the town. Although these “strange depredators” apparently failed to exercise their plans on the Tuesday night the day after the election result, it was the actions of the authorities in the town that inadvertently prompted their success the following evening.

2.1.2 The end of the fair

Several sources refer to their being “considerable excitement” in Sherborne on the Wednesday which translating from nineteenth century written sources to current parlance, might be read more accurately as “considerable tension”.⁹³ One source, a child at the time in Sherborne School, stated in his memoirs that this was the result of the arrival of “the agitation” related to reform, though this had clearly been the case for several days if not several weeks due to the election campaign in Dorset and the defeat of the Bill in the House of Lords.⁹⁴ Despite the fact

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² *Sherborne Journal* 27 October 1831. Our emphasis in italics. A similar reference appeared in the *Dorset County Chronicle* 27 October 1831.

⁹³ *Dorset County Chronicle* 27 Oct 1831; Mate, *Then and Now, or Fifty Years Ago* p. 103.

⁹⁴ Lyon, William Hector “Reminiscences of my life at Sherborne School, 1836-1845” *The Shirburnian* Vol. XXVI No. 7 March 1912 p. 226.

that the Pack Monday Fair had 'officially' ended there were still a number of shows taking place on Half Moon Street in front of the Town Hall in the early evening. These included the "drolleries of the clown and the attractions of the dancers" and had drawn "a great number of the humbler class of people".⁹⁵ The "acting magistrate" Rev. John Parsons who had been attending the Michaelmas Quarter Sessions in Dorchester the previous day arrived back in Sherborne in the evening.⁹⁶ At this stage Parsons would have been aware of the riots and disturbances that had occurred in Dorchester, Poole, Blandford and Wareham and perhaps of the attempt to 'raise a mob' the previous evening in Sherborne. Armed with this information, somewhere between 8.00 and 9.00pm, he made the decision to close the remaining shows and attractions on Half Moon Street, though not in person but by sending a messenger. The order from the magistrate duly arrived "ordering these performances to cease and the show lights were put out" making it clear to all the spectators that the events had been prematurely ended.⁹⁷ It is likely that the knowledge that it was a decision from a magistrate, and perhaps Rev. John Parsons, was swiftly communicated by the show hosts to the audience. At that point, the crowd was described by an eyewitness as being "scarcely a hundred persons ... women and children included" (that is men, women and teenagers). Clearly "discontented" with the decision, it was at that moment:

Three strange persons appeared with a drum, fife, and a small flag, and cried "Reform"... this was now in the dark instantly re-echoed, all the excited feelings of the recent Election renewed, and a cry made for smashing the windows of anti-reformers.⁹⁸

It is important here to note the rapid change, from anger at the perceived illegitimacy of the decision of the magistrate to halt the performances to grievances over reform. Bawn argues that it was merely the grievance over the early closing of the Pack Monday Fair that produced the riot, that this is proven by the behaviour of the crowd, and he relegates the effect of reform to being merely contextual:

The custom of the fair, dating back until at least the fifteenth century, was that a gang of local men and youths would form Teddy Rowe's Band, and parade the town, making rough music throughout the night preceding the fair... so the early closing of the fair by the magistrates would have been a genuine grievance amongst the townspeople of Sherborne. It is this which probably started the riot of October 1831, although the excitement caused by the Ashley-Ponsonby election undoubtedly made for an unsettled atmosphere. The Sherborne riot is an example of the community's protest at threats to their customs, in this case the loss of a day of their fair.⁹⁹

A closer examination of the evidence suggests that this interpretation is incorrect in its emphasis and misunderstands the transition from a pacific crowd to collective violence. It is true that the form of protest may represent customary practice but that does not mean the content *has to* necessarily relate to tradition, particularly in a period of rapid social and political change. Bushaway notes in his analysis of the Swing riots that:

...negotiations between farm labourers and their masters for higher wages were conducted within a customary framework. The new form of proto-

⁹⁵ *Sherborne Journal* 27 October 1831.

⁹⁶ *Dorset County Chronicle* 20 Oct 1831; *Sherborne Journal* 27 October 1831.

⁹⁷ *Sherborne Journal* 27 October 1831.

⁹⁸ *Sherborne Journal* 27 October 1831; DHC Easter Quarter Sessions 1832 notes D-FFO 25/23.

⁹⁹ Bawn, "Social protest, popular disturbances and public order in Dorset" p. 177.

political activity was channelled through the medium of older ceremonial forms.¹⁰⁰

In this case the tradition of collective protest against community transgressors encapsulated by the practice of 'rough music' and specifically of Sherborne's 'Teddy Rowe's Band' parade may have defined the *form* of protest but the *content* was defined by the movement for reform.

Bawn also fails to note the dynamic agenda of the crowd which moves rapidly from a relatively minor transgression by a magistrate to the much larger issues of the dubious county byelection and the perceived defeat of 'reform' in the House of Lords. This change is borne out not just by the explicit chants of the crowds ("Reform" and the calls for smashing the windows of the anti-reformers) but the apparent failure to confront their immediate target, magistrate Rev. John Parsons who had given the order to shut the fair. Parson's residence, the Vicarage, was less than 100 metres to the west of the Town Hall but the crowd moved off in the opposite direction with, initially at least, quite different targets in mind.¹⁰¹

2.1.3 With fife, drum and flag....

The description in several sources of three men with 'fife, drum and flag' as being 'strangers' to Sherborne is not untypical of narratives of riot which often refer to 'outsiders' as being to blame for initiating or leading collective violence within a community. This kind of response displaces responsibility for the violence to those outside the 'community' and tries to conceal antagonisms within the 'community'. The distilled version of this narrative is the 'outside agitator' trope, where cunning Moriarty-like figures with devious political agendas manipulate crowds from the periphery.¹⁰² The descriptions of the three men on Half Moon Street given in the newspapers and court statements fulfil most of these categories, with the characters as somehow alien to the town ('outsiders') and as leaders ('agitators') able to manipulate the crowd to their agenda ('reform'). The whole notion is based on the idea that people are gullible in crowds and susceptible to the influence of powerful leaders. However, these outsider narratives are rarely accurate or based on evidence and carry with them significant contradictions. Why should an outsider group or figure have more influence upon a crowd than a local? Surely well-known local people sharing a social identity with a group would have more influence than an 'outsider'. And why were influential insiders unable (or unwilling) to stop the activities of the crowd supposedly led by 'outside agitators'?¹⁰³ The Sherborne riots of 1831 demonstrate the limitations of the 'outsider' narrative.

The primary sources suggest that at least two of the young men leading the parade were Robert Harris (16 years) and Leonard Pearce (16 years) both from Sherborne and living in the grim conditions of the 'drains' on Hound Street and Newland respectively. Harris, an illegitimate child, the fife and flag bearer, was an apprentice blacksmith living with his single mother, a silk winder. Pearce had been a chimney sweep at the age of 13 and was now labouring. Both had been imprisoned by the magistrate Rev. John Parsons in Dorchester gaol in 1829 with hard labour for minor offences related to food, Harris (13) for stealing pears from a garden and

¹⁰⁰ Bushaway, *By Rite* p. 130.

¹⁰¹ Percy, *Numerical Terrier* item 494.

¹⁰² For a more detailed discussion on this see Ball, R. "Violent urban disturbance in England 1980-81" (Thesis). University of the West of England, 2012 Section 7.2.5.

¹⁰³ For an empirically based critique of the 'outside agitator' theme see Reicher, S. D. "The St. Pauls' riot: An explanation of the limits of crowd action in terms of a social identity model". *European journal of social psychology*, (1984) 14(1) p. 10.

Pearce (14) for stealing a duck. Pearce had also been whipped at the behest of Parsons.¹⁰⁴ Harris and Pearce were thus established and well-known figures in their communities and also known to an extent by authority figures such as the magistrates and town constables. They were certainly not ‘outsiders’ or ‘outside agitators’.

According to eyewitnesses the intervention of the fife, drum and flag bearers amongst the relatively small crowd had an immediate effect, drawing many to the gathering in Half Moon Street and more as they paraded through the town. Estimates of the subsequent crowd size range from 200, 4-500 to 1,000, though local eyewitnesses tend towards the first two estimates.¹⁰⁵ The crowd then processed along Half Moon Street and passed up Cheap Street selecting two particular targets from the various shop fronts; a drapers where they smashed the windows and a solicitors office where they broke one pane of glass.¹⁰⁶ The former was owned by James Ridout (snr), an Ashley voter, whose son had been elected as a town Constable a few years previously (1829-30) and the latter by William Boswell whose vote for Ashley in the Dorset County election had been objected to.¹⁰⁷



Figure 9: Greenhill House, residence of Thomas Fooks¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Dorset OPC Sherborne Baptisms 1810-1819, 1830-1839, Marriages 1830-1849, 1841 Census Sherborne; Percy, *Numerical Terrier* items 31d and 108i; Dorset, England, Dorchester Prison Admission and Discharge Registers, 1782-1901 Prisoner Register 1827-1839; England and Wales Criminal registers 1791-1892 – Dorset; Dorset, England, Quarter Sessions Order Books, 1625-1905 Order Books 1827-1836 (QSM 1/16); *Dorset County Chronicle* 30 October 1828, 15 January 1829; *Sherborne Mercury* 12 January, 19 January 1829.

¹⁰⁵ TNA HO 52/12 ff. 18-20 (200); *Sherborne Journal* 12 January 1832 (4-500); *Guardian* 29 Oct 1831, *Morning Post* 22 Oct 1831 (1,000).

¹⁰⁶ DHC Easter Quarter Sessions 1832 notes D-FFO 25/23; DHC Q/D/A(M)/3/2 Officers in Militia, Local Militia, Volunteer Infantry and Yeomanry. Summary of payments for damages by riots within the Hundred of Sherborne, 13 Jan 1832. 1803-1856.

¹⁰⁷ *Dorset election, September and October, 1831. The poll* pp. 70-71; Percy, *Numerical Terrier* items 177 and 600; *Pigot's Directory 1842: Sherborne*; "Sherborne: Entries from the 1835 Robson's Directory"; Dorset OPC 1841 Census Sherborne; *Sherborne Mercury* 12, 26 October 1829, 14 November 1831.

¹⁰⁸ Image courtesy of Sherborne School Archive.

Ignoring numerous further targets on Cheap Street the rowdy procession made its way up the hill until they came upon Greenhill House the residence of the Steward of the Liberty and Clerk to the Dorset Commission of the Peace, solicitor Thomas Fooks (Figure 9). As noted previously, Fooks had acted as part of the legal team for both Tory anti-reform candidates Henry Bankes and Ashley in 1831 and represented the interests of Lord Digby who had voted against reform in the House of Lords. His vote for Lord Ashley in the by-election had also been objected to.¹⁰⁹ Fooks was thus a prime target:

As they went on their numbers increased: on reaching Mr. Fooks residence they became more daring, and sent a shower of stones against the glass.¹¹⁰

Another shop front and house were attacked by the crowd on New Well Hill, a few doors on from Fook's house. These were the next-door neighbours, grocer Robert Woodbourne and retired Royal Navy Lieutenant Peter Crawford, both of whom were Ashley voters.¹¹¹ The crowd then attacked the *Antelope Hotel* on Greenhill, owned by Thomas Hilliar (Figure 10).¹¹² The reasons for choosing this target are less clear, Hilliar did not vote in the election and was not listed as an Ashley supporter. However, the *Antelope Hotel* was a relatively exclusive institution frequented by the elite not only in Sherborne but from Dorset as a whole. It hosted banquets and parties for the "nobility, gentry and commercial businessmen", particularly after horse race meetings and acted as an auction room for major land sales.¹¹³ Hilliar, who held Digby estate leases and freeholds for more than 25 acres of land in and around Sherborne, also ran one of the other major inns in the town the *King's Arms*, on Half Moon Street opposite the Town Hall.¹¹⁴ This was the location chosen by the Yeomanry the following day to base their operations, which may provide some circumstantial evidence for why the *Antelope* was targeted. In any case, this was an institution that would have certainly excluded poor agricultural labourers and their families.



Figure 10: The Antelope Hotel (c.2010) on Greenhill

¹⁰⁹ *Dorset election, September and October, 1831. The poll* p. 70.

¹¹⁰ *Sherborne Journal* 27 October 1831.

¹¹¹ DHC Q/D/A(M)/3/2 Officers in Militia, Local Militia, Volunteer Infantry and Yeomanry. Summary of payments for damages by riots within the Hundred of Sherborne, 13 Jan 1832. 1803-1856; Percy, *Numerical Terrier* items 539 and 540; Dorset OPC 1841 Census Sherborne; *Dorset election, September and October, 1831. The poll* pp. 70-71; *The Sherborne Register 1550-1950* 4th ed. p. 31; TNA Will of Peter Craufurd, Commander of the Royal Navy of Sherborne, Dorset 12 June 1849 PROB 11/2094/173; "Sherborne: Entries from the 1835 Robson's Directory"; Dorset OPC *Sherborne Postal Directory* 1823.

¹¹² Percy, *Numerical Terrier* items 355 and 356.

¹¹³ See for example the *Sherborne Mercury* 25 October 1830, 22 November 1830, 21 March 1831, 03 October 1831.

¹¹⁴ Percy, *Numerical Terrier* item 742.

The crowd moved on from Greenhill to Newland, first damaging the residence of Thomas Sherrin, a butcher, significant landholder and Ashley voter, and then breaking the ground floor windows of Nathaniel Highmore's home, 200 metres further on near the junction with Hound Street (Figure 11). Highmore, a surgeon, was also an Ashley voter.¹¹⁵ It appears from the evidence, of dozens of residences on Newland, no other properties were significantly damaged, though the crowd was growing larger and more confident: "As the mob proceeded up the street they gathered rapidly in numbers and increased in violence".¹¹⁶ As discussed previously (see Section 1.4), Newland, particularly the lower portion towards the junction with Long Street, was home to concentrations of the poorest labourers and their families (see Figure 5), the majority living in the 'drains'. This may explain why estimates of the size of the crowd change from 100-200 on Half Moon Street and Cheap Street to 4-500 (or even 1,000) through the latter stages of the riot. Residents of the metaphorical 'dark village' were now a majority within the crowd.



Figure 11: Surgeon Nathaniel Highmore's house on Newland (c.2022)

2.1.4 Now for the Castle...

The end of Newland connects with Long Street completing the third side of a triangle of roads (Cheap Street, Newland, Long Street) that effectively define the eastern part of Sherborne town. Logically, if the crowd wanted to return to the centre of the town to protest about the closing of the fair, attack the magistrate Rev. John Parson's house who had issued the order, or merely to celebrate in the beer houses and taverns, then they would have turned right and headed down Long Street to Half Moon Street and the Town Hall, completing the circuit of their parade. Instead, they headed in the opposite direction down a dark lane, crossing a bridge over a tributary of the River Yeo, towards the small suburb of Castleton. Passing through the neighbourhood, "gaining strength at every step", of the 20 or so dwellings they selected only one for their attention, the Rev. Edward Walter West's house.¹¹⁷ West (see Table 7 and Table 8) was the vicar for the parish of Haydon in the Sherborne Hundred (see Figure 1), a magistrate closely affiliated with his 'Chief' Rev. John Parsons and, like the vast majority of the clergy in the region, an Ashley voter.¹¹⁸ The crowd "threw several volies [volleys] of stones at the windows of West's house and did much damage" after which "they cried out 'Now for the Castle'".¹¹⁹ It

¹¹⁵ Percy, *Numerical Terrier* items 151, 238 and 239; *Dorset election, September and October, 1831. The poll* pp. 70-71.

¹¹⁶ *Dorset County Chronicle* 27 October 1831.

¹¹⁷ *Sherborne Journal* 27 October 1831.

¹¹⁸ *Dorset election, September and October, 1831. The poll* p. 69.

¹¹⁹ DHC Easter Quarter Sessions 1832 notes D-FFO 25/23; *Sherborne Journal* 27 October 1831.

was at this point it became clear the primary target of the diversion away from the centre of town was Lord Digby's residence, Sherborne Castle, about a mile by road from the Town Hall.

The Castle, which could be more accurately described as a Tudor mansion (Figure 12), was host to a large party of guests of Lord Digby when the crowd arrived outside. The residents were completely unaware of their presence, as Mary Frampton described in her diary:

they were playing at some round [card] game, when a yell was heard, and a volley of stones shivered the glass about the room, and put them to flight.¹²⁰

Another report noted the increase in anger of the crowd as they arrived at the Castle:

here they became more infuriated, dashing the windows in all directions, and throwing the stones with such force as to break a large glass in the drawing-room. His Lordship [Digby] we understand was at the dinner table, and was only apprized of the attack by the stones falling into the room¹²¹

A third, eyewitness, described "a most furious attack on the windows and other parts of the Castle and outbuildings" and Frampton wrote "they broke every pane of glass which they could get at".¹²² Several newspaper reports state that nearly all 365 windows in the mansion were smashed, suggesting a sustained attack by a large number of people over a significant period of time.¹²³ One source claimed that the systematic destruction continued for an hour and a half.¹²⁴

The attack on Sherborne Castle was not just limited to stone throwing, according to Frampton, the crowd "tried to force the great gates leading into the court of the castle".¹²⁵ Lord Digby apparently gave an instruction to his servants not to fire on the 'mob' unless they broke into the building,¹²⁶ though an eyewitness stated that the stone throwing continued:

till a gun was fired, about a minute after the gun had been fired several of the Mob cried "Back Back", and several said "to the Stables" but they fortunately did not go there. No entrance was made into any Door or Window of the castle, but the outside court door fastened by an iron bar was forced open and the mob came into the court¹²⁷

It is unclear in the sources why the attack ceased at this point; one local source refers to the arrival of some gentlemen who "by their influence, the mob was drawn off".¹²⁸ Whether this 'influence' on the crowd was coded language for the threat of the use of firearms by those defending the mansion (a gun had already been fired from inside) or some other form of persuasion is unclear. *The Guardian* speculated that the crowd were "not daring enough ... or could not accomplish" entry to Digby's residence.¹²⁹ In any case, the crowd, having broken most the windows and terrified Lord Digby's guests, decided to leave the Castle and return to Sherborne, though this was far from the end of the action that night.

¹²⁰ Frampton, *The journal of Mary Frampton* p. 381

¹²¹ *Sherborne Journal* 27 October 1831.

¹²² DHC Easter Quarter Sessions 1832 notes D-FFO 25/23; Frampton, *The journal of Mary Frampton* p. 381.

¹²³ *Guardian* 29 October 1831; *Morning Post* 22 October 1831.

¹²⁴ TNA HO 52/12 [ff: 18-20].

¹²⁵ Frampton, *The journal of Mary Frampton* p. 381.

¹²⁶ *The Standard* 21 October 1831; *Morning Post* 22 October 1831; *Guardian* 29 October 1831.

¹²⁷ DHC Easter Quarter Sessions 1832 notes D-FFO 25/23.

¹²⁸ *Sherborne Journal* 27 October 1831.

¹²⁹ *Guardian* 29 October 1831.



Figure 12: Sherborne Castle – seat of Lord Edward Digby in 1831¹³⁰

2.1.5 Confrontation with the ‘chief’ magistrate

The crowd retraced their path to Sherborne from the Castle, passing back through Castleton where they halted once again to attack Rev. West’s house with missiles.¹³¹ Having completed their destructive efforts in Castleton they returned to Long Street where they targeted the residence of the Edward Turner (see Figure 13). Turner, a surgeon and landlord, had been a Governor of Sherborne School, brother of the almshouse and was an Ashley voter.¹³² His large town house, included in the grounds an ornamental ‘pleasure garden’, a symbol of significant wealth when most gardens in the town were dedicated to producing fruit and vegetables for the table.¹³³ The crowd set about breaking the windows of Turner’s house that faced Long Street.



Figure 13: Surgeon, Edward Turner's house on Long Street (c.2022)

¹³⁰ Image from geograph ST6416 ©Mike Searle and licensed for reuse under Creative Commons Licence.

¹³¹ *Dorset County Chronicle* 27 Oct 1831.

¹³² *Dorset election, September and October, 1831. The poll* p. 71.

¹³³ Percy, *Numerical Terrier* item 84.

Around 10.15pm, magistrate Rev. John Parsons, received news that Lord Digby's Castle was being attacked by a 'mob'. It seems Parsons was unaware of the damage that had been caused by the crowd in Sherborne earlier that evening and its relationship to his decision to close the shows on Half Moon Street. He left the Vicarage in Church Yard with the "intention of going to the Castle" for "the purpose of quelling the tumult". Parsons was not alone, he later stated that he was accompanied by "gentlemen" who wanted to "prevent the riot".¹³⁴ Although it remains unclear from Parsons' evidence as to how many 'gentlemen' there were, it is likely that one was the solicitor James Melmoth, who lived and practiced a few doors down from the Vicarage.¹³⁵ After walking for six to seven minutes, the group came across the crowd on Long Street "composed of men, women, and children":

I saw a very considerable number, perhaps two hundred persons assembled together in a very riotous and tumultuous manner, and I heard them break some panes of glass...they were very noisy and many of them were armed with large sticks and stones¹³⁶

Parsons' narrative, the evidence and reports in the newspapers diverge considerably at this point. Parsons claimed that the crowd were breaking "Mr Allford's" windows. Here he is referring to, William Naish Allford, a solicitor, but a well-known *supporter* of reform who lived about 50 metres further west along Long Street from Edward Turner (see Figure 14).¹³⁷ Allford had attempted to vote for Ponsonby in the byelection but it had been objected to.¹³⁸ Allford did not make any claim for loss after the riot but Turner did, and for the considerable sum of £20 1s 5p suggesting a large amount of damage to his house.¹³⁹ There are no reports in the newspapers or anywhere other than Parsons' statement in court that Allford was targeted, whereas several accounts state that Turner's house was attacked.¹⁴⁰ There are several potential explanations for this anomaly; Parsons was mistaken about the location of the attack, as Turner's house and Allford's were located close together and look very similar from Long Street in darkness (see Figure 13 and Figure 14). Alternatively, though less likely, is that elements of the crowd did attack Allford's house either because they had incorrect information about their target or a separate, unknown grievance.

A second issue is that several sources including newspapers and a memoir claim that it was at this point in the disturbance that Parsons read the Riot Act and was subsequently attacked by members of the crowd.¹⁴¹ However, Parsons makes no mention of this in his written or verbal

¹³⁴ DHC Christmas - January Quarter Sessions depositions 1831-1832 27a: Information of John Parsons, 26 October 1831; *Sherborne Mercury* 19 March 1832.

¹³⁵ Percy, *Numerical Terrier* item 486c.

¹³⁶ DHC Christmas - January Quarter Sessions depositions 1831-1832 27a: Information of John Parsons, 26 October 1831; *Sherborne Mercury* 19 March 1832.

¹³⁷ Percy, *Numerical Terrier* item 76. Allford spoke at a pro-reform public meeting in Sherborne on 23 April 1831 proposing Edward Portman as a candidate. See Ball et al, *Preludes to the riots in Dorset in October 1831* Riot 1831 – Case Studies Retrieved from: <https://riot1831.com/2023/05/prelude-to-the-riots-in-dorset-in-october-1831/> p. 6.

¹³⁸ *Dorset election, September and October, 1831. The poll* p. 71.

¹³⁹ DHC Q/D/A(M)/3/2 Officers in Militia, Local Militia, Volunteer Infantry and Yeomanry. Summary of payments for damages by riots within the Hundred of Sherborne, 13 Jan 1832. 1803-1856.

¹⁴⁰ See for examples *Sherborne Journal* 27 October 1831; *Dorset County Chronicle* 27 Oct 1831; TNA HO 52/12 [ff: 18-20].

¹⁴¹ *Guardian* 29 October 1831; *Morning Post* 22 Oct 1831; *Standard* 21 October 1831; Lyon, "Reminiscences of my life at Sherborne School, 1836-1845" p. 226.

statements to the court in the aftermath of the riot. Instead, he describes his motive and intervention thus:

Entertaining no doubt that they were the same persons who had been at Lord Digby's, I was desirous of ascertaining who they were; and for that purpose I laid hold of one and afterwards of another. I recognised five persons. I endeavoured in vain to address them, and to dissuade them from their riotous and illegal conduct; but I was immediately struck by a stick by, as I have reason to believe, Robert Collins of Sherborne. I received several blows after Collins had struck me, and all of those blows were given by stones, by one of which, from some unknown hand, I was felled to the ground, and badly wounded in the face.¹⁴²



Figure 14: Solicitor, William Allford's house on Long Street (c. 2022)

In this account, Parsons assaults two members of the crowd in, he claims, an attempt to identify them before remonstrating with the group and then being attacked by Collins and others. Daniel Penny, a landlord and Postmaster on Long Street, also refers to this incident in a letter to Secretary of the General Post Office though in a different manner stating “Rev. Mr. Parsons *in collaring one of them* was knocked down and otherwise bruised”.¹⁴³ This source suggests that Parsons was attempting an arrest (or two) and leaves out any reference to remonstrance. Parsons admitted in a letter to the Home Secretary a few days after the incident that he had acted rashly in exposing himself to the ‘mob’.¹⁴⁴ In any case, it was Parsons who initiated the assault on members of the crowd and Collins responded, there was certainly no formal reading of the Riot Act as such.

How did Parsons recognise Robert Collins? Collins had no apparent criminal record, so would not have been identified by Parsons from court appearances but his father, Joseph, was a tenant of one of his colleagues on the night, James Melmoth, living a few doors down from Parsons in

¹⁴² DHC Christmas - January Quarter Sessions depositions 1831-1832 27a: Information of John Parsons, 26 October 1831.

¹⁴³ TNA HO 52/12 [ff: 18-20] 20 October 1831. Letter from Daniel Penny to Sir Francis Freeling (Secretary of the General Post Office); Percy, *Numerical Terrier* item 615; Dorset OPC *Sherborne Postal Directory* 1823; “*Sherborne: Entries from the 1835 Robson’s Directory*”.

¹⁴⁴ TNA HO 52/12 [ff: 21-24] 22 October 1831. Letter from Reverend (and magistrate) John Parsons to Home Secretary Lord Melbourne.

the Church Yard.¹⁴⁵ The other four men Parsons named in his statement as part of the incident on Long Street were James Sturgess, John Pitman, Edward Parsons and Frederick Lewis. The families of Sturgess a 42-year-old, single labourer and Pitman a 26-year-old mason's labourer, married with two children were well known to Parsons. In his role as a magistrate, he had punished Sturgess at least three times, giving him three months hard labour for assault in 1822, two years imprisonment with his brother Richard for breach of the peace in 1823, and one year of hard labour for stealing bacon in 1826. Parsons had also given Sturgess' younger brother William a sentence of three months in Dorchester gaol in 1826 for poaching.¹⁴⁶

John Pitman's father Charles was a servant for James Melmoth (who was also his landlord) living next door to Joseph Collins (Robert Collins' father), close to the Vicarage in Church Yard.¹⁴⁷ Although John Pitman had no serious criminal record his father had been arrested and charged for stealing potatoes in 1828 and his younger brother James had been through a series of punishments from the age of 13.¹⁴⁸ In 1824 James was privately whipped for stealing some cheese, in 1827 he was given one month hard labour for 'leaving service' and another month for stealing apples. In 1828 he was publicly whipped in Sherborne and imprisoned for six months for stealing two ducks with another 'rioter' Leonard Pearce (see Section 2.1.3) and in 1830 at the age of 19 he was transported for seven years to Van Diemen's Land for stealing two scythes. All these judgements were made by Rev. John Parsons, except the final one which was made by his magistrate colleague, the Rev. Edward West.¹⁴⁹

The remaining two 'rioters' identified by Rev. John Parsons were both young, single men, the 20-year-old Edward Parsons and 21-year-old Frederick Lewis, both of whom were from Sherborne and without significant criminal records. Edward Parsons, a shopman, lived with his mother and father in the Warr Court on Newland (see Table 6 and Figure 5) and five surviving siblings (his mother had lost three children).¹⁵⁰ This made him a neighbour of another 'rioter' Leonard Pearce of the 'fife, drum and flag' group (see Section 2.1.3). Parsons' mother may have been a domestic servant for Thomas Fooks, Steward of the Liberty and Clerk to the Dorset Commission of the Peace.¹⁵¹ Frederick Lewis was the most unrepresentative of the 'rioters' who were either arrested or identified by Parsons. He was the son of Robert Lewis, a solicitor, who had premises on Cheap Street and Albertina (nee Willmott). Frederick's father passed away when he was six in 1816 and his mother in 1829. Robert may have been living with one of his two older brothers, Robert and John who were renting properties on Trendle Street and Long

¹⁴⁵ Percy, *Numerical Terrier* item 486a.

¹⁴⁶ Dorset, England, Dorchester Prison Admission and Discharge Registers, 1782-1901 Prisoner Register 1812-1827 and 1828-1839; Dorset OPC Sherborne: Baptisms 1780-1789, 1800-1809, Castleton: Baptisms 1801-1901, Marriages 1716-1919, 1841, 1851 Census Sherborne; *Dorset County Chronicle* 30 November 1826.

¹⁴⁷ Percy, *Numerical Terrier* item 486b.

¹⁴⁸ *Dorset County Chronicle* 24 January 1828.

¹⁴⁹ Dorset, England, Dorchester Prison Admission and Discharge Registers, 1782-1901 Prisoner Register 1812-1827 and 1828-1839; England and Wales Criminal registers 1791-1892 Dorset 1829; 1827-1836 Dorset Quarter Session Order Book; *Sherborne Mercury* 19 January, 6, 27 April 1829, 19 July 1830; *Dorset County Chronicle* 15 January 1829; Libraries Tasmania CON14-1-2 Image 11, CON18-1-3 Image 46, CON31-1-35 Image 68.

¹⁵⁰ Percy, *Numerical Terrier* item 108t; Dorset OPC 1841, 1851, 1861 Census Sherborne, Osborne Baptisms 1761-1812, Castleton Baptisms 1801-1901, Sherborne Marriages 1830-1849; Edward Parsons was later listed by occupation as a carter (1841) and a labourer (1851) and finally Sexton (1861).

¹⁵¹ Percy, *Numerical Terrier* item 521. Thomas Fooks is listed as owning the property in 1834 and occupying it with Elizabeth Parsons.

Street respectively.¹⁵² Lewis was also the nephew of Thomas Willmott the silk mill owner and his aunt Mary was married to Thomas (see Section 4.5). Given these connections it is likely Frederick Lewis may have already been known by Parsons.

Recognition, of course, is often a two-way process and after his aggressive intervention on Long Street, Rev. John Parsons was also recognised by members of the crowd. For some, he was the leading magistrate who had punished their friends, family or themselves with imprisonment, whippings or transportation. For many, he may have represented the anti-reform elements of the clergy who voted for Lord Ashley en masse in Dorset and against reform in the House of Lords. For others he was, like Fooks, the lackey of Lord Digby and the big landowners, the gentry opposed to the salvation of reform. Parsons may have been struck by Robert Collins, but he was felled by one of a volley of stones from several members of the crowd. If the violence had been indiscriminate, then why were none of the rest of the ‘gentlemen’ in Parsons’ group attacked and injured?

The *Sherborne Journal*, along with several other sources wrote dramatically about the incident and the role of one of the ‘gentlemen’ in the group: “had it not been for the protection of Mr. J [James] Melmoth his [Parsons] life must have been sacrificed in the attempt [to read the Riot Act]”.¹⁵³ As we have noted previously, Melmoth would have been recognised by several of the rioters as he was landlord to members of their families but he was also a Ponsonby voter and a pro-reform speaker at public meetings. Unlike Parsons, he and the other ‘gentlemen’ did not apparently aggressively intervene in Long Street. Instead, Melmoth accompanied the injured Parsons, apparently without further molestation, to the surgeon Edward Turners’ house, which minutes before had been the focus of the rioters.¹⁵⁴ Parsons was clearly selected as a target by the rioters in the altercation and this was confirmed by their ultimate actions of the evening. Empowered by their successful collective activities over several hours the crowd moved “in parties” purposefully down Long Street “in a most riotous and disorderly manner” towards their final targets in the town centre.¹⁵⁵

2.1.6 The Vicarage

According to the *Sherborne Journal* when the crowd of “3-400” arrived on Half Moon Street at about 10:45 in the evening “the popular fury was beyond all control”.¹⁵⁶ However, studying the evidence, clearly it was controlled, because only two targets were attacked, out of dozens of houses, businesses and shops. The first was the premises of Adam Lowman, a grocer, tea dealer and butter factor, on the corner of Half Moon Street and Westbury adjacent to Church Yard.¹⁵⁷ Why Lowman’s shop was chosen and significantly damaged remains somewhat of a mystery;

¹⁵² Percy, *Numerical Terrier* items 473 and 65; Dorset OPC Sherborne Postal Directory 1823, Sherborne Baptisms at the Parish Church 1800-1809, 1810-1819, Castleton Marriages 1716-1919; England Select Births and Christenings 1538-1975; *Sherborne Mercury* 18 May 1829.

¹⁵³ *Sherborne Journal* 27 October 1831.

¹⁵⁴ As Fripp notes, the accounts in the *Sherborne Journal* and of Parsons himself diverge at this point with the former claiming he was unconscious for a significant period after he was struck in the face with a stone, whilst Parsons stated he was conscious and returned to his house about an hour after he had left. Fripp, John “The Sherborne Riot of 1831: Causes, Characters and Consequences” *Proceedings of the Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society* Vol. 127 (2005) p. 21 n. 10.

¹⁵⁵ DHC Christmas - January Quarter Sessions depositions 1831-1832 27b: Information of John Parsons, 26 October 1831.

¹⁵⁶ *Sherborne Journal* 27 October 1831; George Down a witness at one of the trials saw the crowd pass down Half Moon Street. *Sherborne Mercury* 19 March 1831.

¹⁵⁷ Percy, *Numerical Terrier* item 744; TNA HO 52/12 [ff: 18-20] 20 October 1831. Letter from Daniel Penny to Sir Francis Freeling (Secretary of the General Post Office); DHC Q/D/A(M)/3/2 Officers in Militia, Local Militia, Volunteer Infantry and Yeomanry. Summary of payments for damages by riots within the Hundred of Sherborne, 13 Jan 1832. 1803-1856.

he does not appear to have voted in the by-election, was not connected to either campaign and had no public political preference. The only tenuous link with the poll is Bankes' and Ashley's election agent Thomas Lowman, the assistant Clerk to the Peace and Fooks' apprentice solicitor.¹⁵⁸ It does not appear from investigation that they were related in any way, but they may have been perceived to be by the rioters.

Lowman's shop was the first target to undergo some looting. Up until this point, of the 12 homes and businesses attacked, all the crimes had been of an expressive nature rather than acquisitive. That is criminal damage. There had been no looting or attempts to loot properties. It appears from the evidence that the damage to Lowman's business, although relatively small (£8 5s), was once again due to physical damage rather than stealing goods.¹⁵⁹ However, this would not be the case for the final target of the rioters that night.

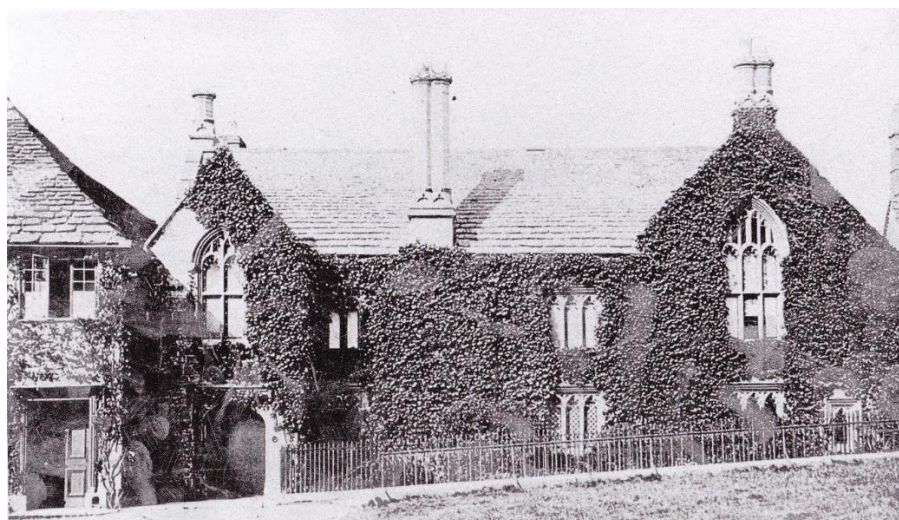


Figure 15: The Vicarage on Church Yard, the home of Rev. John Parsons (c. 1857)¹⁶⁰

As the crowd entered Church Yard, despite the worries of those in the nearby Sherborne School where the boys "armed with cudgels were patrolling the premises", it became clear that their target was Rev. John Parsons' home, the Vicarage on Church Yard (see Figure 15).¹⁶¹ It appears that Parson's family and servants vacated the property from the rear when the crowd arrived outside the front, though Parsons makes no specific mention of his family, only of his servant.¹⁶² Estimates of the number of people present in the Church Yard around 11.00pm range from 200 to 3-400.¹⁶³ Whilst members of the crowd forced open the front door, others set about systematically demolishing the exterior of the house and the gardens:

the windows, in which there were 496 panes of glass, had been altogether demolished; the wood rails in the churchyard were pulled down; the water-

¹⁵⁸ See Ball et al, *Preludes to the riots in Dorset in October 1831* p. 6, 8.

¹⁵⁹ DHC Q/D/A(M)/3/2 Officers in Militia, Local Militia, Volunteer Infantry and Yeomanry. Summary of payments for damages by riots within the Hundred of Sherborne, 13 Jan 1832. 1803-1856.

¹⁶⁰ Image courtesy of Sherborne School Archives.

¹⁶¹ Lyon, "Reminiscences of my life at Sherborne School, 1836-1845" p. 226; Percy, *Numerical Terrier* items 494 and 609a.

¹⁶² Rev. John Parsons was married to Mary Smith, and they had a 15-year-old daughter Mary in 1831. In the 1841 census Parsons is listed a living with his daughter and two female servants. Despite investigation the fate of his wife is unknown from the birth of Mary in 1816 onwards.

¹⁶³ Estimates from these sources TNA HO 52/12 ff. 18-20 (200); *Sherborne Mercury* 19 March 1831 (3-400).

shoots, which were attached to the house by stay-nails were removed; the fruit-trees were destroyed...The window shutters, internal and external, were broken to pieces¹⁶⁴

The destruction outside the Vicarage was matched by that inside as internal doors were broken down and furniture smashed by “many persons”. The number of people in the house was so large one witness stated the “passage was quite full”.¹⁶⁵ Amongst the general vandalism some of the invaders were taking furniture, crockery, foodstuffs, books and other household items.¹⁶⁶ These activities were apparently not an acquisitive scramble but being carried out relatively calmly. In the passage to the back courtyard of the house the rioters forced open the cellar door where they found stores of alcohol. Here they staved in one barrel of beer, before lifting another up and dragging it outside for the awaiting crowd in the Church Yard. Others brought bottles of spirits from inside the house. After the destruction outside and inside the Vicarage had waned and with the delivery of alcohol, the atmosphere became more party-like. Witnesses described the rioters as “laughing and talking” in groups and a number of people wandered in and out of the wrecked house merely out of curiosity.¹⁶⁷

However, not all the interlopers in the house were accepted by the rioters. Henry Roberts (25), a brazier and tin plate worker who rented a shop on the Parade at the end of Cheap Street, wandered down to the Church Yard with his mother Edith.¹⁶⁸ It appears they had not taken part in the earlier ‘riot’ but were curious to see what was happening at the Vicarage. After entering the house, they recognised Robert Harris (see Section 2.1.3) in a court leading to the kitchen. Harris, who was holding a stave, immediately threw it at Roberts and his mother, whereupon Roberts punched Harris.¹⁶⁹ The reason for this violent altercation may be the very fact that we know about it. Henry Roberts later gave evidence in court against the rioters, suggesting that he and his mother were already regarded as likely to inform on the rioters, and were thus potential targets of members of the crowd.

Other figures in or connected to the ‘dark village’ who had informed on some of the arrestees in the past were also present that evening, both at the start and end of the riot. They were not part of the crowd or the riot but observed the activities from a distance and later identified people. For example, Robert Lamb (17) an agricultural labourer living with his parents on Hound Street, identified Robert Harris and Leonard Pearce in court as being involved in the ‘fife, drum and flag’ group as the crowd assembled on Half Moon Street.¹⁷⁰ Two years previously, Lamb had informed on Pearce and James Pitman, the brother of rioter John Pitman (see Section 2.1.5), leading to their imprisonment with hard labour and whipping under the judgement of Rev. John Parsons.¹⁷¹ Lamb who had been directly involved with the crime (stealing ducks) escaped justice as a result of his actions and it is likely he would have been regarded by the magistrates as a potential source of information in the future. Lamb, if he had been recognised, would also have been regarded as a direct threat by many of the rioters. This is the reason Lamb and several

¹⁶⁴ *Sherborne Mercury* 19 March 1831.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ DHC D-FFO 25/23 Revd John Parsons of Sherborne. Papers in dispute Parsons v Inhabitants of the Hundred of Sherborne, (Riot and trespass). 1831.

¹⁶⁷ *Sherborne Mercury* 19 March 1831.

¹⁶⁸ Dorset OPC Sherborne Baptisms 1800-1809, Hermitage Marriages 1717-1869; 1841, 1851 census Sherborne; Percy, *Numerical Terrier* items 458 and 606; “Sherborne: Entries from the 1835 Robson’s Directory”; *Pigot’s Directory 1842: Sherborne*.

¹⁶⁹ *Sherborne Mercury* 19 March 1831.

¹⁷⁰ Percy, *Numerical Terrier* item 143; *Sherborne Mercury* 19 March 1831.

¹⁷¹ *Dorset County Chronicle* 15 January 1829.

other eyewitnesses who appeared in court stayed clear of the crowd, whereas others could move quite freely through it.¹⁷²

Incidents of intra-crowd violence in riots are not as common as might be imagined. Although they are often portrayed in the media (without explanation) as part of the general chaotic, lawlessness and mindlessness of crowds, they typically have a rationality from the perspective of the rioters. In the urban riots of the 1980s in England, prime targets for confrontation by members of rioting crowds were photographers, whether amateur or professional journalists. Often their equipment was seized and broken by rioters, or they were assaulted for not giving it up. This was because of the danger that the photograph posed, particularly after the law was changed to allow police forces to requisition photographic material from news organisations.¹⁷³ The corollary in 1831 to the photograph was, of course, the eyewitness. It is no surprise that in Sherborne the rioting crowd was to exclude from their activities both the 'respectable reformer' and the 'informer' as being, in the aftermath, at best unreliable and at worst a direct threat to life and liberty.

Three arrestees were named by John Parsons as having taken part in the destruction of his house. These were Robert Harris, Leonard Pearce and John Seville.¹⁷⁴ Harris and Pearce have been described elsewhere in this study (see Section 2.1.3). Seville, 19 years of age, was single and an apprentice plasterer by trade.¹⁷⁵ The Seville family were well known in Sherborne as 'tinkers', typically itinerant tinsmiths who repaired household utensils. Although they did not have a registered business as such, they operated out of their rented cottage at the end of Long Street close to the junction with Newland.¹⁷⁶ This placed John Seville very close to the homes of fellow arrestees Leonard Pearce and Edward Parsons who lived in Warr's Court, and it is likely he grew up with them.

The Seville family were known to the local magistrates which is probably why John was identified. Although he had no serious criminal record, his father Joseph was involved in a significant court case in 1830 where he had apparently acted as a fence for a theft of brass from lawyer James Melmoth. It does not appear that Joseph Seville was charged, and he did not give evidence against the accused father and son, Charles and Samuel Yeatman. Both were found guilty; Charles was transported for seven years, and his son imprisoned for six months with hard labour. This was despite a plea from Samuel "on behalf of the family" that he should serve his father's sentence of transportation. It is likely the Seville family were tarnished with a criminal reputation because of this incident if that wasn't the case already.

By midnight, the crowd of people partying in the Church Yard had dwindled in size to around 50 or so. They had control over the Vicarage for around an hour and satisfied with their efforts over the night, began to make their way home. Around midnight, the injured John Parsons made his way back towards the Vicarage, though for safety he took refuge in a neighbouring house probably James Melmoth's residence on Church Yard. At around 1.00am the crowd had completely dispersed, and Parsons immediately returned to the Vicarage.¹⁷⁷ Clearly shocked by

¹⁷² See for example the account of Fanny Fox a witness in the court case for Robert Harris, Leonard Pearce and John Seville. She was outside the Vicarage that night and knew all the defendants. It appears her evidence helped acquit the three men. *Sherborne Mercury* 19 March 1832.

¹⁷³ Reicher, "The St. Pauls' riot" p. 12.

¹⁷⁴ John Seville's name is spelt several ways in the sources (Cevil, Sevil, Sevill) probably due to his lack of literacy.

¹⁷⁵ Dorset, England, Dorchester Prison Admission and Discharge Registers, 1782-1901 Prisoner Register 1827-1839; Dorset, England, Church of England Baptisms, Marriages and Burials, 1538-1812 October 1812.

¹⁷⁶ Percy, *Numerical Terrier* item 96.

¹⁷⁷ *Sherborne Mercury* 19 March 1831.

the attacks on his person and property, at 3.00am Parsons sent express messengers to Dorchester asking for regular troops to be sent immediately.¹⁷⁸ Later that morning Lord Lieutenant Digby penned a letter to the Home Secretary, Lord Melbourne, in London lamenting the fact that the military units in Dorchester probably could not be spared. Instead, he requested that the Home Secretary immediately send troops to Sherborne.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ DHC D-DOY A-3-1 (pt. 1) Dorset Yeomanry correspondence: Digby to Frampton 20 October 1831.

¹⁷⁹ TNA HO 52/12 Counties Correspondence Berks – Gloucester [ff:16-17] Letter from Lord Digby to Lord Melbourne. October 20 1831.



Key

1. Town Hall
2. William Boswell (lawyer)
3. James Ridout (draper)
4. Thomas Fooks (Clerk of the Peace, agent for Ashley)
5. Lt. Crawford & Robert Woodbourne (grocer)
6. The Antelope Inn – Thomas Hilliar
7. Thomas Sherrin (butcher)
8. Nathaniel Highmore (surgeon)
9. Rev. Edward. W. West (magistrate)
10. Sherborne Castle (Lord Lt. Digby)
11. Edward Turner (surgeon)
12. William Allford (solicitor)
13. Rev. John Parsons (magistrate) intervenes and is attacked
14. Adam Lowman (grocers)
15. Rev. John Parsons Vicarage ransacked

Figure 16: Targets and path of rioters in Sherborne – 19 October 1831

2.2 Thursday 20 October - Day 2

2.2.1 The morning after...

On the morning of 20 October, news of the previous night's riot was spreading by word of mouth in Sherborne and its immediate environs, carried by those travelling on horseback to other towns in Dorset and in letters in mail coaches heading to London. As a result, different narratives of the events were being propagated, depending on the source of the information. For example, Daniel Penny, the Postmaster in Sherborne, who lived on Long Street which experienced some of the rioting, wrote a letter early that morning to the Secretary of the General Post Office, Sir Francis Freeling in London. During the 1790s Freeling, a Tory supporter and (joint) secretary of the postal service, had carried out an important role amongst "a network of officials who assisted the government in monitoring the activities of corresponding societies and other radical supporters of the French revolution".¹⁸⁰ Penny's letter strongly implied a causal connection between the rioting in the evening in Sherborne and the earlier gathering held in the Town Hall to protest over the dubious victory of Ashley in the by-election (see Section 2.1.1). Penny even provided Freeling with a copy of the leaflet advertising the meeting (see Figure 8) to back up his claim.¹⁸¹

Sadly there is no evidence available of the narrative that the rioters and their supporters were communicating to others, though the *Sherborne Journal* commented retrospectively that "the whole day passed in a state of anxiety" whilst the *Dorset County Chronicle* stated "In the course of the day the greatest excitement prevailed".¹⁸² The suggestion from these comments is that the tension in the town was generated by a feeling that the rioting was not yet over. This was certainly the perception of the authorities in Sherborne (Lord Lieutenant Digby, Steward of the Liberty Fooks, and the magistrates, Parsons and West), who were still smarting from the attacks on their person and property. A message was sent by the magistrates to Captain John Goodden four miles away at Over Compton to immediately assemble his troop of Yeomanry.¹⁸³

The Rev. John Parsons followed a similar causal path to Postmaster Penny in directly linking the rioting with the formal reform protests in Sherborne. By implication this meant that those residents of Sherborne who organised pro-reform meetings, vocalised anti-reform sentiments in the media or merely supported these actions were to blame for the violence. This argument could be constructed precisely because the targeting of the rioters was so selective, and this was rapidly becoming general knowledge in the town. For example, in his memoirs the Rev. William Lyon, Vicar of Sherborne and Governor of Sherborne School, remembered the 20th October 1831 as a child at the school:

Many persons of Tory principles had their windows smashed, and great alarm was felt. My only recollection of this troublous time is that a screen was placed before our bed in the nursery, in case of stones coming through the window, and, on one evening at least, I and my brother were carried

¹⁸⁰ Smith, G. B., and Jean Farrugia. "Freeling, Sir Francis, first baronet (1764–1836), postal administrator and book collector." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. 23 Sep. 2004; Accessed 23 Jul. 2022. <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-10144>.

¹⁸¹ TNA HO 52/12 Counties Correspondence Berks – Gloucester [ff: 18-20] Letter from Daniel Penny to Sir Francis Freeling (Secretary of the General Post Office) 20 October 1831.

¹⁸² *Sherborne Journal* 27 October 1831; *Dorset County Chronicle* 27 October 1831.

¹⁸³ *Dorset County Chronicle* 27 October 1831.

down to the house of a Mr. Elias Penny in South (then Duck) Street, as he, being a Whig, *was in no danger of attack*.¹⁸⁴

Parsons was fully aware of this selectivity, in a letter to the Home Secretary he noted: “At present however *it is all one way* except by mistake, which is most promptly discovered by the mob.”¹⁸⁵ Here Parsons’ is explaining that the property damage and violence is *only* being directed at the anti-reformers and notes that any errors in the targeting are being discovered and corrected by the rioters.¹⁸⁶

Parsons was so convinced about the culpability of the reformers and, one suspects, angry about attacks on his person and home that he decided to directly confront the pro-reformers in Sherborne. According to the *Sherborne Journal* that morning he “passed through the town ... charging the Reformers with being the cause of the riots on the preceding evening”.¹⁸⁷ It is unclear whether this involved haranguing people in the street or making personal visits. Either way, as the *Journal* pointed out, the angry Parsons challenged “the reform party... the greater portion of the most wealthy and respectable inhabitants” of the town.¹⁸⁸ Parsons was not alone in making these divisive attacks, as reformer John Penny pointed out in an editorial in the *Journal*:

In Sherborne the riots have been a beacon of animosity - day after day have the anti-reformers calumniated their more liberal neighbours, by charging them with having produced the destruction of property. Letters have appeared in the *Standard* newspaper, from the anti-reformers propagating the most erroneous and ridiculous reports, and attempting to cast an odium ... on the Reformers.¹⁸⁹

The uncertainties in when (or if) regular or irregular military support would arrive in Sherborne made the need for recruiting significant numbers of Special Constables a necessity for the authorities. Consequently, that morning notices were hurriedly distributed, signed by Lord Lieutenant Digby and the magistrates, Revs. Parsons and West, announcing a meeting for “preserving the peace and the protection of private property” at the Town Hall in the afternoon to enrol the Constables.¹⁹⁰ The meeting was an important test of the unity of the ‘respectable’ classes in Sherborne which, almost a year before, had been largely united when threatened by the ‘Swing riots’.¹⁹¹ Although attended by the Lord Lieutenant and the magistrates as well as the ‘patriotic’ personage, war hero Admiral Sir Henry Digby, the meeting was a disaster. Parsons’ confrontation with the ‘respectable’ reformers earlier that day had caused great offence:

they declined coming forward [to enrol as special constables] unless a suitable explanation was given by Mr Parsons respecting the charges which he had so unjustly and incautiously made in the morning. An explanation

¹⁸⁴ Our emphasis in italics. Lyon, “Reminiscences of my life at Sherborne School, 1836-1845” p. 226. Elias Penny was the father of William Webb Penny the editor of the *Sherborne Mercury* and ran a bookshop, library and reading room on Half Moon Street.

¹⁸⁵ TNA HO 52/12 Counties Correspondence Berks – Gloucester [ff: 21-24] Letter from Reverend John Parsons to Home Secretary Lord Melbourne. 22 October 1831. Our emphasis in italics.

¹⁸⁶ This may be a reference to the attack on the pro-reformer William Alford’s house on Long Street that Parsons witnessed the previous evening (see Section 2.1.5).

¹⁸⁷ This event is also reported in the *Hereford Journal* 02 November 1831.

¹⁸⁸ *Sherborne Journal* 27 October 1831.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ *Sherborne Journal* 27 October 1831; TNA HO 52/12 [ff: 21-24] 22 October 1831. John Parsons to Home Secretary Lord Melbourne.

¹⁹¹ See Ball et al, *Preludes to the riots in Dorset in October 1831* pp. 2-3.

was attempted on the part of Mr. Parsons, but it was a most unsatisfactory one; consequently the respectable gentlemen whose characters had been aspersed withdrew their interference in the quarrel which existed between *the Anti-Reformers and the lawless persons*.¹⁹²

This final phrase is interesting as it describes the rioters as an ‘other’, outside of the wider politics of reform, just as they were outside the formal political process in Sherborne; the ‘lawless’ from the ‘dark village’. In tandem with the denials in the *Sherborne Journal* that the attendees at the meeting to protest the result of the election the previous day were rioters (see Section 2.1.1), a line was being drawn between the rioting crowd and the formal reform movement in Sherborne both in composition and causality.

Only 10 or perhaps 12 residents of Sherborne volunteered to become Special Constables at the meeting out of “many hundreds”.¹⁹³ This should be compared with the claim that 700 enrolled in the aftermath of the Division of Sherborne meeting the previous November, when the fear of ‘Captain Swing’ was at its zenith.¹⁹⁴ Parsons noted in a letter to the Home Secretary that the embarrassingly low turnout was despite the threat of a fine for refusal to enrol:

Of course, the means provided in the very recent Act of Parl. 1 & 2 of the present King. ch. 41 were those recommended ... I am confident that were we to nominate & issue precepts for appointing 50 or 100 every man would refuse, & would submit to the penalty of £5, now the only punishment for refusal. I have the authority of a most influential man among the Reformers, ... to assert that every man would object to be sworn in. There are some very painful & exciting causes to this deadness and want of proper feeling, but I wish only to state the exact condition we are in.¹⁹⁵

The “most influential man among the Reformers” that Parsons was negotiating with remains a mystery but what is clear is that the ‘respectable reformers’ voted with their feet and were stepping back from their customary responsibility to provide physical support for the local state. They were not being targeted and they were leaving the battle with the “lawless persons” in the hands of the Lord Lieutenant, the Steward of the Liberty and the magistrates to resolve. In Sherborne, these positions were dominated by significant figures in the Tory anti-reform faction: Digby, Fooks, Parsons and to a lesser extent West, all of whom had been targeted by the rioters. The *Sherborne Journal* article suggests that this outcome was merely down to the accusative behaviour of Parsons but this is a somewhat shallow explanation. The refusal was also a reflection of general dissent over the failure of the reform bill in the House of Lords and the dubious result of the county by-election. In a sense, the feeling was that the Tories had created the crisis both locally and nationally, and it is they that would have to deal with the consequences.

The meeting was described by various sources as “a noisy one which suddenly broke up” and “a failure and created some confusion”.¹⁹⁶ The impression is that there was significant vocal dissent from the floor and a lack of clarity at the end, perhaps leading to a walkout by most of the audience. The failure to recruit a significant number of special constables left Digby and the magistrates in a difficult position, they were now relying for policing on units of the yeomanry and the military regulars.

¹⁹² *Sherborne Journal* 27 October 1831. Our emphasis in italics.

¹⁹³ TNA HO 52/12 [ff: 21-24] 22 October 1831. John Parsons to Home Secretary Lord Melbourne.

¹⁹⁴ See Ball et al, *Preludes to the riots in Dorset in October 1831* pp. 2-3.

¹⁹⁵ TNA HO 52/12 [ff: 21-24] 22 October 1831. John Parsons to Home Secretary Lord Melbourne.

¹⁹⁶ *Dorset County Chronicle* 27 Oct 1831; *Hereford Journal* 02 November 1831.

2.2.2 The Yeomanry and the Military

A major problem for Lord Lieutenant Digby, Steward of the Liberty Fooks, and the magistrates, Parsons and West was that Sherborne was not ideally placed to call upon substantial and rapid support from the recently re-formed Dorset Yeomanry Cavalry. The disposition of the various troops and commanding officers in mid-October 1831 is shown in Figure 17. The Yeomanry forces consisted of nine troops, five of whom were integrated and named the Dorset Regiment of Yeomanry Cavalry (DRYC) and four independent Yeomanry troops (see Table 10). The DRYC was planned in December 1830 to be 715 strong but by August 1831 it only had 351 officers and privates enrolled. The shortfall was made up by the independent troops which had a total compliment of 270 when they mustered in mid-April 1831, giving a total of 621 Yeomanry in Dorset, with an average of around 69 men per troop. Each troop were armed with swords, pistols and 12 heavy carbines with bayonets. The overall commander of the DRYC was Lieutenant Colonel James Frampton based at Moreton, near Dorchester and his vice was Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Bower who lived at Iwerne Minster near Blandford.¹⁹⁷ The nearest senior officer to Sherborne was Major Fox-Strangways, the Earl of Ilchester, effectively third in command of the DRYC at Melbury House about ten miles away.

Troop	Troop Type	Captain/Major	Location of Captain/Major	Strength April/Aug 1831	Vote in 1831 by-election
1 st Melbury	Integrated (DRYC)	Maj. Henry Fox-Strangways (Earl of Ilchester)	Melbury	89	Pro-reform ¹⁹⁸
Blackmore Vale		Capt. George Jacob	Shillingstone	58	Ponsonby
Dorchester		Capt. Henry Frampton	Moreton	68	?
Ranston		Capt. Sir Edward Baker	Ranston	65	Ashley
Sherborne		Capt. John Goodden	Over Compton	67	Ashley activist ¹⁹⁹
Sub-total				351 ²⁰⁰	
Blandford	Independent	Capt. James Farquharson	Langton, Nr. Blandford	82	Ashley
Wimborne		Capt. William Hanham	High Hall, Nr. Wimborne	59	Ashley
Isle of Purbeck and Wareham		Capt. John Bond	Creech Grange, Isle of Purbeck	74	Ashley
Charborough		Capt. John Erle Drax/Capt. John Wauley	Charborough	55	Ponsonby/?
Sub-total				270	

Table 10: The Dorset Yeomanry Cavalry troops in 1831²⁰¹

¹⁹⁷ DHC D-DOY/A/6/1 Dorset Queen's Own Yeomanry Papers: Notes and statistics compiled by General Thompson when writing Records of the Dorset Yeomanry including an account of the rioting in Stour Provost in 1831. 1893.

¹⁹⁸ Lord Ilchester voted for the Second Reform Bill in the House of Lords on 8th October 1831.

¹⁹⁹ See Ball et al, *Preludes to the riots in Dorset in October 1831* p. 6.

²⁰⁰ This figure includes four staff officers, Lieutenant Colonel (Commandant), Lieutenant Colonel, Adjutant and a surgeon.

²⁰¹ This chart is derived from the following sources: DHC D-DOY A-3-1 (pt. 2) Dorset Yeomanry correspondence: Return of the number of persons now enrolled and serving in the Dorset Regt. of Yeo.

None of the four independent Troops in the east of the county were within twenty miles of Sherborne. Including the time delay for a request to arrive with the Captain of a Troop, for the messages then to be sent out for the troopers to muster and for them to actually assemble, they were unlikely to be available within at least 12 hours of a call, if not 24. The one unit nearby, was Captain John Goodden's integrated troop, recruited from the environs of Sherborne.²⁰² The other senior officers of this unit included Lieutenant (Rev.) Charles Digby at Bishops Caundle (six miles from Sherborne) and Cornet Samuel Pretor, the banker, landlord and magistrate who lived in the town.²⁰³

The formal organisation of the Dorset Yeomanry Cavalry obscured divisions in class interest and politics amongst both troopers and senior officers. In his history of the Regiment General Thompson quotes Sir Walter Scott on the general disbanding of the Yeomanry in 1828 to save public expenditure:

I ... have seen the rise, progress, and now the fall of this very constitutional part of the National force. Its efficacy on occasions of insurrections was sufficiently proved in Radical times. But besides *it kept up a spirit of harmony between the proprietors of land and the occupiers, and made them known to and beloved by each other*; and it gave to the young men a sort of military and high spirited character which always does honour to a country. The manufacturers are in high glee on this occasion. I wish Parliament, as they have turned the Yeomen adrift somewhat scornfully, may not have occasion to roar them in again.²⁰⁴

Scott's point was that outside of its policing role the Yeomanry regiments helped unify the landed gentry with the freeholders and manufacturers around their patriotic duty. In 1830 the issue of reform was exacerbating divisions between these classes around their political allegiances (Tory and Whig), and the loss of the Yeomanry a few years previously had removed one 'neutral' arena for cooperation and socialising. The unity between these classes shown in Dorset in reaction to the Swing risings temporarily confounded this schism but by October 1831 and the defeat of the Reform Bill in the Lords, the divisions had become greater than ever.

The process of re-forming the Dorset Yeomanry Cavalry in early 1831 had demonstrated these political differences were alive and well. Lord Digby's initial request to the Secretary of State to form the regiment under the command of James Frampton and his second Thomas Bower, was countered by a proposal from Edward Portman who argued that it should be divided into a western and eastern division, under separate commanders.²⁰⁵ This would create two different chains of command and effectively two regiments. Portman, a Justice of the Peace, county MP and well-known supporter of reform recognised the danger of placing the whole regiment under the command of two committed Tory anti-reformers. Instead, Portman suggested that Frampton could take command of the Eastern units and Henry Fox-Strangways (3rd Earl of Ilchester) the Western, with each having "a distinct set of officers".²⁰⁶ Fox-Strangways was a supporter of reform, voting for the Second Reform Bill in the House of Lords, and thus acted as

Cavalry commanded by Lt. Col. Frampton 1st August 1832; DHC D-DOY/A/6/1 Dorset Queen's Own Yeomanry Papers: Notes and statistics compiled by General Thompson when writing Records of the Dorset Yeomanry including an account of the rioting in Stour Provost in 1831. 1893; Farrell, "Dorset County" in *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons*.

²⁰² *Sherborne Mercury* 27 December 1830.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*; Percy, *Numerical Terrier* item 617b; see also Table 5 and Table 7.

²⁰⁴ Thompson, C. W. *The Records of the Dorset Yeomanry ("Queen's Own")* (Dorchester: Dorset County Chronicle, 1894) p. 108. Our emphasis in italics.

²⁰⁵ DHC D-FRA-X-4 Frampton's account of the Dorset Yeomanry Cavalry Regiment from 1830.

²⁰⁶ Thompson, *The Records of the Dorset Yeomanry ("Queen's Own")* p. 109.

a balancing measure as far as Portman was concerned.²⁰⁷ Portman justified his plan by making the accusation that Frampton was not a respected commander:

[Portman claimed] some of the men who had belonged to the former Regiment of Yeomanry, particularly in the neighbourhood of Blandford objected to rise again under me [James Frampton] as I had given them offence at the time the last regiment had been disbanded in 1814.²⁰⁸

Frampton undermined this claim, Fox-Strangways refused Portman's support and thus Portman's plan ultimately failed. As a result, the command structure was somewhat of a muddle with half the regiment integrated and under the direct command of James Frampton and the other half consisting of the independent troops. It is likely this internal power struggle created animosity between some of the Whig and Tory commanders; it certainly angered Frampton.²⁰⁹ On a county level the overt support for Lord Ashley by Captains Baker, Farquharson and Hanham and the actions the 'off-duty' troops during the October by-election and the involvement of Lieutenant Colonels Frampton and Bower in Ashley's election committee, exacerbated these political divisions. Similarly, Captain John Goodden, the senior officer of the Sherborne troop of Yeomanry cavalry, had been an activist for the anti-reform Tory, Henry Bankes, in the May election. The partisan nature of reform politics in the early 1830s certainly affected the available 'policing' bodies such as Special Constables and Yeomanry but also the authorities themselves: magistrates, Stewards and Lord Lieutenants. Disagreements amongst them over the deployment of yeomanry and military forces, for situational and political reasons, would be a feature of the reform riots in Dorset.²¹⁰

One might have thought that Lieutenant Colonel Frampton would have been keen to get his Yeomanry Cavalry units into action once the reform-related rioting broke out in Dorset. In actuality he recognised the potential danger of how they were now perceived by both the 'respectable reformers' and the 'lower orders'. Writing from outside the Quarter Sessions in Dorchester to Lord Lieutenant Digby on 20th October, the day after the rioting in Sherborne commenced and in response to the call for assistance to Captain Goodden's Troop at Over Compton, Frampton stated:

I cannot help suggesting to you whether at this moment, just after the conclusion of so warmly contested an election, it would not have been better to have employed the Regular Troops who are now stationed at Dorchester than to have assembled any of the Troops of Yeomanry for that purpose – which might be the occasion of more irritation and excite angry feelings which it must be the object of every person of both parties to suppress.²¹¹

Digby was "entirely in agreement" with Frampton but pointed out that the regular troops might not be available in Dorset and hence he had appealed directly to the Home Secretary for immediate assistance.²¹² It is somewhat ironic that the overt posturing by anti-reform Yeomanry commanders and their 'off-duty' troopers in support of Ashley would come back to haunt them once the reform riots began.

In terms of regular cavalry units available to the authorities in Sherborne the primary force was the 3rd Dragoon Guards based at Dorchester barracks. According to the *Dorset County Chronicle*

²⁰⁷ *Sherborne Mercury* 17 October 1831.

²⁰⁸ DHC D-FRA-X-4 Frampton's account of the Dorset Yeomanry Cavalry Regiment from 1830.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

²¹⁰ See Poole et al, *The Blandford Forum riots*.

²¹¹ DHC D-DOY A-3-1 (pt. 1) Dorset Yeomanry Correspondence: Frampton to Digby 20 October 1831.

²¹² DHC D-DOY A-3-1 (pt. 1) Dorset Yeomanry Correspondence: Digby to Frampton 20 October 1831.

the main body of these troops had been moved a further seven miles south to Weymouth and were present at the coast on the afternoon of Monday 17 October 1831, the day of the Ashley/Ponsonby by-election result.²¹³ This may explain why they were not readily accessible for quelling the disturbances at the polling ground. After disturbances in Blandford on the Saturday afternoon and evening, the following day town Bailiff and Vicar of Blandford, Rev. John Chard, sent a letter to Weymouth requesting military aid.²¹⁴ A party of the 3rd Dragoon Guards arrived in Blandford late on Monday afternoon and they were engaged with the rioters that evening and the following day. On Wednesday 19th, the day the disturbances in Sherborne began, the Dragoons were requested to stay in Blandford until “tranquillity is returned”.²¹⁵ It was in the early hours of the Thursday morning that Parsons requested military assistance from Dorchester, probably unaware that the main body of Dragoons had been moved to Weymouth and that there was a unit at Blandford.

When Captain Goodden at Over Compton received the message from the Sherborne magistrates about the previous night’s violence and the request to assemble his Yeomanry troop on the morning of 20th October, he immediately followed the ‘riot’ protocol laid down in the regimental orders. This was to contact the commander of the nearest integrated troop for assistance, which in this case was Major Henry Fox-Strangways (Earl of Ilchester) at Melbury House about ten miles away.²¹⁶ However, Goodden knew that Fox-Strangways was in London, so instead he contacted the nearest senior officer to Melbury, Lieutenant Samuel Cox, at Beaminster a further ten miles to the west, asking him to muster the Earl’s troop and bring them to Sherborne. Goodden then sent a second express message to his Commanding Officer Lieutenant Colonel James Frampton who was attending the Quarter Sessions in Dorchester. Goodden asked Frampton to send his adjutant Joseph Frith to Sherborne and for agreement for his request that Yeomanry troops to support him from Melbury.²¹⁷

Frampton received Goodden’s message at 2.30pm in the afternoon and immediately acquiesced to his requests. He sent a message ordering his adjutant, who was drilling a Yeomanry unit about five miles away, back to Dorchester. On Frith’s return Frampton ordered him to:

proceed to Sherborne without delay he being then in his Plain Clothes without going home for his Regimentals [uniform]; and I did this not only to save time but because I thought he would enter the Town of Sherborne where he was not known more safely in that Dress then if he was seen singly in his Regimentals. He left Dorchester at about four o’clock.²¹⁸

Frampton’s worries about the effect of engaging the Yeomanry against the rioters demonstrated in his letter to the Lord Digby are also reflected in his order for a senior officer to travel incognito. Though, it was not just the effect a Yeomanry Officer in full uniform would have on the rioters but now it was also a question of their personal safety in what appeared to be a deteriorating situation.

Captain Goodden’s request for assistance reached Lieutenant Cox at Beaminster between 3.00 and 4.00pm that afternoon. Cox immediately sent out messages for the 1st Troop of DYRC to assemble at Evershot, the nearest village to Melbury House, the residence of the absent Major, the Earl of Ilchester. Arriving at Evershot in the early evening Cox discovered only 12 men and

²¹³ *Dorset County Chronicle* 20 October 1831.

²¹⁴ TNA HO 52/12 [ff:35-37] George Chard to Melbourne 29 October 1831.

²¹⁵ Poole et al, *The Blandford Forum riots*

²¹⁶ Bawn, “Social protest, popular disturbances and public order in Dorset” p. 236.

²¹⁷ DHC D-DOY A-3-1 (pt. 1) *Dorset Yeomanry Correspondence: Frampton to Digby* 29 October 1831.

²¹⁸ DHC D-DOY A-3-1 (pt. 1) *Dorset Yeomanry Correspondence: Frampton to Digby* 20 October 1831.

horses had assembled. Rather than wait any longer for more troopers to arrive, at 8.30pm he decided to set out with this small party for Sherborne leaving directions for others to follow on.²¹⁹ That afternoon Lieutenant Colonel Frampton, who was stranded at the Quarter Sessions in Dorchester without a horse and his “accoutrements” which were at his residence on Moreton about eight miles distant, sent for them so he could leave as soon as possible for Sherborne. His departure was delayed once again when:

I was informed by various persons that it would be unsafe for me to proceed to Sherborne without an escort. I took a Corporal and six men of Captain Frampton’s Troop with me.²²⁰

The fears for the safety of the Dorset Yeomanry’s commanding officer are reminiscent of having to move through contested or occupied ‘foreign’ territory in wartime, rather than through the roads of rural Dorset. However, they do provide an interesting insight into the tensions and perceptions of October 1831. It was not until 7.00am on the morning 21st October, more than 30 hours after the rioting began in Sherborne, that Frampton and his entourage finally left Dorchester. Frampton’s sister commented in her diary:

My brother, Mr. Frampton, Colonel of the Yeomanry ... started in full costume for Sherborne ... He had an escort with him; but although some murmurs and cries of “Ponsonby for ever!” pursued him in two or three of the villages through which he passed, no efforts were made to detain him.²²¹

²¹⁹ DHC D-DOY A-3-1 (pt. 1) Dorset Yeomanry Correspondence: Cox to Frampton 21 October 1831.

²²⁰ DHC D-DOY A-3-1 (pt. 1) Dorset Yeomanry Correspondence: Frampton to Digby 29 October 1831.

²²¹ Frampton, *The journal of Mary Frampton* p. 381.

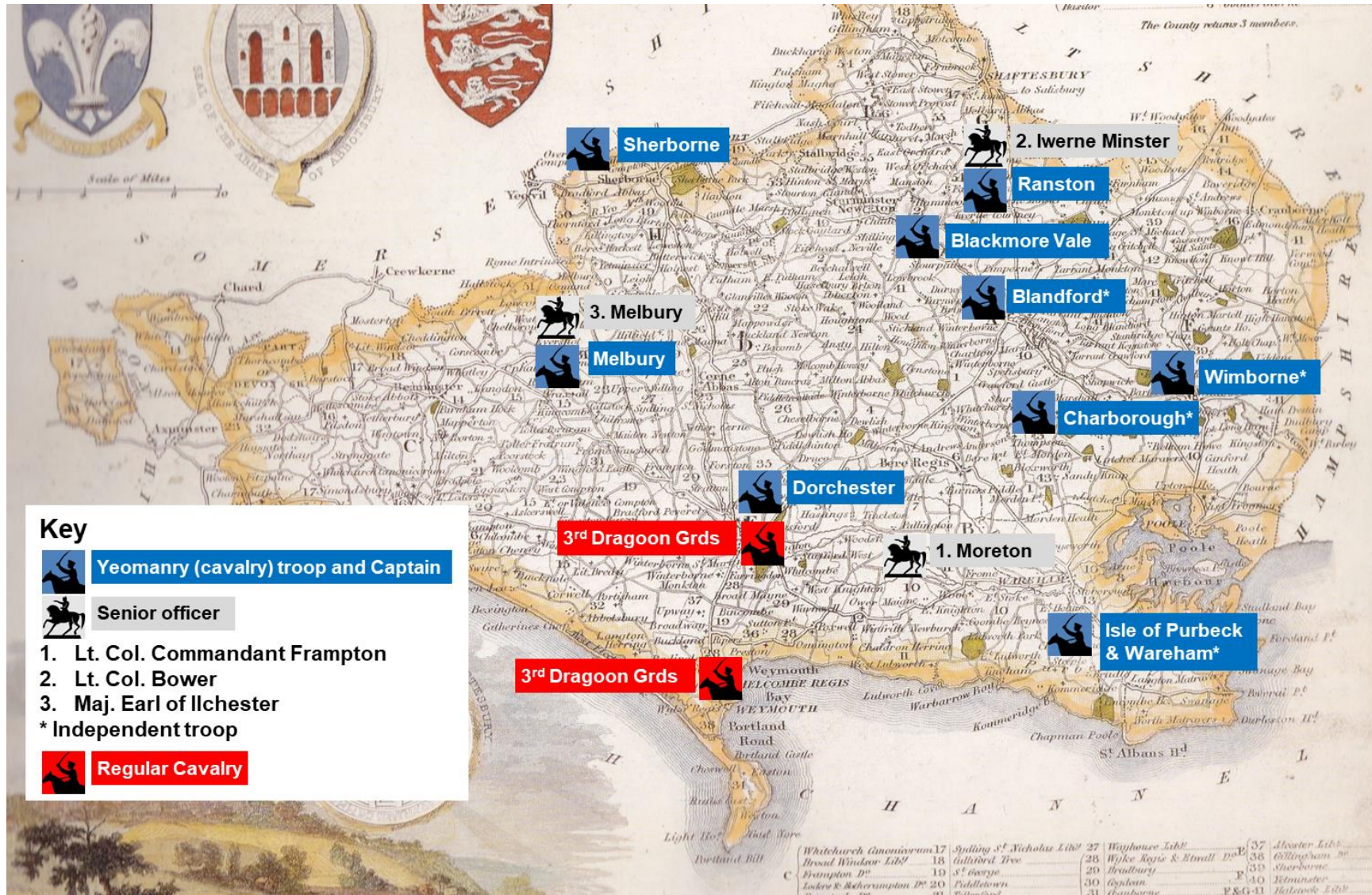


Figure 17: Disposition of Dorset Yeomanry Regiment and regular military in mid-October 1831

2.2.3 Confrontation with the Yeomanry

Captain Goodden had managed to muster some elements of his Yeomanry troop in Sherborne by late morning.²²² They were armed, mounted and wearing their new scarlet uniforms and thus clearly visible to residents in the town (see Figure 18).²²³ Around 6.30pm in the early evening the Adjutant to Lieutenant Colonel Frampton, Joseph Frith, arrived in plain clothes from Dorchester and contacted Goodden. News spreading around the town by word of mouth would have undoubtedly been focused on the appearance of the small force of Yeomanry, some of whom would have been known by face to the rioters, and the failure of the meeting that afternoon in the Town Hall to enrol many Special Constables. By the early evening, Goodden appears to have decided upon the *King's Arms* Inn, on Half Moon Street opposite the Town Hall, as his muster point and base of operations in the town.²²⁴ As the troopers moved through the town to the meeting point, they were hooted and jeered at by some, whilst others cheered them.²²⁵



Figure 18: Dorset Regiment of Yeomanry Cavalry parading in front of Greenhill House (1846)²²⁶

Goodden had only been able to raise about 20 or so men and horses from his Troop by the evening of 20th October. This was significantly understrength for a unit of 67 officers and men (see Table 10), though there may have been several reasons for this. First, the call to muster had been unexpected and had only been in operation for a few hours and so messages may not have arrived or found their way to those concerned, and as an angry letter to the *Sherborne Journal* argued in response to criticisms of the Sherborne troop: “some were from home at the time, others could not attend from the illness of themselves or of their horses”.²²⁷ Second, knowledge of the rioting in Sherborne and perhaps its reform related nature was now

²²² *Sherborne Journal* 27 October 1831; *Dorset County Chronicle* 27 October 1831.

²²³ *Sherborne Mercury* 07 February 1831.

²²⁴ DHC Christmas – January QS depositions 1831-1832 29 and 32: Information of John Chainey. 31 October 1831.

²²⁵ *Sherborne Journal* 27 October 1831.

²²⁶ Image courtesy of Medlycott family.

²²⁷ *Sherborne Journal* 27 October 1831.

widespread. Consequently, members of Goodden's troop, particularly those living in Sherborne, would have known that they were likely to be involved in serious violence, would probably be outnumbered, engaging with people from their home area and, crucially, that the rioting was reform related. The latter certainly influenced some members of the unit.

In the aftermath of the riot, Captain Goodden launched an inquiry into the officers and men of his troop that were absent during the violence. It appears that only three troopers could not give "any satisfactory reasons" for their failure to muster, which suggests they may have been selected as scapegoats for others. Lieutenant Colonel Frampton, who made the final decision on the three absentees stated:

I have allowed John Penny of Sherborne to resign; as it was his own wish and that of the troop that he should do so; as he certainly showed a great want of readiness to attend on that occasion altho he had an excuse which in strictness might be considered as allowable.²²⁸

John Penny was allowed to 'quietly' retire from the Troop whilst the other two absentees, Quarter Master Samuel Gould and Private John Balster were publicly dismissed in order to "satisfy the minds of the other men and to keep up the credit of the Regiment".²²⁹ Gould (45) was a tallow chandler and soap boiler who lived and had premises at the end of Half Moon Street in Sherborne.²³⁰ A few doors up on Cheap Street, were the premises of Balster (30), a currier and wine and spirit merchant who was married with two young children.²³¹ They would have known each other due to their proximity and involvement with the Yeomanry. Both were Ponsonby voters, with Balster a leading pro-reformer in the town who spoke in favour of Edward Portman's candidacy in the May election.²³² Balster was also connected through his business dealings with another leading pro-reformer Benjamin Chandler.²³³

Small businessmen like Penny, Gould and Balster, who were pro-reform and members of the Yeomanry Regiment, were faced with a dilemma in October 1831. It is very likely they would all have attended the pro-reform meetings in Sherborne and been aware of the use of 'off-duty' Yeomanry units to support the controversial election of Lord Ashley. They were now faced with pro-reform riots that selectively targeted their political enemies. Mustering for the apparently 'anti-reform' Yeomanry to potentially cut down these crowds was clearly an anathema to them. Instead, they chose to refuse to serve through absenteeism. How many others in the Dorset Yeomanry Regiment opted for this route, though provided acceptable excuses to their commanding officers for absence, is unknown, but the sluggish and low turnouts suggest there was significant dissent within the ranks. It is noticeable, that of all the troops in the DRYC,

²²⁸ DHC D-DOY A-3-1 (pt. 2) Dorset Yeomanry correspondence: Frampton to Digby 11 November 1831.

²²⁹ Frampton, *Account of the Regiment of Dorset Yeomanry Cavalry raised in the year 1830* DHC D-FRA/X/4; DHC D-DOY/A/6/1 Dorset Queen's Own Yeomanry Papers: Notes and statistics compiled by General Thompson when writing Records of the Dorset Yeomanry including an account of the rioting in Stour Provost in 1831. 1893. There are two John Penny's listed for the Sherborne Division in the 1831 Poll Book. One was the editor of the *Sherborne Journal*, a Ponsonby voter and the other an Ashley voter. It is likely that the former resigned from the Sherborne Troop. *The poll* p. 71.

²³⁰ Percy, *Numerical Terrier* item 722; Dorset OPC *Sherborne Postal Directory* 1823; "Sherborne: Entries from the 1835 Robson's Directory".

²³¹ Percy, *Numerical Terrier* items 16 and 17; "Sherborne: Entries from the 1835 Robson's Directory". A currier helped bring tanned hides or skins to saleable form.

²³² See Ball et al, *Preludes to the riots in Dorset in October 1831* p. 6.

²³³ *The poll* p. 70. Benjamin Chandler, Samuel Pretor and Thomas Willmott (all pro-reformers) acted as executors for Benjamin Vowell when his wine and spirit business was purchased by Balster in 1830. *Sherborne Mercury* 01 March 1830.

Goodden's lost the most men, with seven leaving the unit between August 1831 and August 1832.²³⁴

After dark, at around 10.00pm that evening a crowd reassembled and proceeded to Greenhill House, Fooks' residence, at the top of Cheap Street.²³⁵ None of the sources provide information as to where the crowd gathered, only that the attack on Greenhill house began again. This suggests that they did not gather close to the Town Hall where the Yeomanry and magistrates were based, but out of sight at another location. Instead, by design or chance, the rioters took an excellent tactical position towards the upper end of the long rise that is Cheap Street (see Figure 19). In 1831, along the quarter mile of its length, only two narrow lanes (Abbey Lane and Hound Street) intersected with it, making east-west access difficult, although it had a series of small passageways leading to yards, walls and gardens behind the frontage of shops and houses on both sides of the street. This was an ideal place for groups on foot largely armed with sticks and stones to engage with mounted Yeomanry armed with swords, and perhaps using pistols and carbines.



Figure 19: Looking north up Cheap Street from Long Street, Sherborne (c. 2010)

Even though Captain Goodden, his troopers and Adjutant Firth had been in the town for much of the day there seems to have been a lack of communication between them and the local authority figures, Digby, Fooks, Parsons and West. The first member of the authorities to react to the news that Fooks' house was under attack once again was the magistrate John Parsons, who without letting Goodden know, proceeded to Newhill House on his own initiative. It is unclear if he was alone, but on arrival Parsons bravely proceeded to read the Riot Act which led to him being attacked by members of the crowd and he "escaped with very great difficulty".²³⁶ Parsons' reading of the Riot Act had little effect, the crowd refused to disperse and continued to attack Fooks' house.

²³⁴ DHC D-DOY A-3-1 (pt. 2) Dorset Yeomanry correspondence: Return of the number of persons now enrolled and serving in the Dorset Regt. of Yeo. Cavalry commanded by Lt. Col. Frampton 1st August 1832.

²³⁵ *Sherborne Journal* 27 October 1831.

²³⁶ Frampton, *Account of the Regiment of Dorset Yeomanry Cavalry raised in the year 1830* DHC D-FRA/X/4.

When news arrived with Gooden and Firth that Parsons had acted unilaterally, they immediately mustered the 20 men and horses of the Yeomanry Regiment at the Kings Arms on Half Moon Street and headed up Cheap Street towards New Hill with the aim of defending Fooks' residence. A large crowd of 4-500 were situated towards the top of Cheap Street some of whom were breaking the windows of Newhill House opposite the Angel Inn.²³⁷ Captain Goodden and Adjutant Frith led a charge by the Yeoman towards them and were "violently attacked with stones and other weapons".²³⁸ According to the *Sherborne Journal* the rioters:

had posted themselves in such a situation as to harass the Yeomanry from all quarters, and the soldiers suffered considerable damage from the missiles which were thrown at them.²³⁹

Gooden's first charge was driven off by the ferocity of the attacks on them:

by stones and missiles thrown at them from behind doors, passages and from behind walls where it was impossible for cavalry to act or get at the assailants.²⁴⁰

Typically, if a crowd had not been prepared for something as frightening as a cavalry charge (albeit by only 20 or so men and horses) it might be expected that they would immediately scatter in fear. The fact that some of the rioters stood their ground and fought suggests that they were psychologically prepared, and it appears spatially and materially also. Perhaps the attack on Fooks' house should be read more as a 'bait in a trap' scenario, than merely a repeat of the previous night's violence. The rioters were aware of the presence of the Yeomanry in their town and the lack of Special Constables and may have taken a position where they could defend themselves for just such an eventuality as a cavalry charge. They were probably watching the movements of Goodden's unit and were ready for the attack when it came.

Retreating down Cheap Street, Goodden looked for another less dangerous avenue of attack on the rioters outside Newhill House. He decided to lead his battered unit in a circuitous route to assault the crowd from their rear. The Yeomanry galloped along Abbey Lane and then up Back Lane which also led to the front of Fooks' residence where the rioters were gathered and "were destroying the windows to effect an entrance to it".²⁴¹ Although they managed to drive the crowd from the front of the house, once again the rioters violently resisted:

This latter charge was made on the pavement, and in consequence of its slippery state, *or one of the horses in the rear being struck*, it fell, and two or three others as a consequence. A cap and a sword or two were then taken up by the mob from the fallen men, and with these they did some mischief.²⁴²

Another eyewitness described the intensity of the attack:

the stones were thrown in all directions like hail, and one of the horses to the rear was stuck a tremendous blow which brought it down.²⁴³

²³⁷ DHC Christmas – January QS depositions 1831-1832 29 and 32: Information of John Chainey. 31 October 1831; Dorset County Chronicle 12 January 1832.

²³⁸ Frampton, *Account of the Regiment of Dorset Yeomanry Cavalry raised in the year 1830* DHC D-FRA/X/4.

²³⁹ *Sherborne Journal* 27 October 1831.

²⁴⁰ Frampton, *Account of the Regiment of Dorset Yeomanry Cavalry raised in the year 1830* DHC D-FRA/X/4.

²⁴¹ *Sherborne Journal* 27 October 1831.

²⁴² Thompson, *The Records of the Dorset Yeomanry ("Queen's Own")* pp. 123-124. Our emphasis in italics.

²⁴³ *Sherborne Journal* 27 October 1831.

Slippery pavements or not, the evidence suggests the rioters were engaging in hand-to-hand combat with the mounted troopers, bringing them off their horses and then attacking the fallen Yeomanry. They were also taking their swords and caps as trophies which may explain dramatic and perhaps fanciful reports of supposed:

“Zummerset Refarmers” from Yeovil and the neighbourhood, some of whom were conspicuous in the crowd last night, *with swords concealed under their coats*, swearing that they would quite as soon die as live in the struggle; others at the same time shouting “Death or victory”.²⁴⁴

A sense of the ferocity of the violence is given by the account of Thomas Axtence, a private in Goodden’s troop, who was caught up in the melee on Newland close to the junction with Cheap Street. Axtence stated that “my horse was struck in the head with some blunt weapon...and I came off”. As his horse lay seriously injured with a fractured skull, Axtence, already wounded from stones thrown at him during the first charge, attempted to “scramble across the road to the White Hart Inn” but was grabbed by one of the rioters, held up against a wall and badly beaten with sticks by a group.²⁴⁵ An eyewitness, James Upsall, confirmed this account by claiming that about 50 persons surrounded Axtence “beating him with sticks and some other weapons”.²⁴⁶

There is evidence as to who at least some of these rioters were. Four people were arrested and charged with riot and/or assault in these incidents: Meshack Wills, Tiras Hockey, George Newman and George Hellier. Meshack Wills was charged with riot and assault on the trooper Thomas Axtence.²⁴⁷ Wills (23) was married with a young child, a metal worker by trade originally from the village of East Orchard, between Sturminster Newton and Shaftesbury in east Dorset. Wills was illiterate, had suffered from smallpox in his early life and had spent ten days in Dorchester prison in 1827 awaiting trial for stealing a “quantity of bacon”, of which he was acquitted.²⁴⁸ There is little evidence of Wills living in Sherborne, he was married in his home parish of St Mary’s in 1829, although he is listed as being resident in the town in the court papers. Wills is also unusual in that all the other Sherborne riot arrestees appeared to be operating in groups and were identified as such. Wills was identified on his own by his victim Thomas Axtence, a cooper, who happened to live on Newland, close to the scene of the crime and directly opposite the other eyewitness James Upsall, a plumber and glazier.²⁴⁹ Why this should be so, considering Wills’ lack of time living in Sherborne remains unclear, though he did have one discerning feature “eruptions on the face”, so perhaps it was the after-effects of smallpox that condemned him.²⁵⁰ The fact of identification of Wills by two eyewitnesses led him to serve two years hard labour in Dorchester prison.

²⁴⁴ *Morning Post* 24 Oct 1831. Our emphasis in italics.

²⁴⁵ DHC Christmas - January Quarter Sessions depositions 1831-1832 23: Information of Thomas Axtence, 7 November 1831.

²⁴⁶ DHC Christmas - January Quarter Sessions depositions 1831-1832 24: Information of James Upsall the younger, 7 November 1831.

²⁴⁷ DHC Christmas - January Quarter Sessions depositions 1831-1832 24: Examination of Meshack Wills, 7 November 1831.

²⁴⁸ Dorset, England, Dorchester Prison Admission and Discharge Registers, 1782-1901: Prisoner Register 1827-1839.

²⁴⁹ Percy, *Numerical Terrier* items 152 (Axtence) and 217 (Upsall); “Sherborne: Entries from the 1835 Robson’s Directory”.

²⁵⁰ Dorset, England, Dorchester Prison Admission and Discharge Registers, 1782-1901 Prisoner Register 1827-1839.

The remaining three arrestees were all from the village of Bradford Abbas about four miles to the southwest of Sherborne. They were all identified by the testimony of John Chainey an agricultural labourer and resident of the village who had been asked by the mother of one of the Yeomanry troopers, Issac Andrews, to go to Sherborne to look after his horse. Chainey stated that he followed Gooden's troop as they made their way up Cheap Street and in the following melee recognised three men from his village. He claimed he saw them all "throw stones at the cavalry and the horses...and in the mob".²⁵¹ None of the group appear to have had previous criminal records. Tiras Hockey (30), the oldest of the group, was married with five children, apparently literate, the son of a foreman in a factory and trained as a mechanic.²⁵² The family came from a non-conformist, protestant dissenter background and, unlike all the other arrestees, Tiras claimed his right to vote in 1839.²⁵³ George Newman (27), born in Sturminster Newton, was married with one child and an illiterate, agricultural labourer. Like many families of rural labourers, they appear to be on the move in the 1830s from Sturminster to Bradford Abbas to Cranborne and then back to Sturminster.²⁵⁴ The final arrestee George Hellier (18), we know little about other than he was an apprentice carpenter. All three arrestees from Bradford Abbas were acquitted mainly because of the unreliable prosecution witness Chainey who altered his testimony, was contradicted by two defence witnesses, and appeared to have been involved in the riot himself.²⁵⁵

After the two failed charges by Gooden's troop, at this point in the narrative the official Yeomanry sources and the other eyewitness testimonies begin to diverge. Frampton quotes the *Dorset County Chronicle* in his official account which stated the Yeomanry used the "flat side of their swords" to disperse the "mob". This claim was flatly contradicted by the *Sherborne Journal*:

after making several charges the horses became unmanageable, from the violent blows which they had received, and several of the soldiers were on the ground seriously hurt: they retired a few yards and reformed in line. The rioters followed...²⁵⁶

By this stage, of the 20 or so men Goodden had led into combat with the rioters eight were badly wounded, some seriously, including Adjutant Firth.²⁵⁷ Having lost more than a third of his force along with several horses and with the rioters spoiling for a fight, he apparently had two options; withdraw or use firearms to try to disperse the crowd on Cheap Street. According to the *Sherborne Journal*, Goodden had initially planned to "put an end to the disturbances without bloodshed".²⁵⁸ However, a more accurate explanation as to why Goodden or the Adjutant did not order the use of firearms when they came under attack, comes from Frampton's account of the event where he stated:

²⁵¹ DHC Christmas - January Quarter Sessions depositions 1831-1832 29: Information of John Chainey (aka Masters), 29 October 1831.

²⁵² England & Wales, Non-Conformist and Non-Parochial Registers, 1567-1936 for Tiras Hockey RG5: Birth Certificates, Protestant Dissenters' Birth Registry, 1824-1837, ALL Piece 0148: Certificate Nos: 12001-12500, Vol 24 (1837 June 30)

²⁵³ Dorset, England, Electoral Registers, 1839-1922.

²⁵⁴ Dorset OPC, Sturminster Newton; Dorset, England, Church of England Baptisms, Marriages and Burials, 1538-1812; Dorset, England, Church of England Marriages and Banns, 1813-1921 for George Newman Sturminster Newton, 1813-1921.

²⁵⁵ Dorset County Chronicle 12 January 1832.

²⁵⁶ *Sherborne Journal* 27 October 1831.

²⁵⁷ DHC D-DOY A-3-1 (pt. 1) Dorset Yeomanry correspondence: Frampton to Digby 29 October 1831.

²⁵⁸ *Sherborne Journal* 27 October 1831.

that as he [Captain Goodden] had no magistrate with him he did not feel justified in using the army and therefore would not allow his men to load with ball and cartridges.²⁵⁹

Although Goodden may have been told second-hand that the Riot Act had been read, he had not been informed personally by the 'chief magistrate' Parsons that he had actually done so. If the Riot Act had *not* been read, technically speaking, Goodden, Frith and their men could be charged with murder or wounding if they opened fire on a crowd. In the midst of the fighting on Cheap Street and New Hill, Parsons, who had been chased off by the crowd, was not to be seen. Goodden therefore had no option and withdrew his mauled unit back to the *King's Arms* Inn opposite the Town Hall. This was not a popular decision amongst his unit, "he had much difficulty in restraining them [from opening fire] after the severe treatment they had met with".²⁶⁰

The rioters, clearly empowered by their victory, pursued the retreating horsemen down Cheap Street and attacked them again with missiles outside the *Kings Arms*. However, the "troop occupied a safe and strong position" on Half Moon Street and were able to finally hold their ground. The crowd appeared satisfied with hooting at and abusing the Yeomanry troop. At this point it appeared to Goodden that no reinforcements had arrived, and his depleted troop were thus outnumbered and on their own. Consequently, he changed his mind and gave the order to serve out ball cartridges to his troopers. It appears that this order was carried out quite openly and this was noted by the rioters, which may have been Goodden's intention. According to the *Dorset County Chronicle* some members of the crowd asked to parley with Goodden, and he agreed. This gesture gave some respect to the rioters, and it appears they reciprocated by letting him speak unmolested. Goodden told them:

that unless they dispersed he should be obliged to order his troop to fire upon them, which he should be sorry to do, as he did not wish to injure a hair of their heads.²⁶¹

They apparently acquiesced to his request, albeit backed by a violent threat, and began to disperse. Bawn noted in his discussion of the incident:

The riots at Sherborne were two days later than those at Blandford so the Sherborne rioters might have been aware that the authorities were prepared to use firearms.²⁶²

This was true; or at least rumours of the use of firearms by the Dragoons in Blandford on the evening of Tuesday 18th October would certainly have reached Sherborne by the Thursday evening.²⁶³ This was a close-run thing; at the very moment Goodden was parleying with the rioters at about 10.30pm, Lieutenant Cox arrived from Evershot with 20 Yeomanry Cavalry from Major Ilchester's troop. Cox cautiously entered the town but

received intelligence that the mob were dispersing and I was requested in consequence not to appear in the town – I retired thro' a back street to that leading to Yeovil. Intelligence arrived from Captain Goodden with orders to remain near but not to show ourselves; remained therefore in a lane near the town.

²⁵⁹ Frampton, *Account of the Regiment of Dorset Yeomanry Cavalry raised in the year 1830* DHC D-FRA/X/4.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁶¹ *Dorset County Chronicle* 27 October 1831.

²⁶² Bawn, "Social protest, popular disturbances and public order in Dorset" p. 73.

²⁶³ Poole et al, *The Blandford Forum riots*.

Cox sent two troopers to reconnoitre the town and they managed to make contact with Goodden at the *King's Arms* as the crowd had largely dispersed from Half Moon Street. Goodden sent the troopers back with a message to Cox asking them to retire either to his house at Over Compton or to Lord Digby's residence, Sherborne Castle. Goodden was explicit in "still desiring the troop would not enter the town". On receipt of the message Cox decided to take the troop on a circuitous route to Sherborne Castle where they remained until 7.30am the following morning.²⁶⁴ By this stage of the evening the town was now quiet and at about 12:30am further reinforcements in the form of a unit of 38 men of the 3rd Dragoon Guards Regiment arrived.²⁶⁵

Despite the efforts of three units to muster and rapidly travel to Sherborne to assist the magistrates and Lord Lieutenant, Goodden had apparently concluded that the very presence of Dorset Yeomanry units was counter-productive in that it had clearly antagonised the rioters and caused the situation to deteriorate. The level of violence unleashed on Goodden's unit had clearly shocked him. Somewhat in contradiction to the official accounts, Parsons noted in a frank letter to the Home Secretary that the "Yeomanry were dreadfully beaten".²⁶⁶

²⁶⁴ DHC D-DOY A-3-1 (pt. 1) Dorset Yeomanry Correspondence: Cox to Frampton 21 October 1831.

²⁶⁵ TNA HO 52/12 Counties Correspondence Berks – Gloucester [ff: 29-30] Letter from Lord Digby to Home Secretary Lord Melbourne 23 October 1831.

²⁶⁶ TNA HO 52/12 [ff: 21-24] 22 October 1831. Letter from John Parsons to Lord Melbourne.



Key

1. Meeting at Town Hall to recruit Special Constable fails
2. Crowd gathers at the top of Cheap Street and attacks Thomas Fooks house (Clerk of the Peace, Steward of the Liberty, Ashley election agent).
3. Capt. Gooddens Sherborne Troop of Yeomanry make their first charge up Cheap Street but are forced to retreat due to stoning by crowd.
4. Sherborne Yeomanry make a second charge via Abbey Lane and Back Lane.
5. Crowd stones Yeomanry from doors, passages and behind walls. Many Yeomanry injured, unseated and some beaten by crowd.
6. Yeomanry withdraw to Kings Head Inn on Half Moon Street followed by crowd who launch another attack on them. Capt. Goodden parleys with crowd and threatens to fire on them. Crowd disperses.

Figure 20: Path of rioters and Sherborne Troop of Yeomanry Cavalry – 20 October 1831

2.3 Friday 21 October – Day 3

2.3.1 Withdrawal of the Yeomanry

In the early morning, the injured Adjutant Frith arrived at Sherborne Castle with orders for Lieutenant Cox to billet his men in Sherborne along with Captain Goodden's which he duly did. By the morning of 21st October, 55 men of the Earl of Ilchester's troop had made it to Sherborne, more than doubling the compliment that had arrived the night before. Around 10.00am Lieutenant Colonel Frampton and his escort of seven men arrived at Sherborne Castle. Riding north from Dorchester they had avoided the town centre, so their presence was unknown to Goodden. Frampton headed into town, finding "everything quiet" and located Goodden, who suggested they meet the officer commanding the compliment of the 3rd Dragoon Guards.²⁶⁷ During the discussion between the Yeomanry and Guards officers the latter suggested:

that in consequence of the late election the appearance of the yeomanry rather occasioned an increase of irritation, and that he should be able to more effectively preserve the peace of the town if left alone with the regulars, than if the two troops of Yeomanry remained.²⁶⁸

Lieutenant Colonel Frampton agreed with this and, accompanied by Captain Goodden, Rev. John Parsons and Lieutenant Cox, put the proposal to Lord Digby.²⁶⁹ Digby concurred, and Frampton later recounted (clearly for the record), that:

I was directed by your Lordship [Digby] and Rev. Parsons to give orders that the two troops of Yeomanry should march out of Sherborne and return to their homes; you considered that the Regular Force would be sufficient to preserve the Peace of the Town.²⁷⁰

At 2.00pm in the afternoon Lieutenant Cox and the Earl of Ilchester's troop left Sherborne to return to west Dorset. Goodden's troop, or what remained of it, returned home and Frampton and his escort left for Dorchester. Writing to the Home Secretary the following day, Parsons stated:

such is the strong feeling against them [the Yeomanry Cavalry] that we have advised their withdrawing for the present, & the regular troops with an assurance from certain influential persons (who are known as within the description before named) we consented to this recommendation, with a hope of allaying the excitement.²⁷¹

Parsons' allusion to "certain influential persons (who are known as within the description before named)" was a reference to the covert negotiations he had been undertaking with a leading figure(s) amongst the reformers (see Section 2.2.1). It appears Digby and Parsons were offering the withdrawal of the Yeomanry (and perhaps at a later stage the Dragoons) as an incentive for the 'respectable' reformers to help deescalate the situation. The question was how much real influence over the rioting crowds these mystery pro-reform figures had?

Over the following few days, the wounded from Goodden's troop were treated by four surgeons from Sherborne. The most seriously injured troopers were John Melmoth, Thomas Tucker, John Percy, John Broughton and Thomas Allford, suffering from bruising, contusions, cuts,

²⁶⁷ DHC D-DOY A-3-1 (pt. 1) Dorset Yeomanry Correspondence: Frampton to Digby 29 October 1831.

²⁶⁸ DHC D-FRA-X-4 Frampton's account of the Dorset Yeomanry Cavalry Regiment from 1830.

²⁶⁹ Frampton, *The journal of Mary Frampton* p. 381.

²⁷⁰ DHC D-DOY A-3-1 (pt. 1) Dorset Yeomanry Correspondence: Frampton to Digby 29 October 1831.

²⁷¹ TNA HO 52/12 [ff: 21-24] 22 October 1831. Letter from Reverend John Parsons to Home Secretary Lord Melbourne.

haemorrhages and concussion to the head and body. Percy had a fractured skull and suffered fever and delirium for several days which endangered his life, though he survived. The fact that Thomas Axtence did not appear on the 'official' injuries list after the blows, fall and beating he endured, suggests that many of Gooden's men suffered injuries which did not merit the expense of a surgeon. To the final bill to the War Office of £18 8s, was added another £25 for Axtence's horse, which was rendered unfit for service.²⁷² There are no indications or sources of information concerning injuries to members of the crowd.

2.3.2 Rumours and intelligence

News of the rioting in Sherborne over the previous two nights had spread widely over the Division. Along with it came rumours and in tandem the need for the civic authorities, Yeomanry and the military to discern useful intelligence. The content of the information they sought ranged from defining who the 'ringleaders' of the rioters were, to knowledge of their meeting times and places and their prospective targets. The previous day they had clearly failed to determine these or grasp the rioters' tactics. In addition, over the two days of rioting involving crowds estimated at 400-500 people, they had identified less than a dozen participants for arrest, eight of whom Parsons had personally named. This was a serious problem for the authorities and was alluded to by Parsons in a letter to the Home Office:

The two negative facts, the inhabitants refusing to offer themselves as Special Constables, - and the fear which prevents individuals who know the guilty parties engaged in the work of felonious demolition, I would humbly submit, are reasons for Lord Melbourne to consent to send down one or perhaps two Police Officers who may by mixing with the lower classes obtain information which at present I cannot get – and also that his Lordship would offer some reward for the discovery & apprehension of any of the guilty. This suggestion is not my own merely, but Lord Digby & Mr. J. [John] Goodden (a magistrate) both are of this opinion.²⁷³

Parsons, Digby and Goodden were struggling in Sherborne with a class division expressed as the 'dark village' and, perhaps, a form of omertà, a customary code of silence. Their and their informer's inability to mix with the 'lower orders' in the town seriously limited identification and access to information and this will have been exacerbated by the political split over reform amongst the wealthier classes. Fripp argued that:

towns and cities with a predominance of small workshops, rather than factories, encourage social harmony... Workers and employees [in Sherborne] were therefore much closer ... and were therefore more likely to understand and sympathise with each other's aspirations and predicaments.²⁷⁴

This structural generalisation might apply to the small workshop environment, but it is also true that Sherborne did have significant mass-worker factories (the silk mills). More importantly, the owner-worker relationship was not the only site of contention; "understanding and sympathy" did not necessarily apply to the relationship between the local authorities (state) and the criminalised 'lower orders'. The evidence (or lack of it) in terms of identified arrestees and

²⁷² Thompson, *The Records of the Dorset Yeomanry ("Queen's Own")* p. 126.

²⁷³ TNA HO 52/12 [ff: 30-31] 24 October 1831. Letter from John Parsons to Home Secretary Lord Melbourne.

²⁷⁴ Fripp, "The Sherborne Riot of 1831" p. 25.

witnesses in court after the Sherborne riots,²⁷⁵ as well as the intelligence failures during them, demonstrates the social and cultural distance of the authorities from those they policed. It also suggests, as Parsons alludes to in his letter, that a code of silence was in operation that the authorities felt could only be breached using infiltration from ‘outsiders’ or monetary reward. Using a similar logic to many state bodies seeking information from a population that are faced with a unified silence, the only explanation that occurs to Parsons, Digby and Goodden is that this must be being enforced by threat and/or violence. In reality, successful codes of silence (as with policing) generally rely on consensus and cooperation rather than coercion and are more likely to be constructed around social identity than fear. In this case, the vast majority of the ‘dark village’ refused to give up *their* rioters and the *exclusivity* of the crowd on a class basis during the riots protected it from the prying eyes of reliable, ‘respectable’ witnesses.

As a result of the lack of verifiable intelligence, decisions were being made based on the fears of the gentry for their property and person and mere rumour. Captain George Jacob of the Blackmore Vale troop of the DRYC received a requisition at his home in Shillingstone, near Sturminster Newton at 6.15pm on 21st October from Rev. Harry Farr Yeatman, claiming that:

Rioters from Sherborne proposed to attack the houses of the Magistrates in the neighbourhood of Bishops Caundle.

How Yeatman obtained (or was fed) this information is unknown, but Jacob reacted immediately, mustering within two hours 32 officers and men of the Vale of Blackmore Troop at Stock House (Yeatman’s country residence) eight miles southeast of Sherborne and less than three miles from Bishops Caundle (see Figure 21). Jacob placed pickets on the roads to Sherborne to intercept incoming rioters, sent a patrol to Sherborne and kept his unit in readiness all night. Having gained no intelligence “of any mob or disturbance” from any of his scouts, Jacob recorded:

I withdrew the troops, and dismissed the men to quarters at ¼ past four, leaving at (his [Yeatman’s] particular desire) a Corporal and seven men under the command of Cornet Yeatman with twenty rounds of Ball cartridge, at the Rev. H. F. Yeatman’s house, as he was still fearful of an attack.²⁷⁶

Captain Edward Baker of the Ranston troop of the DRYC had also received similar information about the threat to the “magistrates in the neighbourhood of Bishops Caundle” and along with Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Bower managed to muster 37 officers and men. On the morning of 22nd October, they rode the 12 or so miles to Stock House arriving a few hours after Captain Jacob had withdrawn the bulk of his men.²⁷⁷

It appears that the supposed attack on “magistrates” was interpreted by Yeatman as a threat to himself and to the Rev. Charles Digby the Rector of Bishop’s Caundle. Yeatman, although originally a prominent public speaker in favour of reform, became a member of Ashley’s committee during the by-election, making him a ‘turn-coat’ and a target of popular anger.²⁷⁸ Charles Digby, cousin of Lord Lieutenant Digby of Sherborne Castle, was an Ashley supporter. Both were magistrates and Cornets in the Blackmore Vale Troop of the DRYC and consequently

²⁷⁵ It should also be noted that several of the prosecution witnesses that appeared in court provided no useful eyewitness evidence that the accused were actually committing crimes. This often led to their acquittal, or the charges being dropped. See, in particular, the cases of Robert Harris, John Sevil (Cevil, Sevil, Seville) and Leonard Pearce, and the evidence of George Down, John Ryall, John Miller and Fanny Fox. *Sherborne Mercury* 9 January 1832.

²⁷⁶ DHC D-DOY A-3-1 (pt. 1) Dorset Yeomanry correspondence: Jacob to Bower 22 October 1831.

²⁷⁷ DHC D-DOY A-3-1 (pt. 1) Dorset Yeomanry correspondence: Bower to Frampton 22 October 1831.

²⁷⁸ Farrell, “Dorset County” in *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons; Dorset County Chronicle* 6 October 1831; See also Ball et al, *Preludes to the riots in Dorset in October 1831* p. 5.

could call directly on ‘their troop’ to protect their own person and property.²⁷⁹ The day after Jacob’s intervention at Stock House and Bishop’s Caundle, he received a similar request for protection from another magistrate and member of Ashley’s by-election committee, George Loftus, who “expected an attack on his house” that night in Woolland, 14 miles southeast of Sherborne. Jacob dispatched a small party of men from the Blackmore Vale troop under the command of Lieutenant John Hussey to Woolland where once again they spent a fruitless night and reported no activity.²⁸⁰



Figure 21: Stock House, residence of Rev. Harry Farr Yeatman

The most interesting question about these rumours was whether they were mistaken, merely empty threats or served another function. Lieutenant Colonel Frampton claimed, “their [the ‘mob’] assembling was prevented by knowing that the yeomanry were ready”.²⁸¹ There is no evidence for this comfortable assessment, instead it appears more likely that several Yeomanry troops were chasing phantoms in the Blackmore Vale. The distances from Sherborne the rioters would have had to cover on foot to carry out attacks on these distant country houses were difficult, if not prohibitive. If the rumours were an attempt to encourage the ‘Swing rioters’ of the Blackmore Vale to rise, then that largely failed.²⁸² However, if the rumours were merely a ruse to distract nearby Yeomanry troops or draw Regular units away from Sherborne, then the plan was a partial success.

²⁷⁹*The poll* p. 68; Flame, “Reconstruction of social and political identities by the Dorset gentry” Appendix A.

²⁸⁰ DHC D-DOY A-3-1 (pt. 1) Dorset Yeomanry correspondence: Jacob to Bower 23 October 1831.

²⁸¹ DHC D-FRA-X-4 Frampton’s account of the Dorset Yeomanry Cavalry Regiment from 1830.

²⁸² There was one exception in Stour Provost, 14 miles east of Sherborne on 22nd October: “The spirit of discontent had also reached Stour Provost, and the rioters, having broken the threshing machine at the Manor Farm, proceeded to surround the Rectory. The Rector of the day - the Rev. J. Tomkyns - was equal to the occasion, for having served through the Peninsular War as a Captain in the Royal Dragoons he eventually took Holy Orders... Displaying the strategy of an old campaigner, this worthy member of the Church Militant, singled out the Ringleader, and having presented him with a sovereign, sent the rioters away well contented to spend it as they liked. The next day a detachment of Capt. Jacob's Troop from Sturminster Newton, under the command of a Non-commissioned Officer named Harvey, came to the assistance of the Rector. The Ringleader was apprehended and sentenced to 7 years' penal servitude. (Information supplied by the Rev. Wm. H. Whitting, Rector of Stour Provost)” Thompson, *The Records of the Dorset Yeomanry (“Queen’s Own”)* p. 123.

2.3.3 The end of the riots

During the afternoon of 21st October, the authorities and the military in Sherborne were working on information received about the potential assembly points for the ‘mob’. Meanwhile, Parsons continued his clandestine negotiations with “influential” reformers to try to deescalate violence. After the complete withdrawal of the Yeomanry Cavalry, the unit of 30 or so Dragoon Guards were now the only policing force available in the town outside of a few outnumbered special constables. The Dragoons “reconnoitred” during the day to make their presence felt. An eyewitness letter writer to the *Standard* newspaper from Sherborne noted “towards evening [the Dragoons] took their position in those parts where a renewal of hostilities was expected”.²⁸³ It is likely these were previous locations of disturbance at the Town Hall, Newhill House (Fooks’ residence) at the top of Cheap Street, Long Street and perhaps Sherborne Castle (Lord Digby’s residence). The *Standard* eyewitness stated:

At half-past six the watchword “Reform” resounded from street to street, and in less than an hour a mob assembled in considerable force.²⁸⁴

As night fell, Parsons’ indirect efforts to influence the crowd seemed to have failed, as had the intelligence gathering. Of course, information gathering is often a two-way process, and it appears the ‘mob’ were well aware of the locations where the Dragoons were stationed. Having assembled, the crowd “paraded” the streets, though did not immediately attack any properties.²⁸⁵

Around 9.00pm “information was passed to the military” from a domestic servant that the *Black Horse* Inn at the junction of Newland and Long Street was a potential target (see Figure 22).²⁸⁶ The inn was owned and occupied by Maltster and Victualler, William Knott who voted for Ashley in the by-election and was situated close to some of the poorest courts on Newland (see Figure 5).²⁸⁷ The intelligence turned out to be accurate when the parading crowd arrived at the *Black Horse* soon after. The “mob were given beer”, generally a euphemism for extortion, which apparently saved the inn from attack. They then moved off en masse down the Osborne Road heading eastwards out of the town.²⁸⁸ This was interpreted by the eyewitness report in the *Standard* as a “ruse” as the “mob” feared engaging with the “regulars”.²⁸⁹ Perhaps more relevant than this supposition is the fact that the Dragoon Guards did not intervene during the parading or at the *Black Horse*. This suggests that Digby and Parsons (and perhaps the Commanding Officer) were holding them back to avoid further escalation. The following few hours would see the crowd testing the boundaries of the authorities and the military.

The marching crowd headed into Osborne, a small village (pop. 129 in 1841) and parish about a mile north-east of Sherborne.²⁹⁰ The reason the crowd chose to travel to Osborne is not clear from the sources. Rev. John Parsons, a primary target of the rioters in Sherborne, had been the Rector of Osborne since 1811. Parsons held the Digby lease on the Church and Yard in the village and was obviously well known in this small community.²⁹¹ However, the crowd did not target any properties connected to Parsons and instead they “compelled a farmer to give them a quantity of cider”.²⁹² A cursory survey of the Poll Book for the October 1831 by-election shows

²⁸³ *The Standard* 24 October 1831.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁵ *Sherborne Journal* 27 October 1831.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*; Fripp, “The Sherborne Riot of 1831” p. 22.

²⁸⁷ Percy, *Numerical Terrier* item 295; *The poll* p. 40.

²⁸⁸ *Sherborne Journal* 27 October 1831.

²⁸⁹ *The Standard* 24 October 1831.

²⁹⁰ Dorset OPC: Osborne 1841 Census HO107/292 Transcribed by Mari Viertal (2022).

²⁹¹ *The Sherborne Register 1550-1950* p. 19; Percy, *Numerical Terrier* item 1652.

²⁹² *Sherborne Journal* 27 October 1831.

that there were no eligible voters in the village but this does not rule out there being anti-reform, Ashley supporters amongst the residents.²⁹³



Figure 22: The Black Horse Inn, Newland, Sherborne (c.2009)

After some time and apparently “intoxicated”, the crowd double backed and headed into Sherborne, catching the authorities off-guard once again. The crowd travelled down Long Street and “before the Dragoons could reach them they had destroyed the windows of several individuals”.²⁹⁴ The *Standard* eyewitness claimed that “they returned to their nightly havoc, which is believed was more extensive than on any previous evening”.²⁹⁵ Which houses were targeted is unclear from the sources. It could have been repeat attacks on Edward Turner and, perhaps, William Allford (see Section 2.1.5). Parsons stated in a letter to the Home Secretary in the aftermath of the violence that “Upwards of 20 houses & windows have been more or less injured”.²⁹⁶ A survey of the targets collated in this study shows that 16 separate properties were damaged at least once over the period 19-20 October,²⁹⁷ so it is probable that several more were damaged on the night of 21st October and went unreported in the press.

At around midnight Admiral Sir Henry Digby read the Riot Act.²⁹⁸ This was clearly in preparation for any action the Dragoons might be ordered to take and to avoid the confusion of the previous night. It is likely the Commanding Officer of the Dragoons demanded it of the local authorities. According to the eyewitness in the *Standard* “the mob, fearing the cool determination of the soldiers, dispersed”.²⁹⁹ However, this was not the case, and the Riot Act gave an hour for the crowd to disperse before the military could use lethal force. Instead, the rioters headed south, avoiding the town centre and the Dragoons, probably down East Mill Lane to the East Silk Mill,

²⁹³ *The poll* p. 70.

²⁹⁴ *Sherborne Journal* 27 October 1831.

²⁹⁵ *The Standard* 24 October 1831.

²⁹⁶ TNA HO 52/12 [ff: 21-24] 22 October 1831. Letter from John Parsons to Home Secretary Lord Melbourne.

²⁹⁷ This includes a reference to a window damaged at Sherborne School. Lyon, “Reminiscences of my life at Sherborne School, 1836-1845” p. 226.

²⁹⁸ TNA HO 52/12 Counties Correspondence Berks – Gloucester [ff: 21-24] Letter from Reverend John Parsons to Home Secretary Lord Melbourne. 22 October 1831; *The Standard* 24 October 1831.

²⁹⁹ *The Standard* 24 October 1831.

a few hundred metres away (see Figure 4).³⁰⁰ It is unlikely they intended to attack the mill, but they were confronted at the gate by its owner Thomas Willmott. According to the Sherborne Journal:

they were addressed by him with such excellent effect that they dropped their stones at the gate, gave him three cheers, and left his premises: since that time the town has been quiet.³⁰¹

As Fripp points out, none of the sources provide any details as to the content of Willmott's speech, so contextual evidence is all that remains.³⁰² Apart from being the largest employer in the town with three silk mills (see Section 1.2) and a landlord, Willmott had around 12 acres of land holdings in Sherborne town, the majority of which were Digby leases, apart from three Almshouses.³⁰³ He was certainly respected on a civic level in Sherborne, acting as chair for a meeting proposing support for Dorset Whig MP Edward Portman's bill (1830) for the watching, lighting and paving of parishes and sitting at the top table with Fooks et al. at the banquet to celebrate the coronation of William IV the same year.³⁰⁴ Willmott also appears to have been close through business and social ties to some of the leading reformers in Sherborne such as Benjamin Chandler and the 'mutineer' Yeoman, John Balster (see note 233). As such the Willmott family, although wealthy, were certainly not directly associated with the Tory 'old guard' in Sherborne. That is, the anti-reform, gentry-clergy-magistrate-yeomanry axis. Willmott was also related to at least one rioter, his nephew Frederick Lewis was named by cleric-magistrate John Parsons as one of his attackers. Lewis may have been amongst the rioters who parleyed with Willmott.

Much of this 'local' information may have been known by members of the crowd that appeared at the mill but Fripp notes that the secondary sources give other reasons for the effectiveness of Willmott in supposedly quelling the riot. Apparently Willmott "paid his employees above the going rate" at his silk mills, although this has to be judged against the large reductions in wages, piecework rates and the massive layoffs of workers that had occurred since 1829.³⁰⁵ It is also probable that Willmott lobbied for the special poor relief payments that were made for silk workers the same year (see Section 1.2). There are signs of a developing philanthropic paternalism in the Willmott family with John (b. 1804 d. 1848), Thomas's eldest son, topping the polls for the elections to the Board of Health in 1851 and his younger brother Robert (b. 1814 d. 1875), building substantial terraces of houses on South Street and Horsecastles in the town to improve housing for his workers in the 1860s.³⁰⁶

With this contextual framing of Willmott and based on the ordering of events on the night of 21st October, a possible reason for the meeting between him and the 'mob' can be deduced. The rioters were faced, as they had been the previous night, with the reading of the Riot Act and the threat of the use of lethal force by armed units. Instead of immediately risking their lives against the anti-reform, gentry-clergy-magistrate authorities who they perceived *would* give the order for the Dragoons to cut them down and/or open fire, they turned towards an influential figure for advice and perhaps *protection*. As far as the rioters were concerned this

³⁰⁰ Percy, *Numerical Terrier* item 695a.

³⁰¹ *Sherborne Journal* 27 October 1831.

³⁰² Fripp, "The Sherborne Riot of 1831" p. 26.

³⁰³ Percy, *Numerical Terrier*.

³⁰⁴ *Sherborne Mercury* 11 October 1830; *Sherborne Mercury* 26 July 1830.

³⁰⁵ Fripp, "The Sherborne Riot of 1831" p. 26; *Victoria History of the County of Dorset* p. 363.

³⁰⁶ "1850 Board of Health Report on Sherborne" [xxiv]; Davey & (Bellamy) *Dorset Historic Towns Survey: Sherborne* Part 5.5 p. 51, 58; Sherborne Museum: Sherborne Silk Tour (2009). Retrieved from: https://www.sherbornemuseum.co.uk/silk_tour.php.

figure had to be prominent on a civic level, be close to the ‘respectable’ pro-reform political opposition and trustworthy. Willmott fitted the bill and as one secondary source pointed out:

It is not surprising that when Mr Willmott confronted the reform mob in 1831 he was able to disperse them: he must have known a good many of them personally and probably recognised the ringleaders.³⁰⁷

The fact that Willmott had employed large numbers of the poorer sections of the working-class in Sherborne and probably encountered them at work on a day-to-day basis, supports this statement. Certainly, as far as identification went, Digby, Parsons, Fooks, Goodden and their ilk, would have had far more limited dealings with the ‘dark village’, other than perhaps court appearances. However, it was the relationship Willmott had with his workers that mattered. Being identified by any of the gentry-clergy-magistrate-yeomanry figures would have landed them in court. Willmott’s ‘solution’ for the problem of lethal violence the rioters faced was probably to suggest that they disperse and return home avoiding the Dragoons, with the understanding that he would follow the code of silence and not identify them to the authorities.

It is noticeable that no rioters from the disturbances of 21st October were identified and thus none were punished, despite the number of properties damaged and their face-to-face meeting with Willmott. This example of ‘trust’ between an employer and crowd should be compared with “the strategy of an old campaigner”, as described by Lieutenant Colonel James Frampton, when the Rector of Stour Provost was confronted by a “mob” on 22nd October. In that case, the Rector bought the ‘mob’ off with a sovereign and then identified the ringleader to authorities leading to his transportation into seven years of penal servitude (see note 282).

A few hours before the riots came to an end on the night of 21st October in Sherborne, six miles away in Yeovil, just across the border in Somerset, rioting began. Lasting two nights and involving the intervention of Yeomanry units, the patterning of expressive, selective attacks on the property of anti-reformers and their supporters by large crowds was similar to the Sherborne and Blandford episodes.³⁰⁸ The following morning, in Sherborne:

a handbill, containing extracts from a recent speech of the Lord Chancellor’s was circulated among the lower classes, which ... recommended the people to be orderly, and not to kick up a dust because the House of Peers thought proper to exercise their judgement on the merits of the mighty bill. The hint, apparently, has not been disregarded, for up to the present hour (9 o’clock Saturday night), not a discordant sound is heard.³⁰⁹

The distributors of the handbill clearly felt that ‘reform’ was the cause of the riots in the town, although the rioters may have had a different conception of what that might mean in practice.

³⁰⁷ Fripp, “The Sherborne Riot of 1831” p. 26.

³⁰⁸ See Poole et al, *The Blandford Forum riots* and Poole et al, *The Yeovil riots*.

³⁰⁹ *The Standard* 24 October 1831.



Key

1. Crowd gathers at Black Horse Inn and extorts beer (William Knott).
2. Crowd walks to Osborne and extorts cider from a farmer (off map).
3. Crowd returns from Osborne and damages more houses.
4. Crowd walks to East Silk Mill and parleys with Thomas Willmott before dispersing.

Figure 23: Targets and path of rioters in Sherborne – 21 October 1831

3 The targets

3.1 Methodology

The purpose of this section is threefold. First, to chronologically delineate the targets of the rioters whether person or property or both. This was achieved by critically studying all the available primary and secondary sources and triangulating the data to establish exactly what the targets were on each day of the riot, when they were attacked and thus the order of attack. Second, to gather biographical data on the heads of households living or owning the buildings that were attacked to determine the extent to which there were patterns in the selection of targets. Third, to cross reference the biographical data to demonstrate any connections between those who were attacked. Biographical data was obtained for the targets from the sources outlined in Table 11.

Type of data	Sources of data	Interpretation
Basic: Title/full name/sex/age	Newspapers, court records, compensation claims, Home Office correspondence, census (1841)	Head of household, owner/leser of property
Address of targeted property	Map and apportionment (Percy 1834), local directories (Postal Directory 1823, Robson 1835), census (1841)	Exact location, type (residence, shop, office) and composition of targeted building(s)
Occupation	Newspapers, Local directories (Postal Directory 1823, Robson 1835), census (1841)	Social class/status, wealth
Property status: number of freehold and Digby leases, ³¹⁰ tenants and tenancies	Map and apportionment (Percy 1834)	Social class/status, wealth
Freehold land ownership: in acres/roods/perches	Map and apportionment (Percy 1834)	Social class/status, wealth
Servants and apprentices	Census (1841)	Social class/status, wealth
Voting rights and preferences	Poll Book (1831), Newspapers	Social class, political belief
Local Government roles	Newspapers	Social class, social power
Leadership of local organisations	Newspapers, Sherborne (School) Register	Social class, social power

Table 11: Types of biographical data collected for the targets

3.2 Limitations

Several primary sources claim that 20 or more properties were damaged by the rioters over the three nights of disturbances in Sherborne.³¹¹ This study has, from the available evidence, located 15 properties that were damaged, one that may have been damaged and two that were targeted but not damaged. It is assumed that the properties whose details do not appear in the

³¹⁰ Digby leases were those directly granted by the principal landowner in Sherborne the Digby family based at Sherborne Castle.

³¹¹ For example: TNA HO 52/12 [ff: 21-24] 22 October 1831. Letter from John Parsons to Lord Melbourne.

primary sources generally underwent lower levels of harm or experienced collateral damage. For example, one property that does not appear in any of the claims for compensation or in the newspapers is Sherborne School. This is probably because it only suffered one broken window.³¹² Similarly, William Boswell's office on Cheap Street only had one pane of glass smashed and only appears in the notes to a court case but nowhere else.³¹³ For this reason, the size of the sample (18) is large enough relative to the full set to be representative of patterns within the target group. There are some issues concerning exactly when and on what day certain properties were damaged, though the ordering of the targets is thought to be largely accurate.

The owners and/or occupiers and the targeted properties in the sample were associated together principally through using high-resolution images of Thomas Percy's 1834 *Plan of the town of Sherborne* and its associated apportionment.³¹⁴ This was cross referenced with an alphabetical transcribed version of the apportionment along with town directories from 1823 and 1835, the 1841 census and newspaper data.³¹⁵ Despite the fact that there was no definitive data for 1831 this triangulation procedure with 'before and after' boundaries was deemed to have correctly located the properties and their owners and/or occupiers.

3.3 Patterns

The principal patterns discerned amongst the targets in order of attack are summarised in Table 12. Of the 16 people whose property was targeted, 12 had either voted for Lord Ashley in the by-election, had their vote for him objected to or were clearly anti-reform in their politics. To contextualise this, in the county by-election in Sherborne of the 98 'legitimate' votes cast, 29 were for Lord Ashley (33 per cent). Of these, only 21 voters were resident in the town and, from the available evidence, 7 (33 per cent) of these were directly targeted during the October riots.³¹⁶ It is quite possible that more Ashley voters were targeted, particularly on the night of 21st October.

Only one of those selected for attack in Table 12, William Allford, was clearly a Ponsonby supporter. Of the nine people who suffered major damage to their properties, all were Ashley voters and/or opponents of reform, except for perhaps Adam Lowman. Three targets clearly produced the most ire amongst the rioters based on the descriptions of the crowd, the amount of damage caused, attempts to enter the properties and the number and duration of the attacks. These were Thomas Fooks, Edward Digby and John Parsons. These three men were the most powerful in the town, parish and division of Sherborne: the largest local landowner, member of the House of Lords and highest office in the county, Lord Lieutenant (Digby), gatekeeper to the government of Dorset (Clerk to the Commission of the Peace) and effectively the mayor (Fooks) and the 'chief magistrate' sitting in the County sessions and vicar of the town (Parsons). All three had been vocal critics of reform, with Digby taking a central role by voting against the second Reform Bill in the House of Lords ten days before the riot. Arguably, these were also the three most dangerous men to attack in the parish in terms of judicial retribution but, it should be noted, this did not hold the rioters back. What apparently did restrain the rioters and diffuse their anger were the words of a paternal mill owner, Thomas Willmott.

³¹² Lyon, "Reminiscences of my life at Sherborne School, 1836-1845" p. 226.

³¹³ DHC Easter Quarter Sessions 1832 notes D-FFO 25/23.

³¹⁴ DHC PH.949 1W/D30. Percy, Edward Thomas *Plan of the Town of Sherborne in the County of Dorset* (1834); Percy, *Numerical Terrier*.

³¹⁵ Robinson, Harry (transcription) *Edward Percy's 1834 Sherborne Terrier rendered Alphabetically Part Two* (Starkraver Press, n.d.); Dorset OPC *Sherborne Postal Directory 1823*; "Sherborne: Entries from the 1835 Robson's Directory"; Census data was obtained from Dorset OPC (2022) retrieved from <http://www.opcdorset.org/index.htm> and Ancestry.com.

³¹⁶ Fripp, "The Sherborne Riot of 1831" App. III.

Other features of the data in Table 12 include the number of magistrate-clerics and lawyers that were targeted. In the preceding riot in Blandford, attacks on lawyers acting as agents for Lord Ashley's election campaign were an important feature of the violence.³¹⁷ Thomas Fooks and Thomas Lowman were Ashley's legal agents for his campaign in Sherborne.³¹⁸ The former was a primary target of the rioters, and the latter may explain the attack on his namesake, Adam Lowman's, property. Magistrate-clerics such as Parsons and West fused resentments about the anti-reform Church of England, the votes of the Lords Spiritual against the Second Reform Bill and the harsh penal regime of Dorset in the 1830s.

Name	No. of attacks on properties	Level of damage ³¹⁹	Vote in 1831 by-election	Civic position	J.P.	Occupation
James Ridout (snr)	1	Major	Ashley	Son - town constable		Linen, wine dealer
William Boswell	1	Minor	Obj. Ashley			Lawyer
Thomas Fooks	2	Major	Obj. Ashley	Steward of the Liberty, Clerk to Commission of the Peace		Lawyer
Robert Woodbourne	1	Minor	Ashley			Grocer
Lt. Peter Crawford	1	Major	Ashley			Navy (ret.)
Thomas Hilliar	1 (2) ³²⁰	Minor	N/K			Inn landlord
Thomas Sherrin	1	Major	Ashley	Son - town constable		Butcher
Nathaniel Highmore	1	Minor	Ashley			Surgeon
Rev. Edward West	2	Major	Ashley		Yes	Clergy
Lord Edward Digby	1	Major	Anti-reform ³²¹	Lord Lieutenant of Dorset	Yes	Landowner, Lord
Edward Turner	1	Major	Ashley	Brother of the Almshouse		Surgeon
William Allford	1	Minor	Obj. Ponsonby	Brother of the Almshouse		Lawyer
Adam Lowman	1	Major	DNV			Grocer, tea, butter factor
Rev. John Parsons	1	Major	Ashley	Vicar	Yes	Clergy
Sherborne School	1	Minor	N/A	-	-	-
William Knott	0 (ext.)	None	Ashley			Publican, maltster
Unknown (Osborne)	0 (ext.)	None	DNV ³²²			Farmer

Key: DNV = Did not vote in by-election, N/A = Not applicable, N/K = Not known, Obj. = Vote objected to, ret. = retired, ext. = extortion, J.P. = magistrate

Table 12: Summary of targets of Sherborne rioters in October 1831 in chronological order

³¹⁷ Poole et al, *The Blandford Forum riots*.

³¹⁸ See Ball et al, *Preludes to the riots in Dorset in October 1831* p. 6, 8.

³¹⁹ The level of damage is determined as being major by either being greater than £5, more than one attack or more than one hour for the attack.

³²⁰ The second attack is in parenthesis as it refers to the King's Arms Inn which may have sustained collateral damage only.

³²¹ Lord Digby could not vote in the by-election but voted in the House of Lords against the Second Reform Bill in October 1831.

³²² There were no registered voters in Osborne in the 1831 by-election. *The poll* p. 70.

The strength of the patterning evidence lies in its selectivity, that is the numerous properties that were not attacked by the rioters. There were potentially dozens of available targets if the expressive violence had been directed merely at the ‘better off’ or if it had transformed into more random acquisitive crime (robbing and looting). Instead, we see a pattern of detailed discrimination between potential targets, repeated and furious attacks against certain properties and, as Fooks noted, the ability of the crowd to correct its errors: “however it is all one way except by mistake, which is most promptly discovered by the mob”. Fooks feared that this selectivity would degenerate into generalised violence against the pro-reform property-holders who had refused to sign up as special constables, when he stated to the Home Secretary:

But we are in metu for the fickle mob may be turned towards those very persons who refuse to be sworn against them.³²³

But with few, if any, exceptions the ‘mob’ were not ‘fickle’ and continued to target those who were anti-reform civic, judicial and clerical leaders in the town and its environs. This includes the Sherborne Troop of Yeomanry Cavalry who were so badly mauled by the rioters on the Thursday evening. As has been demonstrated the recent history of vigilante action against agricultural labourers during the ‘Swing riots’, the apparent anti-reform stance of Yeomanry units during the Ashley-Ponsonby by-election and their class-composition and leadership, were plenty of reasons for them being a primary target of the violence of rioters.³²⁴

3.4 Connections

Beyond the immediate prosopographical categories of age, gender, occupation, home address, marital status and land ownership were the business and social networks that may have connected the targets of the rioters. One of the key institutions in the town was Sherborne School for boys. Founded in its modern form in 1550 by order of King Edward VI and expanded in 1749, the school was one of the first exclusive ‘public schools’ in the country.³²⁵ As such, being an alumnus, a member of staff or on its board of governors were significant status symbols in the country in the nineteenth century. Within Sherborne, civic and social status was confirmed by association with the school, membership of the board of governors and the post of warden. It also helped gain access for male offspring. Lord Digby was a major benefactor to the school in the period, providing the Abbey buildings in 1851. Eight of the targets of the rioters had already been or were in the process of becoming governors and wardens and/or had sons who were pupils at the school, as shown in Table 13.³²⁶

Target	Governor	Warden	Notes
James Ridout (snr)	1799	1799, 1815, 1821, 1833	Son was a pupil
Thomas Fooks	1805	1806, 1818, 1827, 1835	Four sons were pupils
Lt Peter Crawford			Son was a pupil
Nathaniel Highmore	1833	1834, 1844, 1855	
Edward Turner	1825	1828, 1839	Four sons were pupils
William Allford	1825	1830, 1841, 1852-53	Son was a pupil
Rev. John Parsons	1805	1808, 1820, 1837, 1848	Ex-officio member of governing body
Thomas Willmott	1805	1810, 1823, 1839	Three sons were pupils

Table 13: Associations of targets of rioters with Sherborne School

³²³ ‘In metu’ means to be ‘in fear’ in Latin. TNA HO 52/12 Counties Correspondence Berks – Gloucester [ff: 21-24] Letter from Reverend John Parsons to Home Secretary Lord Melbourne. 22 October 1831.

³²⁴ See Ball et al, *Preludes to the riots in Dorset in October 1831*.

³²⁵ Davey & (Bellamy) *Dorset Historic Towns Survey: Sherborne* Part 5.4 and 5.5.

³²⁶ Table 13 was constructed by interrogating *The Sherborne Register 1550-1950* 4th Edition.

Another locus for members of the target group was the Sherborne Savings Bank which established premises on Cheap Street in 1818 (see Figure 24). Five of the target group sat on the committee for the bank in the 1830s James Ridout (snr), Thomas Fooks, Lt. Peter Crawford, Rev. Edward West and William Allford.³²⁷ Savings banks were:

set up to provide banking facilities for poorer people – those who were not normally the customers of the established banks, whose accounts did not normally bear interest at this time. Savings banks welcomed small investors, including those who could save only intermittently, as their incomes were unreliable and varied according to the seasons or the availability of work. Although savings banks did not help the very poor, who found it impossible to save any money at all, they were attractive to those such as artisans, small farmers, shopkeepers, and domestic servants, among whom were many who had a little money to save and who liked the idea of self-help. Savings banks were not perfect: in an era before elaborate state regulation of financial institutions, some folded as the result of fraud or incompetence.³²⁸

Although the bank itself was not targeted during the riot, is interesting that this supposed initiative for the lower income residents did not save the five committee members from attack.



Figure 24: Sherborne Savings Bank on Cheap Street

Thomas Fooks and William Allford appear in both networks, and they also feature in a third, the Sherborne Association for the Protection of Property (APP), along with Yeomanry Captain John Goodden in his role as a lawyer and magistrate. The Sherborne branch had about 30 members in the 1830s. APPs and their ilk began to appear in Dorset in the 1790s. Up until that point it was often up to the individual owner to protect his property. As food and fuel theft grew during the Napoleonic wars and the associated famines, in the post-war squeeze on labourers' wages due to mechanisation and the collapse of the silk and gloving industries in the mid-1820s the

³²⁷ *Sherborne Mercury* 7 December 1831.

³²⁸ Wilkinson, Philip *English Buildings: Sherborne Dorset* (25 August 2021) Retrieved from: https://englishbuildings.blogspot.com/2021/08/sherborne-dorset_01652221598.html.

number of APP type associations increased. Eventually, around 90 per cent of Dorset was in the jurisdiction of one or other association. Subscribing to an APP offered members collective protection by using the joint funds either as rewards for information leading to conviction or to pay the costs of prosecution for the victim of a crime. The President of the overarching Dorset and Somerset APP was Rev. Harry Farr Yeatman.³²⁹

The three institutions considered here, the Governors of Sherborne School, the Committee of the Sherborne Savings Bank and the Association for the Protection of Property can all be characterised as exclusive organisations that require members to be educated and to have significant wealth and property. They also represent an exclusive social network which connected professional members of the Sherborne middle-classes such as lawyers and surgeons with those having civic power such as magistrates, mayors and clerics. These are not organisations that include women of any class or male artisans and labourers.

4 The crowd

4.1 Methodology

The purpose of this section of the case study was to derive as much information about the composition of the crowd that rioted over the three days in Sherborne. There were two methods used in this study for achieving this.

The first was to gather descriptions of the crowd from eye-witness reports in newspapers, court records, memoirs and other primary sources. These descriptions were also compared over the period of the riot to ascertain if the composition was changing over time and space based on assessments of gender, age and social class. The content of the description was recorded but also the source of that data, as this provided some information about the relative 'position' of the observer.

The second was to collect the names of those either arrested or named in the primary sources as being part of the rioting crowd. A prosopographical analysis was then carried out on this sample of participants. This involved using existing secondary sources along with map apportionments, parish records, court and prison records, census data, newspapers and contemporary family history databases³³⁰ to gain as much biographical information about the sample of crowd members and their immediate families as possible. The types of biographical data that could be gathered, sources for this data and its potential interpretation are given in Table 14.

The assembled data was cross referenced paying specific attention to connections between the 'rioters' and interactions between them and their families and the 'targets' analysed in Section 3 over several years before the events of October 1831.³³¹ This data was then summarised in a spreadsheet for interpretation.

³²⁹ Bawn, "Social protest, popular disturbances and public order in Dorset" p. 263-264; Flame, "Reconstruction of social and political identities by the Dorset gentry" p. 118-119.

³³⁰ Ancestry.com.

³³¹ The sample of participants were analysed in sources such as local newspapers back to January 1825.

Type of data	Sources of data	Interpretation
Basic: sex/age/parish/ marital status/no. children	Census, court data, prison registers, newspapers	Local habitation, transience
Physical: height, hair, eyes, complexion, marks	Prison registers	Working/social life, disease
Family: parents, siblings, spouse, children	Births, baptisms, marriages, burial certificates	Family size, mortality, displacement
Occupation	Court records, prison registers, census data, business directories	Social class/status, wealth
Home address	Maps and apportionments, census, business directories	Household status: freeholder, tenant, leaseholder, landlord, servant, housing conditions
Land ownership	Maps and apportionments	Social class, status, wealth
Criminal history (for individual and other family members)	Court data, prison registers, newspapers	Relationship to authorities and law, social class
Voting rights and preferences	Poll books	Social class, political belief
Literacy	Court depositions and marriage certificates	Access to schooling, learning and written media
Religion	Conformist/non-conformist burials/baptisms	Social inclusion/exclusion, political belief
Family history	Burials, migration, transportation, workhouses	Transience, class/social status

Table 14: Types of biographical information collected for the crowd sample

4.2 Limitations

There were a number of limitations associated with the two analytical approaches. The majority, if not all, of the descriptions of the 'rioters' were, unsurprisingly, from observers outside the crowd. Internal descriptions by participants were few and far between and where they did exist were mediated by the judicial experience as a witness. None of the rioters described the composition of the crowd, though some of the witnesses were accused in court of being involved in the riot. Consequently, the survey is more a study of perceptions of the crowd from above, than a study 'from below'.

Of the 12 rioters that were named or arrested, eight were identified by the magistrate Rev. John Parsons in two groups, although other witnesses later corroborated their presence. Of the remaining four, three men from Bradford Abbas were recognised by a single witness from their village and the final arrestee from Sherborne was recognised by his victim and another witness. This process does create some issues concerning circularity. As will be demonstrated, some of the arrestees (or their families) had previously been in court and judgements had been made on them by the magistrates Parsons and West, two of the primary targets of the rioters. Consequently, they were recognised by them and arrested whilst others who did not have a criminal record or previous appearance in court were not identified. Similarly, it appears certain families had 'criminal reputations' amongst the magistracy and were known to informer/witnesses (such as Robert Lamb) and were more likely to be identified as a result. This 'low hanging fruit' problem creates a bias in the sample of arrestees towards those with previous criminal records or reputations. This was exacerbated by the small size of the sample (12) compared to the size of the crowds involved (several hundreds), and the fact that two thirds

of the suspects and arrestees were identified by one magistrate. Consequently, an analysis was also carried out on an auxiliary list of seven witnesses who knew some of the arrestees and *may* have been members of the crowd.

4.3 Descriptions of the crowd

The analysis of descriptions of the crowd employed 34 sources of which 20 were ascertained to be eyewitness accounts. The overall sample produced 66 descriptions of the composition or nature of the crowd which are given in Table 15. It should be noted these are not frequencies of the term *within* the sources, but the frequency of sources using the term.

Description	Frequency
"mob"	27
"men"	5
"women"	5
"children"	4
"reformers"	4
"idle"; "idlers"	2
"boys"	2
"ruffian"	2
"strange persons"	2
"misguided"	2
"rioters"	1
"levellers"	1
"radical"	1
"fickle"	1
"country persons"	1
"intoxicated"	1
"humbler class"	1
"lawless persons"	1
"unknown"	1
"persons"	1
"outsiders"	1

Table 15: Frequency of descriptions of the crowd in sources describing the Sherborne riots of October 1831

Unsurprisingly, "mob" is the most common and perhaps least useful of the descriptors as it tells us little, other than in the context of the lack of the words "protestors", "paraders", "marchers" or the like in the descriptions. The preponderance of "mob" suggests collective violence, property damage and 'rough music' rather than a formal meeting or demonstration. Of more interest are the high frequencies of the terms "women" and "children", which suggest a diversity in age and gender within the crowd. However, it should be noted that some journalists used "women and children" descriptors to denigrate protest crowds as being less serious. Despite this, the evidence suggests there was significant diversity amongst the participants. Analysing the gender and age descriptions over time produces more useful results, with all of the terms "women", "children" and "boys" appearing in descriptions of the first night of rioting on 19th October. This suggests that as the rioting progressed it became less diverse, more of an adult, male affair. Similarly, the terms "outsiders", "country men" and "unknown" only appear on the second day, providing some evidence for the involvement of people who were non-

residents of the town. The “strange persons” descriptions both appear in accounts of the beginning of the rioting on the first evening and are in reference to the “fife, drum and flag” entourage who take up the shout of “reform”. This was an attempt to blame the initiation of the riot on “outside agitators” and is debunked in Section 2.1.3.

The “reformer” descriptions often go hand in hand with the “mob” for political purposes as it was in the interest of anti-reform newspapers to connect these. Similarly, it was often the aim of pro-reform newspapers to do the opposite and attempt to disconnect the riots from the discourse of ‘respectable’ reform. Some anti-reform papers such as the *Standard* and the *Morning Post* went further claiming that the rioters on the Thursday night during the battle with the Yeomanry were using (French) revolutionary language:

swearing that they would quite as soon die as live in the struggle; others at the same time shouting “Death or Victory!”³³²

Interestingly, this was angrily refuted by an eyewitness in Sherborne who grudgingly accepted:

neither did they shout “Death or Victory,” or that they would as soon “Die as Live;” their uniform cry was “Reform” – a cause worthy of better hands, and to which they were then doing serious mischief.³³³

This is supported by the reports on the initiation of the rioting on the evening of the 20th October and on the final night of rioting on the 21st when “reform” was used as a rallying cry on both occasions (see Sections 2.1.3 and 2.3.3).

The series of derogatory descriptors “idle”, “idlers”, “ruffians”, “fickle”, “misguided”, “humbler class” and “lawless” were common currency amongst the middle and upper classes in the period for describing proletarian crowds.³³⁴ These were multiple antonyms for “respectable”, a term which does not appear anywhere in the descriptions of the rioting crowds in Sherborne. This is telling, as “respectable” was typically code for middle class property-owners. The descriptive evidence suggests that this was a crowd made up of labourers and artisans and initially their families, a working-class gathering with a ‘reform’ agenda of some form.

4.4 Prosopography

The detailed biographies of the suspects and arrestees, the principal sample of the crowd in Sherborne, have been included in the Sections covering the narratives of the riot (see 2.1.5, 2.1.6 and 2.2.3). The purpose of this section is to consider the 12 arrestees and the 7 witnesses as a group, noting similarities between them. The prosopographical data is summarised for the arrestees and suspects in Table 16 and for the witnesses in Table 17. All of the suspects and arrestees were male and can be broken into three groups. Those who were recognised by John Parsons for being part of the crowd that assaulted him on Long Street (Robert Collins, John Pitman, James Sturgess, Frederick Lewis and Edward Parsons), those that Parsons named for attacking the Vicarage (Robert Harris, John Seville and Leonard Pearce) and those that were identified by witnesses for engaging with the Yeomanry Cavalry the following day (Meshack Wills, Tiras Hockey, George Newman, George Hellier). With the exception of Hockey, Newman and Hellier, who were from the nearby village of Bradford Abbas, all the suspects and arrestees

³³² *Morning Post* 24 October 1831.

³³³ *Sherborne Journal* 27 October 1831.

³³⁴ This observation was made in our study of more than 150 newspapers reporting on the reform protests and riots over the period October-December 1831. See Ball and Askew, *The defeat of the Second Reform Bill in October 1831*.

were from the town of Sherborne. This was true of the witnesses with the exception of John Chainey who was from Bradford Abbas and identified the three arrestees from his village.

Of the 12 suspects and arrestees, six were unskilled labourers, five were engaged in skilled artisanal-type trades, with one unknown. This was mirrored by the seven witnesses with three labourers, two artisans and two unknown. So as a combined sample it was principally, if not wholly, working-class. Of the 11 people in the combined sample of which there is data on their property ownership, only one Robert Collins was freeholder. All the rest were tenants, and it is very likely that the remaining eight owned no land or property as this could not be located in the sources. Some of the younger members amongst the arrestees, Robert Harris, Edward Parsons and Leonard Pearce were living with large families in some of the worst housing conditions (the courts or drains) in the town. Several others already had young families (John Pitman, Meshack Wills, Tiras Hockey and George Newman) but this did not restrain them from being involved in the riots. None of the combined sample had electoral rights through property ownership, though Tiras Hockey went on to gain the vote in 1839. In terms of literacy or more accurately semi-literacy, there is data available on ten people.³³⁵ Four of the combined sample were semi-literate, or at least probably so, and six were illiterate.

Although Fripp claimed the defendants had no criminal record, research has demonstrated that four out of the 12 suspects and arrestees, James Sturgess, Robert Harris, Leonard Pearce and Meshack Wills, had all appeared in court previously, the former three times.³³⁶ Wills had been acquitted but Sturgess, Harris and Pearce had all served time in Dorchester prison, and the latter had been whipped for his offences. All three had been judged and sentenced by Sherborne magistrate Rev. John Parsons. The only offences involving violence had been Sturgess' assault and breach of the peace in the early 1820s, the rest were all food related, stealing bacon, pears or ducks. Outside of the individual defendants, research has demonstrated that their immediate families had suffered at the hands of the legal system. John Pitman's father and younger brother James had been arrested previously, with the latter suffering whippings, imprisonment and finally transportation and James Sturgess' brothers Robert and William had also been imprisoned for significant terms. In both cases the presiding magistrates were John Parsons and Edward West. Again, the content of the crimes was mostly food related, stealing ducks, potatoes, and poaching. Finally, as noted previously, the 'tinker family' of John Seville were already characterised as being involved in the movement of stolen goods.

4.5 Connections

Of the rioters from Sherborne, there are several connections between them that are apparent. The group named by John Parsons for wrecking his house and by other witnesses for being present when the fife, drum and flag contingent assembled, Robert Harris, John Seville and Leonard Pearce were of similar ages (16-19). Several of the witnesses stated that they knew all three, which suggests they were a social group. Pearce and Seville lived very close to each other, along with another rioter Edward Parsons (20) at the junction of Newland and Long Street. Pearce had been previously arrested with James Pitman, the brother of arrestee John Pitman, for stealing ducks in 1829. John Pitman's father, Charles lived next-door to Joseph Collins on Churchyard, the father of rioter Robert Collins.

It is likely that the three accused rioters from Bradford Abbas, Tiras Hockey, George Newman and George Hellier knew each other as they were seen together as a group. Their presence also

³³⁵ The term semi-literate is being used here as in most cases the data is being derived from marriage certificates or court documents which only involve writing your name. Non-literacy is derived from a person making a mark. Semi-literacy is assumed when the subject writes their name, and probable semi-literacy is assumed when the subject's parents are semi-literate.

³³⁶ Fripp, "The Sherborne Riot of 1831" p. 26.

gives some credence to the observation made in some contemporary sources that “country men” or “outsiders” had travelled to take part in the rioting, particularly on the second night, 20th October. Apart from this group there is no other supporting evidence for the involvement of travellers from the environs of Sherborne.

One important connection concerns the connections between the family of rioter Frederick Lewis and the Willmott’s the silk mill owners. Lewis’ mother Albertina (b. 1782 d. 1829) was Thomas Willmott’s sister. This made the town’s most important silk mill owner Frederick’s uncle. And Frederick’s aunt, Mary Bower Lewis (b. 1781 d. 1823) was married to Thomas Willmott. Familial relationships such as this may have aided in the influence that Thomas Willmott had with the rioters when they parleyed on the final night of the riots.

Name	Age	Home town	Address (Percy 1834) [status]	Occupation	Marital status and children	Semi-literate	Voter	Previous criminality	Charge and date of incident	Sentence	Notes
Robert Collins	20	Sherborne	Newland (228 a-b, 230b) [Fh]	Labourer	Single	Yes	No	None	Riot (19 Oct)	Two years hard labour	Group who beat Parsons after he tried to apprehend them. His father Joseph Collins and Charles Pitman were next door neighbours.
John Pitman	26	Castleton, Sherborne	Castleton [?]	Labourer	Married/2	No	No	None	Riot (19 Oct)	Two years hard labour	Group who beat Parsons after he tried to apprehend them. Joseph Collins and his father Charles Pitman were next door neighbours. Father arrested for stealing potatoes (1828). His younger brother James was arrested for poaching, stealing ducks (with Leonard Pearce) and scythes, whipped, imprisoned and transported. Judgements by Parsons and West.
James Sturgess	42	Sherborne	Cold Harbour Father (329) [DL] and brother William (323) [Te]	Labourer	Single	No	No	1822 1823 1826	Riot (19 Oct)	Two years hard labour	Imprisoned three times by Parsons: 3 months hard labour for assault (1822), 2 years with his brother Richard for breach of the peace (1823) and 1 year hard labour for stealing bacon (1826). Group who beat Parsons after he tried to apprehend them. Younger brother William Bicknell Sturgess imprisoned for poaching for 3 months (1826) by Parsons
Frederick Lewis	21	Sherborne	Brothers, Trendle St. (473) [Te] & Long St. (65) [Te]	?	Single	?	No	None	Not charged (19 Oct)	N/A	Group who beat Parsons after he tried to apprehend them. Son of the attorney Robert Lewis on Cheap St. Both parents dead by 1829. Lewis' mother Albertina (nee Willmott) was silk mill owner Thomas Willmotts' sister and his aunt Mary was Thomas Willmott's wife.
Edward Parsons	20	Sherborne	Mother, Newland (108t) [Te] Warr's Court	Shopman (1841) Carter (1851)	Single	?	No	None	Not Charged (19 Oct)	N/A	Group who beat Parsons after he tried to apprehend them. It looks like Elizabeth Parsons was sharing a property with Thomas Fooks. Edward Parsons and Leonard Pearce are neighbours.

Name	Age	Home town	Address (Percy 1834) [status]	Occupation	Marital status and children	Semi-literate	Voter	Previous criminality	Charge and date of incident	Sentence	Notes
Robert Harris	16	Sherborne	Mother, Hound St. (31d) [Te]	Blacksmith	Single	?	No	1829	Housebreaking (19 Oct)	Acquitted	Parsons imprisoned him for 3 weeks hard labour for stealing pears from a garden aged 13 (1829). Raised 'mob' with fife and carried flag. Named by John Parsons for wrecking his house. 'Base born' (illegitimate) to silk winder mother.
John Seville	(17) 19	Sherborne	Mother, Long St. (96) [Te]	Plasterer	Single	Probably	No	None	Housebreaking (19 Oct)	Acquitted	Named by John Parsons for wrecking his house.
Leonard Pearce	16	Sherborne	Newland (108i) [Te] Warr's Court	Labourer	Single	Probably	No	1829	Housebreaking (19 Oct)	Acquitted	James Pitman, Leonard Pearce and Robert Lamb stole ducks together (1829) and Pitman and Pearce were imprisoned by Parsons (1 month hard labour and private whipping) 1829. Named by John Parsons for wrecking his house. Seen with Harris by an eyewitness at the "raising of the crowd". Edward Parsons and Leonard Pearce are neighbours.
Meshack Wills	23	Sherborne	N/K	Razer grinder	Married/1	No	No	1827	Assault (20 Oct)	Two years hard labour	Arrested for stealing bacon in 1827, acquitted. Mob in Greenhill beat Yeomanry soldier after he fell off his horse.
Tiras Hockey	30	Bradford Abbas	Silver Street [?]	Mechanic	Married/5	Yes	No	None	Riot (20 Oct)	Acquitted	Throwing stones at Yeomanry. Non-conformist background. Father votes in 1831. Obtained vote in 1839.
George Newman	27	Bradford Abbas	N/K	Agricultural Labourer	Married/1	No	No	None	Riot & assault (20 Oct)	Acquitted	Throwing stones at Yeomanry
George Hellier	18	Bradford Abbas	N/K	Carpenter	?	?	No	None	Riot (20 Oct)	Acquitted	Throwing stones at Yeomanry

Key: Fh = freeholder Te = tenant

Table 16: Prosopographical data for suspects and arrestees in Sherborne riots of October 1831

Name	Age	Home town	Address (Percy 1834) [status]	Occupation	Marital status and children	Semi-literate	Voter	Previous criminality	Notes
John Chainey (aka Masters)	21	Bradford Abbas	N/K	Agricultural Labourer	Single	No	No	None	Servant to one of the Sherborne Troop of Yeomanry. Witness to events on 20 th October but appears to have been involved. Identified George Hellier, Tiras Hockey and John Newman at top of Cheap Street.
Robert Lamb	17	Sherborne	Father, Hound St. (142/143) [Te]	Agricultural Labourer	Single	?	No	1829	Informed on Leonard Pearce and James Pittman for stealing ducks in 1829. Identified Leonard Pearce and Robert Harris on evening of 19 th October.
George Down	21	Sherborne	Half Moon St. (749) [Te]	Carpenter	Married/1	?	No	None	Witness to events on 19 th October but may have been involved. Identified John Seville in Churchyard.
John Ryall	34	Warminster but Sherborne in 1831	N/K	Agricultural Labourer	Married/1	No	No	None	Witness to events on 19 th October but may have been involved. Identified John Seville in Churchyard.
John Miller	?	Sherborne	N/K	?	?	?	No	None	Knew John Seville. Witness to events on 19 th October but may have been involved. Identified Seville in Vicarage.
Fanny Fox	19	Sherborne	N/K	?	Single?	?	No	None	Knew John Seville, Leonard Pearce and Robert Harris. Witness to events on 19 th October but may have been involved. Died in 1832.
Henry Roberts	25	Sherborne	Shop on the Parade (606) [Te], Acreman St. (458) [Te]	Brazier	Married/0	?	No	None	Knew John Seville, Leonard Pearce and Robert Harris. Entered Vicarage with mother, Edith and recognised Harris.

Key: Fh = freeholder Te = tenant

Table 17: Prosopographical data on court witnesses to Sherborne riots of October 1831