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Author(s): Dr Roger Ball (UWE), Professor Steve Poole (UWE), Professor John Drury (University of Sussex)
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For all enquiries please contact: riot1831@uwe.ac.uk

Preludes to the riots in Dorset in October 1831

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List of abbreviations

DCC	<i>Dorset County Chronicle</i>
DHC	Dorset History Centre
DRYC	Dorset Regiment of Yeomanry Cavalry
FACHRS	Family and Community Historical Research Society
SJ	<i>Sherborne Journal</i>
SM	<i>Sherborne Mercury</i>

1 Introduction

The following essay considers a series of preludes in 1830 and 1831 to the riots in Dorset and south Somerset in October 1831. Although written from the perspective of Sherborne in north Dorset this paper provides useful context for case studies of riots in Blandford, Sherborne and Yeovil. It examines agricultural disturbances (known as the Swing riots), early reform protests, the general election of May 1831, the defeat of the Second Reform Bill in the House of Lords and the Dorset by-election of October 1831. The disturbances on the final day of polling in Dorchester and subsequently in Poole, Wareham and Blandford are also briefly documented.

2 The Swing 'riots' of 1830-31

Dorset first experienced the wave of 'Captain Swing riots' in mid to late November 1830 with serious disturbances continuing for several weeks until mid-December. The 'riots' in the county over wages, relief and the right to work, consisted of a repertoire of activities including "localised and fragmented rioting, assemblies to demand higher wages, strikes, incendiarism, and machine breaking".¹ The main loci of the 'riots' were described by Hobsbawm and Rudé as:

the eastern inland plain stretching from Dorchester to Wimborne with Bere Regis at its centre; and the north-eastern "frontier" area between Cranborne and Stalbridge, passing through Cranborne Chase and Shaftesbury along the southern boundaries of Wiltshire and Somerset²

An analysis of 65 Swing rioter arrestees from Dorset who were largely agricultural labourers demonstrates that the villages of Buckland Newton (19), Six Penny Handley (10), East Stower/Stower Provost (8) and the town of Stalbridge (5) produced almost two thirds of the offenders.³ These places are located on Figure 1. Although there were no rioters arrested who were from the parish of Sherborne, many were from the Blackmore Vale, the dairy farming valley between Yeovil, Sherborne and Blandford.

Fear of the wave of machine breaking, incendiarism and 'riots' was palpable in Sherborne towards the end of November 1830. Although incidents had not occurred close to the town at that stage, they were occurring in Wiltshire and in other parts of Dorset, and the feeling was that the wave was advancing. A public meeting was called by the magistrates in the Town Hall on 25 November for:

the purpose of swearing in a large body of special constables, and to adopt immediate measures for the maintenance of order and the preservation of peace. The Meeting was most numerously attended, and was severally addressed by the Rev. John Parsons and by Robert Gordon, Esq. M.P., who pointed out the objects for which it was assembled, and stated that a mutual cooperation had become necessary for the protection of property and the suppression of lawless outrage.⁴

The meeting was a success in that a committee was set up and the *Sherborne Mercury* claimed that 700 special constables were signed up over a few days and organised in companies. Clearly the threat of 'Swing' had, in Sherborne at least, apparently motivated Tory and Whig voters, gentry and

¹ Scriven, "The Dorchester labourers and Swing's aftermath in Dorset" p. 1.

² Hobsbawm and Rudé *Captain Swing* p. 127.

³ 73 rioters from Dorset appear on the FACHRS database but 8 were removed as being related to election disturbances in October 1831. *Swing Unmasked: the agricultural riots of 1830-1832 and their wider implications*, Holland, Michael (ed.) (Milton Keynes: FACHRS, 2005) CD ROM Database.

⁴ *Sherborne Mercury* 29 November 1830.

freeholder, farmer and industrialist to put aside their differences for the sake of the protection of private property. The editor of the *Mercury* was confident enough of the cross-class composition of the constables to state:

The utmost praise is due to the numerous labourers and mechanics who have so promptly come forward, in the true spirit of Englishmen for the public defence.⁵

How unified the wider population was across the acute class divisions in place in Dorset in the 1830s is a moot point. Certainly, understanding the feelings of labourers and their families in the 'dark village' of Sherborne about 'Swing' was not something the *Mercury* or the other newspapers were going to be either bothered with or achieve easily. Instead, the mainstream press in Dorset tended to emphasise the 'victories' of the Yeomanry or para-military formations over parties of largely unarmed and impoverished farm labourers. These articles, mirroring war reporting by stating the numbers of the latter wounded and taken prisoner, may not have been as popular amongst the 'lower orders' as their editors might have imagined. After the 'war', came the trials of the Swing rioters. In Dorset these were numerous in January 1831, with six death sentences handed out, a dozen or more labourers transported and many imprisoned, sometimes involving several members of the same family. The outcomes of these trials and those in neighbouring counties were widely reported in the press and would have been common knowledge amongst residents of Sherborne.⁶

It would also be wrong to assume that the effect of the Swing protests in Dorset were limited to the end of the trials in early 1831. Although wage rises and other concessions, such as more generous provision of poor relief, had been achieved by agricultural labourers through the riots, within a few months, despite promises from magistrates, they had then been reneged on by landowners. This caused significant anger amongst the labourers. However, Scriven argues that this apparent defeat of the Swing movement actually encouraged *more* Union activity and negotiation, not less.⁷ Quoting, soon to be Tolpuddle 'martyr', George Loveless and his nemesis the landowner and magistrate James Frampton, Scriven states:

Loveless wrote ... that between 1831 and 1832 'there was a general movement of the working classes for an increase of wages.' This movement had already been identified by Frampton in summer 1831, who reported 'there can be no doubt that there is a very great uneasiness amongst the lower orders...the conversations at the Beer Houses & alehouses is of a very discontented & unpleasant kind &...the Labouring Classes think they did themselves a great deal of good by the mobs of last year.'⁸

By the autumn of 1831, many agricultural labourers were facing another winter of unemployment, underemployment and unstable food prices. Scriven points out that labourers living in relatively 'urban' areas such as Sherborne were not excluded from this discontent; by travelling to work in farms they may have served as a "synapse between the radical artisans and the Swing rioters" of the Vale of Blackmore.⁹

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ A disturbing account of the various trials in Hampshire, Wiltshire and Dorset and their effect on the public is given in Mate, W. *Then and Now, or Fifty Years Ago* (Poole & Bournemouth: Mate, 1883) pp. 54-61.

⁷ Scriven, "The Dorchester labourers and Swing's aftermath in Dorset".

⁸ Ibid. pp. 7-8.

⁹ Scriven, Thomas "Activism and the Everyday" p. 44.



Figure 1: Dorset in 1831

3 Reform protest and the general election

The first sign of formal protest for electoral reform in Sherborne came in early 1831, prompted by the “unsettled state of the country” in the aftermath of the Swing riots.¹⁰ A requisition to the Steward of the Liberty, Thomas Fooks, was made by 45 residents for a public meeting for the “purpose of Petitioning the Parliament for Reforming the Representation of the People in the House of Commons”.¹¹ The meeting was held in the Town Hall at midday on Monday 31 January 1831 and according to the *Sherborne Mercury* “the attendance of the gentlemen and inhabitants of the town was highly respectable and numerous”. The *Dorset County Chronicle* claimed “upwards of a hundred” were at the meeting, suggesting that there were few working-class attendees, which would be unsurprising in the middle of a working day.¹²

The meeting opened with the anti-reformer Fooks making his position quite clear, that he would *not* have called *any* meeting without the requisition and that “he was decidedly of the opinion that it would be much better to leave the particular measure to the Ministers and of Parliament”.¹³ MP for Cricklade, Robert Gordon, who lived in nearby Leweston House chaired the meeting, which included speakers Rev. Harry Farr Yeatman of Stock House, Demander Caswell Higgs, John Penny editor of the *Sherborne Journal*, Rev. A. Bishop a “Congregational minister, who resided for some years at Ringwood” and the auctioneer and surveyor Edward T. Percy from Sherborne.¹⁴ Of the speakers, only Higgs, who appears not to have been a resident of Sherborne or a voter in the later county election, spoke against reform. There was a large amount of vocal support for the pro-reform speeches and all the resolutions in the petition were passed.¹⁵ The ensuing petition was presented to the House of Commons in February by Edward Berkeley Portman (II) one of the two sitting MPs for Dorset. Portman stated:

it is my firm conviction that the question of reform has made great progress in the county which I have the honour to represent, where public opinion was formerly opposed to it.¹⁶

The other sitting MP in Dorset was the anti-reformer Henry Bankes who had been representing Corfe Castle and latterly Dorset in Parliament for over 50 years. The spring general election of 1831 pitted Bankes against two pro-reform candidates, Portman and the interloping John Calcraft who had recently and publicly changed his mind about the Reform Bill, allowing it to pass through its second reading by one vote. Bankes was supported by leading peers and the gentry but realising the growth in pro-reforming sentiment in the county he also:

set up an organization of over 30 agents, led by the Dorchester attorney Thomas Gould Read. Committees were established in each of the major towns, responsible for circulating handbills, producing and acting on lists of electors and controlling the expenses.¹⁷

In Sherborne, Bankes had at least two election agents operating, which included Steward of the Liberty, Clerk to the Commission of the Peace and lawyer Thomas Fooks and his colleague,

¹⁰ Farrell, Stephen “Dorset County” in *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons 1820-1832*, ed. D.R. Fisher (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹¹ *Sherborne Mercury* 31 January 1831.

¹² *Dorset County Chronicle* 3 February 1831. Only 93 men in the parish of Sherborne were registered to sit on Petty Session juries in 1830. Parish of Sherborne. August 22 1830. *Dorset Jury Lists, 1825-1921*. DHC Qsj/5/1830/79 To 102.

¹³ *Sherborne Mercury* 07 February 1831; *Dorset County Chronicle* 3 February 1831.

¹⁴ Mate, *Then and Now, or Fifty Years Ago* p. 64. Cricklade is near Swindon in Wiltshire. Ringwood is in east Hampshire. Stock House is about six miles to the southeast of Sherborne.

¹⁵ *Sherborne Mercury* 07 February 1831.

¹⁶ Farrell, “Dorset County” in *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons*.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

solicitor and Assistant Clerk to the Peace, Thomas Lowman.¹⁸ Bankes was correct in his assessment that support for the anti-reformers might be waning when another of his activists, the lawyer, magistrate and Captain of the Sherborne troop of the DRYC, John Goodden, warned him that:

I found today in Sherborne that many of my *loyal soldiers* are so annoyed at my endeavours for Mr. Bankes that, I am told, many mean to resign. This, to say the least, speaks volumes for their disappointment, and the speedy evaporation of their loyalty.¹⁹

A few weeks before the election began on the evening of Saturday April 23, 1831, a meeting at the Town Hall in Sherborne was held to endorse Edward Portman as the pro-reform candidate. The speakers and their supporters included many of the leading pro-reformers in the town, the chair, lawyer and landlord George Warry, John Penny editor of the *Sherborne Journal*, grocer and landlord Charles Brook, auctioneer and surveyor Edward T. Percy, the surgeons John Gray and Ernest Fussell, wine and spirit merchant John Balster, solicitors James Procter Melmoth and William Naish Alford, and banker Benjamin Chandler.²⁰

Despite the fact that this meeting was once again described as “highly respectable and numerous” by the *Sherborne Mercury* and there were apparently no voices from the working-class present, there were significant stirrings from below in Dorset. Bankes, noted in his journal that:

in this time of excitement, which was indeed excessive and nearly universal among the lower orders, reform covered a multitude of sins.²¹

This statement is interesting, in that it could merely be read that ‘reform’ was a useful umbrella for justifying various forms of protest and disorder by the ‘lower orders’. However, it could also be that ‘reform’ was understood differently on a class basis. That it might be perceived to offer different forms of change based on the needs and desires of the propertyless, rather than the propertied, regardless of its actual content. William Mate attested to this feeling when, in his epic collection of letters covering the history of Dorset and the South-West in the period, he stated in early 1831 that:

The country unquestionably was in a very distracted state, and it was considered by a large section of the community that Parliamentary Reform was the panacea for curing *all the ills* under which the state was suffering.²²

The popularity of Portman in Sherborne was matched by the alternative, pro-reform candidate Calcraft, who despite criticisms of being a turncoat, “shameless inconsistency” and general ridicule over his reform ‘U-turn’, “conducted a triumphant canvass” in the town.²³ This demonstrated both Calcraft’s popularity and Sherborne’s increasingly generalised support for reform outside of the squabbles between candidates. From the beginning, the election campaign was marked by collective violence, with major clashes at the nomination ceremony in Dorchester in early May between Bankes’ hired bludgeon men from Portland, the Yeoman

¹⁸ Ibid. Note 54. In 1825, Thomas Lowman signed for a five year ‘apprenticeship’ to act as clerk for Thomas Fooks. Articles of Clerkship, 1756-1874, August 20, 1825. He is also listed as being paid for acting as Assistant Clerk to the Commission of the Peace in Dorset, England, Quarter Sessions Order Books, 1625-1905, 1831.

¹⁹ Farrell, “Dorset County” in *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons*.

²⁰ More detail about these people can be found in Ball et al. *The Sherborne Riots of October 1831 Case Studies - Riot 1831*. Retrieved from: <https://riot1831.com/>; *Sherborne Mercury* 25 April 1831.

²¹ Farrell, “Dorset County” in *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons*.

²² Mate, *Then and Now, or Fifty Years Ago* p. 62. Our emphasis.

²³ Ibid.

Cavalry and pro-reform crowds from Poole and Wareham.²⁴ Despite this the pro-reform camp were confident:

declaring that they have with them the whole of the intelligence of Dorsetshire, and that they are only opposed by an oligarchy of squireens and parsons.²⁵

The election itself began on 10 May and after only six days of voting, Banks conceded to the other two candidates. The pro-reformers' electoral victory led to jubilation, celebrations and parades across the county particularly in Blandford and Poole. It was also marked by attacks on the gentry in Banks' election team in Blandford and Wareham. The electoral success in Dorset was matched by a sweep of pro-reform candidates winning in the county contests in Hampshire, Wiltshire, Somerset, Devon and Cornwall. Mate observed:

The whole of the West of England seemed ablaze with the reform agitation, and the news of the Reform victory was everywhere received with great rejoicing.²⁶

4 The Dorset County by-election and defeat in the House of Lords

On 11 September 1831, a few days after the coronation of William IV, the incumbent county MP John Calcraft committed suicide. This led to an important historical conjunction in Dorset, the combination of a county by-election and the Second Reform Bill entering the House of Lords. The importance of the former was that it would provide a test of public opinion which could influence the decision in the upper chamber. The victory of the pro-reform Whig candidates in the general election of the spring had made the passing of the Bill through the lower chamber a great deal easier than the first Bill but in August a by-election in Weymouth had been won by an anti-reform candidate. This had allowed anti-reform politicians and press to argue vociferously that there had been a 'great reaction' against reform in Dorset and by implication across the rest of the country, a compelling argument for any waverers amongst the Lords. The by-election in Dorset thus took on a role of a microcosm of the national debate on reform but also could have been a factor in the very survival of the Whig government. This dual danger in both houses was recognised by Grey the prime minister who endorsed the Whig candidate William Ponsonby with the words "he was *the Atlas* of the government and must win this battle for them".²⁷ As the *Dorset County Chronicle* commented the "eyes of all England" were simultaneously on Dorset and Westminster.²⁸

The contest between Ponsonby and the anti-reform Tory candidate Lord Ashley was fought over 15 days, between 30 September and 17 October. The hustings and polling took place in the Iron Age fort at Poundbury in Dorchester, an apt location considering the violence that was to follow. The machinations concerning the nominations, and content and tactics of the political struggle in this by-election are covered in considerable detail elsewhere.²⁹ Of particular interest to this study are the public perceptions of the by-election, how the different 'sides' of the reform struggle were delineated in relation to local state forces and the effect the defeat of the pro-reform candidate had in Dorset and in particular Sherborne, prior to the outbreak of the riots in the town.

²⁴ Mate, *Then and Now, or Fifty Years Ago* pp. 80-82.

²⁵ Farrell, "Dorset County" in *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons*.

²⁶ Mate, *Then and Now, or Fifty Years Ago* pp. 80-82.

²⁷ Farrell, "Dorset County" in *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons*.

²⁸ *Dorset County Chronicle* 22 September 1831.

²⁹ See for example Morris, R. "The Dorset By-election of 1831" in *Proceedings of the Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society*, Vol. 109 (1987); Mate, *Then and Now, or Fifty Years Ago* pp. 90-102; Farrell, "Dorset County" in *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons*.

Lord Ashley declared himself a candidate in the election at the very last moment, with a virulent anti-reform speech on 27 September. The following day, as Dorchester races drew to a close, the speech in printed form was distributed amongst the spectators. Around 200 horsemen, the majority members of the Dorset Regiment of Yeomanry Cavalry (DYRC), mustered on the track and then processed into the town. Led by prominent supporters of Ashley and “many other influential gentlemen of the county” they formed up in a line outside the *King’s Arms* public house and gave “three cheers for Lord Ashley”. Ashley then gave a speech, followed by a leading member of his election team James John Farquharson. Farquharson gave the impression that the event had been spontaneous and that they were merely “obeying the wishes of the Yeomanry of Dorset” by nominating Ashley as the anti-reform candidate. The editorial in the *Dorset County Chronicle* in describing this clearly contrived event stated:

The zeal and spirit manifested by the Yeomanry of Dorset, the alacrity which they evinced in support of the Constitutional Candidate, the determination which they so freely expressed to stand firm in the maintenance of conservative principles, have had a noble effect upon “The Cause,” and have even increased that confidence of success which was before entertained, because the Yeomanry of the County are zealous to maintain the integrity of their civil and religious institutions.³⁰

This questionable fusing of the ‘Yeomanry of Dorset’ with the anti-reform cause carried a deeper message to the people of Dorset by implication and representation. It implied that the para-military formations of the Dorset Yeomanry Cavalry, recently revived after the Swing Riots, were on the side of anti-reform and it demonstrated this by a public show of force on horseback. Political battlelines may have been drawn amongst the population in relation to the county election and the reform struggle, these were now being publicly joined by the forces of the local state.

Following a similar tactic of the county election in May, the Ashley camp organised “a small army of attorneys” led by Thomas Gould Read of Dorchester to help run the campaign.³¹ Committees were set up in the major towns that circulated campaign literature, analysed lists of voters and managed finances. As in the May election, the leading agents in Sherborne for the anti-reform candidate were the solicitors Thomas Fooks and his assistant Thomas Lowman. The fact that the effective ‘Mayor’ of Sherborne and Clerk to the Commission of the Peace had once again taken an active role in running an anti-reform campaign, would have been common knowledge in the town.

The symbiotic and simultaneous nature of the Dorset by-election and the progress of the Second Reform Bill in the House of Lords was exemplified by the comments of a Ponsonby activist who stated:

this contest is of the *greatest importance*. The letters from every department of the government received here this morning say (at least imply) that the bill depends on Dorsetshire. The Lords are looking to us for the *present* expression of public opinion.³²

In the crucial first week of October, whilst the Lords were debating the Bill, Ashley took a significant lead in the contest leading many to believe that the supposed ‘reaction’ to reform was a reality, at least in Dorset. This may have affected the outcome in the Lords when, in the

³⁰ *Dorset County Chronicle* 29 September 1831.

³¹ Quoted from Farrell, “Dorset County” in *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons*.

³² Quoted from Farrell, “Dorset County” in *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons*.

midst of the voting in Dorset, on Saturday 8 October the Lords voted by a majority of 41 to reject the Second Reform Bill. According to Mate:

The news of the defeat of the Government reached Dorchester on Sunday [9 October] evening and spread like wild-fire throughout the county early on Monday morning. The news that the Bill had been rejected could hardly be said to have taken the country by surprise...nevertheless it had some influence on the contest...Lord Ashley's supporters received the intelligence with great rejoicing. They asserted that the country was determined not to have so revolutionary a measure, and the constant repetition of this statement decided some of the wavering freeholders to record their votes in favour of the anti-Reform candidate.³³

There is little evidence of a significant public reaction in Sherborne to news of the defeat in the Lords. This may have been because news only became generalised on a Monday, a working day, and that the outcome of the county election was yet to be resolved. The *Sherborne Mercury* published a detailed list of all the Lords and their voting preferences for and against the Second Reform Bill a week later.³⁴ This confirmed that Lord Digby, of Sherborne Castle and the Bishop of Bristol, whose diocese Sherborne came under, had both voted against the Bill. The anti-reform and pro-Tory editor of the *Dorset County Chronicle*, John Sydenham, claimed confidently that in the county it "did not appear to have caused any great sensation, that result having been so confidently anticipated by both parties".³⁵ The reaction to the apparent defeat of the reform cause, when it did finally come in Dorset, would certainly challenge this comfortable assessment.

Throughout the closely fought county election the question of contested votes and rumours of corruption were rife. The fact that there was no register of voters meant that anyone who could prove they held a freehold could attempt to claim the right to vote. This also meant that their votes could be objected to, and such disputes had to be settled by the election assessors. The numbers of objections in the by-election of 1831 were excessive, running into several hundred, surpassing the total for the previous election after only seven days of voting, less than half way through the contest. Attempts by the Ponsonby committee to engage more assessors to deal with the backlog were successfully opposed by Ashley and rejected by the High Sheriff, Henry Dawson Damer, a Tory.³⁶

By way of example, of the 102 people who attempted to vote in the parish of Sherborne, 14 were either withdrawn (5) or objected to and excluded (9), typically because the assessor remained undecided about whether the voter was an eligible freeholder or not. In this case, the majority of these were Ponsonby voters (10).³⁷ These were not just random objections either, with leading figures on both sides targeted. Prominent Ashley supporters such as Steward of the Liberty, Clerk to the Commission of the Peace and leading Ashley agent Thomas Fooks was denied a vote, as was the attorney, William Boswell. Of the Ponsonby voters, it appears there were tit-for-tat objections amongst the legal profession with the pro-reform solicitors James Melmoth and William Alford removed from the ballot.

The widespread tactic of objecting to voters created serious hostility between the two sides, even leading to fistfights between the lawyers of both camps. Allied with the increasing use of 'dirty tricks' to hinder voters from getting to the polling ground, allegations of bribery and "the general atmosphere of scaremongering and intimidation" the popular understanding of the

³³ Mate, *Then and Now, or Fifty Years Ago* p. 99.

³⁴ *Sherborne Mercury* 17 October 1831.

³⁵ *Dorset County Chronicle* 20 October 1831.

³⁶ Mate, *Then and Now, or Fifty Years Ago* pp. 98-99.

³⁷ *Dorset election, September and October, 1831. The poll* pp. 70-72.

ballot was that it was more dubious than ever, primarily because the stakes were higher. *The Times* noted that “very few elections have taken place where so much acrimonious feeling has been manifested as by the agents and partisans of the two candidates”.³⁸ As the polling in Dorset entered its final week, news of serious rioting in Derby and Nottingham and attacks on anti-reforming Lords during mass pro-reform demonstrations in London began to arrive.³⁹

5 Confrontations on the final day of polling

The final day of the election on Monday 17 October was significant for two reasons, the unsatisfactory nature of the result and the violence at the Dorchester polling ground which clearly delineated the relation of local state forces to the two sides. Perceptions of these two events would influence the subsequent unrest in Dorset (and Somerset) towns. Ashley’s narrow victory in the poll by 36 votes was overshadowed by the huge number of votes (451) that had been objected to, about 11 per cent of the total ballot. The majority (58 per cent) of these uncounted votes (260) were for Ponsonby.⁴⁰ Despite desperate attempts by Ponsonby’s election team to get the result deferred until the undecided votes could be resolved, the High Sheriff and the Assessor (a Whig lawyer) declared the ballot over and that Ashley was the winner.

The final day at the poll had already been marked by significant violence before the result was announced. As the voting began in the morning a large crowd of Ponsonby supporters, headed by a band and flag bearers, began parading in front of the voting booths cheering pro-reformers as they arrived on the field. Within the crowd, numbering several thousand, many were carrying sticks, and as a result the High Sherriff issued an order that those “approaching the size of a bludgeon” should be taken away and stored in one of the candidate’s booths. Some of Ponsonby’s election agents and special constables wandered through the crowd and were able to convince them to hand over the sticks, most of which were stored in Ashley’s election booth. Sometime later a group of ‘bludgeon men’ from Portland arrived bearing Ashley’s colours and fights began to break out between the pro and anti-reform crowds. As most of the pro-reform crowd were now unarmed, a group of several hundred stormed the Ashley election booth to retrieve their sticks, whilst others tore it down for makeshift weapons. Men, women and children of the Ashley party escaped through the windows.⁴¹

The violence of the general melee between pro and anti-reform crowds was exacerbated by the intervention of Ashley supporters, “gentlemen on horseback”, who used sticks and riding crops to attack the Ponsonby crowd. The High Sheriff who had just arrived at the polling ground issued orders for the special constables to intervene but before they could act James Templer, an Ashley supporter who had been involved in the melee, rode into Dorchester to fetch the ‘yeomanry’. Within minutes he had returned “followed by a large body of farmer-looking men” on horseback and armed with large sticks who galloped towards the pro-reform crowd, who turned to face them “apparently determined to receive the charge”. At the last moment the horsemen came to dead stop, when onlookers were expecting a “scene of the most appalling in nature”.⁴²

³⁸ Farrell, “Dorset County” in *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons*.

³⁹ Ball, Roger, Poole, Steve and Askew, Jane “The defeat of the Second Reform Bill in October 1831 – An overview of public responses (part 2 – In the metropolis)”. *Riot1831* Retrieved from: <https://riot1831.com/2021/10/overview-part-2/7>

⁴⁰ Farrell, “Dorset County” in *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons*.

⁴¹ *The Times* 22 October 1831. Although there are several accounts of this violence in secondary sources (see for example, Farrell, “Dorset County” in *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons* and Morris, “The Dorset By-election of 1831” p. 11) the eyewitness account in *The Times* is the most detailed.

⁴² *Ibid.*

Mary Frampton, an eyewitness to the event described the horsemen as the “Yeomanry” noting “they were all in plain clothes, others belonged to none of the troops, but were merely farmers”.⁴³ *The Times* correspondent was more specific stating that they “amounted to more than 300 and belonged to the Troops of Sir E. [Edward] Baker, Mr. [James John] Farquharson and Mr. [William] Hannam [Hanham]”.⁴⁴ All three were Captains in the Dorset Yeomanry Cavalry, with Baker leading an integrated Troop, whilst Farquharson (Blandford) and Hanham (Wimborne) led independent Troops, all of which were under the overall command of Lieutenant Colonel Commandant James Frampton and Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Bower.⁴⁵ Baker, Farquharson and Hanham were prominent members of Lord Ashley’s election committee, along with their senior officers Frampton and Bower, appearing in newspaper articles and election poster campaigns (see Figure 2).⁴⁶

Having averted their charge, the “troops” drew “themselves up in a warlike array before the mob”. At his point, Ponsonby, addressed the crowd, asking them to put down their sticks but to loud cries, members of the crowd responded:

But the men on horses have theirs, why should we let ours be knocked down by Farquharson’s men? Make those fellows put their sticks down and we will then give up our arms again.

Ponsonby responded by castigating the ‘Yeomanry’:

He must say that the yeomanry, who were supposed to be men of some degree of sense and consideration, would have set a much better example had they not galloped up in the manner they had done – in a manner, allow him to add, which was calculated in itself alone to create a disturbance amongst the lower orders, who at no time were disposed, nor ought they, he would boldly say, to submit to be trampled underfoot. (Tremendous cheering from the Ponsonby party, and hisses from the antis). He asserted again that riding up the field, as though they were about to charge a foreign invader, with large sticks in their hands, was in itself sufficient to have caused a disturbance, which might have led to bloodshed, and perhaps loss of life. But the good judgement of the people had triumphed by their at once desisting from that struggle which was preceding on the entrance of the yeomanry in the field. (Loud cheering and cries of “To be sure we did, for we did not choose to give the *boroughmongering troop* an opportunity of gratifying themselves at our expense”).⁴⁷

Lord Ashley then addressed the crowd asking them to desist from further violence and was met with cries of “Dismount *your* cavalry and take away their weapons”. After praising the Yeomanry for their “exertions in *his* cause”, Ashley requested that they give up their weapons. The crowd responded sarcastically “They’ll take good care not to do so, although you’ll tell them”. The intervention of Ponsonby and Ashley averted further violence at this stage, though as the crowd had pointed out:

⁴³ Frampton, Mary *The journal of Mary Frampton: From the year 1779, until the year 1846*. Edt. Munday, Harriot (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1885) p. 380.

⁴⁴ *The Times* 22 October 1831.

⁴⁵ 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.

⁴⁶ *Dorset County Chronicle* 29 September 1831; 6 October 1831; Poster: list of those declaring support for Lord Ashley on offering himself as representative for the county – 28th September 1831. Dorset County Museum, Dorchester.

⁴⁷ *The Times* 22 October 1831. Our emphasis in italics.

some of the yeomanry deposited their sticks with the poll-clerks, yet a very large majority rode about, not merely with large sticks in their hands, but with large strips of the boards which had been pulled down from Lord Ashley's Booth. Many of these individuals, on being taunted by the mob for not having followed *their master's orders* to throw away their wooden swords, held them up in a threatening manner, and, on more than one occasion we anticipated further disturbances.⁴⁸

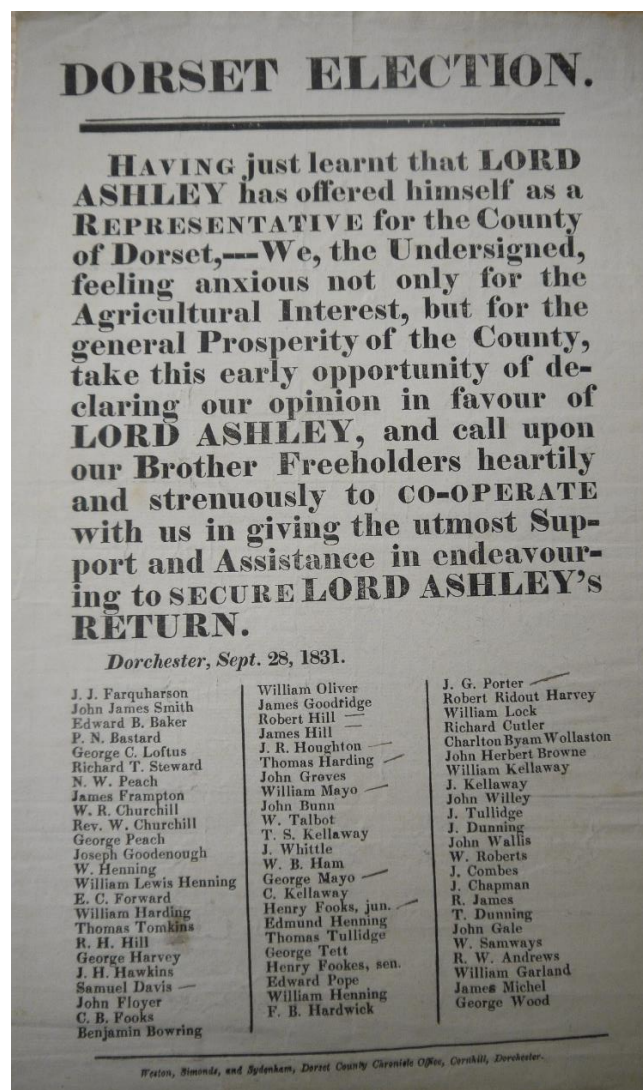


Figure 2: Election poster declaring supporters of Lord Ashley's campaign.⁴⁹

The importance of this detailed account of the mass public confrontation on the polling ground lies in the confirmation of perceptions of in-group and out-group amongst the pro-and anti-reform crowds and the 'yeomanry'. Quotation marks are employed here to refer to the 'yeomanry' for several reasons. First, they were in plain clothes, rather than their customary uniforms and carrying sticks rather than sabres and carbines. Second, the last Dorset Yeomanry troop had been disbanded in 1827 and the Regiment had only been recently officially reformed in January 1831 as a consequence of the Swing riots, so they were relatively 'new' to recent

⁴⁸ Ibid. Our emphasis in italics.

⁴⁹ Courtesy of Dorset County Museum, Dorchester.

public consciousness.⁵⁰ Lastly, as Mary Frampton pointed out, they were not all members of official Yeomanry units, some “were merely farmers”.⁵¹

Despite the potential confusion, both anti and pro-reform crowds clearly knew which ‘side’ the ‘yeomanry’ were on. Three weeks previously, the presence of hundreds of ‘off duty’ Dorset Yeomanry at Dorchester Races, later parading in support of Lord Ashley on the day after he announced his candidature sent a clear public message, which was amplified by the *Dorset County Chronicle*. Their dramatic intervention at the polling ground in front of thousands on the final day of voting, attempting to charge the pro-reform crowd (the “foreign rioters” as the virulently anti-reform national newspaper *The Morning Post* referred to them) and then forming up in a “war-like manner” was an important public display.⁵²

These actions, allied by the fact they were being led by gentry directly involved in Ashley’s campaign, were instrumental in fixing the perception amongst the pro-reform crowd that they were ‘outgroup’ and ‘in-group’ for the anti-reformers. During the Napoleonic Wars yeomanry units may have been regarded as ‘neutral’ by much of the population, as their stated purpose was home defence against the threat of French invasion. However, the iconic events of Peterloo (1819), the Swing riots and the reform movement certainly altered, if not wholly changed these perceptions.

This is confirmed by the language of the negotiations between the pro-reform crowd, Ponsonby and Ashley. Members of the pro-reform crowd refer to the ‘yeomanry’ as a “boroughmongering troop”, as “your [Ashley’s] cavalry” and for failing to follow “their master’s [Ashley’s] orders”. Here the critical, political language of reform, “boroughmongering” is combined with the observation that they are ‘Ashley’s troops’. Even Ashley in his speech referred to the ‘yeomanry’ as having exerted themselves in “his cause”, further cementing the idea amongst the anti-reformers that they were ‘in-group’. This fusing of the ‘yeomanry’ to the *interests* of the anti-reformers is implied in the *Dorset County Chronicle* editorial of 20 October which described the events at Dorchester within a wider context of ‘reform’, as a threat to the nation, monarchy, church and the propertied:

we must pay tribute to the loyal and patriotic manner in which the Yeomanry of our County have acted during the Election, which their exertions have carried. The efforts they have made to preserve inviolate the public peace – efforts which, under Divine Providence, proved successful to a degree far beyond the anticipation of every man; - the zeal, the activity, and the energy they evinced throughout the election ... the brave and hardy Yeomen of Dorset are calmly resolute in the defence of the Institutions of this country, and of those interests which, they are convinced, are the strongholds of the Nation’s welfare ... and that, if, on a future day, the internal peace of England shall be assailed, she may depend on her Yeomanry for the defence and maintenance of the Throne of their King, the Altars of their Church, and the general Security of property.⁵³

Later in the afternoon, after the controversial election result had been announced, the candidates made closing speeches. Ashley briefly addressed the crowd, before leaving the

⁵⁰ The Dorset Yeomanry Cavalry troops had been disbanded over several years, for example Blandford in 1814, Bridport in 1824 and the remaining troop at Sadborow in 1827. 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.

⁵¹ Frampton, *The journal of Mary Frampton* p. 380.

⁵² *Morning Post* 20 October 1831.

⁵³ *Dorset County Chronicle* 20 October 1831. Our emphasis.

polling ground with his supporters to head into Dorchester to celebrate his victory. The parade was described thus:

Lord Ashley having been girt with the sword, and the spurs being fixed, as is customary, rode through the town in a most triumphant manner, his horse being led by his brother, the Hon. J. Ashley, M.P. preceded by banners, and two bands of music, about 400 horsemen, accompanied by a most numerous procession of gentlemen on foot; and attended by a crowd of several thousand individuals, each endeavouring to outvie the other in demonstrations of joy at the success of the Constitutional Cause which they all had so deeply at heart; the windows were thronged with ladies waving ribbons and handkerchiefs, and heightening by their smiles the universal brilliancy of the spectacle.⁵⁴

The 'yeomanry' had, of course, left the polling field and had now morphed into the (supposed) 400 horsemen in the parade, further cementing their allegiance to Ashley and the cause of anti-reform, which was clearly visible to both camps. Commenting in the aftermath of the unrest in the county, Lord Melbourne, the Home Secretary, stated that he was:

extremely concerned to learn ... that the spirit of party ... prevails to such a degree in the yeomanry corps of that county [Dorset] that it is deemed inexpedient to call upon them to act in case of riot⁵⁵

As Ashley left the polling ground with his supporters, Ponsonby took the stage and made an unusually incendiary speech. He contested the result of the election based on the large number of unresolved objections to votes and stated that this manoeuvre had been planned by the Ashley camp. He claimed he had spotted the tactic in the early stages of the campaign and despite his protestations neither Ashley nor the High Sheriff would take any action to deal with the issue. As a result, he stated that:

when I see so greater proportion, upwards of one tenth of all the freeholders of the county, deprived so far as this election goes, of their elective franchise: I feel myself called upon to protest against the illegality of the proceeding.

Ponsonby completed his address by declaring that "if there has been any partiality, it is to be attributed to the assessor alone".⁵⁶ Thus Ponsonby left the poll calling into question the integrity of the election officials, Ashley's campaign tactics and by default the election as a whole. It is of little surprise that the Ponsonby supporters turned on the High Sherriff and the Election Assessor, who although protected by Special Constables, were given 'rough music' by the crowd. It required the return of the 'yeomanry' from Ashley's celebration to disperse the crowd before they were able to escape the field.⁵⁷ Ponsonby continued to publicly contest the election result over the following days, claiming that if the votes that were objected to were added for both candidates, he had won the election by 33 votes.⁵⁸

6 Disturbances at Fordington, Blandford, Poole and Wareham

The disturbances in the immediate aftermath of the election result on 17 October were not confined to the polling ground at Poundbury. As groups of Ashley and Ponsonby supporters retreated to the public houses and beer shops in Dorchester and then made their home on

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Farrell, "Dorset County" in *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons*.

⁵⁶ *Dorset County Chronicle* 20 October 1831.

⁵⁷ Mate, *Then and Now, or Fifty Years Ago* p. 102.

⁵⁸ See for example Ponsonby's letter dated 17 October 1831 in the *Sherborne Mercury* 24 October 1831.

horseback or on foot in the evening, bitter altercations broke out between them. In the most serious of several incidents, at dusk a group of 50-100 Ponsonby supporters outside a pub threw stones and struck with sticks a group of 20-30 'farmers' on horseback as they made their way through Fordington on the road to Blandford and Poole. The 'farmers', which included the prominent Ashley supporter Henry Fookes, responded by charging them, using their sticks to deal out blows, before being driven by the crowd over the Frome bridge.⁵⁹ The motivation for the violence was partly captured in the exclamations of one of the pro-reform crowd, a chimney sweep, who shouted "we'll drive the damned farmers before us" and "if he heard any man cry 'Ashley' he would cleave his skull".⁶⁰ Although referred to as 'farmers' in the trials and newspapers it is likely that these men on horseback carrying sticks were an element of the off-duty yeomanry that had engaged the crowd at Poundbury earlier in the day. The danger to Lord Ashley from bands of Ponsonby supporters meant that he had to leave Dorchester after the celebrations by a "circuitous route".⁶¹

The official announcement of Ashley's victory at Poundbury came at around 3.30 on the Monday afternoon. Three hours later, and 18 miles away in Blandford, a mail coach brought the news of Ponsonby's defeat to an awaiting crowd of 400 outside the Crown Inn. This was the signal for attacks to begin on the houses of Ashley's election agents and Tory voters in the town. The rioting would last for two days.⁶² An hour or so later, the news arrived in Poole, 25 miles east of Dorchester. A crowd traversed the town in the evening "shouting and yelling" outside the houses of anti-reformers. Then they proceeded to the adjacent villages of Longfleet and then Parkstone to attack the houses and businesses of well-known Ashley voters.⁶³ In Wareham, the houses of Ashley's election agents were attacked with "many windows broken".⁶⁴ These were not the first signs of disturbances in these towns over the election, there had already been incidents in Poole and Blandford during the campaign.⁶⁵ However, the latter events were more destructive, of greater duration and involved more participants. The Sherborne riot lasted three days (19-21 October)⁶⁶, nearby Yeovil in Somerset two days (21-22 October)⁶⁷ and there were less serious disturbances in Stour Provost, Dorset (22 October) and Crewkerne, Somerset (24-25 October). Table 1 summarises the reform-related protests, disturbances and riots in Dorset and south Somerset in a timeline.⁶⁸ The data in the table suggests that it was the defeat of pro-

⁵⁹ Both Henry Fookes, senior and junior, are listed as supporters of Lord Ashley in the *Dorset County Chronicle* 29 September 1831.

⁶⁰ *Dorset County Chronicle* 27 October 1831; DHC Michaelmas Quarter Sessions, October 1831. Father and son, chimney sweeps, Henry (54) and William (34) Standley were both convicted of assault in this incident and imprisoned for a year. Dorset, England, Church of England Births and Baptisms, 1813-1906 Winterborne Kingston 1813-1906; Dorset, England, Dorchester Prison Admission and Discharge Registers, 1782-1901 Prisoner Register 1812-1827.

⁶¹ Farrell, "Dorset County" in *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons*.

⁶² For the full account see Poole et al, *The Blandford Forum riots, 15-19 October 1831*, Case Studies - Riot 1831. Retrieved from: <https://riot1831.com/>.

⁶³ *Salisbury and Winchester Journal* 24 October 1831; Mate, *Then and Now, or Fifty Years Ago* p. 102.

⁶⁴ *Dorset County Chronicle* 20 October 1831.

⁶⁵ See for examples Poole et al, *The Blandford Forum riots* and for Poole the *Evening Mail* 17 October 1831 and the *Salisbury and Winchester Journal* 24 October 1831.

⁶⁶ For the full account see Ball et al. *The Sherborne Riots of October 1831*.

⁶⁷ For the full account see Poole et al. *Yeovil, Friday 21 and Saturday 22 October 1831* Case Studies - Riot 1831. Retrieved from: <https://riot1831.com/>.

⁶⁸ Table 1 is constructed from data collected in an overall survey of reform related protests and disturbances in Britain and Ireland from October-December 1831. The definition of the categories protest, the lesser severity 'disturbance' and greater severity 'riot' are - Protest: Non-violent (property or people) public event - Disturbance: Minor violent event, with minor damage, without major military/yeomanry intervention or significant casualties - Riot: Major violent event with significant

reformers in the county by-election that precipitated the unrest rather than the defeat of the Reform Bill in the Lords; or at least there was a delay in reaction because of the county election having such importance as a measure of voter's opinions.

The news of Ashley's victory would have arrived in Sherborne, 18 miles north from Dorchester, during the evening of Monday 17 October, carried by horse, coach and word of mouth, and would have become general knowledge by the following day. In terms of written reports, the first local newspapers available in Sherborne appeared several days later as the *Sherborne Mercury* was published on the morning of Monday 17 October before the result was announced. The *Sherborne Journal* and the *Dorset County Chronicle* which both carried reports of Ashley's victory and the disturbances at Poundbury were published on Thursday 20 October. The earliest of the national newspapers to report was *The Times* on Wednesday 19 October, though it would have taken the best part of a day for the issue to arrive in Sherborne by mail coach.⁶⁹ The salient point about this delay in the printed media, is that information concerning the election result would have been solely transmitted by word of mouth and the sources carrying the most reliable information would have been attendees at the final day of polling at Poundbury. This would almost certainly mean that eye-witness accounts of the actions and reactions of the two candidates, their mass of supporters, the 'yeomanry' and the authorities would have been central to the narrative(s), whether pro-or anti-reform, as they spread by word of mouth.

Similarly, the reform-related riots and disturbances in Blandford, Poole and Wareham (see Table 1) which were initiated by the news from Dorchester were first reported in the press on Thursday 20 October in the *Dorset County Chronicle* and *The Times*, the latter being available in Dorset the following day. The *Sherborne Journal* also published on the 20th gave a brief account of the disturbances in Poole, nothing about Blandford or Wareham and a brief stop-press concerning Sherborne:

a mob has been parading the streets for some hours, demolishing the windows of various individuals. Such practices as these are unlawful and disgraceful: we therefore earnestly recommend all persons to use every exertion in putting them down.⁷⁰

Verbal accounts of the incidents on the evening of Monday 17 October in Blandford (22 miles by road from Sherborne), Poole (36 miles) and Wareham (36 miles) would have arrived in Sherborne the following morning, becoming common knowledge in the town by the end of that day. As with the election result, the first news of the disturbances and riots in Dorset, would have been communicated exclusively by word of mouth, several days ahead of accounts in the printed media.

damage to property or loss of life, mass participation, significant longevity and intervention of the yeomanry or military. Ball et al, "The defeat of the Second Reform Bill in October 1831 – An overview of public responses (part 1 – the overall survey)" riot1831. Retrieved from <https://riot1831.com/2021/10/an-overview-of-public-responses/>.

⁶⁹ It would have taken at least 12 hours for a mail coach to arrive from London (see journey durations for various coaches in *Dorset County Chronicle*, 21 July 1831). Publication dates for a selection of other national newspapers covering the by-election were the *Morning Post* Thursday 20 October 1831, *The Examiner* Sunday 23 October 1831 and *The Globe* Monday 24 October 1831, all *at least a day* after the disturbances in Sherborne began.

⁷⁰ *Sherborne Journal* 20 October 1831.

Month 1831	Date	Day	National Event	Dorset Event	Newspaper publication day	Locations of reform related protest and unrest in Dorset/Somerset				
Sep	27	Tuesday		Lord Ashley announces his candidature for county by-election						
	28	Wednesday		Parade by Ashley supporters led by yeomanry from Dorchester Races to town centre; Ashley's acceptance speech						
	29	Thursday			DCC, SJ					
	30	Friday		Start of polling for county by-election at Poundbury, Dorchester						
Oct	1	Saturday		By-election polling day at Dorchester						
	2	Sunday				Blandford				
	3	Monday		By-election polling day at Dorchester	SM					
	4	Tuesday		By-election polling day at Dorchester						
	5	Wednesday		By-election polling day at Dorchester						
	6	Thursday		By-election polling day at Dorchester	DCC, SJ					
	7	Friday		By-election polling day at Dorchester						
	8	Saturday	Lords reject reform bill, rioting in Derby	By-election polling day at Dorchester						
	9	Sunday	Riots in Derby and Nottingham	News of defeat of second reform bill arrives						
	10	Monday	Riots in Derby and Nottingham, mass meetings and disturbances in London	By-election polling day at Dorchester	SM					
	11	Tuesday	Riots in Nottingham and Loughborough	By-election polling day at Dorchester			Poole			
	12	Wednesday	Mass parades and disturbances in London	By-election polling day at Dorchester						
	13	Thursday	Riot in Tewkesbury	By-election polling day at Dorchester	DCC, SJ					
	14	Friday	Riot in Manchester	By-election polling day at Dorchester; Pro-reform meeting in Lyme Regis			Lyme Regis			
	15	Saturday		By-election polling day at Dorchester; Market Day in Blandford			Blandford			
	16	Sunday								
	17	Monday		Final day of by-election polling at Dorchester; Lord Ashley wins county by-election; Annual Pack Monday Fair in Sherborne begins	SM		Dorchester	Blandford	Poole	Wareham
	18	Tuesday					Blandford			
	19	Wednesday	Riot in Mansfield	Pro-reform protest meeting about by-election in Sherborne			Sherborne	Sherborne		
	20	Thursday			DCC, SJ		Sherborne			
21	Friday					Sherborne	Yeovil			
22	Saturday					Stour Provost	Yeovil			
23	Sunday									
24	Monday			SM		Crewkerne				
25	Tuesday					Crewkerne				
26	Wednesday		Pro-reform protest meeting about by-election in Bridport			Bridport				

Table 1: Timeline of reform related unrest in Dorset and south Somerset in October 1831

Key

Cell	Type of unrest
	Protest meeting
	Disturbance
	Riot

Newspapers: DCC = Dorset County Chronicle, SM = Sherborne Mercury, SJ = Sherborne Journal