The period immediately after the end of the Napoleonic Wars saw enormous changes for the agricultural community when virtually all aspects of life and work in rural areas were changed irreversibly. These developments led to a series of events at the beginning of the 1830s known as the Swing Riots. Uprisings, named after the fictitious ‘Captain Swing’, became a major cause for concern for landowners and authorities as mobs of labourers roamed the countryside of the southeast of England, burning farms and destroying the hated threshing machines. First used in the late eighteenth century, these were viewed as revolutionary and highly unwelcome development in agriculture, though they had not previously been the focus of unrest.¹

Historians have explained the Swing Riots in three different ways: the Marxist analysis, argued by E.J. Hobsbawm and others, is that the Swing Riots were part of the cycle of the oppressed overthrowing the oppressors. He saw the conditions suffered by the rural population at this time as the precursor of a Marxist revolt.² Other historians have looked towards shorter-term factors, such as the post-Waterloo economic depression and the technological advances that occurred in the following fifteen years, including Jethro Tull’s seed drill and the threshing machine.³ More efficient agricultural methods reduced the need for large amounts of labour and increased the speed of farming, meaning more land could be cultivated more easily. Asa Briggs called the riots the ‘village labourers’ revolt’ as the riots were almost completely isolated to rural areas.⁴ Finally, there is evidence to suggest that the most violent and organised phase of the riots was actually linked to revolution in France in July 1830, which broke out only a few weeks before the main series of riots happened in the southeast of England.⁵

However the strongest case can be made for the short-term factors contributing to increasing social tension that had been brewing at the time. The threshing machines, despite being vitally important proved to be no more than the tipping point. One should not ignore the economic crisis that had been mounting since 1815 but, if was not for the agricultural upheaval of the time, the rural community could have weathered the economic problems faced during 1830.

¹ Beckett p27
² Hobsbawm and Rudé
³ Beckett p27; Lane pp74-75.
⁴ Murphy
⁵ Hobsbawm and Rudé p217
The Marxist analysis of Hobsbawm and others depends on evidence that there had been a long-term deterioration in the living conditions of agricultural workers in the areas affected. There is some evidence to support the case but nothing to explain the timing or precise geography of the Swing Riots. With the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, an economic depression fell over most of Europe, whilst war-torn countries began to salvage their economies and produce grain again. The mass demobilisation of between 250,000 and 300,000 men from the British army at the end of the Napoleonic War created a vast surplus of labour. Men were now left to get on with their lives and to try to find whatever work they could. Many of them had been recruited from rural areas of Britain and many headed home to the land where they hoped to find their old jobs but during their absence the rural communities had thrived since Britain had had to become self-sufficient in food. High grain prices and relative agrarian efficiency had created a fair standard of living for the farmers. This meant that Britain no longer needed to grow the same amount of wheat and prices plummeted, which crippled farmers and forced them to lay off workers. Farmer-labourer contracts gradually shrank from a year to six months and finally to only a week or fortnight. This coupled with the returning demobbed men and the introduction of new machinery created huge amounts of social tension in the countryside. Life for the rural farm labourer became much harder.

Hobsbawm argues in his book, Captain Swing, that the events of 1830 were a result of years of oppression and class conflict and the increasing levels of poverty within the rural community. He explains that ‘the absence of any statistical sources makes it impossible to measure the progress of rural poverty and degradation with any accuracy or detail’. However, he does go on to show several ways that rural poverty can be estimated. One of these is the number of recorded poaching incidents in rural areas, since poaching was an alternative way of bringing food to a family living in poverty. He argues that poaching is a clear indicator of rural deficiency. Peter Lane also recognises it as an important pointer towards social problems: ‘in the distressed years following 1815 [the poor] felt an increased need to catch a rabbit or two as a source of food or income.’ Between 1817 and 1829, the annual average of reported incidents in the South East of England rose from 149 to 281. East Anglia also had a very high rate of poaching but the area that saw the largest increase in recorded poaching was the South-East of England from the Wash to the Isle of Wight. This was precisely the area most affected by the Swing Riots in the summer of 1830. If the link between poaching and poverty can be accepted, this evidence seems to strongly indicate that there was a connection between poverty and the Swing Riots. However, Hobsbawm and Lane give no reason to believe that lawless people were more likely to be in poverty. Indeed many convicted poachers were far from being impoverished and the vast majority of impoverished people were not lawless. Most rural agricultural workers remained a civilised class of people despite the hard times that they faced.

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6 ibid p72; Lane p75.
7 Hobsbawm and Rudé pp80-81
8 Lane p81
9 ibid
There is further evidence to connect the Swing Riots with rural poverty. As a result of the enclosure movement there was a significant shift during this period in the method of agriculture from largely subsistence farming towards a more modern system of tenant farmers, owning larger areas of land and hiring workers. According to Lane ‘this meant that the rural population had lost its almost feudal system and now had to work for the landowners and tenant farmers to stay alive’. These hired workers, carrying out the bulk of the work on the farms, were unskilled labourers, in contrast to the highly skilled and well-paid ploughmen. Threshing was the main job during the winter. It was labour intensive and is what kept many rural families out of starvation in the winter months when all other work was scarce or non-existent. Those left unemployed relied on the Poor Law and donations from their employers for survival for part of the year. It was often a small payment, barely enough to live on but, by 1830, it made up 15% of the annual income of a typical English farm labourer. The figure was much higher in ‘Swing’ counties, especially the southeast and the midlands. What is more, Poor Law payments began to be reduced from 1815 to 1820 as the administration sought to increase incentives to work at a time when the number of unemployed workers rose hugely. The Poor Law was exceedingly unpopular with those who received its benefits. Eric Hopkins in A Social History of the English Working Classes states that ‘with so much criticism of the poor law in the air, it is not surprising that when the Swing Riots occurred in Kent in 1830 … it was decided that poor law reform could not wait’. Hobsbawm comments that four years of poor harvests in the 1820s compounded the problem, so that ‘the rural poor relied even more on this payment … creating tensions and misery as people struggled to survive.’ The Poor Law can be seen as another indication of rural poverty, as well as a focus for discontent, in the very counties and at the exact time where and when the Swing Rioting was most active.

However, there is a problem with the analysis simply linking poverty and the Swing Riots. Whereas poverty and appalling the social conditions affecting agricultural workers were long-term and endemic, the Swing Riots were a short-term phenomenon. There were no recorded incidents of unrest until 1830, though all the evidence suggests that the situation of the poor had become unbearable following the economic depression throughout the 1820s. Furthermore, the particular downturn in economic conditions must be seen as too short-term and localised to back the Marxist analysis of the Swing Riots as a response to economic oppression. A more convincing case can be made by considering the problems of the 1820s closely. An economic slump had been created by the government at the end of the Napoleonic Wars, when they had cancelled their contracts for equipment and this was compounded by the sudden demobilisation of thousands of men. Every sector of the economy was affected by this enormous drop in demand. Even agriculture suffered as the warring countries of Europe now had the resources to grow their own wheat to

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10 ibid p75
11 Beckett p27
12 Hopkins p89
13 Hobsbawm and Rudé p85
feed their populations: they no longer needed British grain. This caused the price of grain to plummet and the introduction of the Corn Laws, implemented as a price buffer for wheat growers. Ultimately this prevented the imports of cheap wheat into Britain unless the price of British grain rose above £4 a quarter. This seemed a good idea but in reality it only benefited the owners of large estates. The artificially high grain price led to inflation and the price of bread increased, causing increased distress to the poor and making Britain even less competitive on the world markets and the economic slump even worse. Rural communities were badly affected, as the price of food became more of a burden.

Marxist historians, in particular Hobsbawm, have seen technological change as a major factor causing the riots. Technology that was economically unsound was, according to this analysis, introduced in a manner which provoked Captain Swing. The most commonly used technological advance in agriculture was the threshing machine. First invented in 1784 by the Scottish engineer Andrew Meikle, these machines did not become widespread until the Corn Laws allowed prices to increase enough for farmers to be able to afford them. There is evidence to suggest that the machines had existed and were in operation during the Napoleonic Wars when labour was scarce. Problems occurred when the demobbed workers returned home in 1815 to find their previous jobs taken by machines. However, it was another fifteen years before any destructive actions were taken against the new technology.

Hobsbawm argues that the threshing machines were actually economically unviable and their introduction was an instrument of class war. He states that rural England possessed ‘an increasingly large surplus of under-employed and unemployed, and consequently the availability of ultra cheap pauperised labour at almost all times’ and argues that the savings made by the machines were offset by the costs of increased rates of the Poor Law that the employers also had to pay. This makes him ask the question: ‘Why mechanise?’ Evidence collected by J. L. Hammond and B. Hammond, however, calls Hobsbawm’s case into question by demonstrating the broader advantages the machines could offer. They report that ‘a farmer near Canterbury in Kent wrote to the Kent Herald that in his parish where no machines had been introduced, there were twenty-three barns. He calculated that in these barns fifteen men at least would find employment threshing corn

\[14 \text{ Lane pp74-75}\]
up till May.\textsuperscript{15} He believed that with their families included as well, this work would support seventy-one people in that parish alone. However, the authors also say that a threshing machine could thresh ten percent more grain than the gang of fifteen men working all winter and they were much easier to manage than a large gang of workers. Farmers’ evident enthusiasm for the machines suggests that the amount paid to labourers under the Poor Law must have been less than the value of the extra grain threshed by machine. The evidence plainly indicates that the Hobsbawm’s view of the significance of the new technology is flawed. By 1780 groups of what would now be called farm contractors travelled the country with their own threshing machines hiring themselves out so even the smallest farmers could afford the service,\textsuperscript{16} making the use of new technology cheaper for farmers. When the workers needed a target for their anger, new machinery became that target. Though not a fundamental cause of the Swing Riots, the threshing machines focused existing discontent.

There are other lesser factors generally unconsidered by the Marxist analysis that can be cited as reasons for the Swing Riots breaking out when they did. One school of thought has argued a case that the riots were a repercussion of the Luddite actions, which had started in the Midlands in 1811 and lasted for several years. The Luddites were a group of textile artisans who protested, often by destroying the new looms, against the introduction of new technology in factories and the destruction of the traditional cottage cloth industry. The Luddites were against the changes produced by the Industrial Revolution, which they felt threatened their livelihood. They clashed with the army on several occasions, most notably at the Spa Fields riot of 1816 and the Peterloo Massacre of 1819.\textsuperscript{17} At one time there were more British troops were said to be fighting the Luddites than there were fighting Napoleon on the Iberian Peninsula. However these events occurred over a decade before the Swing Riots and there is very little evidence that there was any direct link between the two.

The July Revolution in France in 1830 has been raised by Hobsbawm, amongst others, as another possible factor instigating the Swing Riots in southern England just four months later. There is evidence that a group of French radicals came to Sittingbourne in Kent during the turbulence to stir up revolutionary feelings even more and eyewitnesses report seeing the French revolutionary banner flying in North Kent for a time. The Times recorded that ‘in several instances, we hear the labourers have hoisted the tricolour flag’. Blackburn, Middleton, and Carlisle all had similar reports of the Tricolour being used as a sign of revolutionary fervour.\textsuperscript{18} There is little information available about these events; no individuals have been identified or clear links established, so no more can be said than that the connections between the Swing Rioters and the July revolutionaries remain speculative.

One of the key historians of the period, Eric Hobsbawm, came to believe that

\textsuperscript{15} Hammond and Hammond p245
\textsuperscript{16} Beckett p28
\textsuperscript{17} Lane pp80-81
\textsuperscript{18} Hobsbawm and Rudé p215
technological developments were indeed a vital factor in the promotion of the Swing Riots, as part of a class conflict, but really the evidence shows that the case against the threshing machine is far from clear. There is too much pointing to shorter-term factors occurring since the end of the Napoleonic Wars to accept Hobsbawm’s argument fully. The Swing Riots were a result of agricultural developments to a large extent but the social and economic situation created after 1815 seems to have been crucial. The resultant poverty and desperation suffered by the rural poor, compounded at that time by the introduction of threshing machines, should be seen as a main cause for the Swing Riots.

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