

Food Riots in England

Published 18 September 2023, with Diane Purkiss.

In her latest book *English Food: A People's History*, Diane Purkiss offers just that, an entrancing survey of what and how the English ate. Impossible to cover all that in a single episode, or even several, we set out to explore what happens when the vast bulk of the English do not have enough to eat. Food riots are a recurring feature of rural life in England, often the result of bad weather and always exacerbated by the action — or inaction — of the ruling classes. So, what was the first food riot?

Diane Purkiss: It's a difficult question because it depends on what you categorise as a food riot, and that's why I'm giving a cautious historian answer. So for me, the Peasants' Revolt is connected with food, but not all historians would immediately agree to that. I would also strongly suggest that many disturbances in even earlier periods connected with Roman rule, such as the revolt of the Iceni, probably have a food element that's not typically emphasised in histories, because histories tend to be written by people who aren't food poor. And indeed, it might be faster to talk about what rebellions don't have a food element. Very many rebellions where the 90% ordinary people get involved have an element that's connected with food.

Jeremy: Yeah, yeah. But okay, let's put aside historianly quibbles for a minute and talk about the Peasants' Revolt, because that's 14th century ...

Diane: Yes, that's right. During the reign of Richard II, when he's actually really quite a tiny baby. He's only 14 years old.

Jeremy: And what's the story?

Diane: Well, the story is really the usual one. The situation in the country is problematic because we're living through the Little Ice Age. The little ice age in and of itself leads to food shortages because it means that main crops are only marginally viable. So crops that people are used to relying on, like wheat, become sickly and develop

mildew and harvests reduce in size. And at exactly that time, you also have flood conditions, and it's difficult to plow and it's difficult to sow. And eventually what this leads to is the recognition that the changing conditions aren't changing the upper classes, or life for the upper classes, but are changing things drastically for most people. So it upsets ordinary people's sense of justice that they are asked at a difficult time to pay tax to support the war in France. They get nothing out of the war in France. The war in France is largely a matter of nobles increasing the lands they hold and the aspirations of the monarchy. And it starts, therefore, as very many revolts do, with refusing to pay tax.

That's not obviously connected with food. And yet it is because people will refuse to pay a tax that they consider only marginally just, if it's excruciatingly painful to pay it. And the monarchy was willing to charge five pence, which is a huge tax for very poor people, and eventually people collectively start refusing to pay and they find themselves a leader. We don't know how that happened. A man called Wat Tyler, who's very determined and actually very reckless and belligerent. And that's what turns it from a quiet refusal to a full scale revolt. And it leads to the inevitable. ...

You know, you could actually do a timeline of revolts, and they all have the same thing. People gather together. They air their grievances. Sometimes someone in authority listens to their grievances. More often, it leads to a march on London. Once they get to London, authority figures tend to come out and offer deals to them. If they accept the deals, they get executed sort of fairly quickly. If they don't accept the deals and they continue to rebel, then authority puts an army in the field and it ends like that. And this is very typical. This is exactly what tends to happen when ordinary people decide they don't have to take it and that they're not going to take it. It's rarely well tolerated by the authorities and this is no exception. Wat Tyler ends up being executed — and violently executed — as an example to others.

Jeremy: And how do his followers react?

Diane: We don't know a lot about what his followers do, but we do know that they don't then settle meekly down. There are a series of other rebellions of comparable size and with comparable lists of demands up to and including Jack Cade's rebellion, which was so

memorable that it made its way into Shakespeare, even though the rebellion was in the 15th century and Shakespeare's writing very much later at the end of the 16th century. So these revolts are really disturbing to the worldview of the better educated because they don't understand why people are taking up arms and why people who yesterday were willing to doff their caps are today arming themselves with pitchforks and bows and arrows, because they don't understand the food economy that's impelling it.

Jeremy: Because they're not hungry.

Diane: That's exactly right. And there's a wonderful argument about the moment at which the upper classes separate themselves fully from the hunger experienced by most people. And it's been argued that this actually happens in the period of Jack Cade's rebellion. That's the moment, sometime in the 15th century after the wars of the roses, so from 1485, the upper classes become able to safeguard themselves against even the gnawing hunger that would go with being involved in a siege or involved in the siege of a castle or involved in a crusade. All of that no longer exists for the very well-off, so they can't imaginatively even connect with the vast majority of their subjects, who kind of understandably go on feeling hungry for the next five centuries in a misunderstood way.

Jeremy: One thing puzzles me about the poll tax behind the Peasants' Revolt. It's 1380 odd. So we've had the Black Death. And my understanding from agricultural history is that because so many people died, labourers, farm labourers, agricultural workers, were actually able to increase their wages. So could they really not afford it?

Diane: Even though they'd increased their wages, it didn't necessarily mean that they could easily afford to pay a fairly substantial tax. But I think the main issue is that they couldn't see the point of paying the tax. It didn't do any good for them. It was, from their point of view, completely unnecessary.

There's also a funny thing about revolutions, and that is that people actually tend to rebel when some kind of gain is being taken away from them rather than when they're at absolute rock bottom. People who've enjoyed a sudden improvement in their circumstances are much more likely to take political action to try to retain that improvement than they are likely to take political action if they're

literally starving in the gutter, where they won't have the energy or the physical resources to do so.

Jeremy: Right. Right. Was the argument always "we don't have enough to eat" or were there, as it were, higher level arguments behind some of these food riots?

Diane: In the case of the Peasants' Revolt, the higher level argument was probably one about taxation and representation. We would nowadays think of the representation part first. But in that case, there's a settled belief that nobody has a right to impose taxes, and any new taxation is always very difficult to justify. We've seen in our own lifetimes the reintroduction of the poll tax, and it's been met with a similar lack of enthusiasm. People don't like the idea of a new tax, and they particularly don't like the idea of a new tax that's not overtly about benefiting them in some direct way. It's possible that if you tell people now that a new tax is going to fund a new hospital, they might be more willing to pay it than to pay a general increase in income tax. And this is sort of similar. The mindset is similar. People want to know what right the king has to take what they see as their resources. And that is quite a high level argument, actually. It's about where sovereignty lies. It's about what role people without a vote and without any land or property might play in the polity.

Jeremy: But the fact that people were working on the land to produce food, which essentially they had little access to, must have been a factor as well. I mean, they were working to to pay rents, I guess.

Diane: They were working to pay rent and also to muster up enough cash for things that they couldn't make themselves. But yeah, generally speaking, there's an overall problem with feudalism in that most of the time you are working to create wealth for somebody else, and this is moderately obvious to you as well, as you, in some respects, literally hand over the wealth to either the person collecting tithes for the clergy or the landlord. So you spend hours in the heat threshing and you don't get the grain. You get what you can glean from the field later, or you get what you've managed to grow in your own tiny strip. Meanwhile, the bulk of the grain goes to somebody else. It does make inegalitarian arrangements very visible and material in a way that working in a factory, for example, not so much. It's not so evident that

you're doing something for somebody else that someone's taking from you.

Jeremy: And to what extent were the enclosures, whereby common land was taken into private possession, did the enclosures trigger much in the way of food riots?

Diane: Huge riots. I mean, arguably one of the largest rebellions in English history is at least in part related to the Tudor enclosure program. And that's the Pilgrimage of Grace, which was able to put 30,000 rebels in the field to oppose a royal army. That's probably proportionately a larger rebellion than any we've ever seen. And it's at least partly to do with the redistribution of monastic lands and the aggregation of those lands to the estates of individual nobles. And worse still, the repurposing of those lands not for subsistence farming, but for a range of different cash crops such as wool or hunting reserves, where no food benefit is emerging for anybody, even in imagination. And therefore that kind of rioting tends to be sporadic and local, depending on when your particular bit of common land gets enclosed by Sir somebody or other. And so it's really just a steady beat, beat, beat throughout the whole of history, that the enclosure process starts in Tudor, England and goes on into the mid 19th century with the drainage of the fens in East Anglia and the enclosure of the last sort of remote bits of Britain like Otmoor in Oxfordshire. And as soon as someone gets enclosed, there are nearly always disturbances and enclosure riots and sometimes they're very sustained because you are literally taking a taking a common from under the goose that was previously living on it.

Jeremy: But you mentioned that the response to the enclosures tended to be local when your bit of the commons was enclosed. And I get the feeling reading through the various examples that you give in your book, I get the feeling that it didn't really gel across the country into what we might now recognise as a revolution.

Diane: No, it didn't. That's quite right. It didn't really. And actually, one of the interesting things is that England never has a revolution, despite having all the conditions for a revolution. And it's a mysterious absence, really. And one obvious reason for it is that the authorities in the early 19th century were hyper conscious of the French example and very anxious and nervous about it. I mean, it led, for example, I've recently learned, to much severity in all of the armed forces, the army

and the navy. The flogging rates massively increased and that was a direct response to fears of revolutionary activity. And you have the Pitt regime of censorship and efforts to control the press and control the spread of radical ideas. And in a way, repression does work. It's worth noting that repression will succeed. And that's probably one of the underlying reasons.

I think the other underlying reason is actually that British people, English people particularly, have a profound sense of investment in local solutions, even when those local solutions look to an outsider unlikely to work. And so there is something of a history of people being more interested in striking a deal with their own local landlord than they are in joining up with people in the next county over.

And my favorite example of that is the Oxfordshire Rising, which is 1595. It's one of the least successful revolutions in history. I mean, it's literally two dozen men with pitchforks. Again, it's to do with land use and land ownership and thus food. But it's also permeated with secret agents, double agents who report every act to the authorities. It's doomed. But it's interesting because it's so short sighted, it's so narrow minded. It doesn't want to be about trying to get them going in Somerset as well. Only nobles do that, kind of plans for rising. I mean, Wyatt's rebellion is an attempt to raise the whole country. It fails, but it's an attempt. And they send a group of people to Suffolk to try and get them going, group of people to Cornwall to try and get them going. Peasants won't do that because they don't really have the resources to plan like that.

Jeremy: Oh, so they can't organise, as today's activists might say.

Diane: Well, I don't think it's that they can't. It's more that they don't think of doing so. Keith Thomas said a wonderful thing once in a seminar that the main reason people don't walk down a shopping street and smash all the windows and steal things is actually because it doesn't occur to them.

Jeremy: I'll come back to that. I will come back to that.

Diane: And there are circumstances in which it starts occurring to them, and that's usually known as a breakdown of law and order. But it normally wouldn't occur to someone in Oxfordshire that there were other peasants elsewhere in the country that they could join forces with. That's a big mindset change.

Jeremy: Coming, forward. When you start to get mechanisation on farms, I mean, you've had the move to sheep. So people are out of work, don't have any requirement for their labour. And then you get automation. You talk in the book also about ... there are a variety of captains ... but the most interesting I think is Captain Swing. So tell me about him.

Diane: Captain Swing is a fantasy. Really. No individual can be described as Captain Swing. I mean, I love Captain Swing because it's such a wonderful campaign. And I particularly like the way that that it works with a series of threats and mysteries, sort of anonymous letters.

"Blood and vengeance against your life and your property for taking away our labour with your threshing machine. Seven of us near your dwelling house," see how local that is, "have agreed that if you do not refrain from your threshing machine, we will thresh your rick with fire and bathe your body in blood."

And it is sort of extraordinarily over the top rhetoric. And it's people who are pushed to their absolute limit by the onset of mechanised threshing. Threshing provided reliable seasonal labor. So as an academic, I'm going to make an analogy. Most academics actually rely on a bit of summer school teaching and lecturing to fund their holiday spend, and therefore Covid hit that quite hard and academics got quite restless and unhappy without ... with that loss of income. But it's not that they need it to live on.

Diane: Threshing, however, was actually by this time, because of enclosures and because of the general kind of problematic fall of wages and also a series of disastrously bad harvests, people were increasingly needing that work in threshing to keep going. And moreover, it was fraught with a series of rituals like gleaning and collecting crannings that enabled you to maximise the amount of grain you and your family could lay hold of. So removing all of that at a stroke to an anonymous machine, taking away both wages and direct access to the materiality of the grain crop, was an absolutely terrible blow. And this led to a spreading phenomenon, where it seems to have been conducted by a kind of whisper campaign starting in Kent and spreading outwards from there, with people probably spread partly through newspapers, peoples or ballads and songs. There are lots of songs from the Swing years, people sort of gradually

starting to hear about this and putting it into practice in their own area. As the Lord of their own demesne buys the threshing machine and they become aggrieved.

Jeremy: So there were probably more than one Captain Swings?

Diane: Oh, there were many captains, many Captains Swing. Many, many Captains Swing. It's a wonderful ... People, historians, have really struggled with why Captain Swing. And it's generally agreed that it refers both to the threshing flail ... There was actually somebody who was in charge of sort of keeping a rhythm for all the threshers who was sometimes called the captain and was in charge of threshing. So the person who sort of acted to mechanise and regularise threshing before the machine could be described as Captain Swing. But it also refers to a gallows and a body swinging on a gallows. So it's a threatening term as well. It's a term that says you're next.

Jeremy: Now when we come forward from Captain Swing to the middle of the 19th century and you have a lot of things going on. You've got the famine in Ireland and the Corn Laws and you've got the Poor Law reform. First of all, what were the Corn Laws? I mean, I keep reading about the great reforms and all the rest of it, but what were the Corn Laws doing?

Diane: They were essentially an artificial inflation of the price of — corn is really wheat — the price of grain in England to ensure that the price of grain wouldn't fall and landowners profits would be protected. But it's probably obvious, as I say, that that the result was that the price of anything made with corn or anything dependent on corn or wheat was therefore artificially kept high.

Jeremy: Which the poorer people obviously didn't like.

Diane: No, indeed. Which led to massive suffering because it was like riotous food inflation was like that because it was that. Wages didn't rise in proportion. And as a result, there was a campaign to repeal the Corn Laws, which was ultimately successful, but not until around mid-century.

Jeremy: But was there violence associated with that campaign?

Diane: There was, but I wouldn't describe it as riotous violence. I would say that the anti-Corn-Law campaign was, on the whole, a

successful political movement based on and arising out of two things that are kind of quite complex really. One was the fear of revolution. The Reform Act in Britain was really the result of a different kind of way of responding to the fear of the French Revolution. In exactly the same way the anti-Corn-Law campaign, spearheaded by actually the elite, including Robert Peel, ultimately, Prime Minister, was an effort to prevent things from getting so bad that guillotines would be being set up in the centre of London. But it was also something else which is maybe a little bit more interesting, and that is, it arose directly out of the campaign for abolition, the abolition of slavery. Many of the same people were involved. Much of the same kind of rhetoric was involved. It was portrayed as a moral reform act because it was felt that it would ... that the Corn Laws were preventing ordinary people from bettering themselves by their own efforts and by their own diligence, and were instead impeding the work of intelligent and able labourers to improve things for their families. Perfectly accurate.

Jeremy: So the corn laws, it's a campaign, it's led in some respects by the elite and it's sort of defanging violence and the poor.

Diane: It was. Yeah, exactly. It was meant to defang, yeah. It was meant to prevent the eruption of actual street violence of the kind that we might associate with the French Revolution. It was an attempt to say, Look, see, we're listening to you. We understand that you're having problems and we're going to do something to help. And in a way, it was sincere. And it's funny to look back on the 19th century. They did work really hard to try and establish how much hardship the Corn Laws were causing, and lots of vicars filled out surveys of what their parishioners were eating, which are gold dust to the food historian, obviously, but make for very depressing reading in other respects. They had a parliamentary commission to look into food poverty and really asked themselves hard questions about how they could best alleviate it. But it was also not at all disinterested really. It was an effort to prevent the overthrow of the upper classes across the British Isles and to ensure the continuance of their rule by giving way on one particular issue.

Jeremy: I'm going to do a thing that historians probably hate and ask you to talk about the present moment. It seems to me, naively, that a lot of the factors that conspired in the past to trigger uprisings are present in the UK today. There's food poverty, there's food inflation, there's disenfranchisement, there's a widening gap between the elites

and the less elite. Why haven't we seen food riots or violence associated with poverty?

Diane: It's a really interesting question and it's an important question, actually.

The bet that the ruling class always make in every era is the same, that they can somehow either exert enough force or manage to persuade the vast majority of people to be quiescent. And it's always a wager that people will just more or less sit there and take it and do their best with the amount of pottage they have. And actually, history suggests that that is a wager that and that at times it can go catastrophically wrong for the ruling class if your name is Romonov or alternatively, Louis XVI.

I think it's actually because, though there's a massive cost of living crisis, people aren't actually starving. I know that's a really horrible thing to say, but if you compare it with — I mean, probably the last substantial popular uprising in Britain, if we don't count the poll tax riots and I'm not sure whether we should, was the Jarrow Marches. And in the early 1930s, people in the north were actually starving. And I'm not sure that that's happening now. People are very badly nourished. I think if it's going to happen, I think it's probably going to happen in the winter because fuel poverty is a thing. The price of oil has just gone up again to \$90 a barrel, and that's going to push food inflation up again. For people, though, to riot, they have to think that their rioting is going to change something. And I think one reason we're not seeing a lot of popular unrest is that people have lost any hope that anyone can change anything, really.

I mean, arguably, the Brexit referendum was all held and organised around the belief that a very simple, easy to understand action — leaving the European Union — would change things a lot. And I think part of the political disillusionment we're seeing now is the realisation that actually there weren't very many changes, and those that there were weren't at all what it was said they were going to be. So I think we're seeing a lot of political inertia at present, but that could change quite fast. And I think if people start ... if we have a very cold, snowy winter and food inflation goes up again ... Yeah, I think ... Hang on to your hats.

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