

Timeline of events

- 1830** – the Swing Riots erupted across the south and east of England
- 1834** – the Poor Law Amendment Act was passed, creating the workhouse system
- 1839** – the tollgate at Efailwen was destroyed
- 1842/3** – more tollgates were destroyed
- 1843** – attack on the workhouse in Carmarthen

Important concept

Poverty and discontent was not confined to industrial towns and cities. The Industrial Revolution also had a huge impact on rural areas. New methods of farming and the adoption of steam machinery changed the lives of many farm labourers, pushing many into poverty. Many, like their urban counterparts, turned to violent protest to show their discontent.



“And they blessed Rebekah and said unto her, let thy seed possess the gates of those which hate them.”
Genesis, Chapter 24, verse 60

Key words

poor relief	help for poor workers whose wages were too low to support their families, in the form of money, food or clothes
the tithe	an annual payment of one tenth of all agricultural produce to support the local church and clergy
tithe barn	the barn in which the church stored the tithe
threshing	the process of separating the grain seed from the chaff - It required a lot of labour
Captain Swing	the fictitious leader of the Swing Riots
the Anglican Church	the Church of England, the official religion of the country
non-conformists	people who attended chapels rather than the church
turnpike roads	roads run by private companies which charged tolls on people and animals which used them
tollgates	gates at which tolls were collected from road users

The causes of the Swing Riots

The Swing Riots took place in the south and east of England in 1830. They had a number of causes:

- **Agricultural labourers** had become **increasingly impoverished**. The **Corn Laws** were meant to protect farmers' incomes, but the price of corn fell, so **farmers cut labourers' wages**.
- **Many labourers had to ask the parish for poor relief** in order to feed their families.
- **Labourers resented paying the tithe** to the church.
- Some labourers turned to **poaching** to find food. However, for those caught, the penalty was 7 years transportation.
- For many labourers **the final straw** came when **farmers began using machinery to replace them**. The increasing use of threshing machines, in particular, created a lot of unemployment.
- With fewer jobs, low wages and no prospect of improvement, labourers decided to act.

The causes of the Rebecca Riots

The Rebecca Riots took place in West Wales between 1839 and 1843. They had a number of causes.

- There was a great deal of **poverty** among farmers and farm labourers. Bad harvests in 1837 and 1838 made this even worse.
- Many farmers rented their land on a yearly basis so **landlords resorted to rack renting** – renting land out to the highest bidder. This meant farmers had no stability.
- **Many landlords were absentee** and lived in England. They **spoke English** and were **members of the Anglican church**, whereas their tenants spoke Welsh and were non-conformist.
- Chapel-going **farmers and labourers resented paying the tithe** to the Anglican church.
- **The Poor Law Amendment Act** saw the introduction of **workhouses**. These soon came to be hated.
- The final straw was **the building of turnpike roads** and the **tolls** they charged. As **the number of tollgates** increased, anger rose and the toll on lime, essential for farmers in improving their land, caused huge resentment.

The activities of the Swing rioters

The first attack on a threshing machine was in **August 1830 in Kent**. By December nearly 1,500 incidents had taken place across the south and east of England. **Attacks were often preceded by a threatening letter** signed by the fictitious **Captain Swing**. They were sent to **wealthy farmers** and **the clergy** – the people labourers believed were the cause of their poverty. Letters would demand a rise in wages, a cut in tithes and the removal of threshing machines. **If these were ignored then, at night, gangs of men would destroy threshing machines**. Workhouses, tithe barns and hayricks were also targeted.

Many farmers did raise wages and some clergy reduced the tithe. However, this did not last and the use of threshing machines increased. The **government cracked down hard** on those responsible. **19 rioters were hanged** and over 480 were transported to Australia.

The activities of the Rebecca rioters

In the late 1830s Thomas Bullin was put in charge of tollgates in West Wales. He erected new gates and ensured that tolls were paid. In **May 1839** the new gate at **Efailwen was destroyed at night by men dressed as women** – “Merched Beca”, (the “**Daughters of Rebecca**”). There were no other attacks for three years but in 1842 and 1843 more gates were destroyed. During **1843 things became more violent**. **Threatening letters** were sent to landowners and clergy. Salmon weirs were destroyed and special constables were shot at. In June 1843 the **workhouse in Carmarthen was attacked**.

At this point **troops were sent to the area** to restore order. Many farmers disapproved of the violence. They left the movement and instead adopted more moderate tactics. However, some protesters continued to attack tollgates. In September Sarah Williams, the 75 year old keeper of the Hendy tollgate, was shot during the attack on the gate. After this the government increased troop levels in the area but also promised to look into the grievances of the protesters.