

A SHORT HISTORY OF BRANDON AND...

THE RIOT OF 1816

When Napoleon was defeated at the Battle of Waterloo, in June 1815, it sparked celebrations in Brandon. You see, Brandon people had played their part, more than most, with the town solely supplying the gun flints for Wellington's armies. Millions of the knapped flints, far superior to anything the French had, were shipped out of town every month, with Brandon experiencing a boom in its fortunes. Residents found employment in digging, knapping, and carting the flints. So why, less than a year later, is Mr Willet, a Brandon banker, watching a violent mob on the rampage through town?

The defeat of Napoleon signalled an end to war. The trouble was that, literally overnight, the demand for gun flints fell away. In the space of months, Brandon went from boom to bust and many people had to find alternative employment. For those who did, it usually meant low paid farm work. The war left another legacy, one that reminded folk it still had to be paid for. Inflation. Prices rose steeply while wages stayed low and the rural community of Brandon was hit hardest. The national average wage was about twenty-two pence a day, whereas in Brandon it was no more than sixpence. Brandon folk, fearing they would not be able to afford food, got together and signed a petition, which was immediately despatched to Parliament. For Brandon this was a serious matter and there was no time to waste. The Government of the day received the petition but, not fearing a few peasant farm workers in Suffolk, decided to simply ignore it. It was a mistake they would regret.

On Thursday, 16th May, 1816, two hundred residents gathered on Market Hill, with a cry for cheap bread, ultimately venting their frustrations by smashing nearby windows. In a hope to maintain the rule of law, twenty-five special constables were sworn in, but it was only when the 'Riot Act' was read to the crowd late that night, meaning their gathering had become unlawful, did they disperse and go home. Another factor leading to the dispersal of the crowd was the arrival of soldiers of the 1st Dragoons, billeted at nearby Thetford, who ironically, may even have had Brandon gun flints in their muskets!

Any thoughts that the protest was over was quashed when a larger crowd, swelled in number by residents from neighbouring villages, appeared on Market Hill on the Friday. Despite the attendance of the Dragoons, the crowd were up for a fight and delivered a message proclaiming, "Bread or Blood". The soldier's commanding officer was having none of it and requested permission to storm the crowd to arrest the ringleaders. However, the local magistrate, preferring to defuse rather than escalate the situation, sent a message to the protestors, asking to parley. The two parties met and agreed a compromise of sorts. There was no cheap bread, but instead cheap beer was served at the Ram Inn, satisfying many of the men who then got drunk and were later heard singing, "God Save The King"! The crowd had lost momentum and again retired home. The magistrate had won the day, but the battle was far from over.

Then, today, Saturday, for the third day running, a huge crowd has gathered, but this time it is estimated to contain 1,500 people, who seem more determined to have their demands met. We return to Mr Willet, who is anxious. His anxiety is raised when he observes the crowd carry a huge banner, with their message of "Bread or Blood" emblazoned across it. Their chants are louder and their demeanour is more violent than that of previous days. A trigger sets them off and they rampage, destroying a Brandon butcher shop. Willet, no doubt fearing his business will be soon targeted, or at the very least worried about being caught up in the bloodshed between protestor and soldier, ponders what he can do about this situation. He decides to seek the support of the Sherriff of Suffolk. Late that night, the two men, aware they cannot match the strength of the 1,500 protestors, make for London. This problem needs the intervention of national government and they intend to speak to none other than Lord Sidmouth, the Secretary of State.

The following day, in London, the three men broker a deal, one that sees the wages of Brandon farm workers rise to two shillings a head and the price of flour capped. The Government also give an assurance that should the grain millers take it upon themselves to raise their prices above the cap, then their grain will be seized by force. Willet returns to Brandon in time to see more soldiers, from Ipswich, arrive in town. These men are not to confront the townsfolk, but simply to ensure the peace holds, which it does. There have been arrests, but the violence of the previous evenings does not reoccur and Brandon steps back from the brink of conflict.

At this point, we may be forgiven for thinking that life improves for the poorest in Brandon, however, it cannot be further from that. Brandon life remains grim, many barely getting by on low wages and poor living conditions. The lives of the ordinary working folk continue to be ruled by those more privileged. Even in the weeks after the Brandon riot, at a time when families are near to starvation and willing to do anything to put food on the table, the wealthy landowners impose their rule. John Angerstein, owner of Weeting Hall, outraged at locals poaching pheasants and hares from his land, hires extra gamekeepers so his land, just recently acquired and added to his large estate, is patrolled day and night. Some feel the Brandon people are deserving of more compassion, especially after their contributions to the war effort. A sentiment that will again cause violence to spill out into the streets of Brandon, one hundred years later.