

Captain Swing

“Captain Swing is coming!”

This was frightening news in November 1830. Some farmers got letters. They went a bit like this:

Sir,

This is to tell you to break up your threshing machines. If not we will do it.

From all of us

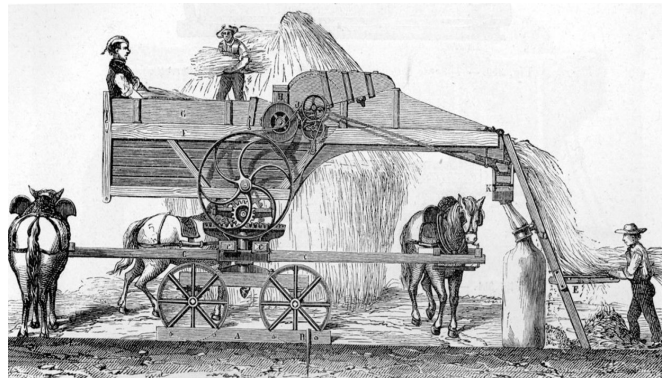
Captain Swing

Who was Captain Swing? Why did he and his men want to break threshing machines?

This was the time of the “Swing Riots”. Farm workers were very poor. The winter was coming. In the winter the poor men used to thresh the corn. This means beating the corn. Beating separates the grain from the chaff. The grain was made into flour for bread. The chaff is the part that cannot be eaten. The men would work hard all day. They were paid a little money for their work. Then they could buy food for their families. They could buy fuel for the fire. They needed the fire to keep warm and to cook food.

But now something had happened.

Threshing machines were invented. You can see one in the picture. In a few hours the machine would thresh all the grain. All the grain from one farm! Now the men were not needed to thresh grain every day in the winter. A few days with the machine was enough.



The men were afraid. They would starve! So would their families. The machines must go, they decided. They went around breaking up the machines. They burned down the farmers' hay ricks too. They wrote letters about the problem. They signed the letters "Captain Swing". Was there really a Captain Swing? Did he really exist? No ! He was just made up!

The government was worried. The job of government is to keep people's belongings safe. They have to do this with all belongings. Even threshing machines must be kept safe. There were not many policemen in those days. Soldiers were called out to catch the men who were breaking the machines. They chased the men over the fields. They dragged them out of their cottages. Sometimes they caught men who were not breaking machines. They thought any farm workers would do! When they caught the men they were not put in prison. They were sent far away to Australia to work hard. Some never saw their families again.

At Andover in Hampshire Mr Tasker had an iron workshop. He made things out of iron there. He made the parts of the threshing machines. On 22nd November gangs of men smashed up Mr Tasker's ironworks. He could not stop them.

Poor men! The winter of 1830 was long. It was freezing cold. It was snowy all over the country. There were even icebergs in the Thames! The men and their families were cold and hungry.

And what about Mr Tasker, whose iron works were smashed up? Mr Tasker was a preacher. When he started his iron works he was a poor man. Some people would not buy from him. "You are a preacher!" they said. "We will not buy from you!"

Mr Tasker was sorry for the men. He knew what made them so desperate.

He had been poor and hungry once. He had seen the men smashing up his ironworks. He knew who they were. He was asked to come to court. "You saw them," said the officers. "You know their faces. You can tell us that they were definitely there. That will be proof. Then we can send them to Australia."

"I will not do it," said Mr Tasker. "I am a Christian. Christians do not take revenge on the poor." No one else had seen. The men were set free. I hope they went to hear Mr Tasker preach after that!