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# REBELLION OR REVOLUTION ? THE SWING RIOTS IN THE BERKSHIRE PARISHES OF BASILDON AND STREATLEY

Rosemary Stewart-Beardsley

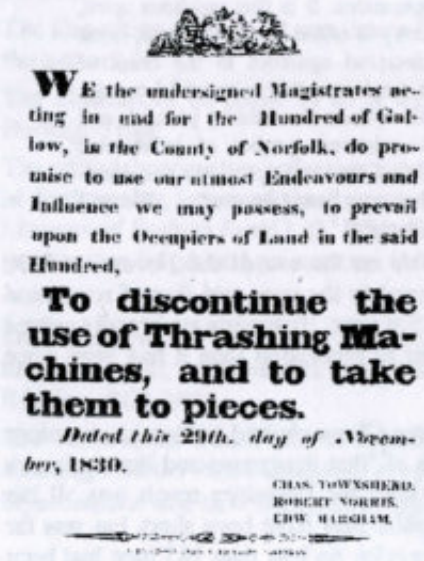
The year was 1830. From Cobbett's great wen, to the industrial centres and the rural hamlets of the Berkshire Downs there was heard a rising clamour for change. Revolution was in the air. On the 1st June 1830, the first fires were lit in Kent in what came to be known as the Swing Riots, as even the humble agricultural labourer rose in rebellion.[1] Later that year the riots erupted in the Berkshire parishes of Basildon and Streatley. This article examines whether the Basildon and Streatley men should be classified as revolutionaries or as rebels and whether or not the Swing Riots in these parishes could be seen as part of a wider revolutionary movement.

> It must be evident to every observant person, that there is a dangerous and Revolutionary spirit abroad, which will require no common share of prudence and vigour effectually to counteract its operations. It is this insidious spirit, that every well wisher to his King and Country is called upon to oppose. Look at Ireland, excited by the acts of unprincipled agitators to the brink of Rebellion! Look at the nightly fires which are desecrating a beautiful county, almost within sight of the Metropolis! Look at the inflammatory placards and tracts which are distributed, and the tri-coloured symbol of jacobinical abomination displayed almost in the sight of the most patriotic and kind-hearted Monarch with which this country has ever been favoured! ... We will ask, what is to be gained by these violent changes? [2]

So wrote the editor of the *Berkshire Chronicle* on the eve of the November 1830 general election in England. His words encapsulate the very real fear of revolution pervading the corridors of power in England that year. Historians are broadly agreed that during this time, Great Britain was closer to revolution than it had been since 1688.[3]

Nine days after the editor of the *Berkshire Chronicle* had written his warnings about the dangers of revolution, first stirrings of 'that dangerous and Revolutionary spirit' were felt in the county.[4] Two weeks later the Berkshire revolt was all but over. The Captain Swing experience in Berkshire may have been short, but was far from sweet. During two tumultuous autumn weeks, no less than 185 men had been arrested for offences committed during the Berkshire revolt.[5] When the sentences of those convicted for Swing Riot offences in Berkshire were handed down, one man was hanged, twenty were transported and twenty-four incarcerated for various terms of hard labour. Of the twenty men who were transported, five had been involved in incidents in Basildon and Streatley.

The miserable plight of the agricultural labourers in arable counties such as Berkshire is well documented. Professor Snell's comparative scale of indexed yearly wages and the Phelps-Brown price of a composite unit of consumables clearly demonstrates that agricultural labourers in Berkshire had been unable to feed and cloth their families out of their wages since 1781.[6] In addition, horrified at the ever-increasing cost of poor rates, parish officials slashed poor relief payments. By 1830 in Berkshire, a married man with two children was receiving four shillings a week less in relief than he had in 1795.[7] In addition, the poor struggled under the burden created by chronic under-employment, mass unemployment, a total lack of job security, appalling housing conditions and, as a result of a succession of bad harvests, high food costs. As early as February 1830 the possibility of civil unrest as a result of the extreme poverty of the labouring classes was recognised in Parliament with Lord Grey speaking of 'a state of general distress such as never before pressed upon any country'.[8]


WE the undersigned Magistrates acting in and for the Hundred of Gallow, in the County of Norfolk, do promise to use our utmost Endeavours and Influence we may possess, to prevail upon the Occupiers of Land in the said Hundred,

**To discontinue the use of Thrashing Machines, and to take them to pieces.**

*Dated this 29th. day of November, 1830.*

CHAS. TOWNSHEND.
ROBERT NORRIS.
EDW. HARBOUR.

Typical poster of the time

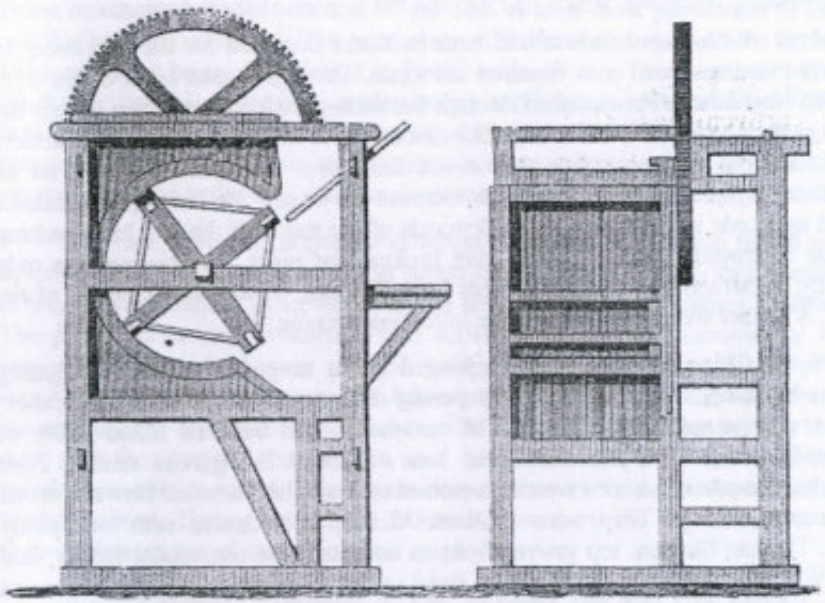
The Berkshire disturbances began on Monday 15th November 1830.[9] The first incident was a largely peaceful protest by labourers in Thatcham on the issue of work and wages. Two days after the Thatcham assembly, the situation in Berkshire deteriorated rapidly. Serious rioting erupted in Kintbury and Hungerford in the Kennet Valley. Rioting was also reported in Vale of White Horse, the Newbury area, in and around Wallingford and through the parishes of Yattendon, Bradfield, Basildon and Streatley.

The county magistrates hastily approved the formation of armed and mounted associations for the protection of property.[10] It is abundantly clear from reading the correspondence and newspapers written during October and November 1830 that the landed and 'respectable' classes were not only in genuine fear of their lives but also totally shocked by the intensity and rapid spread of the agricultural rioting across the county. Following pleas from two Berkshire Members of Parliament to the Home Office on 22nd November for a 'military force to be immediately sent to Reading … [otherwise] it will be impossible to preserve





the peace of the county', two companies of Grenadier Guards were immediately garrisoned at Reading.[11]



H P Lee of Maidenhead: Improved Threshing Machine

The riots in Basildon and Streatley were planned on the evening of Monday 22nd November in an alehouse at Burnt Common, close to the Yattendon, Ashampstead and Bradfield parish boundaries.[12] Here, it was alleged by several witnesses, the leaders of the mob who had toured Yattendon and other neighbouring parishes earlier that day actively exhorted Ashampstead men to join them in breaking machines, demanding money and striking for extra wages (12 shillings a week for married men and 9 shillings for single men).[13] Later, during the small hours of Tuesday 23rd November some or all of these men began terrorising the parishes of Ashampstead and Aldworth high on the Berkshire Downs. No acts or threats of violence were recorded, other than those of press-ganging fellow workers.

Not long after first light on that cold Tuesday, the mob crossed into Streatley parish. But the tenor of the protest had changed. It was in Streatley the machine breaking had begun. Two machines were broken. One belonged to John Froome and the other to John Tun. These men were neighbours and farmed close to the Ashampstead parish boundary. Both men, highly incensed by the attitude and

actions of the rowdy mob, refused to be easily cowed by their demands for either money or wage increases. Some of the more militant protesters then smashed the hated threshing machines, which had become the symbol of their distress.

Many of the crowd then retired back to Burnt Common for the afternoon. In the early evening a hard core ventured out again. Throughout the night of the 23rd and 24th November, they marched through Basildon parish pressing men to join the protest as they had earlier in the day. The raucous horn-blowing mob roused farmers and anyone else of importance they could find from their beds insisting on an immediate payment of money and an increase in wages. As before, if a farmer refused to accede immediately to the demands of the militants, he had his threshing machine destroyed. Four machines were broken that night. The rioting was only halted by the arrival of a troop of Guards from Reading, which caught twelve of the rioters. A further five were captured the following evening.[14]

Of the fifteen men eventually charged for a range of offences including machine-breaking, rioting and robbery during the riots in Basildon and Streatley, nine were acquitted of all charges. The remaining men were all found guilty of machine-breaking. One, Edward Davis, was sentenced to eighteen months hard labour, but the other five men were transported to Australia for terms between seven and fourteen years.[15] They were: William Viccus, a herdsman who was partly literate, Thomas Hanson, top sawyer from an educated non-conformist family; and James West, a ploughman, all of whom lived in Basildon parish. Joseph Edney, an illiterate shepherd, came from Pangbourne and Charles Milsom was a literate carpenter from Ashampstead, recently moved from Basildon.[16] As the three men who were given the harshest transportation sentences had at least some literacy skills, it seems likely they were singled out for the harshest treatment.

None of the five men convicted of machine breaking in Basildon and Streatley appear to have had a reputation of political activism. Neither were their offences committed in places of any critical or strategic importance. By no stretch of the imagination Basildon and Streatley were anything more than insignificant, agricultural parishes. While an important turnpike road with a high traffic volume ran through both, neither drew significant economic advantage from any passing trade. A riot here or there was hardly likely to disturb the economic health of the county.[17]

On the face of things the two parishes are very similar. Most of the land in Basildon and Streatley was owned by very few men. The area of Basildon was 3139 acres making it slightly smaller than Streatley which had an area of 3655 acres.[18] The experience of enclosure was within living memory in both parishes as Streatley was not totally enclosed until 1817.[19] It is possible that in 1830 there may still have





been common land in Basildon.[20] In 1831 Basildon had a population of 780, while the population of Streatley was 582.[21] Agricultural labourers as an employment group represented 37 per cent and 27 per cent of total male population of Streatley and Basildon respectively.[22] The percentage of the total male population listed in the 1831 census as being, 'Employed in Retail trade, or in a Handicraft as Masters or Workmen' was 8 per cent for Streatley parish and 9 per cent for Basildon.[23] No more than three men in each parish were listed in any other category, leading one to presume that there must have been either a massive male unemployment problem, or great numbers of males who were unemployable by virtue of their age.

There are, however, important differences. Although Basildon parish could be described as being 'closed' as it was substantially owned by only two people, (one of whom was William Stone of Streatley) neither men were resident landowners.[24] The parish had a well established and active non-conformist community with an associated school; both were situated in Upper Basildon, the only village of any size.[25] The village was close to the Ashampstead boundary, on the opposite side of the parish from Basildon House and the Church of England church both of which were near the river and the turnpike road. In other words, the workers of Basildon parish were able to spend their leisure time well away from the supervision of the landed interest. Their geographical isolation gave them the opportunity to discuss their grievances out of earshot of their employers.

Streatley presents a different picture. Streatley was also very much a 'closed' parish with three principal landowners. However two of them were resident in the parish. The London lawyer, William Stone (who had properties in both Streatley and Basildon) lived in Streatley village and was known to be active in local affairs.[26] The establishment Church of England church was in the main village and well supported by the landed families.[27] A small non-conformist chapel lay on the outskirts of Streatley village.[28] The hamlets of Westridge and Southridge were very much estate villages with no leisure infrastructure. While the turnpike road ran through the centre of the village making for ease of information flow, both of the inns were also within the village. One of them was a popular meeting place for the local gentry and the other adjoined the church. Streatley parish, therefore, presented little opportunity for the workers to spend their leisure time away from the eyes or ears of their employers.

Reading through the accounts of the trials, it is striking to note that none of the arrested men appear to live in Streatley parish. One can only assume that this is as a result of the tightly controlled nature of the parish community. On the other hand, almost all of the men convicted of riotous offences either lived in, or were closely associated with, Basildon parish - an enclave of independent, non-conformists who were therefore deeply suspect.

It is highly unlikely that any of the Basildon and Streatley men convicted of acts of 'tumultuous outrage, violence and rapine' even remotely considered themselves as criminals, let alone violent rioters set on bringing 'great insecurity and danger [to] the kingdom and its inhabitants'.[29] They most certainly were angry and frustrated by the appalling poverty trap in which they and their peers found themselves. Faced with neither job security nor living wages, these men had simply organised campaigns of direct action in order to force some improvement to the dreadful situation they found themselves in. Perhaps their obvious organisational skills militated against them, especially given the proximity of Basildon parish to Bradfield, where militant placards had been paraded the previous week.

The great weight of government and publicly expressed opinion from the propertied classes of Berkshire saw things rather differently. From the outset of the Swing riots, the actions of the perpetrators were variously described as acts of insurrection, anarchic, lawless outrages, which placed 'the very existence of society in imminent peril'.[30] The sight of agricultural labourers stepping outside their place in society to take part in confrontational campaigns against their betters was profoundly unsettling, particularly given the fear of a general revolution. Anyone who could be held responsible for exciting the peasantry would automatically present a threat to the old order. It also seems highly significant that Thomas Hanson was from a family of practising non-conformists thus placing him and his associates outside of the influence of the established church.[31] Clearly, Hanson, Milsom, Viccus and West were seen to present revolutionary tendencies and therefore had to be removed out of harm's way. But were the men convicted of offences in Basildon and Streatley revolutionaries? The evidence suggests not. Yes, they were angry. Frustrated, most certainly. Not one of the five men represented 'a threat to the peace and well-being of the country' as the sentencing judge of the Berkshire Special Commission described them.[32] Thomas Hanson and Charles Milsom did demonstrate a definite skill at efficient campaign organisation which, one suspects, was their greatest sin. However, they did not organise a revolutionary campaign to overturn the established social order; they merely campaigned for the dignity of a living wage.

Were the ruling classes justified in seeing the disturbances in Basildon and Streatley as having the potential to be part of a wider revolutionary movement? Perhaps they were. Many feared that the 1830 revolutions in Europe would only too quickly infect Great Britain, as across the social spectrum people were demanding political reform. The landed interest quite rightly saw their power base under threat as the spectre of democracy loomed before them. Undoubtedly their panic at the wide unrest was increased by a sense of absolute outrage that the rural poor had presumed to take any sort of direct action against their masters. They were expected





to be 'perfectly tranquil and shew a disposition for order', to be loyal and peaceful, always attending to 'the duties of their station'.[33] That was the ordered way of the countryside. In the eyes of those who governed the sight of hordes of ragged angry men beating on their doors most definitely represented a social revolution.

Norman Gash eloquently describes the November Berkshire rebellion as 'not a springtime revolt of hope, but a winter rising of despair; not the confident challenge of a prosperous class, but the last protest of ultimate distress'.[34] The uprisings in Basildon and Streatley were not a revolution. Nor were they a rebellion. They were a cry for survival.

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# FIREWOOD FROM BERKSHIRE

Pat Preece

Today's energy is derived from many sources, oil, coal, gas, nuclear fission, electricity generated from fossil fuel, water and to a lesser extent, from the wind and sun. Until the canals and railways provided a cheap form of transport from the coal mines, the main raw material as a source of energy was wood. Although it may seem a bit boring nowadays to mention firewood, it was an important product of the woodlands and hedges. It provided fuel for domestic heating and cooking and was the basic source of power for industrial processes as diverse as smelting, glass making and tile and brick making.

This is going to be a description of the various types of firewood and their uses through a long period. It was obtained from woodland managed either as coppice or timber. Any sort of wood could be used for firewood, although beech and oak tended to be the favourites as they burnt well. The coppices provided most of the firewood but the branches etc. stripped from the trunks of growing and felled timber trees were also employed. The trimmings of hedges, especially hawthorn, were a form of fuel particularly valuable to cottagers although no mention can be found in the records. In Berkshire nowadays there are not many coppices left, but in the past hazel was probably predominant, though around Mortimer chestnut was common and was used for fencing. The twiggy tops of the chestnut poles would have been used for faggots. Hawkridge in Bucklebury has an overgrown beech coppice and it is probable that the

'Stool' of Beech Coppice

shoots of the pollarded beeches in Burnham Beeches were used. Oak seems to have been the chief tree grown in Berkshire although mixed woods were fairly common. Unfortunately conifer has been planted in many of the ancient woods.

Firewood was often a by-product of woodland industries such as timber production, hoop making and the many crafts of the woodmen. Wood was turned into charcoal, although little mention is found of this as it was not particularly valuable locally, since there was little iron working or smelting of any sort, except by blacksmiths. It is unlikely that trunks of timber trees were used for firewood until the beginning of the 19th century, as until then oak was needed for ships and the beams of houses; at this time ships were beginning to be made of iron and any wood in houses was pine either grown here or imported. Every scrap of wood was used and the woodland floor was not littered with pieces of wood as nowadays. Sources of information about firewood are not easy to find; odd references in the charters of the mediaeval period and other documents can be helpful. Unfortunately there seem to be few early wood accounts and the references in the Royal forests are mostly to do with deer and timber. However from the 18th century onwards there are some estate wood accounts that detail the wood sold and the articles made. One has to search diligently for mentions of types of firewood in early documents. The types of firewood are rarely

Hazel Coppice





defined in mediaeval records, although there are occasional references. In Saxon times it is known to be important but finding any mention seems to be impossible. Four old woodmen, John Cottrell, R Busby who worked in South Oxfordshire and Arthur Smith and George Bowman of Mortimer gave me much information about the management of woods and their products and the manufacture of them.

At Chaddleworth in the 12th century, Richard son of Thurstan Basset retained the local woodland for fires for himself, presumably to heat his house, and in the kitchen for cooking.[1] A picture arises of a mediaeval kitchen set apart from the house, because of fire danger, with one or more enormous fires supplied with firewood from the local coppices. The majority of woods in this period were coppices of any variety of broad leaf tree, commonly hazel with standard trees, mostly oak or ash.

Windfall wood was allowed to tenants, although little reference is found. Reginald, son of Jordan the Forester, had the right to windfall wood (cableicio), dead wood and lop and top (coperines) in Suthe wood at Waltham - presumably Waltham St Lawrence. As he was called a Forester, this must have been in the Royal Forest, as in estate woods it was mostly a woodward who supervised the woods. Unfortunately South wood cannot be found on the map, but it would seem to have timber trees because of the reference to lop and top (this is the side branches 'lop' - and the upper branches 'top') Often royal forests had pollards because of the deer, so that the shoots were out of their reach. The Forester probably had a good trade selling the firewood, to which he was entitled. In the 13th century he parted with this right to Chertsey abbey for 20s - an appreciable sum in those days.[2] At Cookham, also in the 13th century, the woodwards had the right to take all windfalls within the woods.[3] The nearest woods to Cookham were probably the present Quarry woods.

The 'Thykket' near Maidenhead supplied 10 cartloads of fuel to Thomas Bardolf, a knight, in 1431.[4] The Thicket is described as a common wood so various tenants would have been entitled to wood from it. As probably the common wood was used for grazing, it is likely that the trees there were pollarded so as to be out of reach of the beasts. Pollarding was the cutting down of a sapling at any height from 6ft to 10ft so that shoots would form, so making the equivalent of a high coppice. This is also found at Bucklebury

Common where pollarded oaks and beeches are found. The Thicket still exists and can be seen by the side of the A4 just outside Maidenhead, though in a much reduced form.

From early times firewood was taken by river from a wharf at Maidenhead, whose name meant maidens hythe or landing place. In Lelands Itinerary of 1542, he states that at Maidenhead, there is a large wharf for timber and firewood at the west end of the bridge. He said that this wood came from Windsor Forest and the Great Frith.[5] No trace can be found of a wood called the Great Frith but it might have been a general name for an area of woodland, as 'Frith' is old English for woodland. Wargrave also had a wharf in mediaeval times and in the Pipe Roll of the bishopric of Winchester there is mention of foreign expenses - in those days 'foreign' meant anywhere out of the immediate locality and therefore Wargrave would be foreign to Winchester. These expenses were for five barges for transporting corn, firewood and timber to London for £4 16s 8d.[6]

Firewood was needed for kilns of various sorts in the mediaeval period although once again it is difficult to find any record. Bakers must have used faggots and certainly pot kilns and tile makers did. The Abbot of Abingdon asked the King to grant him firewood from Saghe wood for two pot kilns (rogos faciendos) in Abingdon.[7] The firewood mentioned could have been 'kiln faggots'. These faggots, according to an old woodman in Mortimer, were of a specific size, apparently about 6 foot long with fairly light and twiggy pieces, as they 'had to burn right away'.

In various documents there is reference to 'fire bote' - spelt in different ways. Botes were the right to take wood for various uses, so apart from fire bote there might be plough bote (ploughs were largely made of wood in the past) and hay bote - this meant wood for fences: the Hayward of the manor was in charge of fences and hedges. Apart from these botes there were many more, in fact practically anything about the farm that might be made of wood. In 1746 from the 'cops' at Beenham farm the tenant could have 'lops and shredings of trees for fireboot'.[8] Another term sometimes found meaning the same is estover.

Sometimes tenants who were granted a corrody by an abbey received firewood. A corrody was when an abbey, in exchange for land or money, would support a person in their old age. A widow Aldeth, in about 1190, was





to be given a cartload of firewood every 15 days by Reading Abbey as part of her maintenance at Whitley near Reading.[9] The poor of the district might be allocated fuel as at West Illsley, where in 1613 the poor were to receive 10 loads of firewood from a grove called Conne Grove at Farnborough, on the Downs, by the will of Erasmus Wood.[10] Sadly Conne Grove cannot be seen on any map, it is possible that it might now be Farnborough wood. Incidentally a 'grove' was specifically a separate piece of woodland and usually a coppice.

Punishment was inflicted on tenants who took firewood to which they were not entitled. In the Bucklebury court rolls of 1583, Henry Esam, the lords woodward, presented that Thomas Goddard had cut down an oak tree and cut firewood in the lord's wood, probably Carbins wood, and he was to lose his land. It seems pretty drastic but it may be that the major misdemeanour was felling the oak. In the same year, at another court, it was decreed that no one should take wood from the Lord's woodlands under a fine of 3s 4d. Later in 1668 at the Bucklebury court John Dash and Bradley Lawrence cut and took from the waste several cartloads of furze and they were fined 20s. Furze was often made into faggots and would have been used as firewood.[11]

'Spray' cut ready for faggot making

From the end of the 17th century the accounts become more explicit about the types of firewood used. A form of faggot often found in earlier accounts was the bavin. This, by a Statute of 1542, was supposed to be 3 feet in length and 24 inches in circumference. It seems likely that after the 17th century, very often the term bavin and faggot were interchangeable and would get the same description applied. Kiln, beech oak and furze bavins are

all found alongside faggots in the Bucklebury accounts. In a curiously spelt account from 'Hamstead Noris at Compton wood 248 bush baving', are sold for 16s 7d[12]. Another strange spelling found is 'babins'.

Faggots and bavins are a collection of pieces of wood, which can be of various sorts bound round with a 'with', which is a strip of split hazel or willow supple enough to use as binding. Sometimes in more recent times string was used. Many accounts have references to men employed to make withs, which could also be used to bind besoms. In 1800 a woodman at Mortimer was employed to make among other things, 2800 withs at 8d a 100.

The faggots and bavins that were bound by withs were of different descriptions. Kiln faggots or bavins have already been mentioned and were obviously important for the baking of pots, tiles and bricks. At Mortimer 13685 kiln bavins were made by Elliot for £68 3s 6d and may have been sold to Smith, who supplied bricks tiles and ridge tiles in the same account in 1805.[13] Unfortunately we do not know where the kiln using these was situated.

Bakers faggots were also 6 feet long and according to an old woodman, usually incorporated some larger pieces of wood so that they would burn longer. These faggots would be pushed into bread ovens, often brick lined, lit with dry kindling and left until the baker (or housewife) by experience would assess the oven to be hot enough. Then the ashes would be raked out and the bread put in on a wooden 'shovel'. House faggots were about 3-4 ft long and generally had smaller pieces to sit more readily on open fires. Puffs were a sort of faggot which had 4 to 5 thicker pieces of wood called 'facers' with more twiggy wood on top and were then bound with a with. Apparently, when used in the house these would probably have been pulled apart. Whether these were used earlier is not known, but in the 1920s these were sold for 3d to 4d each and 100 cost 12s 6d to make. Another small faggot, which does not appear in earlier accounts, was a small bundle of kindling wood called a 'pimp' and these were sold to households from barrows.

There were other sorts of faggots mostly descriptive of their contents, such as elm, ash, oak, beech and abele (poplar). Shrouding, shredding or shragging faggots were made from the side shoots that were cut off the





trunks of growing trees, so that timber trunks would have the minimum size of knots. Shragging as it was called there, was particularly done in the beechwoods of the Oxfordshire Chilterns until the 1960s. A reference to shroudes meaning shredding or shraggin, is found in Beenham in 1631.[14] In a Bradfield Survey of 1746 'Lops and shredings' of trees were allowed for 'fireboot' with the probability that they would have been made into faggots.[15] In the Bucklebury estate accounts there are several references to 'lop' faggots and these were made from the lop and top of trees when they were felled and the branches and twigs had been trimmed off.

Another faggot that may seem strange to many, was the furze faggot or 'bob' which were frequently made in the past. On the Bucklebury estate in 1823 one of the woodmen 'cutt 2200 furze faggots' and was paid £4 1s 6d. Furze is gorse and because it burns quickly these faggots would have been useful in starting fires. However, one cannot help thinking of the poor man's hands with all those thorns, no gloves are likely to have been provided in those days! A further form of faggot mentioned by an old woodman in Mortimer was a 'tuck' made from birch which grows freely on the commons locally. Traditionally the faggots would be sold in scores and sometimes the word score was omitted, so two faggots were in reality 40.

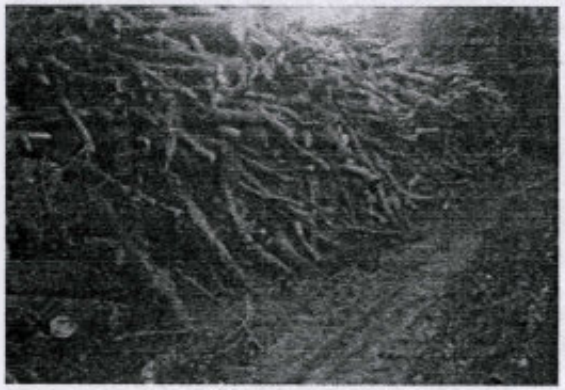
Until the 19th century, one important form of firewood, was billet. This, by Statute of Elizabeth I, should be a piece of wood 3 ft 4 ins long with a circumference of 10 inches; these logs would fit on the fireplace andirons or firedogs, which were commonly 3 ft apart. Billet was usually harvested from coppice stools which had been grown for 15-20 years or from branches of a suitable size. Beech seems to have been the main species employed but oak and ash were sometimes used. The 'spray' or top of the coppice poles would be made into faggots. Billet was often sent to London by barge from wharves along the Thames. It was used for firing kilns, glass making and many other uses.

In 1573 Thomas West, a barge owner of Wallingford, died and in his inventory there is an item for 'cardge' [carriage] of 10 loade of billetes from Homeses of Pangburne to Bruckenes the woodmongerre £1 13s 4d.' This may well have been going to London as there are several other loads listed, including one from 'Whichchurch' (across the river from Pangbourne) going to Scotland Yard in London.[16] Ewins wood in Bradfield, which no longer

exists since it was in the process of being clear felled, when in 1575, 3220 loads of billet were produced which were sold for 2s 4d a load.[17] Pepys came to Henley in 1688 to purchase firewood, including billet, for the navy and his papers about this are in the Bodleian in his own writing. He stated about billet: -

> 'Fifty notches [probably pieces of billet]goe to a hundred [hundred weight], Five hundred goes to a load. The price for 100 load - the quantity they commonly sell to the woodmongers is from 14 to 16li [i.e. pounds]. Carriage by water from thence down to London is from 15d to 18d per load. Five loads is ordinarily stiled a 100 of billet'.

He also commented on the virtues of beech firewood ' ... beachwood which is said to burn sooner, clearer, freer from sparkle ... it will keep fire longer than those of oake'.[18] The price of billet was increasing steadily and by 1726 the value was greater since Marmaduke Penn of Bradfield charged 11s a load as stated in the Bradfield Survey. A load of billet was deemed to be what one horse could pull and that, according to local information, appears to have been equivalent to 25 cubic feet and about one ton in weight. This is assuming it is a Shire or other heavy horse.



Stackwood

By the beginning of the 19th century billet almost disappears from the accounts and stackwood takes its place. A stack was a collection of wood 6ft long by 3 ft wide and 2 ft high containing 108 cubic feet, so it seems that the pieces of wood would have been 6 ft long and probably varying in circumference. The first reference found to a stack is seen where the same Marmaduke was selling 2 loads of stackwood. In 1802, '27 loads 10ft' of stackwood was produced by a woodman in Bucklebury who received £3 11s 6d, which included 8s 11d wood money. Wood money was a percentage charged on goods made, presumably for the use of tools etc. It





seems likely that the theoretical stack measurement was not being used in practice and it was a name for a known large heap of wood or stack 6 ft long.

Another measurement of firewood was a cord which was 8 ft long 4 ft broad and 4 ft high and contained 128 cubic feet of wood. It may be that this again was a measurement of a pile of wood with no great accuracy. There are two items in the Bucklebury papers; one of Thomas Adams cutting and slitting 7 cord of wood and Joseph Naylor for clefting 16 cord of wood and a further 6 cords of blocks. Blocks were usually trunks of small trees or large branches split, slit or cleft into chunks. Only one mention has been found in Berkshire of 'logs' which is a term commonly in use today; this was in Hampstead Norris where 'six skore loudge' is recorded in the Bradfield Survey in 1734. I am not sure whether my guess at 'loudge' being logs is correct.

A source of fuel which has not been found recorded in Berkshire was tree roots which when dry burnt well. They are often found in Oxfordshire accounts and must have provided cheap fuel. The fact that no mention has yet been found does not mean that they were not used, probably never itemised.

The river Thames and the Kennet and Avon canal provided transport for quantities of firewood, much of it to London. There were wharves at places which seem strange nowadays such as Mapledurham. All the towns on the Thames had wharves where loads of firewood could be picked up, mostly for London. The Kennet and Avon canal also carried quantities of firewood from places such as Aldermaston, Newbury and Hungerford where barges picked up loads from the woods. Mention is made in various accounts of wharfage paid for wood.

It must now seem obvious how important wood fuel was until the advent of easily obtainable coal due to canals and railways. Every scrap of wood was used from coppicing and felling operations. These same woodlands still show roadside signs 'Logs and kindling for sale' advertising the availability of firewood to the passing motorist.

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My thanks are due to Arthur Smith, John Cottrell, George Bowman and R Busby, all unfortunately deceased, whose knowledge was invaluable.

A mid-eighteenth century naval captain taken from two contemporary paintings
Naval Officers uniforms were not standard until 1746



# THE PRESS GANG IN READING DURING THE SEVEN YEARS' WAR, 1756-1763

Judith and Rip Hunter

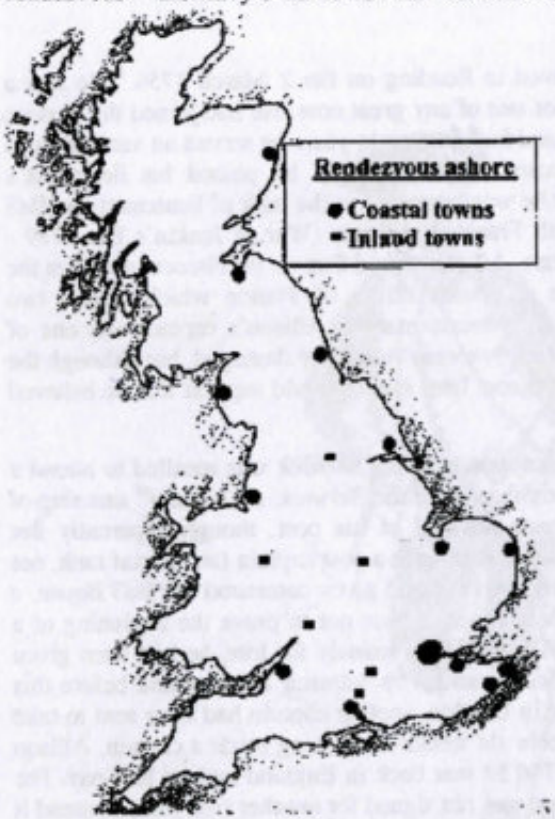
Captain Thomas Allison arrived in Reading on the 2 March 1756.[1] He was a captain in the Royal Navy, but not one of any great note. He had joined the Service about 1729 at the late age of 24, and for some eight years he served on various ships as an AB, midshipman and master's mate. In 1737 he passed his lieutenant's examination and three years later he was promoted to the rank of lieutenant on *HMS Success*. England was at war with France and Spain (War of Jenkin's Ear 1739 - 1748) and during the next four years, Allison served first on the *Success* and then the *Princessa*[2] He took part in the disastrous Battle of Toulon which caused two admirals and eleven captains to face courts martial. Allison's captain was one of those accused of misconduct and the *Princessa* was badly damaged, but although the records do not mention Thomas Allison, later events would suggest that he behaved well.[3]

In November 1745, when the captain of *HMS Berwick* was recalled to attend a court martial, Allison was made commander of the *Berwick*, a 64-gun 3rd rate ship of the line. Seven weeks later he was relieved of his post, though apparently not because of any incompetence, since he was made a post captain (an official rank, not merely a captain of a ship) in February 1746 and given command of *HMS Boyne*, a larger, 80-gun ship of the line. This, however, was not to prove the beginning of a distinguished career for Thomas Allison. Unfortunately for him, he had been given promotion while he was in the Mediterranean by Admiral Medley, and before this could be ratified by the Admiralty in London, another captain had been sent to take command of the *Boyne*. Thus a mere six weeks after being made a captain, Allison was without a ship and by July 1746 he was back in England and on half-pay. For him the war was over, though peace was not signed for another two years. Instead it was the beginning of a long period of unemployment.[4]

Not until 1756 did he again receive orders from the Admiralty.[5] Then, in February that year, he was ordered to Reading to take up the post of regulating captain, his task to recruit men for the Royal Navy - be it by encouraging them to voluntarily enter the Service, or by impressment.

Britain was not officially at war with France until May that year, but neither were the countries at peace. A cold war existed between them and there had been skirmishes in Canada and India; the Admiralty had begun to prepare for the inevitable. Officers, who for several years had been retired on half pay, were ordered back into service, old ships were repaired and new ones built and an intensive

recruitment campaign was set in motion. Captains of all ships were ordered to procure men to man navy ships. In 1755, other captains had been ordered to set up rendezvous - the navy's name for its recruitment headquarters - on shore in the towns of Bristol, Liverpool, Kings Lynn, Newcastle, Whitehaven and Great Yarmouth. The following year captains were again directed to set up rendezvous ashore, this time in fourteen towns, including six in the inland towns of Shrewsbury, Gloucester, Winchester, Leicester, Leeds and Reading.[6]




Towns to which regulating captains were sent during the Seven Years War to 'procure men' for the Royal Navy. Most were sea ports, but 6 were inland towns.

Until the Seven Years' War (1756 - 1763) the Impress Service rarely operated from such land based rendezvous. Men were taken from merchants' ships returning from overseas, and by press gangs sent from their ships to search for seamen in coastal towns and villages. While their ship was in port, lieutenants were also sent to London to form press gangs under the command of two regulating officers. In 1745, however, during the War of Jenkin's Ear, a rendezvous had been set up at Gravesend, the first and only instance of a captain regulating the recruitment being stationed ashore other than in London.

In 1756 Allison was not a well man and his journey from Southampton, where he was living, had been delayed for the three or four days because of his gout; it had kept him housebound for the previous six weeks. Having established himself in lodgings at the Black Bear Inn in Reading, Allison's first task was to wait on the mayor of Reading to ask for his assistance in 'procuring men for His Majesty's





Service'. His actions were supported by the printed Royal Proclamations and Orders in Council; he had been sent twenty copies of each to publicise the royal navy's need for recruits and the benefits of volunteering for service. There was no legal obligation for the navy to obtain permission for any of their recruiting activities, but the official Instructions make it quite clear that captains and lieutenants on impress duty were expected to 'cultivate a good understanding' with the civil authorities. Later in the month Allison was to wait on the local magistrates and the gentlemen of the Grand Jury; he and his lieutenants also dealt with the magistrates of Abingdon and Oxford, and the mayor of Abingdon.[7]

Within a day of his arrival, Allison had been joined by Lieutenant Ambrose Jones, who was promptly ordered to hire a room for a rendezvous. There is no further information about this room but it is likely to have been in one of the lesser inns where the lieutenant himself lodged. A second lieutenant, Edmund Hunt arrived a day or two later, but no seamen were sent to Reading to form the press gangs. Lieutenants working ashore were expected to encourage landsmen to volunteer for the job. According to the official instructions, press gangs should be composed of ten or more men, each paid 2s per day for wages and subsistence. From Allison's letters to the Admiralty, it would appear that both lieutenants were eventually successful in forming gangs, but they may well have been under strength. In the meantime, Allison had approached Lt Col Murray of the Jordan's Regiment, which was quartered in Reading, for the loan of a sergeant, drum and six soldiers so that they could 'beat up the drum' in order to make their presence known.

Allison was to stay three months in Reading, during which time he reported two or three times a week to the Admiralty. Altogether he wrote at least thirty five letters, each one of which should have been accompanied by an official form listing the names of the men recruited as volunteers or pressed men. Only eight letters did so. It maybe that not all the lists have survived, but it was the normal practice to 'acquaint' the Admiralty at the beginning of each letter of any enclosures. Allison did so only for the eight letters which contained forms, and it seems very likely that he omitted to send regular lists, the apologetic tone of his letters explaining why he had none or very few recruits to list.

Allison wasted no time in making himself and his task known in Reading and we may surmise that his early successes gave him reason to feel confident of good results. His first recruit, John Coward, volunteered his services to Lieutenant Jones at the rendezvous on the day the room was hired. He was a landman, but Thomas Welch who volunteered the following day was a seaman. During the rest of that first week, 3 - 9 March, there were thirteen other volunteers and seven pressed men.

The majority were recruited by the lieutenants, but five had been procured by the constables of Oxford. They were collected by Lieutenant Jones and brought to the rendezvous in Reading with assistance from Oxford, as Jones had not yet formed a gang. The second week, as far as the number of recruits was concerned, was equally encouraging - twenty volunteers and one pressed man, fifteen of whom had been recruited by the constables of Abingdon. During the third week three deserters from royal navy ships were apprehended by the constables at Maidenhead and two others by Lieutenant Jones.


The graph shows the number of men raised each day during the period that Captain Thomas Alison was in Reading – 3 March to 23 May 1756. It makes clear that he was more successful during the first two weeks in March

By the end of the month fifty-two men had been entered into the Service, and most of them had been dispatched to the regulating captains in London, prior to being put aboard a ship. Each man was examined by Captain Allison to ascertain that he was fit for that service. There were age limits for both seamen and landmen, and men needed to be healthily enough to do the work. The oft quoted opinion that the Navy in this period was substantially manned by the riff raff, the scum of the prisons was simply not true.[8] Any unsuitable recruits were almost always sent back by the first senior officer who examined them. In no part of the sea service were criminals ever accepted, except smugglers and debtors.

By the third week, however, Allison had met with some of the problems that beset many regulating captains. Several of the men from Abingdon, he was informed by Lieutenant Jones, had the Itch - a contagious skin disease - and the London regulating captains rejected such men. Allison protested that in his opinion they were good able-bodied landmen, some of them bargemen who had been at sea. All the same, he discharged the afflicted men. Other men were also rejected and it may well have been that the civil authorities at Abingdon were taking opportunity to rid the district of some of their unemployed and less desirable inhabitants - a not uncommon situation. Allison met with the justices and they promised to issue the constables with warrants to search for 'idlers' - tradesmen who would be useful at sea - provided they were not returned upon their hands. Allison responded with a promise that he would come to Abingdon (or any other place where potential recruits had been gathered) and 'pick out such men as would be fit for the Service





without giving them the trouble of sending the whole party to Reading to be examined'.

Allison was authorised to recompense the constables for bringing men to the rendezvous - £1 for every seaman and 6d per man a mile travelling expenses. There was no payment, however, for landmen and none of the men brought to Reading by the Abingdon constables were seamen. For the sake of good will Allison paid the constables one guinea, though at 6d per mile for each man, the officers almost certainly expected much more, and on 14 March Allison wrote to the Admiralty of the 'great murmurings' of the Abingdon and Oxford constables. They complained of the great expense and loss of business time which they had incurred in raising men. He feared that he would get no more men from Abingdon and Oxford unless procured by the press gangs

There was clearly some confusion about the rewards, despite the printed proclamations and the written Instructions. Bounties should be paid to men who volunteered to serve in the navy - landmen, as well as seamen. Constables and other members of the public could only claim rewards for' discovering' hidden seamen. It does not seem to matter whether these men were pressed or volunteers, but they had to be seamen not landmen. Likewise navy lieutenants were paid a fee for the seamen they pressed.

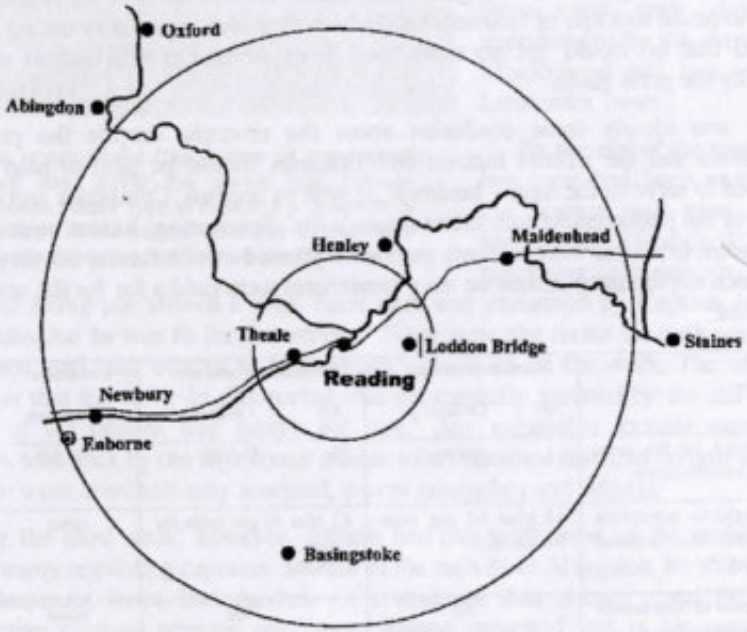
| | Seamen pressed | | Seamen volunteers | | Landmen |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | AB | Ordinary | AB | Ordinary | volunteers |
| Bounty paid to the men recruited into the navy | none | | £3 | £1.10s | £1.10 |
| Reward paid to constables and others for seamen 'discovered' * | £1 plus 6d per mile for travel | | £1 plus 6d per mile for travel | | none |
| Amount paid to lieutenants for each seaman raised | l0s | | l0s | | none |

* This was raised to £5 and £2.10s by 1762
AB - able bodied seamen - were more experienced than ordinary seamen.

Table to show the financial awards available for men raised for the navy in 1756

More than half the men raised by Allison were landmen and no doubt he was glad to procure them - providing they were between the ages of 20 and 35, able bodied and fit for a life at sea.[9] His gangs found very few seamen. Indeed, according to his letter of 8 April, he did not believe there were any seamen hereabouts for he gave 'good encouragement to the soldiers and other people who [are] always straggling on the roads in case they should meet with any seamen or seafaring men

to bring them to [him] should be well rewarded'. But during April and May the gangs raised only thirteen men, and those sent to the regulating captain in London on the 11 April were in poor shape. Their feet were so blistered with travelling from Abingdon to Reading that Allison was obliged to hire a carriage. His letters have a ring of despair. Day after day he kept one lieutenant and his gang in and around Reading and along the Bath and London Roads. Did they merely patrol the roads by foot, or was the lieutenant on horseback, and did they spend much of their time in the many alehouses and inns, trying to get information of likely recruits?




Towns and villages visited by Captain Allison's press gangs in 1756

All the places within five miles of Reading were searched, and time after time Allison sent one of the gangs to places within a twenty mile radius -Henley and Maidenhead, Basingstoke, Abingdon, Staines, Oxford, Newbury, and Theale - but with little or no success:





*15 April Reading*

*Please to acquaint their Lordships that I have this day sent Lieutenant Hunt and his gang to Henley and Maidenhead and the places adjacent thereto for the procuring of men for His Majesty's Service.*

*Thomas Allison*

*20 April Reading*

*Please to acquaint their Lordships that on Sunday evening Lieutenant Hunt and his gang returned from Henley and Maidenhead who informed me that he could not meet with any seamen or seafaring men, neither could he get any intelligence of any being in that part of the country, he entered one able bodied bargeman. I shall send one of the officers to Basingstoke with his gang to try if he can pick up any straggling seamen or seafaring men in that part of the country.*

*Thomas Allison*

For awhile he kept Lieutenant Hunt at Loddon Bridge in a desperate attempt to apprehend any seamen who might travel that way in an effort to avoid the press gangs on the Bath Road or in Reading. Allison also organised a hot press, an all-out effort when both gangs and civilian constables acted together in a surprise round up of all and any men they could find. Men who were too old, too unfit, or of the wrong class could be released later.[10] The only reference to this hot press is very brief, but apparently it took place at Enborne sometime in late March. Why Enborne? The press was not successful.

At last, on the 17 May 1756, after some eighteen months of increasingly hostile encounters, war was officially declared by Britain. A few days later the mayor of Reading received notification and he and his fellow aldermen and burgesses processed from the Town Hall to the Market Place where the declaration was read with all due solemnity. Lord Albemarle's Dragoons were on parade and the occasion was also marked with 'an elegant entertainment' and the drinking of loyal toasts. There is no mention in the local newspaper report, however, of Captain Allison or the Royal Navy.[11] The following day, Allison received orders from the Admiralty to close the rendezvous. His final group of recruits were sent to Portsmouth on 22 May. Two days later Allison returned to his home in Southampton. All over the country captains and lieutenants were being ordered to close rendezvous. Many of the officers joined ships - but not Thomas Allison; his naval career was over.

The next regulating captain to serve in the town was William Hamilton who arrived in March 1759. He was still in his late thirties and had not yet been promoted to the rank of post captain. He served in Reading for some six months, but only nine of his letters to the Admiralty have survived and there is no information as to when

he gave up the appointment.[12] There are only two lists of men entering the Service, but since he had only one gang it was difficult for him to raise men during the time when his recruits were being transported to Portsmouth, a sixty mile journey and a long walk for the men and the guard of lieutenant and press gang.

One of Hamilton's letters highlights the problems of keeping secure the men raised, be they pressed or volunteers. Those men who were true volunteers might willingly have waited at the rendezvous until they could be taken to Portsmouth, but many of the volunteers were in reality pressed men who had preferred to offer

The press gang in action.
Taken from a political cartoon condemning the Impress Service as a means of recruiting men for the Royal Navy.

themselves rather than be taken against their will. Such men, as well as those pressed, needed guarding. It is unlikely that they could be held at the rendezvous, and unlike coastal towns, there was no convenient ship that could be used. Official Instructions give no guidance to regulating captains working ashore and Hamilton, like other regulating captains in similar circumstances, made use of the town gaol. It was the only secure place in the town that was available to him. Unfortunately it was not secure enough and on the 18 April 1759 twelve pressed men made their escape. In his letter to the Admiralty, Hamilton wrote that he thought that they had had outside help. He did all he could to recapture them, getting his own men to search and sending express letters to places he 'thought they might pass through', but they were not found.





The Admiralty advised Hamilton to 'to take more care for the security of the men' he raised, and 'as one means, he should send the men away before they mount to too great numbers to be well managed'. It was not a very fair comment, for Hamilton visited the gaol every other day, and he could not have sent the men sooner as he had only one press gang and that was away taking men to Portsmouth.

On the 19 August Hamilton received a letter from the Admiralty questioning his pressing of one Thomas Wilson, an apprentice since apprentices should not be pressed. It appears that two travellers had hired a man to show them the way through Reading avoiding the press gang. Having learnt of this from two soldiers, Hamilton apprehended the men. Neither of them was a seaman, and one of them, who gave a good account of himself, was released immediately. The other, Wilson, however was a runaway apprentice. Hamilton allowed him to write to his master, but receiving no answer within ten days, Hamilton thought it 'proper to send him off with the rest of the people as a person very fit to serve His Majesty'.

Hamilton closed his rendezvous sometime after August 1759. He did not go back to sea again until 1763, some months after the war had ended. Instead he was ordered to Bristol where he did a year-long stint as a regulating captain.

The third and last regulating captain employed at Reading during the Seven Years' War was Francis Burslem. He was sent there in 1761. He was probably in his thirties and had only been a post captain since 1759 when was given command *of HMS Coventry* .Ill health had brought a halt to his career, but by May 1761, he had sufficiently recovered to apply for re-employment. He had hoped to be given a new command, but to his bitter disappointment he was ordered to Reading. He was there until November 1762. Only forty-two of his letters survive though he is likely to have written many more. The surviving lists of men procured for the navy contain the names of 119 men, but how many there were altogether is impossible to calculate. On the other hand some of the lists compiled by Burslem are far more informative than those of Hamilton and Allison.[13]

Those compiled for July to September 1761 give details of when and where the first forty eight men were recruited, their status (seaman, landman or bargeman), age and height and description, as well as their place of abode (home town, country or county) and their marital status. Thus, the first man pressed was Edward Burt, a landman pressed at Reading on 31 July. He was 35 years old, single, 5 ft 6 ins high, with a darkish complexion, pitted by small pox. His home was in Sussex. Analysis of these forms and three others, which were not quite so detailed, throws up some interesting statistics:

| Recruitment | | Marital Status | | Age | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pressed | 23 | Single | 26 | 19 years old | 2 |
| Volunteer | 21 | Married | 6 | 20-29 | 16 |
| Hired | 4 | Widowed | 0 | 30-39 | 8 |
| | | | | 40-49 | 6 |

It was unusual for lieutenants to use the term 'hired', though of course they did employ men in the press gangs who offered to be gangmen if they did not have to join the navy. Often it was the only way they could bring a gang to full strength. At this date, August 1761, he had only six gang members and on 20 August he had to report to the Admiralty that three of his gang men had run away.[14] Conditions were bad for those confined in Reading gaol and Burslem wrote several times to the Admiralty asking for assistance so that he could use his lieutenant and gang to take the men to London. Eventually a party of marines was sent to guard the men on the journey .A year later, however, it should be noted there were three lieutenants stationed at Reading, and presumably three gangs.

| Places where men were pressed | | Places of abode | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Reading | 31 | Ireland | 9 | Portsmouth | 1 |
| London | 5 | Bristol & Kingsmead | 4 | Worcester | 1 |
| Maidenhead | 3 | London & Southwark | 5 | Marlow | 1 |
| Colnbrook | 3 | Wiltshire | 2 | Hatfield | 1 |
| Basingstoke | 2 | Suffolk & Norfolk | 2 | unknown | 1 |
| Henley | 1 | Oxfordshire | 3 | | |
| Hounslow | 1 | Sussex | 1 | | |
| Kingston | 2 | Essex | 1 | | |

Clearly, although most of the men were procured in Reading they were not local inhabitants, but presumably men travelling to, or through, Reading. It would also seem from these statistics that the press gang was mainly working in and around Reading and along the Bath Road, though much further than is generally accepted in accounts of the Impress Service. Colnbrook is some twenty-five miles from Reading and Kingston about thirty.





Judged by his surviving letters to the Admiralty, much of Burslem's time during the early months of 1762, was concerned with the apprehension of deserters, including arranging the return of those who had subsequently volunteered for the army - a tricky business since money was involved. Ships' records had to be searched to ascertain the details of when each man had joined the navy and what wages were owing. Set against this in the case of those who became soldiers, was the money expended by the regiment. The army expected to be reimbursed for feeding and clothing the men while they were in the regiment and for any bounties paid to them when they volunteered. If the deserters were 'discovered' by a soldier, constable or member of the public, the award paid to them would also be charged against the deserter's wages.

For three deserters who surrendered at Abingdon, Burslem paid £28 2s to Captain Samuel Ellwood of the 113 Regiment - money which would be paid back to Burslem by the Navy Board and then stopped from the men's wages. In the case of John Green, alias Gum, subsistence of 6d per day for the period 21 November (when he joined the Black Rangers) to 7 March (when he was released by the army) amounted to £2 11s 6d. A bounty of £7 7s had also been paid.[15]

Deserter, volunteer or pressed man, all could incur expenses which would be set against their future earnings. Phillip Thompson, a landman pressed in June 1761 was provided with clothing worth 13s 2d:

| | |
|---|---|
| a pair of trousers | 3s 6d |
| a shirt | 4s 0d |
| a pair of stockings | 2s 2d |
| a pair of shoes | 3s 6d |

On 7 November Burslem sent his last group of men, five volunteers and thirteen pressed men, to *HMS Royal Sovereign* at Portsmouth in the care of Lieutenant Gordon. By the 18 November Burslem had broken up the rendezvous, discharged his gangs and two of the lieutenants; Lieutenant Cunningham was yet to return from Abingdon. Two problems remained: what to do about James McQuin, a volunteer seamen who was ill of a fever, and James Garney, a seaman who had volunteered only a day or two before Burslem had been ordered to close the rendezvous.[16] At his own request McQuin was discharged and Garney was taken to the regulating captains in London. With his final letter, posted on 21 November, Burslem returned the press warrants belonging to himself and his lieutenants.

Was it all worth the expenditure of time and money? With hindsight and without information as to the whole picture, it does not seem so. Although it is not possible

to calculate the cost per head of man recruited, nationally or for Reading alone, a glance at a list of the usual costs is enlightening:

Travel expenses for the regulating captain and lieutenants to Reading
Wages of regulating captain, two or three lieutenants and their press gangs, and a clerk Subsistence costs for the press gangs
Subsistence costs for the volunteers and pressed men while at the rendezvous or in transport
Hire of a room for the rendezvous and for the gaol (perhaps free)
Occasional hire of carriage or stagecoach to carry recruits to London Hire of horses for the regulating captain and lieutenants
Bounties paid to volunteer seamen and landmen
Rewards and travelling expenses paid to constables and others bringing seamen to the rendezvous.
Rewards paid for information given as to whereabouts of 'secreted' seamen

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5 ADM 1/141 Captains' Letters, Captain Allison, 1756. The story of Captain Thomas Allison in Reading is told almost entirely from these letters.

6 The following two books have been used extensively for background information about manning the Royal Navy during the Seven Years' War:
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ADM 3/63 Admiralty Minutes, 15 February 1755,
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7 ADM 2/75 Secretary's Letter Books, pp 38-40; Proclamations were regularly printed in the *London Gazette*.

8 N A M Roger *The Wooden World* (1986) p 170.







9 The proclamations encouraging seamen and landmen to enter the navy gave details of acceptable ages.

10 The reference to Loddon Bridge was misinterpreted by Hutchinson who wrote *The Press Gang Ashore and Afloat* (1913). There was no law or instructions to regulating captains confining pressing to the lower classes, but it was generally believed that being a property owner, businessman or member of the gentry exempted a man from being pressed.

11 *Reading Mercury* 22 May 1756.

12 ADM 1/1894 Captains' Letters, William Hamilton,
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13 ADM 1/1492 and 1/1493 Captains' Letters, William Burslem.

14 ADM 1/1492 Captains' Letters, William Burslem. A party of marines were eventually sent to guard the men on the journey;
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15 Altogether 18 men are named as deserters, all but three had enlisted in the army since deserting.

16 Burslem bad suggested that McQuin should stay in Reading under the care of a surgeon with provision of 6d a day for subsistence.


The Cenotaph 28 August 1919



# MAIDENHEAD'S TEMPORARY CENOTAPH

Brian Boulter

On 28th August 1919, the Maidenhead branches of two ex-servicemen's organisations celebrated 'Recognition Day'. There was a march-past for which an almost exact copy, 25 feet high, of the Whitehall Cenotaph was erected in the High Street, opposite the Bear Hotel. The event was covered extensively by the *Maidenhead Advertiser* and local photographers published sets of postcards. Research into the day and the memorial has revealed a unique Maidenhead occasion and has examined the evolution of what was commemorated as 'Armistice Day', locally and nationally, until 1939.

Although the armistice marking the end of the first World War came into effect at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, 1918, it had been widely anticipated. The *Maidenhead Advertiser* commented that 'the usual visit of the Mayor and Corporation to the Parish Church on Sunday (10th November) was even more historic and memorable ... for it chanced to fall on Armistice Sunday'.

The mayor received a telegram at 9 am on Monday 11th November confirming that the armistice had been signed. At 10 am he raised the union jack on the Guildhall and ordered the church bells to be rung. At noon he appeared on the Guildhall steps to announce the good news. The public houses were 'besieged' and there was dancing in the street, followed by a torch-lit procession in the evening.

At their next meeting, the Town Council resolved that it should consider 'the desirability of erecting a permanent memorial to those citizens of Maidenhead, Cookham and Bray who lost their lives in the Great War'. A public meeting was called in January 1919 but so few attended that it was postponed and re-advertised for a later date. Even then, only 40 members of the public were present and the organisers were particularly disappointed that mothers and widows had not come to give their views. Four options were proposed. The Council favoured a Memorial Temple or Cross, in finest granite or marble, designed by a leading architect and erected in a prominent position. The representatives of ex-servicemen were more interested in the welfare of the survivors. They wanted a Haven of Rest for the incapacitated or a hostel for nurses who would care for them at home. The headmaster of Maidenhead Grammar School suggested a scholarship-endowment fund for

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Although the armistice marking the end of the first World War came into effect at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, 1918, it had been widely anticipated. The *Maidenhead Advertiser* commented that 'the usual visit of the Mayor and Corporation to the Parish Church on Sunday (10th November) was even more historic and memorable ... for it chanced to fall on Armistice Sunday'.

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servicemen's sons. It was decided to set up a memorial fund and to ask donors to express their preference for the schemes.

The prolonged negotiations to end the war concluded with the signing of the Treaty of Versailles on 28th June 1919. On his return the Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, ordered that Saturday 19th July be celebrated as Peace Day. He sent for Sir Edwin Lutyens and asked him to design a temporary saluting-base for Whitehall. Lutyens proposed a 'cenotaph', a memorial to those buried elsewhere. It was constructed of wood and plaster, and bore the dedication 'To the Glorious Dead' proposed by Lloyd George. When the march-past was over a vast crowd of mourners visited the Cenotaph to pay their respects and surrounded it with a carpet of flowers twelve feet deep. The probable reason for this lies in the decision which had been taken early in the war, to bury those who died in cemeteries close to where they fell. Consequently there were no local graves at which relatives could mourn. The Cenotaph provided a focus for their grief. In its report on the ceremony, *The Times* insisted that the memorial 'ought undoubtedly to be rebuilt in a permanent form'.

Peace Day in Maidenhead was less impressive. The *Maidenhead Advertiser* scathingly reported that 'considering the unpreparedness and apathy of the governors of the borough, the scanty backing given to the committee in charge and the consequent lack of enthusiasm, enterprise and energy, it equalled anything that can be expected of Maidenhead in its modern disunited and unambitious mood'. It had been hoped that the day would begin with a march-past by ex-servicemen, but their two organisations declined the invitation. The 'Comrades' (Comrades of the Great War) objected to the mayor taking the salute rather than a military officer. The 'Federationists' (Federation of Discharged & Demobilised Soldiers & Sailors) refused in protest at the fact that pensions and other matters were still unresolved. The Comrades eventually decided to stage their own march around the town and some Federationists joined them. Their parade was arranged too late to be included in the published programme and it was watched with surprise by onlookers. In the afternoon, children were given a tea at their schools and then marched to Kidwells Park where there were sports and a fun fair. The mayor read out a message from the King, and gave out 15s 6d Savings Certificates on behalf of the Maidenhead War Orphans





Fund. Subsequent events were marred by increasing drizzle and there were only six or seven entries for the fancy dress competition. The Maidenhead Town Silver Band had to change its repertoire to dance music when the second band failed to turn up.

A Mr Charles James Reynolds wrote to the *Maidenhead Advertiser* to express his indignation at the Council's ineptitude. He criticised the decision to give the children their tea at 3 pm, saying it was too soon after lunch. He had heard that the margarine used for the bread and butter was scarcely edible and that the tea was stewed. Each child had been given two free tickets for fairground rides but he understood that paying customers had been given preference. In all he thought it was a penny rate poorly spent.

The issue of the *Maidenhead Advertiser* which reported the events of Peace Day also included a letter from representatives of the Comrades and Federationists stating that they proposed to organise a 'Soldiers and Sailors Recognition Day' on Thursday 28th August 1919, for which they hoped employers would release men at 1 pm. The letter did not indicate whether this had been planned before or after Peace Day but if before, it may explain why the ex-servicemen had refused to take part in it. Recognition Day was to be organised on the lines of the celebration held after the South African War.It was to be for men from Cookham and Bray as well as Maidenhead, possibly numbering 1,200. The estimated cost was £400 which would be met from donations and gifts. It would have no connection with the town council or the rates. A Joint Committee was set up and the following week it reported that it had already received over £200, and that one supporter had offered to provide the artistes and defray the costs of the concert.

By contrast, the Maidenhead War Memorial Committee found donations coming in very slowly, a shilling or two from individuals, a guinea or two from firms and institutions. Less than £1,000 had been contributed - not enough for any of the proposed schemes. It was therefore decided to economise by having the Borough Surveyor design a simple memorial cross. Nine possible sites were 'fully and impartially explained' to the committee by the Borough Surveyor, and two were proposed for adoption. One involved placing the cross on a 15 foot mound on Maidenhead Moor. This is a public open space which often floods. It was suggested that the memorial would look particularly dignified when surrounded by water on moonlit

nights. The alternative was the garden next to the public library. The latter site was chosen by nine votes to eight.

The Joint Committee responsible for organising Recognition Day was having a busy time. Mr G Baker, a local restaurateur and caterer and former Quartermaster Sergeant, advertised for 100 willing workers, paid or voluntary - and also for the loan of portable boilers and coppers. On the day before the event, local builders began to erect the replica of the Whitehall Cenotaph under the supervision of the Borough Surveyor. This took longer than anticipated, and on the great day it was still 'crude and incomplete'. The


The Moor, Maidenhead

'boys' were under orders to fall-in at 2 pm but this had to be delayed for an hour to give time for the workmen to finish painting the memorial.

Eventually the parade got under way. It was led by the band of the 19th Hussars and the sound of their approach was the signal for the workmen to remove their ladders and for the guard of two marines and two soldiers to take up their positions with arms reversed. The large crowds had to be held back as the parade went past the cenotaph. First came those in uniform, then civilians with their medals, led by the Comrades own band. They were followed by open motor cars and a British Traction Company bus from the





local garage all gaily decorated and carrying those who could not march After saluting their fallen comrades at the cenotaph, the parade made its way

The Parade passing the Cenotaph

through the town, singing cheery war songs and 'other stranger ditties'. The parade ended at Kidwells Park, where there were races and competitions for the men, their children and the orphans, whilst the band of the 19th Hussars played. There were two competitors for the One-legged Race (no false limbs). To loud cheers, the winner managed to hop to the finishing line. The other had to sit down. The *Maidenhead Advertiser* reporter thought it 'a pathetic as well as a novel event'.

After the sports, and well behind time, the parade reformed and marched via the cenotaph to the Cricket Field where four huge marquees had been set up.. There the 2,500 men consumed 1,300 Ibs. of roast and cooked meat, half a ton of potatoes, 3,500 fruit tarts, 3 cwts. apples, washed down with two

pints of beer a head, all served by 200 waiters. Afterwards, their lady friends joined them for entertainment provided by London artistes. At 10 pm a star shell signalled the start of the fireworks, ending with 'Good Night' in letters of fire. The show was on a scale not seen since the coronation. Even then the day was not over, for the departing revellers joined in a torchlight procession around the town. Thus ended what the *Maidenhead Advertiser* declared to be 'one of the happiest days in Maidenhead's history'.

Recognition Day appears to have captured the mood of Maidonians in the immediate post-war period, in a way which the official Peace Day celebrations had not. Many other buildings, even local buses, were decorated. The exception was the Guildhall, which only flew the union jack. This led the *Maidenhead Advertiser* to exclaim 'Ye Gods, One Flag'. Although the number of participants was twice what had been anticipated, much of the food was donated by local tradesmen and the increased costs were soon covered by donations. Unfortunately some of the cutlery disappeared but G. Baker proudly boasted of his feat in feeding the 2,500 in his advertisements for the next ten years.

On the following day, the cenotaph 'was more complete and like its original'. Also like the original, there had been a 'mass of wreaths and big bunches of flowers placed on the pedestal by sorrowing relatives in memory of the brave dead'. This made the War Memorial Committee wonder whether this should be the site for the permanent memorial. However the cenotaph was situated in the centre of the Bath Road, even then a busy main road. The committee therefore had to ask permission from Berkshire County Council and the Ministry of Transport to erect a memorial there.

At 11 am. on 11th November 1919, a two-minute silence was observed nationally at the request of King George V. In Maidenhead hundreds of persons assembled at the Cenotaph to pay their tribute to the dead, the silence broken only by the sobs of the bereaved. Afterwards, widows and mothers laid wreaths and flowers at the base of the memorial. On the following Sunday the civic service took place at the borough church, after which the new mayor and corporation processed to the cenotaph to pay their respects. The Editor of the *Maidenhead Advertiser* hoped that the mayor would take in hand 'the settlement of the long-drawn-out war memorial scheme'.





Although Berkshire County Council replied within a few weeks, it was March 1920 before the Ministry of Transport gave their response. Both required alteration to the camber of the road, the County also wanted the memorial illuminated at night. The High Street has a slope from the Bear Hotel on the north to the former offices of the Maidenhead Gas Company on the south. There was no explanation as to why this was considered to be so important. In April, the Borough Surveyor reported that he had taken levels but did not see how the road and pavement could be altered without affecting the Gas Company. It was therefore decided to revert to the original choice for the memorial site, next to the public library .In the meantime the cenotaph would be renovated by the borough surveyor, and eventually removed at the public's expense. The *Maidenhead Advertiser* commented that the decision had been taken 'after an almost unseemly delay, and jangling over sites and designs'.

Once the decision had been made, work proceeded steadily, The council had to prepare the site and erect the cross as funds were still short. It was not ready for the armistice day service on 11th November 1920. This was held in Grenfell Park and arranged by the Boy Scouts' Association. In London, the stone cenotaph in Whitehall was unveiled and the Unknown Warrior laid to rest with full military honours in Westminster Abbey. There was no ceremonial at the Maidenhead Cenotaph, but during the morning many laid flowers and wreaths and chose to observe the two-minute silence there. A larger crowd assembled in the evening to hear the 'Last Post' sounded.

Maidenhead's war memorial was unveiled by Lord Desborough, High Steward of the borough on 5th December 1920. Soon afterwards, the temporary cenotaph was removed. It was proposed to mark the site by an iron plate in the road, and to erect a commemorative tablet on a building opposite. Whether this was ever done is unrecorded but no such markers are there today. Originally intended to be removed after Recognition Day, it had survived for well over a year.

On 11th November 1921, the armistice day service was held at the War Memorial. By then the British Legion had been formed by the Comrades and the Federationists combining with an ex-naval organisation. This was the first occasion on which poppies were sold in aid of the Earl Haig Fund, set

up by the Legion to relieve the hardship caused by inadequate treatment of ex-servicemen by the Ministry of Pensions.

Maidenhead was by no means the only place to have a temporary war memorial. The database of war memorials set up by the Imperial War Museum has records of five others, although as they have pointed out, this type of record is elusive. The Northamptonshire Association for Local History has confirmed there was a wooden structure 'resembling Lutyens' timeless masterpiece' near the Central Library in Northampton. D Boorman, in his survey of British First World War memorials, mentions others. That in Liverpool was not replaced by a permanent structure until 1930, severe unemployment in the city delaying an appeal. Gloucester was unable to raise funds for a memorial until 1933, when the next conflict was nearly upon us.

Recognition Day, however seems to have been a unique Maidenhead occasion.

**Sources and acknowledgements**

The principal sources for this account were the *Maidenhead Advertiser* and the printed minutes of Maidenhead Borough Council and its Committees. Both are available in the Local Studies Room of Maidenhead Library - and I thank the staff there for their help .

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I thank Jane Anner, Project Assistant UK National Inventory of War Memorials, Imperial War Museum (iwm.org.uk), for answering my enquiries.

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ISBN are given where they are known. As usual, unless stated, most items listed are available in Reading Local Studies Library. Some items are available in the main libraries in the other Unitary Authorities in Berkshire, or in the library of Berkshire Record Office.