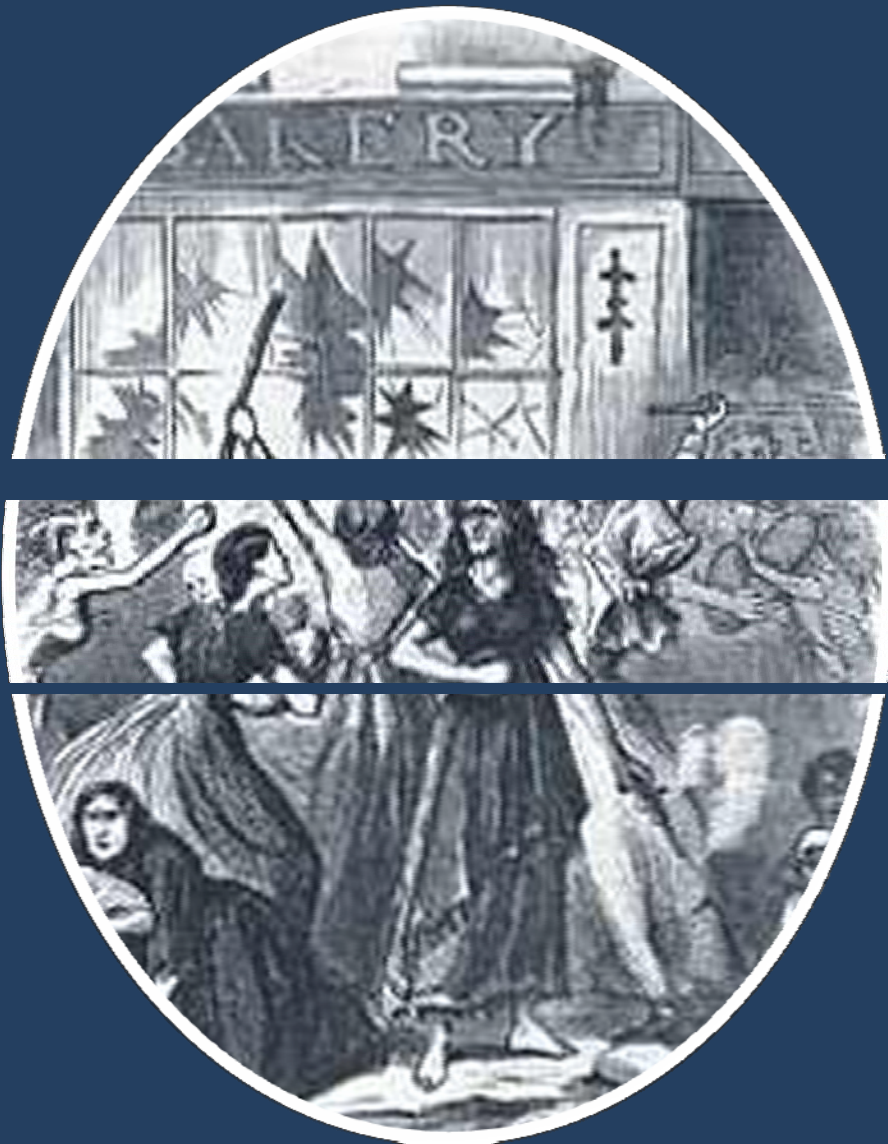


LOCAL STUDIES EDUCATION SERIES

THE BREAD RIOTS



CIVIL UNREST IN 1847 AND 1867

"At this point a desperate fight was sustained for some time, in which some terrible blows were given and taken."

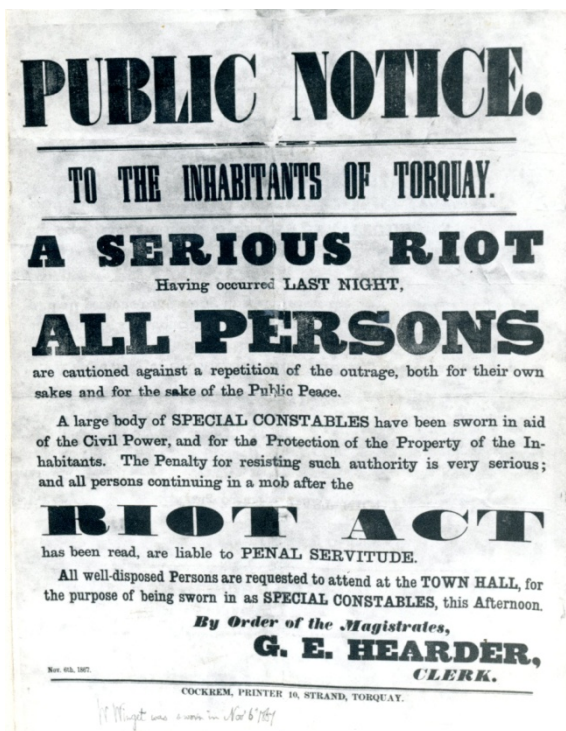
- The Torquay Directory and South Devon Journal
Wednesday, 13th November, 1867

In 1846 the potato crop failed and there was a poor harvest, resulting in the price of bread rising steeply, and this, in turn, led to a feeling of discontent. Ultimately rioting broke out across Devon, including in Torquay. On 17th May, 1847, bakers' shops and flour stores were attacked and plundered as angry men and women, many of whom lived in poverty in George Street, Swan Street and Pimlico, swarmed up and down Union Street and on to The Strand before heading back up to Torre. The rioters were aided by a decision of the town's commissioners (the councillors of the day) to economise on gas lighting by removing the burners and lanterns for the summer months, and so they were able to move more freely in the dark. Their main targets were those bakers who were thought to have sold underweight bread or refused to give credit, but some shopkeepers, like Henry Bowden, resisted and threatened to shoot anyone who attempted to enter his premises.

The crowd was eventually confronted by two local magistrates, Mr March Phillipps and Mr Vivian, backed up by a posse of constables and tradesmen, and after the Riot Act was read, several prisoners were escorted to the town hall

and locked up. The following day a party of navvies, who were working on the new railway line, marched into town to free those of their comrades who had also been arrested. After a tense stand-off their leader, James Hart, was seized and armed coastguards and forty members of the 5th Fusiliers, newly arrived, helped restore order. The prisoners were taken by ship to Exeter for trial after the discovery of a plot to rescue them should they have been taken by road.

Of the twenty-nine men who appeared in court most were discharged on their own recognizance of £10 (about £340 today), while twelve of their number were sent down for varying lengths of time. One, Daniel Stockman, a cabinet maker, who had confronted a baker, Mr Butland, over the weight of a loaf of bread he had bought on the morning of the riot, was sentenced to six weeks for his part in proceedings. Later in the day, another, James Hart, was given fourteen days. But overall it was thought that they were treated leniently, the *Western Times* commenting that, "Severe sentences would have excited feelings of commiseration for the culprits."



1867 : The Riot Act [b]read again

There cannot be that many towns and cities in the country that have had the Riot Act read at all on their streets, let alone twice, as is the case with Torquay. It was proclaimed again on the night of 5th November, 1867, after the town had erupted with a bread riot that was far more confrontational and violent than the events of twenty years before.

That year had started off on a radical note when on 1st January, a huge march in favour of the Reform Act (which was intended to extend the franchise in urban areas) processed through the streets of Torquay and joined a mass demonstration on Ellacombe Green. But if the town's gentry thought the local populace was content to merely air their views peacefully then they were in for a shock.

It was another sharp hike in the cost of bread that provoked a repeat of 1847, as on Bonfire Night bakers' and butchers' shops were smashed open, broken into

and looted, and it was reported that, "The mob in Lower Union Street had assumed formidable proportions, women bringing supplies of heavy stones from Ellacombe with which many serious wounds were inflicted." And when the same March Phillipps read the Riot Act again once more, this time he was jeered. Fierce fighting carried on regardless between the rioters and the police and personnel of the Volunteer Artillery, Rifles and Engineers and the magistrate himself received a nasty head wound. During the mayhem a certain Josiah Chudleigh slipped away and over to Livermead to try and to cut the gas main to plunge the town into darkness, but was apprehended before he could complete his work.

Although several prisoners were taken, many were freed again, often by women. "In fact, all through the night the women appeared to be the most active in inciting rioters to deeds of violence," said one newspaper report. And even the policemen who had infiltrated the crowd with a brief to identify ringleaders thought it prudent to quietly leave the scene.

The arrival of fully-armed coastguards, three hundred more special constables and a detachment of Yeomanry Cavalry helped tip the balance in favour of the authorities, and the town was quiet again by the early hours of the following morning, though minor incidents occurred until 11.30 the following night. But Torquay would never be the same again for the more genteel of its residents.

- The Riot Act (1714) could be read by local magistrates to a crowd of twelve or more. It was formally called, "An Act for preventing tumults and riotous assemblies, and for more speedy and effectual punishing of the rioters."
- Many South Devonians escaped grinding poverty by scraping the fare together (£3.10sh. for adults and £1.10sh. children) and boarding the *Elizabeth*, *Isabella* and *Margaret*, ships taking emigrants from Torquay Harbour to America and Canada.
- On 26th August, 1863, the remains of a young man were discovered in a shallow grave above Torre. It is thought that he may have been killed during the rioting of 1847. The following year two more skeletons of men were dug up in Babbacombe Road. It is not known if they were also victims of the riots.
- You can read full contemporary reports about the riots in the Torquay and Tor Directory for Friday, 21st May, 1847, and the Torquay Directory and South Devon Journal of Wednesday, 13th November and Wednesday, 27th November, 1867, at Torquay Library.

This leaflet was produced in collaboration with Torquay Library Local History Group, with particular thanks to Jack Critchlow. If you are interested in joining the group, please speak to a member of staff.



Further research on local history

Torre Abbey, TQ2 5JE
01803 293593

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www.torre-abbey.org.uk

Brixham Heritage Museum, TQ5 8LZ
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The Museum records, preserves and promotes the story of historic Brixham and its people with a host of exhibits, education programmes and archive resources.

www.brixhamheritage.org.uk

Torquay Museum, TQ1 1HG
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Find out about local wildlife, famous people and Torquay through the ages. The museum houses a variety of temporary exhibitions throughout the year. The Agatha Christie Memorial Room documents the history behind the famous crime writer.

www.torquaymuseum.org

Torbay Civic Society

The Society promotes public appreciation of the beauty, history and character of Torbay and its surroundings and is responsible for installing the blue plaques in our area.

www.torbaycivicsociety.co.uk

