

Rebecca riots

Sociology, Poverty



They attacked the toll gates because they were tangible objects in which to release frustration. However many Rebecca incidents were regarding dire poverty and general economic conditions in the countryside and not about tolls. The origin of the name Rebecca comes from a biblical quote, "And they blessed Rebecca and said to her thou art our sister, be thou mother of thousand of millions and let thy seed possess the gate of those which hate them." (Genesis 24: 60). The people saw this as a sign for action against the turnpike trusts.

The other origin for Rebecca came from the accepted leader of the first protests Thomas Reese who wore women's clothing when leading the attacks to disguise himself. He was a large man and it's said he borrowed the clothes from a lady named Rebecca. The consequences of the attacks would be serious such as transportation, so the men knew they had to hide their identity during the attacks. The turnpike trusts were created by private acts of parliament. Their purpose was to upgrade specific stretches of road and they were authorized to levy tolls in order to repay their subscribers.

The toll gates were increasingly popular in England and Wales. Money was collected to maintain the roads but a number of trusts kept profits for themselves ; many trusts were inefficient and neglected roads. Turnpike trusts were a particular burden for the tenant farmers and the farm workers because of the high toll charges demanded from them when traveling to market. They were forced to pay more than once over a short distance where the roads of the trusts interlinked. In Leamington there were 11 different Turnpike Trusts operating around the town, there were several gates in Leamington and Swansea as well.

Document 10 is an extract from David Howell a Welsh academic historian from his book "The Rebecca Riots". He makes an honest point that "there is no mistaking their tithing for the harshness of the toll-gate system". The tenant farmers were oppressed by the English toll renters, the most reviled was Thomas Bulling. The side bars were simple toll gates on the B roads. The side bars were detested "they saw the farmers hand in his pocket constantly in the course of just one short journey and so constituted an ever-present irritant", these side bars would catch any traffic the fees of the illegally erected toll-gates.

The fees would contribute to dire poverty because they had less money affecting their livelihoods, they would lose on their way to sell produce at market. Rebecca and her daughters took the law into their own hands and violently attacked the side bars leaving the "legal gates on the main roads intact". The area had no policing or local government to stop the injustice of the turnpike trusts, this is the reason for the many protests on toll gates which were unguarded. "They say there is not a bye-lane of any sort by which a cart can get to the lime-kilns which has not a bar or a chain across it.

They say if ever there is a lane by which one or two farmers can get to their farms without paying toll, an application is immediately made to the trustees to grant a bar on the lane". Document 3 by Thomas Campbell Foster, an executive journalist from the Times newspaper was searching for the root causes of the Rebecca riots. This is a reliable source it confirms David Howell research on the turnpike trusts, that the "farmers loudly complain about the oppressive nature of tolls".

The turnpike trusts were dishonest they gained money from the toll gates but did not attend the roads," they could continue to do this because Wales did not have a authorities who would oversee the injustice of the turnpike trust. This source highlights the oppression of the Turnpike Trusts who exacerbated the poverty. Document 2 from the Illustrated London news, the image shows men dressed as women with farming tools attacking toll gates which is valid. However this source is primary evidence, which means it can be exaggerated, it shows false information.

There are children present and some undisguised where they would usually have blackened faces and it's also taking place in daytime when it would be at night. The image further exaggerates the situation as it shows magistrates and gentlemen at the other side of the gates his may be because they were another grievance. Magistrates were a small elite group in society who charged any corrupt sentence they felt. Toll gates were attacked because they were tangible objects and nobody guarded them at night.

This source highlights the attention the Rebecca riots brought. This publicity was from London it was an achievement as the government could hear of the riots and poor living conditions in Wales. Document 4 is an extremely a well informed source from the cartoon punch 1843. It's a very popular contemporary magazine known for its humorous portrayal of political issues. This image shows the attack of the toll gates, with farmers dressed in omen's clothes with blackened faces carrying the torches and sticks.

The riot is taking place at night and engraved on the gate are several issues with caused the Rebecca riots. The grievances are church rate, tithes the

poor law and its union workhouses. On top of the gate are the faces of unpopular landlords or magistrates and on the building is the name " Robert Peel" a prime minister who introduced income taxes. Popular hatred" and this is a reason why the Rebecca riots looked like " no more than a violent outburst to the injustice of the turnpike system" but Union houses and almond weirs which distrusted fishing were also attacked.

Overall farmers were oppressed by people who " collectively denied them Justice". This source has the hindsight of the Rebecca riots it is an entry in the Welsh Academy Encyclopedia of WALES, published by the University of Wales in 2008. It will be a well researched source considerably valid used in higher education. Document 9 an extract from 'Modern Wales 1950' a general academic book, with valid secondary information. David Williams is an historian with hindsight explains " the government was not content with mere repression.

Largely because of the publicity even to the riots by The Times, three special commissioners were appointed in October 1843. " The times was read by the governing class and Journalist Thomas Campbell Foster captured the attention and importance of the Rebecca riots through his researched reports. The publicity caused the authorities to try relieve the grievances and they feared backlash if nothing was helped. " The commissioners analyses the general causes underlying the riots and in particular, exposed the abuses of the turnpike system. Commissioners were sent to analyses the problems but they did not look into underlying causes. A legal system was introduced because the government had previously neglected the area allowing the

impressive turnpike trusts. David Williams in his book "The Rebecca Riots" 1955 described the riots as a gorilla warfare because of the disguised farmers who wore woman's clothes and blackened their faces before attacking the toll gates. David Williams an outstanding historian with a traditional and liberal point of view that argues the social structure is most important at a local level.

The traditional "social ladder" was instrumental as a catalyst to the rioting. He believes the riots would have taken place even without the oppression of the absentee landlords. Religion was of crucial importance as the the tenant farmers were non-conformists and the local squires above them were believers of the Church of England. It was the non conformist preachers who spoke of social and economic conditions in their congregations. Their words were justified in the bible read in the chapel, "let thy seed possess the gate of those which hate them. It was the chapel goers who started this burning fire. The actions of landowners led to poverty. This source calls the landlords "unsympathetic, culturally alien", this is because they no longer had paternal instinct to protect their tenants. They were absent landlords who moved because they were attracted to the political and social life in London separate from the tenant farmers. Rents were higher in Wales than the whole of England. The landlords weakened the Welsh economy spending their wealth outside Wales.

Document 10 states that "Rebecca was concerned at the high rents paid by farmers to their landlords and it's likely that had the latter made timely reductions the riots would not have occurred". The everyday pressures on

the farmers and struggle to cope financially in life were the main reasons for fury in the Replicates. Source ten states " landlords were retests were not enough and that's why Rebecca had to make a scene and use their traditional methods like Chiefly Preen to take their frustration out on landlords.

David Howell book, " In land and people in 19th century Wales" in 1977, provides a detailed examination of the character of land holdings, regulations of ten year and farming techniques. Framing techniques were backward because the tenants were insecure on their land and didn't know if they would be evicted after a year. The book argues that the riots were orchestrated by non-conformist radicals against the local landlords and absent landlords who are higher in the social anarchy. David Howell implies that the situation is a type of class warfare where it's the peasant farmers in rivalry with landlords.

His Marxist beliefs and critical of wanting a fair society, blames absentee landlords as well as local landlords for the breakdown in the paternal caring system which has been tradition for centuries in Wales. Absentee landlords increased local landlords rents who then further passed the burden onto the peasants. The Chiefly Preen (the wooden horse) tradition started before the sass's as protest due to the atrocious living conditions the people lived in. The roots of the Rebecca riots an be seen in Chiefly Preen where the people would use this as a way of frightening and humiliating someone who had offended the community's values.

The men dressed as women and blackened their faces carrying a mock of the unpopular person without having to resort to seeking the help of the authorities. Source E is a poster issued payable LEWIS GROWER the local landowner following the attack on the salmon weir on the river TOEFL at Lechery in Garnisheed from Castle- Amalgam, 24th July 1843. The landowner presents a threatening notice " Being informed that the people, styling themselves Replicates, were assembled on Lechery Bridge, on Tuesday night, the 18th July, with the declared intention of destroying the SALMON WEIR".

Being a landowner with money he is unaware of how affected the farm laborers were by this restriction to their way offood. The Rebecca rioters attacked salmon wires because they belonged to the landowners and they were also tangible objects. " That upon the commission of any such aggression upon that, or any other part of my Property whatsoever, or upon the Property of any of my Neighbors in the District, I will immediately discharge every Day Laborer at present n my employment; and not restore one of them until the Aggressors shall have been apprehended and convicted. These people did not care about the underlying grievances of the people, Just saw it as them committing criminal acts. He was even willing to put his own laborers out of a Job to catch the people who attacked the salmon weir. There was no sympathy they only looked to protect themselves. There were big social divisions between the gentry and the small tenant farmers which contributed to the riots. Laborers who worked on the land. The gentry tended to belong to the Church of England and spoke English.

They often served as local magistrates or were Poor Law officials or belonged to Turnpike Trusts. They fixed the poor rate, the tolls and the tithes, they were unjust people. They had little in common with those who worked on the land and often made decisions that suited their own Document 7 is extremely useful primary evidence of Mary Thomas a tenant farmers wife to the Commission of Inquiry 1844. This lady represents the working people in West Wales at the time of the Rebecca riots. She explains that tithes were very high, " we paid E. 82 in January last.... N 1842 we paid E. 54 this is the receipt eleven years go we paid E. 50". Mary Thomas was a respectable woman she was clever with financial matters keeping the receipts as evidence of the forever rising rents. The last time she had tithe to pay she could " only make up seven sovereigns which she could to squire Thomas agent but he refused to take them... Till I could sell something. " There was no sympathy for the hard times, stock for tenant farmers was very low and they were struggling. " I have nursed 16 children and never owed a farthing that I did not pay in my life. This woman has budgeted her money all this time for herfamilyto survive the hardships. Nor can I or the children go to church or chapel for the want of decent clothing", she feels ashamed to even attend the chapel that she is paying such high tithes to because she is ashamed of the clothes her family have to wear. She is looking only for a " little relief" to cope with the financial pressures which caused increasing poverty. This woman would have been taken very seriously, she has genuine grievances presented to the gentlemen.

Her evidence provided is reliable because she has receipts to back up her evidence. Religious factors also contributed to the hardships. Landlords were

the members of the Anglican church and mostly spoke English, when eighty percent of the population of west Wales was Welsh speaking. The area of west Wales believed in non-conformity. Which was the refusal to accept or conform to the doctrines of the Church of England. Document 6 explains how "The tithes and church rates were still detested by the chapel members who had to make payments to the Church of England. This is because income of tenant farmers was further reduced because of the tithes they had to pay. Tithes were originally payments made for the support of the parish church, these payments were made in kind, for example crops or wool. Tithes were paid to the Anglican Church in almost all Welsh parishes once a year. In 1836, an Act was passed replacing payment in kind by a money payment that was fixed by the vicar or sometimes by the local landowner. They resented having to pay tithes to a church that was not their own.

Another cause for discontent was the new Poor Law set up in England and Wales in 1834. Document C is from Neil Evans an honorary research fellow from the School of History and Archaeology in Cardiff University. This source is an historic news report on BBC website, it quotes "Under the new system, if you did not have enough money to support yourself you had to go into one of the new workhouses where conditions were to be worse than the worst paid laborer outside". The rioters attacked workhouses as well as tollgates. The law meant that poor relief was no longer paid to the able-bodied poor. Instead, they were forced to live in a workhouse where conditions were deliberately made harsher than the worst conditions outside, this was called the workhouse test because the government believed that the cause of

different parts of the workhouse. The poor were made to wear a uniform and the diet was monotonous. There were also strict rules and regulations to follow. Inmates, male and female, young and old were made to work hard, often doing unpleasant jobs such as picking oakum or breaking stones. Children could also find themselves hired out to work in factories or mines. In the past, they had often given food and goods to the poor but now they were expected to pay for building the hated workhouses. This meant paying rates and they had little spare cash". The workhouses persecuted the poor, families were split up husbands separated from wives and their children. The farmers believed the system was cruel and expensive. This source has very useful information about the workhouse conditions. It is reliable because he is an academic historian and has valuable hindsight on the Rebecca riots. His research aims to inform and educate the public as it's in a BBC report.

Abject poverty was the main grievance of the people of west Wales. It was distress and semi-starvation which led the country people to march under the banners of Rebecca. Source A explains " The attacks on the toll-gates were almost accidental. The main cause the mischief is beyond doubt the poverty of the farmers. " The people had become dissatisfied at every tax and burden they have been called upon to pay, it was too much pressure and it was impossible to cope. The tolls were undoubtedly an unjust imposition this was the breaking point " which has fanned this discontent into a flame".

Thomas Campbell Foster, a Journalist sent to report on the Rebecca riots, writing in an article in the London newspaper, The Times (26 June 1843)

studied the livelihoods of the people and delivered honest feedback of their main reasons for the rioting which was more than the injustice of the turnpike system it was the deep rooted deprivation. " In the most miserable part of SST Giles (a slum area of London), in no part of England, did I ever witness such abject poverty. These are living conditions which Foster describes.

Thomas Campbell foster empathetic with the people and contributed to the awareness of the Rebecca riots he was trusted by the people of West Wales and eventually helped the government set up the Commission of inquiry into the dire poverty and agitation in West Wales. " Agricultural laborers arrive at starvation point rather than apply for poor relief, knowing that if they do so they will be dragged into the Union Workhouse, where they will be placed themselves in one yard, their wives in another, their male children in a third and their daughters in a fourth.

Many people thought that the poor law was wrong as it humiliated and punished people who were poor through no fault of their own. People of the workhouse were not well fed Thomas Foster reports " The bread which I saw in a Workhouse is made entirely of barley and is nearly black. It has a gritty and rather sour taste. " The workhouses were like prisons for the poor. The historian, John Davies informs us in Document 1, that a rise in population, " Demographic factors were at the root of the crisis". This led to competition for land and insecurity which ruthless landowners used to their advantage.

Farmers constantly feared eviction if they were unable to pay rent. Most of the farmers in rented their land from wealthy landlords. The landlords were

arrogant wanted to make more money and started to reduce the number of smallholdings available to rent they then created larger farms that could only be rented at a much higher price. Poor harvests in 1837 and 1838 increased shortages and poverty. There was a good harvest in 1842, but this did not benefit because that was a year of economic depression, so industrial workers could not afford to buy agricultural goods.

Houses of the farm laborers were like mud hovels with no furniture they were cold and dire. Most had no beds just loose straw and rags which was extremely unhealthy. The laborers had peat fires a cheap and poor coal that filled the home with smoke. Source B is by James Rogers of Carpenter, a corn merchant, giving evidence to the Commission of Inquiry into the causes of the Rebecca riots (1844). This is primary proof of the continuous hardships the people faced. " In the year 1840, which was a very wet summer, nearly all the farmers had to purchase corn, either for seed or bread.

This distress has not been the result of one or two or three years, but a series of at least twenty. The value of the farmer's land and property has decreased in value while the rates, taxes, tithes and rent have been increased. This made the farmers very distressed. " To sum up, dire poverty had led to a serious situation in Wales. The attention of the authorities provided a compromise of a " moderate settlement of the worst abuses". The government eventually suppressed the Rebecca riots, using troops and the full force of the law. Some rioters were caught and sentenced to transportation.

Social notations gradually improved and the laws controlling turnpike trusts was amended eventually railway development eased the pressures of a growing population as farmers moved away in search of industrial employment. West Wales provided an easier market for produce and a safety valve for surplus population. People could move more easily to find work and this helped reduce pressure in rural areas for jobs. The ending of the Corn Laws in 1846, and attempts in 1847 to make the Poor Law more attractive also helped. " As a result Rebecca disappeared from view to become a proud memory of the Welsh heritage. " Hollies John