

Riots at Littleport and Ely.

By the transition from war to peace, a number of persons were thrown on the country without employment; work became scarce, and wages low. The manufacturers also were much depressed, so that many discontents broke out, not only in the manufacturing districts, but in various parts of the kingdom. At Wisbech, a riot was openly threatened, which was only prevented by the activity of the magistrates, and the prompt appearance of the three troops of yeomanry cavalry of Upwell, Whittlesea, and March, added to the organized assistance of between two and three hundred of the respectable and well disposed inhabitants, who volunteered their services to be sworn as special constables to act on an emergency. These measures so effectually paralysed all the intentions of the evil-minded and their emissaries, that no public disturbance took place, though a considerable number of bad characters, as well of the neighbourhood as from a distance, strayed into the town on the market-day, mixing with the populace in the streets and market, with every intention of exciting them to riot.

At Littleport the disorder broke out into actual riot, for in the night of the 22d May 1816, a desperate mob of men assembled there, and attacked the house of the Rev. Mr. Vachell, the rector, and also a magistrate ; he for some time resisted their endeavours at his door, armed with a pistol, but was overpowered by three men rushing suddenly upon and disarming him. His wife and daughters were constrained to make their escape, running nearly the whole of the way to Ely. The rioters then broke all the windows, and nearly demolished every thing in the house, burning all Mr. Vachells valuable papers and writings, and stamping his plate under their feet; they then proceeded to different shops in the town, and to the publicans' cellars, &c. helping themselves to money and liquors, without any one daring to oppose them. Elated with their present success; they then got a waggon and team of horses, and proceeded to Ely, taking with them every gun and other deadly weapon they could find. On their arrival at that city, they were joined by some of its refractory inhabitants, and demanded contributions from the houses and shops, besides extorting money from several persons, which was unavoidably assented to, and there was now every appearance of the most serious consequences ; even threats were thrown out of setting fire to the noble cathedral. The Littleport banditti, however, separated themselves, and returned to their own town, after liberating two of their confederates from prison, where they had been committed by the Ely magistrates. At length the riots were terminated, by the very spirited and active exertions of Sir Henry Bate Dudley, baronet, the Rev. Mr. Law, and the Rev. Mr. Metcalfe, the then acting magistrates, aided by a very respectable number of the gentlemen and inhabitants of Ely, and the Royston troop of volunteer cavalry, who, with a small detachment of the first royal dragoons sent from Bury, proceeded in a body to Littleport ; a severe struggle now ensued between them and the rioters, who had secreted themselves in different houses, armed with guns, with which they fired many shots at the military and civil power; one of the soldiers was severely wounded, whereupon the military received orders "to fire," and the man who had wounded the soldier was instantly shot dead, and another fell. When this took place, the rioters were completely disconcerted, and fled in every direction, but by the activity of the military and civil power, no less than seventy-three of them were immediately taken prisoners. Among them were several persons of some property and apparent respectability in life. Fifty guns and nine or ten long fowling pieces were taken from the rioters. Special assizes were appointed to be held at Ely in the beginning of June following, when Mr. Justice Abbott and Mr. Justice Burrough were associated with Edward Christian, esq. the chief justice of the isle in the commission, more than seventy prisoners having been committed for trial. The assizes lasted from the Monday until the following Saturday, when

- 24 were condemned, of whom five were left for execution and the sentence of the others mitigated.
 - 6 acquitted.
 - 10 were discharged by proclamation.
 - 36 were allowed to be set at liberty on producing bail for their good behaviour.
- 76 Total.

After this the district was restored to perfect tranquillity.

EXECUTION OF THE RIOTERS AT ELY.

At nine o'clock on Friday morning last, the Ordinary (the Rev. R. Griffith) performed his last religious offices in the gaol with the prisoners under sentence of death, and about half an hour after the great bell of St. Mary's tolled the signal, when *John Dennis, George Crow, William Beamiss, the elder, Thomas South the younger, and Isaac Harley*, were brought out with white caps on their heads, tied with black ribbands, and ascended a cart with elevated seats on each side, covered with black cloth, to be conveyed to the usual place of execution. Several of the Magistrates attended in person, accompanied by not less than three hundred of the most respectable inhabitants of the isle, on horseback, with white wands. All the peace officers, with additional ones sworn in special on the occasion, headed by Mr. Edwards, and three other chief constables, with their staffs of office covered with black crape, forming a large body, preceded and followed the melancholy procession, which was conducted without the necessity of any military aid.

The unhappy sufferers demonstrated the most sincere contrition, and signed an acknowledgement of the justice of their sentence, which they gave to the Ordinary before they left the prison, hoping that their fate would prove an example to the country, and deter others from the perpetration or such crimes for which they were about to die, and particularly their confederates, who had so mercifully escaped being made partakers in their sufferings.

The procession reached the place of execution about eleven o'clock, where a platform was erected, with a drop, which they ascended. The spectacle was awful and impressive on the surrounding multitude. When they reached the platform they knelt down severally, and prayed fervently for a considerable time; the Ordinary then went up to them and assisted them in their last devotions; after this John Dennis addressed the multitude as follows:

"All you who are witness in this my disgraceful end, I exhort you, in the name of God, that God before whom I must shortly appear, to avoid drunkenness, Sabbath-breaking, whoremongery, and had company : oh! beware of these sins. I pray you also to avoid rioting! and in every respect refrain from breaking the laws of your country! - Remember the words of the Judge, that tried us for the crime, for which, we are now going to suffer, who said 'The law of the land will always be too strong for its assailants, and those who defy the law, will, in the end, be subdued by the law, and be compelled to submit to its justice or its mercy.' - We stand here a melancholy example of the power and justice of the law. I freely forgive those who gave their evidence against me, and may the God of mercy forgive me, and have mercy on my soul!"

Harley and Beamiss also addressed the people to nearly a similar effect. - Harley said he died the death he expected; South confessed that his case could not have been pardoned; Crow denied any intention of murdering Mr. Martin, but was checked by Dennis who said - "Yes, yes, he would have been murdered if he had been found," - meaning by this that he saw the temper of the mob, which he declared that he had endeavoured to restrain; and he added, that he gave Mr. Martin warning to keep out of the way. Beamiss acknowledged his general guilt; but denied the words imputed to him.

The whole then prayed again for some time, when, on a signal given, the drop fell, and they were launched into eternity almost without a struggle.

After hanging the usual time, the bodies were put into coffins, and given to their respective friends for interment in St. Mary's Church-yard on Saturday.

The following is an authentic copy of their voluntary confession:-

"We your poor unfortunate suffering fellow creatures, beg leave to present the public with this our dying acknowledgement of the justice of that sentence, which has condemned us to die for the violent outrages we have committed, and hope it will be a warning to all, who may see, or hear of us, to avoid the like course. We acknowledge and confess our sins in general, and we must sincerely beg of God to pardon our sins fervently hoping and trusting that God Almighty will, for the sake of the all-atoning merits of the Redeemer, receive our precious and immortal souls into his favour, though we have delayed their interests to this late hour; most earnestly entreating that the Almighty may grant us all our sufferings in this world, and none in the next. We most sincerely warn you all to avoid those sins, which have been the cause of

bringing us here."

"By all means avoid irreligion and vice of every kind, particularly that of swearing, drunkenness, Sabbath breaking, and that of shameful neglect of the means of grace, the only means through the merit of Christ, of our soul's salvation. We sincerely recommend to you, that you attend the public worship of God, particularly on the Lord's day, and most sincerely pray that all our friends and relations will not put off their repentance to a death bed, lest that God, whom they have neglected to serve while in health and strength, should say unto them at last, as he does to every neglecter of salvation - 'Because I have called, and ye refused: I have stretched out my hands and no man regarded: but ye have set at nought all my counsel, and none of my reproof. I also will laugh at your calamity, and mock when your fear cometh.'"

" JOHN DENNIS

" W BEAMIS

"THOMAS SOUTH. X

"GEORGE CROW. X

"ISAAC HARLEY." X

In the presence of BENJ. BARLOW, Gaoler.

A true copy,

H. B. DUDLEY

HENRY LAW

Acting Magistrates for the Isle of Ely

Source: THE CAMBRIDGE CHRONICLE AND HUNTINGDONSHIRE GAZETTE FRIDAY 5 JULY 1816