

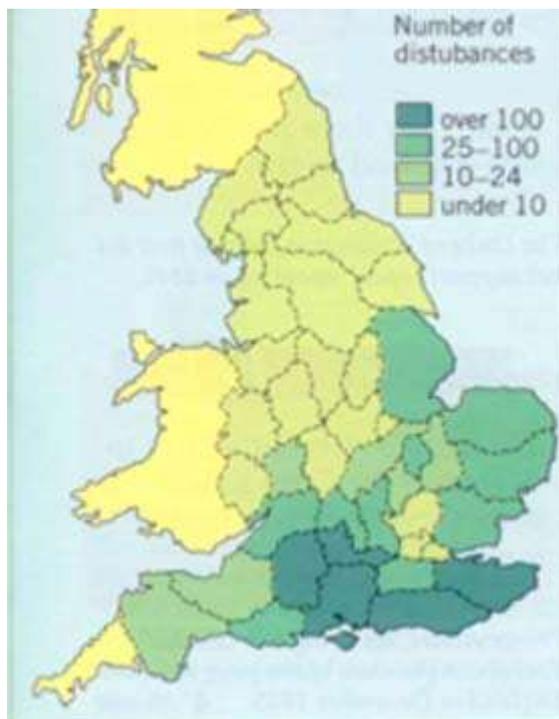
## Agricultural riots of 1820s and 1830s

Parliamentary Enclosure, which started in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century upset traditional rural society. In Wheatley, enclosure was complete by 1813. Enclosure led to a shift from the self-sufficient, open field villages to farms rented by tenant farmers employing labourers. Hiring was on a casual basis and no payment was given if no work was done. After enclosure it became more common for labourers to be paid by the day or week or by results, and to be employed for short periods for harvesting, hedging, ditching, threshing, and so on. 'Living in' disappeared. Farmhands were transformed into casual labourers with no guarantee of work. Pay declined because of the surplus of labour. Hiring for less than a year meant the unemployed could not claim on the Poor Rates.

During the Napoleonic Wars, the effects of enclosure were hidden by the boom in farming but this came to an abrupt end in 1815, when the boom turned into an acute and prolonged recession. The rural labour market was swamped by demobilised servicemen. The Speenhamland System (a method of giving relief to the poor, based on the price of bread and the number of children a man had) only gave relief and guaranteed a minimum wage, so labourers had no protection. There was no security because of short contracts and money wages.

The problem of pauperism was worst in the so-called 'Swing' counties of the south-east which included Oxfordshire, where enclosure had taken place on a large scale.

In the 1820s high poor rates led to increasing attempts to cut relief. Between 1815 and 1820 Poor Law expenditure was 12/10d per head, but by 1830 it was 9/9d. Reductions were made by making the Poor Law a deterrent and by stopping people asking for relief. This created a hatred of the Poor Law but it is also noticeable that between 1824 and 1830, rural crime rates increased by 30% - mainly poaching and food thefts. Pauperism, desperation and discontent were almost universal in agricultural areas. The map shows the incidence of disturbances with Oxfordshire in the second highest category, and probably at the upper end of this.



In summary, unrest rose over enclosures, voting rights and farm mechanisation. 'Mobs went around the country' wrote Great Milton's vicar, 'breaking threshing and other machines'. A mob of two hundred raided a Little Milton farm by night, destroying everything then extorting money and provisions from the family. At Wheatley and Waterperry, machines

were broken and hayricks torched. Wheatley/Cuddesdon workhouse (Littleworth) was small, but unemployment in a growing population meant no parish could afford its poor. 71 received various reliefs in 1832 alone.

Wheatley Chapelry in 1832 farmed out [privatised] its poor and their dole was cut. They had to prove they had applied for jobs. Itinerant workers were banned from local jobs. Anyone with gun or dog was excluded from relief. Attitudes hardened. In May 1834, fearing the worst, the Wheatley Overseers ordered a lockup (Keep) constructed – windowless, roofless and impenetrable. It was a monumental warning against revolt, but any rioters were locked up overnight before being taken to the court in Oxford in the morning. Across the country, there were nearly 2000 court appearances of which some 250 received the death sentence but most were commuted to ‘transportation’ along with 500 others who received this sentence, some 650 were imprisoned, and some 800 were bound over or acquitted.

The 'Swing' riots were the first large-scale demonstration of agricultural labourer's strength, although outbreaks were localised. Agitation continued, especially after the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act. There were no agricultural trade unions because jobs and therefore homes were at stake. The 'Swing' riots did influence the passing of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act and the 1836 Tithe Commutation Act, but wages and conditions did not improve. Average wages for farm labourers rose from 8/11d per week in 1795 to 9/6d per week in 1850, but real wages (i.e. how far the money went) declined. Agricultural labourers continued to be the worst paid, worst fed and worst housed of all the working communities