

London Riots

by Martin Thompson

The recent London riots have been a traumatic experience, particularly for those directly affected. And yet they are nothing new. When they kicked off and people started to get anxious, I expected them to ease off after a few days, as history has shown so many times in the past: riots and London are familiar bedfellows. I am sure many of us remember the Poll Tax Riots of 1990; the Brixton Riots of 1981 and even further back the Notting Hill Riots of 1958. These are all largely within living memory. However, there are many examples of riots through the ages which often arose out of perceived injustices which led to death and destruction in our city.

Besides the sacking of London by Boudicca, one of the first insurrections was The Peasants' Revolt, also called Wat Tyler's Rebellion, or the Great Rising of 1381. It was one of a number of popular revolts in late medieval Europe and a major event in the history of England. It was also one of the best documented. The names of some its leaders - John Ball, Wat Tyler and Jack Straw - are still familiar, although relatively little is known of them in detail. The revolt was precipitated by King Richard II's rather heavy-handed attempts to enforce a medieval poll tax, something which resonates in more recent history! The initial incidents began in Essex but in 1381 Kentish rebels formed behind Wat Tyler and marched on London arriving at Blackheath on 12th June. Meanwhile, the Essex contingent had arrived at Stepney. Among their demands were that some of the king's more unpopular ministers be dismissed and the effective abolition of serfdom. A group of rebels stormed the Tower of London and executed those found hiding there, including the Archbishop of Canterbury (Simon of Sudbury) and the Lord Treasurer (Robert de Hales). The rioters then proceeded to attack and destroy the Savoy Palace of the king's uncle, John of Gaunt. At Smithfield the following day negotiations with the king were arranged but did not go according to plan: Wat Tyler was killed. The rebel army was in uproar but the king defused the situation by promising that their demands would be met. However, after organising a militia of over 7,000 he broke his promise. Most of the leaders were pursued, captured and executed including John Ball and Jack Straw: the revolt collapsed. The king's concessions were quickly revoked.

Going forward, there were the May Day riots of 1517. These broke out due to resentment towards foreign merchants and craftsmen who had settled in London and were thought to be taking jobs from local citizens. Five hundred years ago Londoners believed what many still believe to be true today. The rioters, comprising mainly apprentices and minor clerics, were led by a man called John Lincoln. They roamed the streets attacking and burning houses and workplaces of foreigners from France, Italy, Flanders and the like. Troops were deployed and over four hundred rioters were arrested, including Lincoln. Many were hung, drawn and quartered.



Death of Wat Tyler from Froussart manuscript, 15C

In 1668 large numbers of apprentices attacked brothels throughout the city. Although it was common for the apprentices to "invade" the brothels in what was alluded to as high spirits, this time things became serious. If one casts one's mind back to this period, it was not long after the Commonwealth and there were still many of Cromwell's adherents who expressed disgust at what they perceived to be the debauchery following the return of the monarchy. Four apprentices were found guilty and hung drawn and quartered.

The Gordon Riots of 1780, which were initially anti-catholic in nature, descended into near anarchy. They were led by a fanatical anti catholic aristocrat Lord George Gordon. He intended to march on Parliament but the demonstration rapidly descended into a series of riots all over the city. The mobs attacked any place thought to be catholic-related including the homes of Catholics and chapels attached to foreign embassies, burning and looting as they went. For a number of days the rioting was out of control with most of the city's prisons, including Newgate, being destroyed and their prisoners released. It took the government more than a week to restore order by which time more than a thousand people may have lost their lives. A hundred and sixty rioters were arrested and twenty five were hanged. Gordon himself was merely gaoled.

In June 1855 riots broke out in protest against a proposed Sunday Trading Bill which sought to ban trading on a Sunday. However, most people worked from Monday to Saturday and was the only day in the week that they were able to purchase goods. Trouble started in Hyde Park and when the police tried to move people on, running battles broke out between them and the mob. It is interesting to note that Karl Marx was present as a reporter for a German newspaper

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and he is alleged to have thought, rather hopefully, that this was the beginning of the English Revolution.

Perhaps one series of disturbances which has something in common with recent events were the riots of February 1886. Radical socialists gathered in Trafalgar Square to protest against unemployment. Despite the possibility of violence the police preparations were woefully inadequate. District Superintendent Robert Walker was responsible for public order but was probably too old for the job and not particularly active. He managed to get himself lost in the crowd and had his pocket picked. After the speeches in the square were over the crowd left and headed to St James's and Piccadilly where they proceeded to smash windows and intimidate all they met. The police stayed put in Trafalgar Square, playing no part in stopping the rioters. The day was a fiasco for the police and the Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Edmund Henderson, who lost his job as a result.



The Gordon Riots, 1780.

London is a very old city and has weathered many such events. I'm sure that there will be more riots in the years ahead over some perceived injustice or other but she will survive as she has over countless centuries.

Source: *The Book of Lists: London* by Nick Rennison

About Martin Thompson

Martin is a retired HR Manager who lives in Hampstead. Born in Birmingham, he was raised and educated (BA(Hons) English and Drama) in Southern Africa. His particular interests are the history of Hampstead and its famous residents, topics which he'd like to turn into a book at some stage. Martin is a member of London Historians.