

BRANSCOMBE PROJECT – HISTORY SNIPS

AN 18th CENTURY BRANSCOMBE FACE-OFF

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Oh dear ... here we go again. Another spike: another lock-down. The first ushered in a most beautiful Spring, the second a wonderful colour-brushed Autumn... But, Winter – ah, that’s going to be tougher –

We’ve had to shield, and have kept ourselves occupied writing another Branscombe Project book. This one won’t fly off the shelves, but it’s dear to our hearts. Set in the second half of the eighteenth century and beginning of the nineteenth, it follows the fortunes of two local ‘characters’. ‘Squire’ Stuckey lives in his fine mansion at Weston. He owns a great deal of property and land, is a tough magistrate and, it’s fair to say, a misanthrope. When he dies, aged ninety-two, Thomas Puddicombe, the village parson, wrote in the burial register:

... He died possess’d of vast worldly property: which, after he had long possess’d, without enjoying and without using; he was, at length constrained to leave to others.

Stuckey died in 1810; fifteen years later, his mansion burnt down. It was, it seems, a case of arson. But who set it alight? You’ll have to read the book to follow our attempts to find out.

Parson Puddicombe, Stuckey’s sworn enemy, is our second ‘character’. A passionate evangelical preacher who rounded up his parishioners on horse-back and preached interminable sermons, his attempts to refurbish the church outraged later church historians. Kind-hearted, irrepressibly curious, irascible and autocratic. You either hated, or loved him.

Today, we’ll describe one moment in the story. It’s the turn of the century – the winter of 1801. The war with France is dragging on and it’s a time of great hardship. Harvests have been terrible, and the weather is atrocious. People in the village are starving,

men are being press-ganged into the navy, and magistrates are coming down hard on smugglers. The only people who seem to be profiting are the land-owners and farmers. The government is buying up wheat to provision the naval garrisons at Plymouth. Prices are rocketing, and some farmers are suspected of hoarding grain to force them still higher.

Close to Christmas the villagers stage a mini-riot, one of the earliest in the region. Although they're mostly illiterate, they manage to hammer out a proclamation. Rather amazingly, it has survived and is in the National Archives at Kew. We'll leave you to decipher it! –

***A Caution to Gentlemen and the Roags [rogues] of
Farmers***

*Gentlemen and Farmers we are now going to aqunt you, what you have to trust to, if in case you do keep us the rise of Corn and other things, in the manner as what you do, tho we shall not let you know our intentions on this paper, the Vollunteers and Inhabitians of this Place have entered in a bond, as to have better times, we write this now to aqunt you of it first and if not better with fair means, you may depend we shall with fowll, betwix this and Christmass day, to think the cruelty of you roags, to youse your fellow creatours in the maner as what you do tho we cannot own you as fellow creators, for you are more like saviges than any thing else to think you keep up such an extortnate Prise of every thing, and constantly every day rising, to be shore your own contions will show, that you will not be uphelded in it much longer, – young men and old woman and Children to starve quietly, to keep up your pride, no we will fight with sword and Muscate in hand, as long as we have a drop of blood in our bodys for ourselves and our dear wifes and families, likewise for his majesty, which we do think it his a better Methwood to do that than to starve quietly, so we shall conclude, hoping your hearts will turn that we may have casion to do this wish and Malencolly afar – if not you may depend that we shall come like a thiff in the night.
God save the King*

Probably during the night of December 10th some of the men creep down through the village. They're heading for the vicarage which, at this time, is at the bottom end of the Square, more or less opposite the Masons Arms. A long wall which encloses the parson's garden and orchards stretches behind the house down Parsons Lane. The men pitch their proclamation over the wall, with a note to the parson attached to it:

Mr Pudicombe Branscombe Sir we shold take it as a grat favour if you would read this in church on Sunday afternoon as you would oblidge the inhabitance of this place much is so doing we are your humble servt.

The parson is in a difficult position. On the one side are the land-owner and farmers - and the law -, on the other, the villagers for whom he has a lot of sympathy. He's also very aware that the farmers will find out who's involved and take revenge. He does what they ask, and on the following Sunday, reads out their proclamation in church. He also tries to warn them against taking further action. He then, sensible man, takes himself out of the village for a few days.

The villagers are not going to be stopped. The following day about a hundred people - probably men and women - 'armed' with pitchforks and scythes, plus a couple of local militia men armed with muskets, surge through the village, through Street, up Berry Hill, to Weston, where they thunder on the door of Stuckey's mansion. By this time, Stuckey's an old man, and lives more or less alone in the big house. He puts up some resistance to their demands, then capitulates and signs a paper commanding the local farmers to lower their prices.

The next day, of course, Stuckey recants and sends post haste to his fellow magistrate, Lord Rolle. Rolle who is also the commander of the local militia, dismisses those of his men who'd taken part. He's not about to give in to the 'mob' but, privately in

a letter to the Home Secretary, the Duke of Portland, he makes clear that he thinks the farmers are out of order –

.... from the inpolicy as well as impropriety of the farmers asking and taking truly extortionate prices for their grain vis 20s for wheat 11s for Barley 6s for oats I mean to reason as far as I can with all I can assemble together and use every persuasive argument to prevail on them to sell at a fair and just price.

Did he assemble the farmers? Did he get them to reduce their prices? We don't know. A couple of years later, during the short-lived Peace of Amiens, wheat prices did go down. But the reprieve didn't last long.

Rolle also made clear to the Duke that he thought Puddicombe's intercession left something to be desired –

On the conduct of the clergyman I shall leave to your Grace your own opinion I have mine.

No doubt Stuckey would have been in even more of a fury; but for the villagers it was a rare moment when someone 'in authority' showed some understanding and compassion for their plight.