

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in
Family & Community History on 10/04/15, available online:
<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1179/1463118015Z.00000000040>

DAVID ADAMS, *The Revolt and Taming of the 'Ignorant': A Study of the Bircham Riots 1835 and Their Aftermath*, Dereham: The Larks Press, 2013. ISBN 978 1 904006 70 1, £10.

The amendment of the poor laws in 1834 introduced harsher relief regimes for many across England and Wales. Parishes were encouraged to come together as unions with a view to making savings for the ratepayers, by restricting access to relief and by making economies of scale. Among other things, the new law was designed to prevent local landowners from benefitting from the 'Speenhamland' and 'allowance' systems whereby the wages of labourers were topped up by payments out of the poor rates. Such practices effectively meant that rural labour in many cases was subsidised off-season by public funds. From 1834, the intention was that it would be far harder for the able-bodied poor to claim relief in cash. Instead they could expect the workhouse or, in many places without workhouses, relief in kind.

For many labourers replacement of doles of money with bread or flour was an affront to their dignity and independence, and would reduce their economic circumstances. Poor law amendment was met with opposition in many quarters and in East Anglia and elsewhere labourers resorted to rioting and incendiarism. In the Norfolk village of Great Bircham labourers went on strike in the summer of 1835, in protest against relief in kind. Attempts to stop strike-breakers became violent and a crowd – perhaps numbering several hundred – broke windows, destroyed furniture and tried to burn down farmhouses. Inhabitants fled. The Bircham riots were among the most serious episodes of public disorder in the region at the time and had distinctive anti-poor-law features, but they can be seen in the context of a longer history of East Anglian disaffection: demonstrations, marching gangs, rick-burning, riots and machine-breaking appeared sporadically after the Napoleonic wars, through the 1820s and into the 1830s with Captain Swing and the new poor law, and continued into the 1840s.

David Adams carefully dissects the 1835 riots, tracing key players: landowners, farmers, labourers, rioters, magistrates, assistant poor law commissioners, police constables, parish overseers, soldiers and more. Meticulous archival research enables him to give a comprehensive account of the development of the strike, its eventual turn to violence and subsequent imprisonment of the ringleaders. Yet the analysis does not stop with the riots, and Adams also explores their impact on social relations

in the longer term. There was enmity between individuals who lived and worked in close proximity, in many cases employer and employee, but pragmatic attitudes to maintaining order were also in evidence. Local landowner Lord Cholmondeley, for instance, was concerned that the villagers should not be subject to what his agent described as ‘abrupt measures’. Adams also explores the impact of the new poor law, as the newly formed Docking union built its workhouse and began to administer a tighter relief system. As his title suggests, Adams sees the new regime as important in disciplining the poor and maintaining community relationships defined by deference.

The book contains a wealth of detailed research conducted in a range of archives including Norfolk Record Office and The National Archives, with interesting finds from Houghton Hall’s ‘cellar documents’. It is replete with names, places and dates which are handled confidently (though it is not always easy to keep track of genealogies) and Adams is adept at explaining national policy and the role of central government. This is an illuminating micro-study which keeps an eye on the wider context and the enduring effects of the disturbances.

DOUGLAS BROWN
KINGSTON UNIVERSITY