

Why was there an increase in crime in Gloucestershire by the early 1830s?

The 1830s was a tumultuous period of history within Britain; the Industrial Revolution was swiftly reaching its peak in Victorian Britain, and the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, ending in 1815, simultaneously triggered an economic slump which lasted through until 1830. Whilst Gloucestershire itself may seem isolated from the world of war and industrialisation, this area was in fact in the midst its own period of unrest and instability that peaked in the early 1830s. The increase of criminality can be attributed to several factors: economic hardship, poverty, implementation of harsh laws as well as technological advances. However, the crux of these issues that caused the inflated crime rates lies in the underlying socio-economic problems within the area that were exacerbated by the contemporary strains upon the common people's lives.

Firstly, it is crucial that we assess the socio-economic context of Gloucestershire in the early 1800s that should be held accountable for the increased crime rates within the area. This specifically refers to the volatile combination of a largely poor population forced to contend with a period of poverty, a frequent cause for increases in crime throughout history. The living and working conditions of the poorest inhabitants in the area were historically abysmal: much of Gloucestershire, especially the predominantly rural part of the county, was controlled by the landowning gentry, and whilst the wealthy lived in relative peace and comfort during this time period, those subservient to them lived in squalor and financial hardship, then slaved away in the fields for a pittance. There is no clear average income and expenditure from the 1800s, given that little has been recorded and the fluctuating nature of the data means that the information varies according to the area or time of year. However, it is estimated that between 1742 and 1808, the wages of a labourer (the main profession of those living in Gloucestershire) and their purchasing power decreased. Essentially, whilst their weekly pay increased by 83%, the price of wheat went up by 89%.

	7s. to 10	0
Common hurdles, each		5

Depreciation of Labourer's wages in purchasing power 1742-1808					
Period	Weekly pay		Price of wheat		Wages in pints of bread
	s.	d.	s.	d.	
1742-52	6	0	30	0	102
1761-70	7	6	42	6	90
1780-90	8	0	51	2	80
1795-99	9	0	70	8	65
1800-08	11	0	86	8	60

as sent by the Poor Law Commissioners in 1834 to 900 parishes in England the average weekly wages of labourers were—

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These statistics suggest that the economic position of most of the area's populace was already on the downturn before the depression had even started to emerge. This is consolidated by a statement made by one local in the late 1700s, Elizabeth Gillboy: "the labourer and craftsman in Gloucestershire barely held their own in general throughout the century, if their standard of living is made in terms of bread" – which, as the staple part of the local diet, aptly proves that their earnings were not simply not sufficient for providing for a family.

The end of the Napoleonic Wars and its economic repercussions were also sorely felt by those in the South West. The re-opening of the European ports, combined with good harvests in 1814 and 1815 resulted in grain saturation and a subsequent price slump made life difficult for those who worked in agriculture. This struggle was worsened by the sudden flood of demobilised men returning from war looking for employment. Whilst one would assume that the extra hands would be beneficial, it proved to be the opposite. The job market had decreased now that the military, which had been promoting sectors of the county's workforce, no longer required materials such as extra sail cloth and uniforms that Gloucestershire's weaving industry had been providing. The end of the war occurred at a most unpropitious time; not only did it deprive the labourers in Gloucestershire's few cities of jobs (Gloucester and Cheltenham being the two growing cities of significance), but a far greater, long-term threat to the stability of labourers was already underway – the agricultural revolution, where man was slowly to be replaced by machine. These two components increased the

level of unemployment in both fields of work, and given that this was occurring at the start of a fifteen year economic depression, many would have been thrown into financial uncertainty, eventually leading to more criminal activity.

With the economic situation in Gloucestershire already dangerously precarious by the early 1800s, any further misfortune would be the tipping point for the financially vulnerable – this unfortunate inevitability came into fruition between the years 1828 and 1830 in the form of a series of poor harvests. This became critical in 1829, as snow in October resulted in many being left hungry and out of work. We can infer that the strain of starvation and unemployment must have been unbearable, as it forced the poor to resort to brutal measures, using violence as a means of threatening farmers for scarce food items such as corn and seizing their houses to find much-needed resources. There were also cases of stolen bread being resold at reduced prices in order to make a little more money.

Another fundamental reason as to why these people were driven into crime was due to the lack of effective economic support within the area. The “poor law” was a parish-based relief system dating back to 1597/8, whereby an overseer per parish was responsible for aiding its poorest inhabitants, such as by providing them with food, fuel and clothing, finding them employment, and collecting the “poor rate”, a tax designed to aid people who were most in need of assistance. It’s antiquated origins and lack of systematic coordination between regions meant it was incredibly inefficient, as well as being unable to cope with rising pressures of industrialisation and the impact of war that inflated the number of paupers. The dual problems of an increasingly impoverished nation needing more poor relief as well as economic hardship provoked the initiative to cut relief support between 1820-1830, whereby the Poor Law expenditure fell from 12/10d to 9/9d in only ten years.

Of course, determining who exactly qualified as being truly in need of this pitiful amount of aid was a source of great contention. The difference between the “deserving poor” and those who were simply too “lazy” was not a debate exclusive to the towns and cities – many of the morally righteous blamed the “burdensome” conditions of the poor upon “alehouses”, as expressed by Samuel Rudder in the preface of his book from the late 18th century, “A New History of Gloucestershire” (see right). The implicit synonymity of “poor” and “idle” is seen within the text, and is accounted for by the “morally corrupt” alehouses considered to be the true source of criminal activity in Gloucestershire. Although there may have been drunkenness, as well as money wasted at these pubs, we must consider why these people were driven to behave in such a manner. The likelihood is that these labourers had no food at home to go to, and therefore sought solace in the alehouse when times were hard. It is also unlikely that the men were throwing away money on drink then leeching off the poor law, given the stigma that surrounded accepting the relief; this law was ultimately a deterrent designed to motivate people into earning their own wages, so they did not face the shame of being in the workhouse or receiving some type of benefit. Ergo, the root cause of the criminal discontent is in the intrinsically faulted socio-economic conditions, rather than any lack of moral virtue.

fields would be of no value, and that rents advance from labour and improved cultivation. If the poor are burthenfome, they should be relieved, and not extirpated. The industrious part of them are the most profitable members of the community; the idle should be reclaimed; but that will never be effected by penal laws, whilst our towns and villages swarm with alehouses. It is there they spend their time and money; there their morals are corrupted; there the sot, the poacher, the petty thief and highwayman are gradually formed; and to those seminaries of vice we chiefly owe the evils complained of among the lower class of people. Strike at the root of them; put down the alehouse, not the cottage, in your village; so shall you soon find the poor more industrious, more honest, and less burthenfome. This is a matter highly deserving the attention	' man well f ' blazoning fade in a lo stances the c appearance churches, h time mistak for green, o Lastly, th of the work seats in the sincere than are adrest, graven. As valuable pa the correct prove accep however, th
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The impact of the common people's impoverishment is reflected in the criminal records of the time. The types of people that frequently appear within Gloucester Quarter Sessions were not "professional criminals" living a life outside the law, but were merely young labourers, usually aged between 17 and 35 with their own families, whose own desperation forced them into stealing. For example, within Thornbury, a sleepy market town in Gloucestershire, only five out of the twenty seven people convicted between 1825-1835 were accused of crimes unrelated to theft. Indeed, many of these reported thefts involved items amounting to little value; on February 25th 1829, a 27 year old man named William Higgins was accused of stealing some potatoes from Rockhampton farmer worth 2/6d, and faced the consequences of a one month penitentiary sentence. It seems that these common people were likely suffering from either lack of employment or adequate financial support, and were consequently forced to commit small-scale crimes in order to survive.

Petty theft was one of the two main criminal activities contributing to the 30% rise in criminal rates within the rural areas of the South West between 1824 and 1830. The other leading crime that has particular historical pertinence within Gloucestershire is poaching. Unlike theft, which seemed to have only been committed as a last resort, poaching in Gloucestershire was so prevalent in rural areas that it became a normal practice for those living in the countryside to go out with a gun and shoot wild animals, sometimes for their own amusement, but mainly as another way of providing food for one's family. This naturally cultivated a "black market" between criminal poachers, butchers and local customers in the area. When faced with the ultimatum of killing wild animals or starving, this is hardly surprising; indeed, a journalist from the 19th century reported that "the product of a single night's poaching was often more than the wages for several weeks' work", further proving that the legal means of earning a living was not enough, and had to be supplemented by more clandestine ventures.

That being said, some of Gloucestershire's more serious criminal pursuits do find their origins in the field of poaching. For instance, the infamous Great Berkeley Poaching Affray of 1816 resonates as a memorable part of the area's criminal history: the fatal trigger of a spring-gun set by gamekeepers on Baron Lord Ducie's land, killing the trespassing Thomas Till, a well-liked farmer's son from Thornbury, instigated a plight of moral revenge from the respectable farmers and labourers of the area, who felt that the verdict "accidental death" concluded by jury of game-preservers and their tenants fell short of justice. Unlike the majority of other poaching expeditions, this was not caused by economic hardship, but social injustice.

However, this was not the final case of poaching the area would bear witness to; in fact, it merely set the tone for further heinous crimes of a similar nature. Another serious example of poaching occurred in Thornbury in 1831. The recurring theme of violence that seems to have been common in Gloucestershire is present in the case – one of the four men attempting to steal a pheasant for their Christmas dinner had his skull smashed in by another group of five who held the same ambition of gaining some food. In comparison to its predecessor, incentivised by the hope of revenge, the 1831 poaching case was a result of something far more basic – sheer poverty. Rather than being a collective tryst against the quasi-autocratic gentry, it was a group of men trying to hunt for something they simply could not afford.

Although the Berkley Affray was morally motivated, it shares similar root causes to other cases of poaching in the area. The principal factors which lead to an increase in convictions of this nature were the enclosure acts and game laws, central elements of the agricultural revolution that meant legal hunting was restricted to only 0.5% of the population. Thus, although in the years of extreme poverty between 1827-1831, 8,000 men in England were sentenced for poaching, this could be due to the harsher laws on poaching, rather than just an increased number of poaching crimes committed.

Between 1760 and 1830, the enclosure acts were passed at intervals of around one every three years. Its aim was to replace the subsistent, open farmland villages with a scheme placing the land into the hands of the landowners and tenant farmers, driving the rural poor off the land. Although this increased agricultural productivity, it was yet another strain to the aforementioned economic struggles of the time. Owning the land allowed the owners to exploit the poor who were now forced to work at low rates for them. The cost of renting the land was made high to ensure the landowners were making the greatest profit, and labourers became casual workers called in only when necessary, with their wages measured by their productivity in a day or a week. This coincided with the ever-tightening game laws that were designed to keep the wild animals under the ownership of the wealthy gentry.

The rigid social framework of Gloucestershire is particularly relevant here; in the face of national economic strain, the gentry did not turn to support those in need, but instead clamped down hard upon their position of authority by reducing poor relief and instigating further laws that would protect their own interests. By widening the gulf between the landowner and the labourer, the former pushed the common people into poverty, which ultimately saw the criminal rates increase.

At this juncture, it is important that we extend our attention beyond simply the rural part of Gloucestershire, and remember that in this current period, two entirely different criminal environments were co-existing – the world of rural crime, and that of industrial crime in the growing towns of Gloucestershire. According to a contemporary census regarding the occupations of the county's inhabitants show that half of the people (49,420) worked in agriculture, whilst the other half (49,645) was employed in manufacture. These men were in an even more tenuous position with regard to their careers than the agricultural workers – in addition to unemployment and poverty, they had the new burden of technological advancement, whereby new threshing machines stimulated resentment amongst workers who were driven out of work. This came to a head in 1830 during the "Swing Riots", a wave of local-scale protests that swept across the southern parts of England, Gloucestershire included. A specific case from Bibury in November 1830 involved a group of one hundred men smashing up three threshing machines within the parish. Ironically, these men avoided damaging the barn in which the machinery was kept. This indicates that these men were not hooligans, but simply honest men with one unanimous enemy – the technology depriving them and their families of a steady income.

To summarise, the increase in crime rates in Gloucestershire by the early 1830s was caused by the contemporary fallout of the war, economic depression, poor harvests and industrialisation clashing against the rigid social framework that deprived the common people of adequate means of surviving within the law. We can compartmentalise the consequences of this into three distinct "spheres" of crime marking the increase: poaching, petty theft, and technological destruction. Despite their differences, the one overruling factor that was the central driving force within these criminal environments was the people's crippling poverty, derived from increasing prices and job insecurity that they could no longer cope with. As they received no economic support of the law or ruling classes, whose only change to the status quo was to reduce the amount of support offered and further tighten their hold on power, they had no other option other than to turn to criminal activity.

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