

Dripping riot, 1865

On 23rd January, Mrs Eliza Stafford, cook to a surgeon (also a magistrate) Mr Henry Chorley, of 8 Park Square, came before local magistrates accused of stealing 2lb of dripping from her employer. She was found guilty and imprisoned for one month in Armley. Her case was widely publicised and occasioned huge public sympathy - even in 1865 the offence of stealing a bit of dripping was regarded as relatively trivial (Mrs Stafford claimed later she had taken it with charitable intent, but this may or may not have been true), and as the month of incarceration proceeded, the local working class became increasingly exercised about the Dripping Injustice, with widespread public bad feeling and disorder. When appearing in public, Mr Chorley was the object of much abuse, being followed by chants of "Dripping, dripping", and shouts such as "How's thee fat, lad?" - he took this in good part and could have been accused of inciting further abuse. The case became a national *cause celebre* - Liverpool papers carried headlines such as "How They Treat Their Cooks in Leeds", and even *The Times* of London picked the case up.

On Wednesday 22nd February, the proposed day of release, many thousands gathered at Armley to greet Mrs Stafford, now a public heroine. One newspaper reported a crowd of 10000-12000, a remarkable figure in view of the cold wet weather and dark conditions, with snow lying on the ground. At the appointed time (9am), the crowd learned that it had been cheated as she had been let out of a rear gate at 7am and was long gone; there was uproar, although this was reported as largely good natured. A significant number, perhaps 1000, took themselves to Park Square to let Mr Chorley know just what they thought about the issue. As matters became more heated, some small windows were broken and the police presence grew as the authorities sensed the possibility of serious disorder. The local Chief Constable, Bell, attended in person and had the misfortune to slip and break his arm - nobody suggested that this was other than an accident. Time passed and at noon the crowd was swollen by a very large number of local workers taking their lunch break; at this point, as stones and bricks were being thrown at the police, the Mayor and magistrates took the view that the crowd had evolved into a mob and telegrams were sent to Bradford for major police reinforcements and to York for military support. In the Square, police charges on the crowd resulted in a second significant injury as George Hodgson, a potter, fell and was trampled - he was taken to hospital with suspected internal injuries.

At 1pm, the crowd started to thin as many returned to work. When the Bradford police reinforcements arrived they were not deployed, and in due course the day took on a carnival atmosphere as a troop of the 8th Hussars appeared from York. These were battle hardened men - most decorated - who proceeded under arms to Park Square and attracted a great deal of public respect (and admiration). The day concluded with the arrest of four individuals, sundry minor casualties on both sides, and evening tension in the town during which the police prevented any congregation occurring. The following day, the casualties are reported as recovering - this proved to be inaccurate as Hodgson died some days later. Three of the arrested were bound over, while Samuel Taylor, a baker whom the press reported as being of "bad character", was imprisoned for 7 days. Magistrates referred to "very silly excitement, which led into disturbance unintended". Mrs Stafford was the beneficiary of a significant public collection, and declared her intention to establish a beerhouse called the "The Dripping Pan".

Despite the fatality, the Dripping Riot was not in the end a major disturbance, being largely good natured in which most missiles were snowballs. Behind it lie some interesting observations; the City Fathers (they *were* male) were obviously very alarmed at the behaviour of the general population, which had been genuinely and widely upset at an obvious injustice. There was at the time a campaign to establish Stipendiary Magistrates, and dispense with the “amateur justice” considered to be to blame for Mrs Stafford’s incarceration; she was in fact one of many incidents that had provoked public discontent. The size of the crowd - overwhelmingly composed of the poor and underprivileged - and the knee-jerk summoning of the military, are testimony to the latent tensions in the city. There was also an interesting press battle being conducted; the *Leeds Express* had followed the story from January, trumpeting the injustice, and was accused by conservative papers such as the *Leeds Mercury* of inciting discontent. Noting longer running undercurrents against harsh amateur magistrates, the *Express* noted “... that our journal should be detested by rabid old Tories is not only what we expect, but is courted by us.” The corresponding language of the *Mercury* drew attention to the poverty and physical condition of the crowd on the day, with clear implications that one could expect no better from such people, and that the working class were not worthy of the vote if this was how they were going to behave.