

The Spread of the Threshing Machine in Central Southern England

By N. E. FOX

UNTIL recently there has been a considerable measure of agreement as to the progress of the threshing machine during, and in the decade or so following, the Napoleonic Wars. The consensus was that the threshing machine spread rapidly, if unevenly, during the war period, and that in some areas at least the expansion continued right up to the Swing Riots of 1830.

In a recent article,¹ however, Dr MacDonald argued that the "massive suspicion" with which the threshing machine was approached had led to its "virtual rejection—by most of England."² That this applied to central southern England is shown by a map accompanying the article where, on the basis of the Board of Agriculture's *Reports*, it is asserted that in or around 1808 there were only "several" machines in existence in Berkshire, Dorset, and Hampshire.³ (That there was "no information" for Wiltshire is due to the fact that an updated version of the first *Report* of 1794 was never published.)

"Several" is, of course, a "Humpty-Dumpty" word, but if any particular number or range of numbers is attached to it surely it would be between three and ten? (The numerical definition given in the *O.E.D.* is "more than two or three, but not very many.") A careful scrutiny of the *Reports* for the three counties mentioned above (published in 1809, 1812, and 1813 respectively) reveals that, even before 1815, there must have been more than thirty threshing machines in existence in each of them.

W. Mavor took note of only the "principal" machines in Berkshire; even so these amounted to fifteen machines, and his further reference to

"a considerable number" having been erected in the county "within the last two or three years" prior to 1809 suggests that the total number was well in excess of thirty.⁴ As early as the spring of 1808 a certain "William Baker, near the Corn Market, Newbury" was advertising "Threshing and Winnowing Machines" in the *Reading Mercury* (30 May 1808), and by 1814 it was possible for a Reading diarist to declare that "the Threshing Machine has now almost superseded the use of the flail."⁵

W. Stevenson also referred to "a considerable number of threshing machines" having been erected in Dorset, "nearly all of them in the present century". He gave details, or at least the names of the owners, of as many as twenty-eight machines and referred in passing to "several" others.⁶ C. Vancouver gave details of twelve of the more important Hampshire installations, and added that smaller machines of two to three h.p. were "getting into much use in the valley of the Avon."⁷

When using or interpreting the information contained in the Board of Agriculture's *Reports* we should bear in mind that it may have been collected some time before the date of publication. Thus the period which elapsed between the date of collection and 1815 may well have been long enough for the tendency for the machines to spread to have been strengthened; or, put another way, for the minor revolution indicated by the *Reports* to have become a major one. Certainly it would not be an extravagant claim that, even before the end of the wars with

¹ S. MacDonald, 'The Progress of the Early Threshing Machine', *Agric. Hist. Rev.*, xxiii, 1, 1975, pp. 63-77.

² *Ibid.*, p. 74. ³ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁴ W. Mavor, *General View of Berkshire*, 1809, pp. 129-36.

⁵ Anon., 'Reading Seventy Years Ago', 1887: Reading Public Library, Local Collection, R/D.

⁶ W. Stevenson, *General View of Dorset*, 1812, pp. 144-63.

⁷ C. Vancouver, *General View of Hampshire*, 1813, pp. 106-113.

Napoleon, certainly more than twenty and possibly as many as forty fixed threshing machines were in use in each of the three counties mentioned above. By 1815 the number may well have reached fifty.

Dr MacDonald admits the possibility that "some machines were built in the South in the first post-war decade," but finds support for his thesis that the threshing machine was virtually rejected by most of England in the fact that "the Swing Rioters could find but 390 threshing machines in twenty-one counties upon which to vent their wrath."⁸ Of course it would be a convincing demonstration of this thesis if it could be shown that less than twenty machines existed in each of these twenty-one Swing counties. However, this is one of those cases where the use of an average figure is most misleading. What is much more interesting, indeed much more important, is the way in which these 390 machines were distributed throughout the twenty-one counties:

274 (or nearly 70 per cent) were destroyed in just seven counties in south-east and south central England (i.e. Kent, Sussex, Surrey, Hants., Berks., Wilts., and Dorset);

217 (or 56 per cent) were destroyed in only three counties (i.e. Hants., Berks., and Wilts.); nearly 36 per cent were destroyed in West Berkshire and Wiltshire, while 97 (or very nearly a quarter) were destroyed in Wiltshire alone.⁹

However vigorously the agricultural workers of south-central England set about their self-imposed task of destroying every single threshing machine, it is unlikely that they completely achieved their objective. Hence, if ninety-seven machines were destroyed, there must have been many more than a hundred threshing machines in existence in Wiltshire alone in November 1830. That a three-figure number of machines must have been in use in the neighbouring county of Berkshire also, is shown by the

extent of the activities of the rioting labourers in one small corner of that county. In an area roughly demarcated by the sides of a triangle with its vertices at Newbury, Shalbourne (in 1830 part of Berkshire), and Great Shefford, but *excluding* the villages of the Lambourn valley, at least thirty-seven threshing machines were definitely destroyed.

As it was the practice of the local machine breakers to levy £2 for the labour involved in breaking one machine, it would be a fair assumption that the Revd Sloper, who owned the whole of the parish of West Woodhay, Berks., and who was asked to pay "£6 for the machines" possessed *three* threshing machines. The vicar of Kintbury informed Charles Dundas, M.P. (known to the local labourers as "the King of Kintbury"), that he had agreed with the latter's bailiff that "it would be better to bring your machines" to the centre of the village; the use of the plural suggests the possibility that Charles Dundas, like the Revd Sloper an owner of much land in the district, possessed more than one threshing machine. Three other farmers were each mulcted of £2, and money was demanded of two more.¹⁰ Thus the overall number of threshing machines destroyed in this small corner of Berkshire may well have been as many as forty-five. As this number of machines was destroyed in an area which was only 6 per cent of the ancient county of Berkshire, and covered between forty and forty-five square miles, the density of machines in this part of the county at least was as much as one per square mile. Thus, though we should not be justified in applying this density figure to the whole of the county, a number well in excess of a hundred would be a very conservative estimate of the number of machines in existence in Berkshire also. We have, therefore, positive evidence for three-figure numbers of machines in two counties of central southern England as at November 1830. Numbers of this order of magnitude must cast grave doubts on Dr MacDonald's general thesis that the thresh-

⁸ MacDonald, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

⁹ E. Hobsbawm and G. Rudé, *Captain Swing*, 1969, pp. 304-5.

¹⁰ P.R.O.: H.O. 52/6, T.S. 11/849-51; Berks. R.O.: papers of W. Hall, Solicitor, Hungerford; *Reading Mercury and Berkshire Chronicle*.

ing machine was virtually rejected by most of England, and wholly demolishes it as far as central southern England is concerned.

Comparing the two sets of figures provided by the second series of the Board's *Reports* and the documents relating to the Swing Riots, we can fairly conclude that the number of threshing machines in existence in central southern England more than doubled between 1815 and 1830. Whether this was due to steady growth or the result of an unprecedented increase in the year or two before the riots we cannot be sure. According to Hobsbawm and Rudé there is no clear evidence one way or another that the use of threshing machines was spreading abnormally fast in the years immediately preceding 1830.¹¹ Yet the difference in the character, timing, and period of the revolt in central southern as compared with south-east England is sufficiently striking to demand some explanation. In the latter area it extended over several months, during which the activities of the labourers involved were many and varied: they included rick-burning, riots over tithes, attacks upon overseers of the poor and upon work-houses, as well as the destruction of foundries and machines. In central southern England, on the other hand, the revolt was over within a few days, began round about the time when, in the pre-machine era, many of the labourers would have found employment in threshing by the flail, and was characterized by a virtually single-minded concentration on the destruction of threshing machines.

I would like to suggest that at least a partial explanation of the difference, and of the large number of machines which existed in Wiltshire and south-west Berkshire, lies in the operations

¹¹ Hobsbawm and Rudé, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

of a "Mr Rider, a mechanic and small farmer, residing upon the Wallop Estate in the parish of Westbury Wilts," who in 1829 had invented "a portable threshing machine," the cost of which was estimated as unlikely to "exceed £8 or £10."¹² Such a low price would have brought a threshing machine within the reach of the poorest farmer and, consequently, "This announcement caused a great deal of comment among the labourers of Dorset, Hants and Wilts [and Berkshire?]. They regarded the machine as certain to produce starvation and want amongst them and their families. It was in their opinion 'an infernal machine'. The man who invented it, the farmer who purchased or used one, and the man who took charge of it were 'a trio of rascals' who deserved no consideration at the hands of 'honest men'." Although "the inventor got frightened, and, acting on the advice of his friends, gave up making the machines . . . other persons took up the trade."¹³

Thus the farm workers of central southern England had no illusions as to the role of the threshing machine. As far as they were concerned it *was* "a major cause" of their dissatisfaction rather than, as Dr MacDonald believes, merely "a focal point" for it.¹⁴ They would have agreed wholeheartedly with Professor E. L. Jones that "the conjunction of a growing population with little alternative to agricultural work and the introduction of the threshing machine . . . resulted in chronic winter unemployment and distress in southern England during the early nineteenth century."¹⁵

¹² *Salisbury and Winchester Journal*, 20 April 1829.

¹³ *Poole and Bournemouth Herald*, 5 Oct. 1882.

¹⁴ MacDonald, *loc. cit.*, p. 74, n. 9.

¹⁵ E. L. Jones, *Seasons and Prices*, 1964, p. 64 (quoted by MacDonald, *loc. cit.*)