

**Intergroup dynamics within the 1831 reform riots**  
**Dorset Research Workshop 2 – 25 November 2021**  
**The Sherborne riot – October 1831**

**Letter from Reverend (and magistrate) John Parsons to Home Secretary Lord Melbourne**

Sherborne Oct 22 1831

My Lord,

The Lord Lieutenant has put your Lordship's letter of the 21<sup>st</sup> into my hands.

The state of this town is most deplorable, and humanly speaking defenceless; but for the help of the 36 or 38 soldiers 3<sup>rd</sup> Dragoon Guards, we are without means. Lord Digby's windows were smashed & other injury committed on Wednesday night last, when the mob broke out with fury. After much personal injury (perhaps from a rash exposure of myself to the mob) my house was the object of severe attack. It was broken into & all my windows & a great deal of my furniture destroyed & carried away: and my Vicarage is in manner a wreck; but providentially the contents of the cellar occupied their attention from further demolition of furniture. We were obliged to abandon the house to the mob, & they had undisturbed possession of it for more than an hour.

On the following day Lord Digby with another magistrate and myself called a meeting of the inhabitants for adopting a means of preserving the peace & the protection of private property. Of course the means provided in the very recent Act of Parl. 1 & 2 of the present King. ch. 41 were those recommended but in a full meeting of the inhabitants not more than 12 offered themselves for Special Constables, and I am confident that were we to nominate & issue precepts for appointing 50 or 100 every man would refuse, & would submit to the penalty of £5, now the only punishment for refusal. I have the authority of a most influential man among the Reformers, (if I may be excused the expression in a letter of this serious nature) to assert that every man would object to be sworn in. There are some very painful & exciting causes to this deadness and want of proper feeling, but I wish only to state the exact condition we are in.

Thursday night and last night were marked by further demolition of property. Upwards of 20 houses & windows have been more or less injured. We have not nor can we get any special constables, for the very few who did offer at our justice meeting were unwilling to take the oath with such little support from others. The Yeomanry were dreadfully beaten & such is the strong feeling against them that we have advised their withdrawing for the present, & ~~the regular troops~~ with an assurance from certain influential persons (who are known as within the description before named) we consented to this recommendation, with a hope of allaying the excitement.

I was obliged to read the Riot act on Thursday night - & last night Sir Henry Digby did the same. But we are in metu [trans. *in fear*] for the fickle mob may be turned towards those

very persons who refuse to be sworn against them. At present however it is all one way except by mistake, which is most promptly discovered by the mob. We have no time for issuing precepts and amercing fines. I can assure your Lordship, & so could Sir H. Digby, Mr Cha[rls] Digby, & one or two other magistrates, that every possible effort has been made in vain to protect property by civil force, the regular military in larger force we want, & permission for their stay till we can safely dispense with them –

I have scarcely the time to write this letter, & begging to be pardoned for the haste in which it is written.

I have the honour to be My Lord Your Lordship's obedient servant

John Parsons

### **Some questions to think about....**

Why were Lord Digby and Rev. Parsons targets of the rioters?

Why did so few residents of Sherborne refuse to sign up to be special constables despite the threat of a fine?

What do you think were the “very painful & exciting causes to this deadness and want of proper feeling” amongst the ‘respectable’ residents of Sherborne?

Who are the “influential persons” that Parsons is negotiating with?

Why were the Yeomanry cavalry withdrawn?

Why were the Dragoons not withdrawn (despite his crossing out!)?

When Parsons says “**we** are in fear for the fickle mob may be turned towards those **very persons** who refuse to be sworn against them” who is the “we” and who are those “very persons”?

When Parson's says “however it is all one way except by mistake, which is most promptly discovered by the mob” what does he mean by “one way” and what does this observation tell us about the rioters?

From this evidence what limits on the behaviour of the authorities and the rioters can be drawn?