

‘Cheese Riots’ of Nottingham, 1766.

In October 1766, during Nottingham’s Goose Fair, huge circles of cheese were rolled down city streets and the Major was knocked over. Over the following days warehouses were searched and a boat was seized as people took, rolled and redistributed food. What became known as The Cheese Riots were part of a series of direct actions across the country that autumn, calling for affordable food and better living standards. Accounts suggest that in Nottingham hundreds may have been involved in this little-known turning point in our social history. The Big Cheese Roll aims to commemorate these uprisings peacefully and inclusively whilst remembering these were very difficult times.

In Nottingham we’re proud of The Goose Fair which has been going in one way or another for around 1000 years, moving from Market Square to Forest Recreation ground in the late 1930s. For centuries, after each harvest, farmers would hope to make enough money to set themselves up for the year ahead.

By 1766 change was in the air. Bigger farms needed fewer labourers and smallholders were struggling, so more people were moving to cities like Nottingham in search of work. Rising numbers (including children) lived and worked in unsafe conditions. Food prices were rising much faster than people’s wages, making it increasingly hard for them to feed themselves and their families. There had been regional epidemics of dysentery in recent years. This particular year the weather was fine on the first market day and the square was busy. There seemed to be more cheeses than usual but high prices meant local people could not buy them. One report tells us how people, becoming “exasperated... broke loose like a torrent; cheeses were rolled down Wheeler-gate and Peck-lane in abundance, many others were carried away.” (*The Date Book, see footnotes*)

The Date Book speaks of ‘women and boys’ carrying off cheeses and it’s clear women played a central role. It is likely this uprising included lace-makers, textile and other factory workers and labourers. Some may have grown up on smallholdings working the land before coming to the city. On the first day arrests were made. A coffee house in Peck Lane was used as a makeshift court until the crowds started destroying the building and the surrounding area until each person was set free. The military was called in and on the following day shots were repeatedly fired into the crowd from horseback when a second riot broke out. We can only guess the number and type of casualties.

memorable events connected with Nottingham and its Neighbourhood; Vol. 2: ‘1750-1884’; Nottingham. <https://peopleshistreh.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/cheeseriotsbook.pdf> (Yarnspinner includes a full bibliography), <https://www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats>, http://www.fraser-courtman.co.uk/list_of_famines_pestilences_england.html plus various background sources on the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions (via <https://www.ecosia.org>)

History is never simple; humans are not simple. The root causes of widespread low wages and high food prices were not down to one individual. There will have been farmers and traders who suffered far more than was fair. However, huge masses of people were experiencing extreme hunger due to what seems to have been unregulated and deeply unequal market forces. Ordinary working people (especially women) had no say in the running of government or any industry, so direct action and civil disobedience arguably became necessary for them to be heard. Their treatment by armed soldiers at the orders of officials in Nottingham was brutal and obviously escalated anger.

It's suggested from accounts of similar uprisings across the country that autumn, that protestors often succeeded in directly and indirectly driving down the cost of food. In some cases, demonstrators were said to have seized then sold food at prices they thought fair, then passed money back to the original traders. On other occasions traders willing to reduce prices had food taken anyway and their stalls and other property destroyed.

Nottingham and the wider world have changed so much. Hard won reform and market regulations, together with minimum wage and workers' rights have increased living standards for many. Meanwhile public services including NHS and social care have protected countless over the years. Increased democracy means we also have more say in how things are run. There is much to be thankful for but still much to strive for. We are facing difficult times when much of what we've gained feels insecure. Threats like food poverty and homelessness are on the rise with millions affected across the UK, including children. Latest stats from The Trussell Trust say a record 1.6 million food parcels were given to people in crisis by their UK foodbanks between April 2018 and March 2019.

The Big Cheese Roll aims to bring people together in a diverse, accessible event to commemorate the past and celebrate how far we've come while challenging food poverty together. It is 100% non-violent and encourages local food producers and businesses to join in, donate and show support. Whether you roll up dressed in yellow with a tin of beans to donate or come dressed as a cheese with a boot load of dried and canned foods, please show your support. It's a politically neutral event with no angry speeches; this is about doing not talking about it. It will be a chance to gather and unite to help create a brighter vision of the future.

In Nottingham, this is how we roll, 'til no one goes hungry.

References & Further Reading: Field, Henry (ed./1884): (edited) The Date Book of remarkable and memorable events connected with Nottingham and its Neighbourhood; Vol. 2: '1750-1884'; Nottingham. <https://peopleshistreh.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/cheeseriotebook.pdf> (Yarnspinner includes a full bibliography), <https://www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats>, http://www.fraser-courtman.co.uk/list_of_famines_pestilences_england.html plus various background sources on the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions (via <https://www.ecosia.org>)