

'Cheese Riots' of Nottingham, 1766

The following over-view can be adapted for different community groups, used in story-telling circles or to spark important conversations. The story is available from different perspectives for different ages and abilities; Lizzie, a textile worker from 1766, the mayor and Mother Big Cheese, who's a close friend of Mother Goose. FMI: wearenottnormal@gmail.com

In October 1766, during Nottingham's Goose Fair, huge circles of cheese were rolled down city streets and the Mayor 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. In Nottingham hundreds were 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.

We're proud of Nottingham's 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 of all ages and abilities 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 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 all genders and ages played central roles. 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 but the crowds started destroying the building and the surrounding area until each person was set free. The military was called

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/cheeseriotsebook.pdf>,
<https://www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats>, http://www.fraser-courtman.co.uk/list_of_famines_&_pestilences_england.html

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.

History is never simple; humans are not simple. There will have been farmers and traders who suffered far more than was fair. However, masses of people were experiencing extreme hunger due to what seems to have been unregulated and unfair market forces. Ordinary people (especially women) had no say in the running of government or any industry, so direct action was arguably the only way for them to be heard. Their treatment by armed soldiers at the orders of officials in Nottingham appears to have been the most brutal nationally, and obviously escalated anger. It's suggested from accounts of these autumn uprisings, 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, together with minimum wage and workers' rights have increased living standards for many. The NHS, schools and social care have protected countless over the years. Increased democracy means we also have more say in how things are run. There's much to be thankful for and protect, but things are changing. We are now facing difficult times. Threats like food poverty and homelessness are on the rise with millions affected across the UK, including children. At least 14 million people are living below the poverty line in the UK. The Trussell Trust recorded 1.9 million food parcels were given to people in crisis by UK foodbanks between April 2019 and March 2020.

The Big Cheese Roll aims to bring people together in diverse, accessible events to commemorate the past and celebrate how far we've come, while challenging food poverty through unity. Last year's event saw over 50 people join us in a procession through town arriving at the National Justice Museum to deliver food donations. Lace worker Lizzie Cotter told stories of 1766, and the Mayor was chased by a big cheese. We encouraged local food producers and businesses to join in, donate and show support. People of all genders, ages and abilities rolled up dressed in yellow with food to donate. This year will be a bit different, but is still about *doing* not talking about it, and a chance to unite, take mutually supportive action, have fun and 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.
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