The Swing Riots in Britain

Background
The population growth after the Napoleonic Wars increased significantly due to the soldiers returning home, and by the 1830's many of the villages in Kent and East Sussex were filled with people living on the edge of starvation. The poor relief that had been started in previous centuries could not keep pace with the growing demand, and the corruption of officials only added to the dissatisfaction. The invention of the threshing machine to help farming only added to the problem by reducing the need for farm workers.

Riots
The riots started in East Kent in 1830 and reached the Weald area by November 1831. The main reason for the riots were the low wages paid by farmers, which in turn meant that the merchants were also affected, by limited sales.

The name "Captain Swing" riots came from the threatening letters, which were often signed “Swing” after people swinging from the gallows. The leaders were known as "The Captain" or "Swing" to try to hide their identity.

The major landowners were concerned for their own farms and due to their influence were able to get military assistance in putting down the riots. Invariably the soldiers arrived at the riots after they had died down, but where they met the rioters they used force to stop them.

Many churches and farms within the area were damaged by the rioters, and quite a few landowners were obliged to give in to the rioters demands.

To illustrate the problems a laborer from Henfield showed his itemized expenses and income. His food and rent came to 14 shillings and one and a halfpenny (about 70.5 pence in current coinage) his income was 12 shillings and threepence (about 61.5 pence) for seven working days in the summer, the parish added 1 shilling and six pence (about 7.5 pence) relief per week which bought his total to 13 shillings and 9 pence (about 69 pence) for the week. The cost of clothing, footwear and heating added on meant that he was getting deeper in debt with no way out.

Outcome
The riots continued sporadically until 1831 when those arrested were sent for trial. In East Sussex 9 men were sentenced to execution, 457 to be transported to the colonies mostly for arson, and 400 were imprisoned for varying periods.

Some of the landowners felt sympathy to the plight of the poor, and raised wages or offered more employment but in general nothing changed until the advent of prosperity in the mid 1850's when manufacturing started to provide employment and draw the population away from the rural areas.

Source: adapted from: http://www.villagenet.co.uk/history/1830-swingriots.html