Rebecca Riots
What happened during them?

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Introduction

The Rebecca riots took place in the rural parts of west Wales, including Pembrokeshire, Cardiganshire, and Carmarthenshire, in 1839-43. They were a series of protests made by tenant farmers against the payment of tolls (fees) charged to use the roads. Turnpike Trusts or groups of businessmen owned most of the main roads. These men fixed the charges and decided how many tollgates (turnpikes) could be built.

During the riots, men disguised as women attacked the tollgates. They called themselves “Rebecca and her daughters”. This is most likely to be after a passage in the Bible where Rebecca talks of the need to “possess the gates of those who hate them” (Genesis XXIV, verse 60). People at that time knew the Bible well.

Tolls were a big expense for small farmers, who used the roads to take their crops and animals to market, and also to collect lime (a chalky mineral). Lime was used to improve the quality of the soil so farmers could grow better crops. It could cost as much as five shillings (25p) in tolls to move a cart of lime eight miles inland. The people of west Wales did not want to pay to use their roads.

Tasks

Look at Source 1

1. This letter was addressed to the inhabitants of St Clears and others in Carmarthenshire in 1842.
   a) Why does the writer of the letter sign it ‘Becca & children’ instead of giving their own name?
   b) Why are the special constables (‘those which has sworn to be connstable’) being warned to take notice of this letter?
   c) Why does the letter object to ‘Bowlin and company’?
   d) What is the writer’s attitude to the police?
   e) How can we tell that the person who wrote this letter was not well educated?
   f) How does the language of the letter make it appear threatening?

Look at Source 2

2. The toll collector describes an attack on the Trevaughan Turnpike Gate in August 1843.
   a) When did the attack on the toll gate take place?
   b) Do you think this is likely to be a reliable piece of evidence? Give your reasons.
   c) Why do you think the supporters of Rebecca wanted the toll keeper’s account books?
   d) What things suggest that the attack was well planned?
   e) How do you think William Rees might have felt during this attack?

Look at Source 3
3. Edward Crompton Lloyd Hall, high sheriff of Cardiganshire, offers advice to Rebecca and her daughters in 1843.
   a) Why does Hall tell Rebecca and her daughters not to meet together on Wednesday night?
   b) How does Hall advise the Welshmen to act to get their views heard?
   c) How does the handbill aim to persuade people to listen? (Comment on: text size; strong adjectives and nouns; Hall’s writing style.)
   d) What information does this source provide about the attitude of the authorities towards Rebecca and her daughters?
   e) Why do you think Hall had this handbill printed in English and Welsh?

Look at Source 4

4. George H. Ellis was involved in gathering evidence at the start of an inquiry into the state of the Turnpike Trusts in Wales and the causes of the disturbances. Read the extracts, think about how a farmer might feel about the points made by Ellis.
   a) What points does Ellis make?
   b) How do you think a farmer might feel about these points?

Background

The first incident occurred in Pembrokeshire in May 1839 when a new tollgate at Efailwen was destroyed. This gate was an obvious target, situated on the road used by those carrying lime back from the coast. The Whitland Turnpike Trust rebuilt the gate, only for it to be destroyed again in June. A second new tollgate was attacked at Llanboidy. Trouble died down when it was agreed by the authorities that the gates would not be rebuilt.

The disturbances started again in 1842 when the Whitland Trust built a new gate at The Mermaid, on the lime road at St Clears in Carmarthenshire. This was destroyed in November, as were the tollgates at Pwll-trap and Trevaughan. The gates were rebuilt, but all gates in St Clears were destroyed by 12 December. The government refused to send soldiers and so the magistrates called in the marines from Pembroke Dock and the Castlemartin Yeomanry Cavalry. The rioting continued.

In May 1843, the tollgates at Carmarthen were destroyed and in June a crowd of 2000 tried to burn down the workhouse there. Troops were called in as the movement became more violent. In August, riots took place for the first time in Glamorgan at Llanelli. The tollgates at Pontardulais and Llangyfelach were attacked. In October, during a riot at the Hendy Gate near Swansea, the tollhouse keeper was killed. Attacks occurred in Cardiganshire and Radnorshire as well.

The main trigger for the Rebecca riots came from farmers having to pay high tolls to use the roads, but there were other reasons for their discontent. Wales had seen a population increase since the start of the 19th century. This increased competition for land and jobs, and added to unemployment and poverty.
Most of the farmers in these areas were small holders who grew enough to support their families. They rented their land from wealthy landlords. The landlords wanted to make more money and started to reduce the number of smallholdings available to rent. They created larger farms that could only be rented at a much higher price.

The income of tenant farmers was further reduced because they had to pay tithes. Tithes were payments made for the support of the parish church. These payments were made in kind, for example crops or wool. Tithes were paid to the Anglican Church in almost all Welsh parishes once a year. In 1836, an act was passed replacing payment in kind by a money payment that was fixed by the vicar or sometimes by the local landowner. As 80% of the population of west Wales was Non-Conformist, they resented having to pay tithes to a church that was not their own.

Another cause for discontent was the new Poor Law set up in England and Wales in 1834. The rioters attacked workhouses as well as tollgates. The law meant that poor relief (money) was no longer paid to the able-bodied poor. Instead, they were forced to live in a workhouse where conditions were deliberately made harsher than the worst conditions outside (the government believed that the cause of poverty was laziness or a bad character).

Poor harvests in 1837 and 1838 increased shortages and poverty. There was a good harvest in 1842, but the benefits of this were lost because that was a year of economic depression, so industrial workers could not afford to buy agricultural goods.

Lastly, there were big social divisions between the gentry (large landowners) and the small tenant farmers and labourers who worked on the land. The gentry tended to belong to the Church of England (Anglican) and spoke English. They often served as local magistrates or were Poor Law officials or belonged to Turnpike Trusts. They fixed the poor rate, the tolls and the tithes. They had little in common with those who worked on the land and often made decisions that suited their own interests. The rest of the population was Welsh-speaking and Non-Conformist.

The authorities eventually suppressed the Rebecca riots, using troops and the full force of the law. Some rioters were caught and sentenced to transportation.

Social conditions also changed over the decade. Improvements in the laws controlling turnpike trusts and the coming of the railway eased many of the transport problems in west Wales. People could move more easily to find work and this helped reduce pressure in rural areas for jobs. The ending of the Corn Laws in 1846, and attempts in 1847 to make the Poor Law less cruel, also helped.

### Teachers Notes

History National Curriculum - England
This snapshot can be used with key stage 3 pupils in year 8. It looks at the story of the Rebecca riots through evidence relating to the nature of the movement, the experience of some of those involved and the reaction of the authorities.

History National Curriculum - Wales

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This snapshot is suitable for key stage 3 pupils studying ‘Wales in Industrial Britain, 1760-1914’. Part of industrialisation was the transport revolution, which involved the turnpike system on the roads and ultimately the coming of the railways. This snapshot looks at one response to the social, economic and technological transformation of Wales in this period.

Links could also be made to:
Key stage 4 GCSE WJEC Specification A & B, which requires an in-depth study option on ‘Popular Movements in Wales and England, 1815-1845’. The snapshot addresses Section C: Rural Protest.

Sources

Source 1 provides evidence of the aims and concerns of the movement. It also reveals the lack of opportunities for those aspiring to protest - they had to conceal their identity to avoid capture. The means of social control used by the authorities are evident in the source.
Source 2 shows what happened during an attack on a tollgate - and the need for disguise.
Source 3 reveals more about the attitude of the authorities and shows that punishments were severe (transportation) for those who damaged the tollgates and houses.
Source 4 provides evidence from the commission of inquiry into the roads of south Wales that ultimately resulted in a change to the law.

More activities

Debate the reasons for and against the Rebecca protests.
Carry out a role play/drama about giving evidence to an inquiry into the causes of the Rebecca riots. Characters can be taken from the sources provided.
Write a poem or a protest song about the Rebecca riots.

Schemes of Work

Industrial changes - Action and reaction
Key Stage 3 Unit 11
Who was struggling for political change between 1815 and 1848?
Key Stage 3 Unit 16 Section 3.
Source 1: Rebecca letter, 16 December 1842 (HO 45/265 f.1)

Take Notice

I wish to give you notice, especial to those which had a sworn to be constable in order to clear Rebecca and her children; but I can assure you that it must be to hard matter for Bowles and Co. to finish the job that they began, and that is to keep up the gate at Slamingel and with such fort. You take this few lines as information for you to mind yourselves; you that had any connection with Bowles, Mr. Ly, Mr. Johnson at Blue Boar, all the site property in our sight shall be in a conflagration if they will not obey this notice, and that to send them vagabonds away all my engagement it’s a reasonable thing that they may do so much on the country only picking pins cartwheels and famous pockets, and you defend that all the gates that are on their small road shall be destroyed. I am writing you the gates on the Queen Road to stand it’s shameable things for us to have to go as we do now, we, do you not remember the long knives which they must have invented to kill our forefathers and you may depend that you shall receive the same if you will not give up, when I shall give you a visit and that shall be in a short time, and now I would give an order to leave the place before I come, for, I do determine that I will have my way with through Beccas. As for the constable and the police men, Becca and childrens, besides the constable, they are not to be named now but in case they will not obey that notice they shall call about them in a short time.

Town Marshall?

Dec 16th 1842

Faithful to Death

with the county

Becca & children.
Source 1 : Transcript of Rebecca letter, 16 December 1842 (HO 45/265 f.1)

Full Transcript

Take Notice

I wish to give you notice especial to those which has sworn to be constable in order to grasp Becca and her children but I can sure you that it will be to hard matter for Bowlin and company to finish the job that they began and that is to keep up the Gate at Llanenigel and [?] gate. Now take this few lines as information for you to mind yourselves, you that had any conection with Bowlin Messrs M. C. Lics, Mr Thomas Blue Boar, all thine property in one night shall be in conflagration if they will not obey to this notice. And that to send them vagabons away witch you are favourable to. I alway like to be plain in all my engagement - is it a reasonable thing that they impose so must on the country only picking poor labours and farmers pockets, and you depend that all the Gates that are on these small roads shall be destroyed. I am willing for the gates on the Queens Road to stand it is a shamefull thing for us welchmen to have the sons of Henegust have a dominion over us. Do you not remember the long knives which Henegust hath invented to kill our fore fathers and you may depend that you shall recieve the same, if you will not give up, when I shall give you a visit and that shall be in a short time, and now I would give an order to leave the place before I will come, for, I do determin that I will have my way all through. As for the constable and the policemen, Becca her children heeds no more of them than the Grass-hopers which fly in the summer there are others which as marked with Becca, but they shall not be named now but in case they will not obey to this notice she shall call about them in a short time.

Faithfull to Death
with the county
Becca & children

Trwn [?]
Dec, 16th 1842

Glossary

those which has sworn to be constable : local men sworn in by magistrates to help enforce the law, known as special constables
Bowlin : Thomas Bulin, chief collector of tolls and builder of gates in the area, an Englishman hated in Wales
Llanengel : Llanfihangel
Conflagration : large fire
Vagabons : vagabonds, people without a permanent home who move from place to place, often in search of food or work; can be used as an insult
Henegust : Hengist, leader of the Saxons in Britain in the early 5th century AD
long knives : The treachery of the long knives was an incident in the wars between the Saxons and the early British peoples. During a peace conference organised by Hengist, the Saxons drew long knives from their boots and killed the British nobility.
the policemen: George Martin, an inspector from the Metropolitan Police in London, and his two men (west Wales had no police force)
heed: pays attention

Source 1: Simplified transcript of Rebecca letter, 16 December 1842 (HO 45/265 f.1)

Take Notice

I wish to give you notice, especially to those sworn in as constables in order to catch Becca and her children. I can assure you that it will be too hard for Bullin and company to finish the job that they began - to keep the gates up at Llanfihangel and [?]. Now take these few lines as information for you to watch yourselves, you that had any connection with Bullin, Messrs M. C. Lics, Mr Thomas Blue Boar. All your property shall be burned in one night if they will not obey this notice. Send away those vagabonds which you are favourable to. I always like to be plain in all my dealings with people. Is it a reasonable thing that they impose so much on the country, only picking the pockets of poor labours and farmers? All the gates that are on these small roads shall be destroyed. I am willing for the gates on the Queens Road to stand. It is a shameful thing for us Welshmen to have the sons of Hengist rule over us. Do you not remember the long knives which Hengist invented to kill our forefathers? You may depend on it, you shall receive the same if you will not give up when I visit you, and that shall be in a short time. Now I give an order to leave the place before I come, for I am determined that I will have my way. As for the constable and the policemen, Becca and her children pay no more attention to them than the grasshoppers which fly in the summer. There are others who are marked by Becca. They shall not be named now, but if they will not obey this notice, she shall call on them in a short time.

Faithfull to Death
with the county
Becca & children

Trwn [?]
Dec, 16th 1842
Source 2: Statement of William Rees, toll collector, 15 August 1843 (HO 45/454 f.415)

Statement of William Rees, Toll Collector of Trevaughan Turnpike Gate

That between one and two o’clock on Sunday morning last he was disturbed by a man knocking at his door who enquired the way to Llanvallteg Bridge, which he told him and that immediately afterwards he heard the sound of horses, when about twenty five or thirty men disguised, (having white frocks on and their heads tied on with coloured handkerchiefs under their chins) came to his house and compelled him by threats, pointing at the same time three Guns at his breast to deliver up his Books, which they carried off. The Books contained among other accounts, the names of several persons who had refused to pay toll at the said Gate, he is unable to identify any of them, but the person nearest to his house window rode a grey horse

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carried off. The Books contained among other accounts, the names of several persons who had refused to pay toll at the said Gate, he is unable to identify any of them, but the person nearest to his house window rode a grey horse.

William Rees
Source 3a: Part of a handbill in Welsh, 20 June 1843 (HO 45/454 f.107)
To Rebecca and her daughters, Welshmen,

Do you think I can countenance or join your riotous proceedings? I tell you No. And what is more, though I have fought, am fighting, and will continue to fight your battles, until I can obtain perfect justice and political regeneration for you and your children, I am and will always be the first man to keep the Queen's peace, and prevent anything like rioting or disturbance. Enough has been done already to convince the Government of the great and universal discontent which your grievances have caused among you. They have sent down soldiers to keep the peace. I therefore entreat you not to meet together on Wednesday night. I have written for the soldiers to come here and prevent your doing any mischief if you should. Why will you hinder me from fighting your battles in the only way in which we can be successful; and by your violence and absurdity, which can do no good, turn me from a friend to an enemy? Your conduct is childish and absurd, and not like men who have great objects to attain. Why will you exhibit folly when wisdom is required? The penalty for pulling down a Turnpike House is Transportation for Life. What good can you get by running such a risk, when you may attain every thing you ought to have, in a peaceable and quiet manner, without running any danger whatever? I can only attribute it to your ignorance, which prevents you from being able to guide in its proper course the great and irresistible force which you possess. A hundredth part of your strength properly applied, will do more for you, and without risk, than a thousand times your power wasted in the absurdities you have lately indulged in. Be guided by me. Do what I tell you, and you must be victorious in the end. Go each one to your own homes on Wednesday night, peaceably and quietly. On Thursday morning let each Parish choose two Delegates to come to me (as the Parishes in the Hundred of Upper Elvet have done,) to make me acquainted with your grievances, and then follow implicitly the advice I shall give them. If you do, peace and prosperity will be sure to return to you. If you do not, I shall leave you to enjoy the results of your ignorance and folly.

EDW. CR. LLOYD HALL.
Source 3b : Transcript of the same section of the handbill in English (HO 45/454 f.108)

TO
REBECCA
AND HER
DAUGHTERS.

WELSHMEN,
......
Do you think I can countenance or join your riotous proceedings? I tell you NO. And what is more, though I have fought, am fighting, and will continue to fight your battles, until I can obtain perfect justice and political regeneration for you and your children, I am and will always be the first man to keep the Queen’s peace, and prevent anything like rioting or disturbance. Enough has been done already to convince the Government of the great and universal discontent which your grievances have caused among you. They have sent down soldiers to keep the peace. I therefore entreat you not to meet together on Wednesday night. I have written for the soldiers to come here and prevent your doing any mischief if you should. Why will you hinder me from fighting your battles in the only way in which we can be successful; and by your violence and absurdity, which can do no good, turn me from a friend to an enemy? Your conduct is childish and absurd, and not like men who have great objects to attain. Why will you exhibit folly when wisdom is required? The penalty for pulling down a Turnpike House is TRANSPORTATION FOR LIFE. What good can you get by running such a risk, when you may attain every thing you ought to have, in a peaceable and quite manner, without running any danger whatever? I can only attribute it to your ignorance, which prevents you from being able to guide in its proper course the great and irresistible force which you possess. A hundredth part of your strength properly applied, will do more for you, and without risk, than a thousand times your power wasted in the absurdities you have lately indulged in. Be guided by me. Do what I tell you, and you must be victorious in the end. Go each one to your own homes on Wednesday night, peaceably and quietly. On Thursday morning let each Parish choose two Delegates to come to me (as the Parishes in the Hundred of Upper Elvet have done,) to make me acquainted with your grievances, and then follow implicitly the advice I shall give them. If you do, peace and prosperity will be sure to return to you. If you do not, I shall leave you to enjoy the results of your ignorance and folly.

EDW. CR. LLOYD HALL.

Glossary

countenance  approve
regeneration  change, improvement
grievances  causes for complaint, causes of distress
entreat  beg
absurdity  stupidity
objects  objectives
transportation  being sent away from Britain
attain  get, achieve
delegates  representatives
to make me acquainted with  to tell me of, to advise me of
implicitly  without question or doubt
Edward Crompton Lloyd Hall  high sheriff of Cardiganshire, he also campaigned for a
secret ballot (voting in an election wasn’t secret at this time)
Source 4 : Extract from George Ellis's memo 2
November 1843 (HO 45/454B f.980)

All the lands of the same trust are at
always kept in an equally good state of
repair. This is a cause of great jealousy
among the Farmers, and personal motives
are freely impelled to the Trustees.

The necessity of examining strictly into
the accounts of revenue and expenditure,
both for itself - the accounts of every trust
will furnish their own field of inquiry.

The multiplication of castl gates is not
a confused error, but I apprehend that the
extent to which it has been carried must be
known into. Besides the oppressive effect of
the numerous gates, I must add that I
heard charges of partiality and injustice against
Trustees for a placing gate at a spot that on
Turns was from paying toll.

If it be within the scope of the Committee,
I think, that it is worth while to consider the
scant of tolls on the several acts as between
persons using carriages and those using carts.
It will be borne in mind what sort of horse
the farmer uses and how many he must use
without underrating the improved and intermediate
roads, to get up the mountains. Also should
draw attention to the size and weight of the
carts which are liable to an increased toll
in respect of narrow wheels, and to the ways
which the carriage of lime and coal is taken.
All the roads of the same trust are not always kept in an equally good state of repair. This is a cause of great jealously among the Farmers and personal motives are freely imputed to the Trustees. ...

The necessity of examining strictly with the accounts of revenue and expenditure speaks for itself - The accounts of every trust will furnish their own field of inquiry.

The multiplication of catch gates is now a confessed error; but I apprehend that the extent to which it has been carried must be inquired into. Besides the oppressive effect of the numerous gates, I must add that I heard charges of partiality and injustice against Trustees for so placing gates as to exempt their own Tenants from paying Toll.

If it be within the scope of the Commission I think that it is worth while to consider the scales of tolls in the several acts as between persons using carriages and those using carts. It will be borne in mind what sort of horse the farmer uses - and how many he must use notwithstanding the improvement of intermediate roads to get up the mountains. Also I would draw attention to the size and weight of the carts which are liable to an increased toll in respect of narrow wheels, and to the way in which the carriage of lime and coal is taxed.

Glossary

imputed attributed, credited, blamed
accounts of revenue and expenditure records of income and spending
furnish supply, offer
multiplication increase
confessed error admitted mistake
apprehend understand, think, know
oppressive overwhelming, burdensome, demanding, unjust
partiality likely to favour one group of people over another group
exempt free, excuse
Commission Set up in October 1843 by the Secretary of State, Sir James Graham, to report on the state of the Turnpike Trusts in Wales and examine the causes of the disturbances, it resulted in a law change the following year to remove some of the worst effects of the trusts.

notwithstanding despite
Map of Wales