



FACTsheet 25

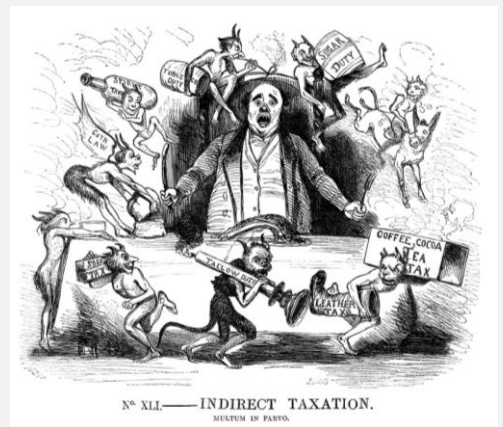
Reading the Riot Act

It was in 1843 when George Stephenson's plans for the building of a railway between Chester and Holyhead were put in front of Parliament for their consideration. The plans gained Royal Assent in 1844 and work started a year later.

This was the period between the first and second industrial revolutions, and Britain and Ireland were having economic problems. Ireland had experienced potato crop failures for two years in a row by 1845, resulting in the emigration of more than 2 million Irish people who hoped to find work and a better life elsewhere.

The problems there, and in Britain as a whole, were exacerbated by the Corn Laws that Peel as Prime Minister and Gladstone as President of the Board of Trade were then refusing to repeal (they did support repeal later). The Laws protected the profits and political power of the land-owning classes by blocking the import of cheap grain and imposing import duties. This 'Bread Tax' led to high costs of living for the working classes, on top of food shortages and economic recession.

The 'hungry forties' were a potent recipe for civil unrest.



Reading the Riot Act

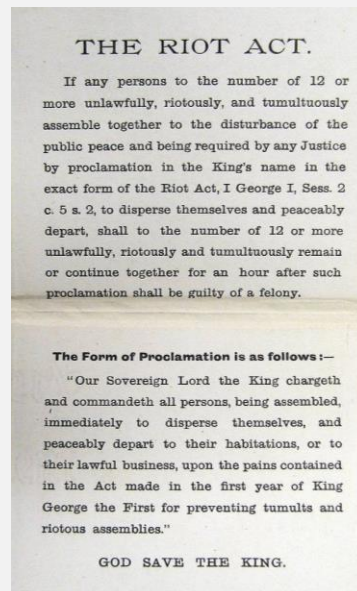


By now, skilled Irish 'navvies' were employed on railway construction projects throughout Britain. They worked in 'Butty Gangs' and were highly paid in comparison to labourers, earning between four and six shilling a day. As well as the job not being easy, the social situation was also tense. Anti-Irish sentiment and anti-Catholic prejudice was rife at this time, and the Irish gangs were often kept separate for their safety.

There had been reports of fighting between the Irish navvies and other groups in the newspapers since 1838, but tensions escalated in 1846 when 280,000 Irish famine refugees entered Britain via Liverpool. This is when the Irish history books report three of the most serious episodes of navvy violence. One of them occurred in Penmaenmawr.

It was May when the incident took place. Hearing the news about the arrival of Irish workers in search of employment, 300 local workers organised an attack to clear all the Irish working on the railway line from Penmaenmawr to the Llandegai tunnel. Eight of the Irish navvies had sought protection from the police, and some of the rioters were arrested.

As the Riot Act was being read, friends of the one of the ringleaders threw a rope over the prison wall and helped him escape. Urgent requests for military aid were sent out, resulting in the deployment of the 68th (Durham) regiment of Foot (Light Infantry) which was rushed to the area by steamship from Liverpool to help restore the peace.



Reading the Riot Act

In order to gather evidence and a record of the incident, letters with eye-witness accounts were sent between Lord Newborough, Captain Wynne and Rev'd Hugh Price. However, it seems that the vast majority of rioters were difficult to apprehend and nothing much came of the prosecutions.

The original letters about the riot are held in the National Library of Wales.

RAILWAY LABOURERS.—DISTURBANCES IN WALES.—We have seen a private letter, dated Penmaenmawr, Saturday, stating that a number of Irish labourers, employed by a railway contractor in that neighbourhood, had been attacked by a body of the country people, 300 Welshmen, who had driven away the Irish, and cleared the whole of the line before them as far as Bangor. Some of the ringleaders were captured by the police. One in particular, whom the police had great difficulty in capturing, they placed in prison. Immediately afterwards the tumult became so violent, that it was deemed necessary for a magistrate to read the riot act, which was done. During these proceedings, a party of the Welsh went behind the prison, and threw a rope over the wall, by means of which the prisoner managed to effect his escape. Most of the railway contractors along the line were sworn in special constables, and were on duty in that capacity on Saturday. A body of soldiers was expected to arrive on Monday, and then the police would apprehend a number of the rioters whom they knew, but dared not take until backed by a strong force. All the public-houses were closed by order of the magistrates, and were ordered to keep closed till further orders. When the letter was posted, a riot was almost hourly expected. We believe the dispute to have arisen from a feeling on the part of the Welsh against the employment of so many Irish, when numbers of Welsh labourers were ready to work.

Monday May 31.
Dear Newborough
I arrived here on Saturday
and on Sunday, I had a con-
-versation with Captain Wynne
who is in command after detach-
-ment which has been sent here,
and who gave me on account
of the proceedings which have
taken place since his arrival,
the circumstances attending
the apprehending

May 1846
Rev Hugh Price Tanybryn
Friday 4, P.M.
My Lord
I sincerely thank your Lordship
for the approval of our conduct, con-
-tained in the communication this
moment received, regarding sending
for the Military. & Prisoners only
were safely lodged in Carnarvon
jail on Wednesday, the result of the
expedition, the evening before, to the
neighbourhood of Penmaenmawr.
We allowed another prisoner, against
whom the evidence was not strong, to
turn King's evidence against the others.
H. Smith says I was not sorry that they
failed in procuring sufficient bail.
XD2/21619