

## **Afterword: Loughborough Luddism and the Pentrich Rising**

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‘Luddite’ is now a pejorative term referring to mistrust of technology, but two hundred years ago it meant textile workers defiantly defending their customary rights. The last great outbreak of Luddite machine-breaking occurred in Loughborough, Leicestershire in 1816. Lace manufacturer John Heathcot had invented and installed a new type of ‘bobbinet’ frame for cheapening and automating production. In reaction to the huge economic depression after the end of the Napoleonic Wars, his firm cut wages by a third. On 28 June 1816, sixteen artisan lace makers, or framework knitters, led by James Towle from Basford, forcibly entered the factory and destroyed over fifty of the new frames. Towle was arrested, tried at Leicester and executed on 20 November 1816. He had refused to reveal who his fellow machine-breakers were, but later another participant shopped some names, leading to the trial and execution of six more Luddites on 17 April 1817.

The East Midlands rebelled again the following year. In Derbyshire, on the night of 9 June 1817, about two hundred framework knitters, stonemasons and labourers from the villages of Pentrich, Wingfield and Ripley marched towards Nottingham, in the belief that the surrounding towns would also rise up against the authorities and start a mass march on London. Early the next morning, the rebels were arrested by local magistrates on the road. This time, it was less to do with their employment and was more of a political act, though the economic depression had pushed the rebels to physical force. Thirty-five men were tried at a special commission for High Treason: twenty-three were found guilty, of whom fourteen were transported to Australia and three, Jeremiah Brandreth, William Turner and Isaac Ludlam, were executed at Derby on 7 November 1817.

The Loughborough Luddite attack and the Pentrich Rising are perhaps the least well-known events covered in this collection, and perhaps also feel somewhat removed from our own experience and contemporary protests in today’s post-industrial, post-truth Britain. But Hedgecock’s portrayal of machinations in secret spaces in the East Midlands in 1816-17 highlights three major features that resonate with current issues: first, the ‘precariat’ and unrepresented; second, government attitudes to protest; and third, privacy and surveillance.

Formerly well paid artisanal trades such as the framework knitters of the East Midlands became the precariat of their day. With the removal of restrictions on apprentice numbers in 1813 and employers increasingly enamoured of the free market principles

espoused in Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, textile workers were increasingly reliant on precarious piece work, while their main trades were replaced by machinery operated by less skilled operatives in large factories. The attack on Heathcot's factory was precipitated by a rumour he was to shift production to Devon. And the attack on his machines did indeed push Heathcot to move to Tiverton, thus leaving the Loughborough framework knitters even more desperate. The actions of the Pentrich risers were political as well as economic. The rebels sought political change, though their aims were admittedly ill-defined, including an end to the ballooning National Debt. Though desperate, they were part of a long tradition of radical and revolutionary behaviour in the region. The Pentrich rising was 'one of the first attempts in history to mount a wholly proletarian insurrection without any middle-class support' according to E. P. Thompson in his classic history of political radicalism in this period, *The Making of the English Working Class*.

Who has the right to protest and in what ways? The Luddites and Pentrich rebels were active in the middle of a major period of government and local authority repression of working-class collective action. Rights we take for granted today – to vote democratically and to join a trade union – were regarded as anathema and politically dangerous by the government and social elites in the early nineteenth century. The 1799-1800 Combination Acts banned collective bargaining by trade unions. In reaction to the earlier outbreak of East Midlands Luddism in 1811, the 1812 Frame Breaking Act made the specific act of destroying stocking frames a capital offence. In 1817, the Tory government under Lord Liverpool set up a secret committee to gather evidence of a mass rebellion being planned by the working classes. The Spencean republican plot at Spa Fields in London, and the Derbyshire and West Yorkshire risings led to the passage of legislation prohibiting 'seditious' publications and any meetings campaigning for reform of parliament or the vote for working men.

The other arm of repression involved spies and *agents provocateurs*. In the age of internet hackers, trolls, surveillance and concerns about privacy on social media, who records what we say and do? During and after the Napoleonic Wars, Britain was a murky world of spies and government informers. Before the setting up of a national police force in the Victorian period, spies were often the only way the local authorities could attempt to keep track on the activities of workers suspected of involvement in the new political and trades societies. Magistrates in the industrial regions of England paid anyone prepared to infiltrate the secret meetings of trades combinations and radical societies. At these points of political and economic crisis, no one could trust a 'stranger'.

The Pentrich rising is thus as much the story of ‘Oliver the Spy’ and his fellow informers as it is about the thwarted attempt of the East Midlands textile workers to rebel, and this is reflected in Hedgecock’s vignettes. Oliver got the confidence of Joseph Mitchell, a Liverpool radical, and joined him in touring former Luddite heartlands in the North and Midlands, and promising the local radical groups that 70,000 men were waiting in London for the signal to rise. Oliver visited Nottingham three times, where he and another local informer encouraged former Luddites and radicals in their plans. On 25 May 1817, a meeting was held in the Three Salmons pub, as mentioned in Hedgecock’s narrative, and secret agents continued to report back to government about the preparations leading up to the rising. The actions and spaces of the story illustrate the desire for privacy, darkness, aliases and disguises of a movement forced into secrecy by repression: tramping along river valleys, mustering at midnight, and meeting in back rooms of pubs.

Of course many of the dark secrets of the spies remain hidden from the historian. Oliver did not act alone; the magistrates and Home Office were inundated with information from home grown spies like Hedgecock’s ‘Bromwich’. The betrayals by these local informers are difficult to find in any archive, done as they were by word of mouth and personal visits. All the written spy reports in the archives were by men, so we do not know if characters like ‘Lydia’ existed. Could they have operated within this masculine and indeed homosocial world of the framework knitters? Women are always more difficult to find in the archive, though this does not mean they did not act as informers: there were several postmistresses in the cotton weaving towns of Lancashire who forwarded on the post of anyone deemed suspicious to the Home Office.

Five days after the arrests at Pentrich, the *Leeds Mercury* newspaper ran a sensational exposé of Oliver, real name W. J. Richards, as a government-paid *agent provocateur*. The revelations of Oliver’s involvement in encouraging the rebels at Pentrich and in West Yorkshire hit all the headlines and were raised in parliament by MPs sympathetic to the parliamentary reform movement. The magistrates’ use of spies was widely criticised as wholly alien to the spirit of English law. The Tory government maintained its stance and resisted calls for an enquiry into Oliver’s conduct. As E. P. Thompson noted, Oliver became a Judas figure in radical legend: he became the archetypal betrayer in the midst of men meeting to fight for democracy and workers’ rights under great pressure of being repressed. Who is the modern Oliver today?