

OUR
HISTORY

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LUDDISM

IN THE PERIOD

1779-1830

Luddism in the period 1779-1830

Owing to a certain confusion that has grown up around the word "Luddite", the scope of this pamphlet will have to be defined.

Strictly, the word "Luddite" applies only to a very short campaign in a very limited area for a very specific purpose - the campaign in 1811-12 of the stocking-makers and lace-makers of Nottinghamshire and district, with the object of preventing the "frames" from being used for purposes which were detrimental to the trade and to their jobs and wages.

But machinery was broken in other areas, before and after the campaign of the Luddites in Nottinghamshire. Sometimes the destruction was part of a wage dispute - "direct action", in a period when trade unionism was weak or else actually illegal. Sometimes the destruction accompanied a strike, in order to prevent blacklegging (pitmen of the North-east would burn the pithead gear, or Welsh iron-workers would damage the furnaces, to ensure a complete stoppage).

Destruction of a new type of machinery, which endangered the jobs or reduced the standard of life of sections of the working class, is the best-known form of Luddism - using this word now in a broader sense to describe all machine-breaking. But this particular reaction to new machinery should not be dissociated from other reactions. The long period of the Industrial Revolution, when new inventions were applied piecemeal first to this industry, then to that, causing unemployment, dislocation and confusion in the older forms of industry, aroused a great deal of discussion. There was a "battle of ideas" going on: in books, pamphlets and newspapers, which we can still read; and in the pubs and trade clubs where workers voiced opinions which are lost to us because they were never put into print.

This pamphlet, then, will have to take into account not only the activities of machine-breakers of all kinds, but also the arguments that were being brought forward in the Industrial Revolution, for and against "unrestricted Machinery".

Before passing on to the more important examples of Luddism, it will be useful to refer to the valuable article by Eric Hobsbawm on "The Machine Breakers" (published in 'Past and Present' No.1, Feb. 1952). Since this is now, unfortunately; out of print and can only be seen in a good Reference Library, its main contentions will be given briefly:

After an introductory survey of the modern views of Luddism based on Liberal and Fabian assumptions (e.g. that capitalist industrial development was inevitable any way, that direct action is ineffectual, and that the early Labour movement simply "reacted blindly and gropingly to the pressure of misery"), and after a reminder that machine-breaking occurs from the 17th century right up to 1830, the various types of machine-breaking are analysed as follows:

- 1) Destruction of property which was merely incidental to riots for some other purpose, such as riots against high food prices,
- 2) Destruction of property as a means of putting pressure on employers during a dispute about wages or other industrial matters. This method was traditional, and included destruction of other kinds of property besides machinery or tools - e.g. cloth in the loom, corn-stacks, etc. It was a method of struggle suited to the pre-industrial period, since it could be used by independent and semi-independent artisans as well as by wage-workers. Being a collective action-, it served to engender solidarity in the days before trade unionism developed. This type of machine-breaking does not imply any hostility whatever to the machines as such.
- 3) Destruction of machinery in order to prevent its introduction into a branch of industry:
Points to notice here are:
 - a) that workers did not oppose Machinery in the abstract; they opposed specific machines when they threatened to cause unemployment or lowering of the standard of living of a particular branch of industry. Most new machines were not opposed at all, either because they did not offer this threat or because they were introduced at a time of boom when the threat was not so obvious
 - b) that there was great sympathy for machine-breakers, from workers (e.g. most of the Luddites were not betrayed) from small manufacturers (who did not want production to expand indefinitely).
Yet, in spite of public feeling against machinery, the capitalist entrepreneur was able to proceed, because he had the support of the State. (NB that it was the Unreformed Parliament of the 18th and early 19th centuries that introduced the doctrine of laissez-faire into industry.)
 - c) that destruction of new machines, although it could not prevent the advance of industrial capitalism as a whole, was often effective in its limited objectives for a time.

The tradition of "direct action"

It is important to begin by establishing the traditional nature of machine-breaking in the course of industrial disputes. The examples of "collective bargaining by riot", as it has been called, come mainly from the cloth-making industry which, since it was England's basic industry right into the Industrial Revolution, will feature rather a lot in this pamphlet.

The article by Eric Hobsbawm gives examples from the early part of the 18th century?

"Clothiers complained to Parliament in 1718 and 1724 that weavers 'threatened to pull down their houses and burn their work unless they would agree with their terms'. The disputes of 1726-7 were fought, in Somerset, Wiltshire and Gloucestershire, as well as in Devon, by weavers 'breaking into the houses' (of masters and blacklegs)'spoiling of wool, and cutting and destroying the pieces in the looms and the utensils of the trade'. They ended in something like a collective contract,"

"The great textile workers' riot at Melksham in 1738 began with workers 'cutting all the chains in the looms belonging to tor. Coulthurst...on account of his lowering of the Prices."

This direct method of "negotiation" continued throughout the century. There are also examples from the coal industry. To these must be added other examples of "direct action", for non-industrial purposes, such as the very extensive "food riots" of 1757s 1766 and 1795, all years of poor harvests and profiteering. These so-called riots prove, on a closer view, to have been well-organised demonstrations in force against millers, merchants and dealers who were hoarding corn or selling it in the markets at exorbitant prices. Destruction of machinery is not a feature of those movements, except that mills were sometimes damaged. Although a few arrests were always made and heavy punishments handed out, there was actually a good deal of public sympathy for the "direct action" that often succeeded in reducing food prices.

The attack on the spinning mills

With this background it is not surprising that, as the Industrial Revolution developed and new machinery began to throw men out of work, direct action was resorted to.

At the beginning of October 1779 "a great mob appeared at Arkwright's spinning-house near Chorley"- (This is actually mis-spelt "Ashwright" in the 'London Chronicle', so little was he then known to London.) "The people defended the place with fire-arms. One was killed on the spot, and about fifty wounded; four or five are since dead."

"On Monday several thousands returned there, armed with guns, scythes, etc., attacked and set fire to the building - it was burning on Monday at 12 o'clock at night"

"The rioters, in flying parties, have destroyed a mill at Bolton, by the bridge) have been at Bury and Ratcliff, and are now going to Toddington, to destroy a mill there....."

Then there is news of military steps taken to quell this outburst. Troops were brought across from Yorkshire. The millowners armed their employees and former militia-men. In Stockport "The Castle cotton works once more became a place of arms, and the embrasures filled with, Sir George Warren's cannon, which commanded Manchester Hill, Stockport Bridge, and the ford of the Mersey." After a week this revolt against machinery was subdued. ..

There are several points to notice about this episode. In the early part of the 18th century the cotton industry in Lancashire had a certain equilibrium: one weaver needed five spinners to keep him busy. Weaving was a man's job, a definite trade. But spinning, on the 'spinning-wheel' was for women and children; it was also a sideline in rural areas - dairy-maids and domestic servants would be set to spinning at slack times. Then the new flying-shuttle (applied to most handlooms by 1760) speeded up weaving and upset the equilibrium.

In 1768 two new inventions began to be used. But they had very different effects. The spinning-jenny was a frame on which eight threads could be spun at a time (the number was later increased to as many as eighty). It was operated by hand, and was small enough for a cottage. It was no threat to the workers, but merely increased their output. It was therefore not opposed, but welcomed.

But Arkwright's "water-frame" (a spinning-frame worked by water power) was essentially an invention for a factory worked by a mill-wheel. By 1776 Arkwright had three cotton mills working in Derbyshire. Then he came to Lancashire and built a new factory at Chorley, large enough to employ 500 men, and he was quickly imitated by others. It was this development that aroused the "direct action" of 1779.

The cotton workers of Lancashire were correct in seeing spinning-mills as a threat to their domestic industry. But in this case the result was not so serious as they had expected. The spinning-mills had been opened at a time of depression due to the War of American Independence, so the effect was immediately felt. But later, the foreign market expanded enormously and mechanised spinning increased the demand for weavers, so that for a time Lancashire workers were kept busy. (The spinning-mills did kill the rural spinning industry; but those scattered workers could not protest.)

"sent home to starve"

The next action against new machinery was in the woollen district of Wiltshire in 1802, when several factories were burnt down. This was merely a part of a campaign through the whole of the West of England and the West Riding against the introduction of gig-mills - machinery for raising the nap of woven cloth, replacing the teazle. Gig-mills had been in use on a small scale for many years, but the threatened extension of their use in 1802 was resisted by the shearmen (i.e. the men who completed the finishing of cloth by shearing the nap after it had been raised). The shearmen were also threatened more directly

by the mechanical shearing-frame, carrying several pairs of shears, which could do their job in one-fifth of the time.

The shearmen refused to "work after machinery". In spite of the Combination Acts which made trade union activity illegal, the Wiltshire shearmen kept close contact with those in Yorkshire; and other trades all over the country supported them financially.

The shearmen in Wiltshire put pressure on the factory-workers not to work with machinery; and some factories were burnt down. When some of the employers met a deputation of shearmen, and offered to refrain from using the machinery so long as shearmen were out of work in that district, the leader of the men "declared he would rather be hanged than recommend the shearmen to accept Mr. Jones's offer, or to work after machinery."

Local sympathy was with the men. The Home Office was informed that "there is good reason to think they are supported and encouraged by contributions from many of the innkeepers and other inhabitants of the place." (see A.Asplinall's "Early English Trade Unions" p.41)

A letter from a demobbed soldier to the local M.P. (quoted by the Hammonds in "The Skilled Labourer") shows that the campaign was closely connected with the problem of unemployment. The War had temporarily ended, by the Treaty of Amiens. "Now the contending nations are at peace with each other we are sent home to starve."

"The burning of factorys or setting fire to the property of people we know is not right, but Starvation forces Nature to do that which he would not, nor would it reach his thoughts had he sufficient employ. We have tried every effort to live by pawning our cloaths and chattles, so we are now on the brink for the last struggle."

The employers, in close contact as always with the Home Office, asked for help in breaking the combination. The shearmen's committee was arrested and several members imprisoned, A man was hanged for burning a factory. The large crowd at his funeral showed the public feeling against machinery that put men out of work.

The Yorkshire shearmen (or croppers) got gig-mills abolished in Huddersfield, and in other places in the West Riding employers were afraid to use them. When the employers in the West of England tried in 1803 to get Parliament to repeal various ancient restrictions on the trade - including a statute against "gig-mills" upon which the shearmen were relying - the shearmen counter-petitioned, calling on weavers and small manufacturers as witnesses on their side. In 1805 the shearmen, backed by weavers and small masters (39,000 signed a petition in Yorkshire) got a Bill introduced making gig-mills illegal, as well as restricting apprenticeship and limiting the number of looms to be used in any one house. The Bill was withdrawn pending the Parliamentary Inquiry of 1806, but when at last a new Act was passed in 1809 the Government had come down on the side of the employers.

All this time gig-mills were gradually coming into use; and the ending of the War in 1815 and consequent increase in unemployment were taken advantage of by the employers in the West of England to speed up the mechanisation of the finishing jobs.

The Yorkshire Luddites and "Great Enoch"

In the West Riding gig-mills were in general use by 1811. Then shearing-frarnos were introduced on a large scale. The woollen trade was already in a state of slump owing to the blockade imposed against European ports by the Orders in Council. In February 1812, while the Nottinghamshire Luddite movement (for quite different purposes) was coming to a close, the Yorkshire chearmen started a similar campaign of destruction. Armed with large hammers (called "Great Enoch" after the smith who made thorn), they entered finishing establishments and mills and broke up the shearing-frames.

The campaign was proceeding successfully. But in April a large-scale night attack on Rawfolds Mill, a finishing mill entirely concerted to machinery, met with strong resistance from the mill-owner Cartwright, who had installed soldiers to protect the machinery. (This is the incident described in Charlotte Bronte's "Shirley"). Two men were left mortally wounded, and Cartwright's callous behaviour towards them (he was alleged to have left them without water or medical attention in the hope of forcing a confession about their accomplices) was, according to the Hammonds, largely responsible for "the passionate-desire for vengeance which diverted the movement from attacks on machinery to attacks on men." Both men died game; the funeral of Sam Hartley was attended by thousands; the authorities took alarm and had John Booth buried secretly.

A week later Cartwright gave evidence against one of his soldier-guards who had refused to fire on the crowd, and the soldier was sentenced to public flogging. As Cartwright rode home, he was shot at by two men - it was said that twelve men had drawn lots for the honour. The shots missed him. But ten days later another equally unpopular manufacturer, Horsfall, who had also mechanised his factory and was an active enemy of the "Luddites", was shot dead by four men. Although this was a planned murder, so great was public sympathy for the shearmen that no informers could be found for many months.

The campaign next took the form of raids on houses for weapons. The magistrates were afraid to act; the soldiers were impotent. The Government appointed a special body of soldiers to act as spies and make arrests and examinations, as though in enemy territory, but this yielded no results. Then a Mr. Lloyd, operating for the Home Office, developed a special method of his own which consisted in kidnapping possible witnesses until they gave him information. At last, six months after the murder of Horsfall, Lloyd got on the track of an accomplice who turned King's evidence. At the next Assizes a large number of men were put on trial for raiding for arms, destruction of shearing-frames, attacking Rawfolds Mill, and the murder of Housfall. Seventeen men were hanged, and seven transported.

The above account is a more skeleton of the extraordinary story which is told in detail in Frank Peel's "Risings of the Luddites" and re-told; with additional facts from Horns Office papers, by the Hammonds in their "Skilled Labourer" (chap.xi). The disastrous twist given at Rawfolds Mill to what began as a campaign against machinery has tended to discredit the whole campaign of those Yorkshire Luddites. But the whole episode should be seen in the context of the abject poverty caused in the woollen trade by the later stages of the Napoleonic War, and the Government's intense efforts to repress the democratic political movement and all working-class activities.

The real Luddites

The Nottinghamshire Luddites, the only genuine followers of the imaginary "Ned Ludd", operated in 1811-12, their campaign coming to an end just at the time when the Yorkshire campaign began. There was no organisational link, for the purposes were quite different, though the methods had some similarity.

As in the woollen industry, there was a tradition of machine-breaking in the course of industrial disputes. In 1778-9 "the framework knitters of cotton hosiery tried to get a minimum wage established by Parliament. When their efforts were frustrated by the opposition of the employers ("hosiers"), stockings from the villages swarmed into Nottingham and destroyed several hundreds of the hosiers' frames. The hosiers then agreed to a new price list. As the Hammonds comment: "Rioting in fact had proved more successful than applications to Parliament."

After a fairly prosperous period, when the "whims of fashion" favoured all kinds of fancy stockings, the trade passed into a state of depression in the later stages of the Napoleonic War - partly due to changes in fashion, and partly because foreign markets were closed by blockade. So the "Luddism" of the framework knitters, breaking out in 1811, was connected with the problems of low wages and unemployment, like all other 19th century examples of machine-breaking.

But the Nottinghamshire campaign was for a very special purpose. It was not directed against now machinery - there was no new machinery in the trade. (This needs emphasising, since this particular misconception has existed since the first mis-statement was made in the House of Lords in the discussion on the "Framebi-oakers' Bill". Even Marx seems to have been misled about this.)

The sympathetic editor of the "Nottingham Review" made a very clear statement on Dec. 6th, 1811, about the purpose of the frame-breaking campaign. Owing to the depression in the hosiery trade, certain wide frames had been used by unscrupulous employers "in making pieces which are cut up into gloves, socks, sandals or stockings". The raw edges were stitched "in the same manner as a tailor stitches a garment." But, having no selvedge, the edges unravelled, and the whole hosiery trade had come into disrepute because of these "cut-ups". In the lace trade, too, a similar thing had happened. A poor quality lace, "made up with STARCH", had been imposed on the customer with "the gloss of the vendor's tongue". In both cases, better-class employers were being undercut by "adventurers" who were ruining the trade.

When these facts are known, the action of the framework knitters (both of hosiery and lace) becomes understandable. They were directly affected because, on top of the general depression and high food prices, their own wages were being cut down and one-fifth were unemployed. It seemed likely that the lowering of the quality of the product would end by destroying the trade. The workers saw themselves as protectors of the trade. A Luddite song (quoted by the Hammonds) promises that Ludd will not "sheath his conquering sword"

"Till full fashioned work at the old fashioned price
Is established by Custom and Law.
Then the Trade when this ardoreus contest is o'er
Shall raise in full splendour its head.
And colting and cutting and squaring no more
Shall deprive honest workmen of bread."

("colting" = employing unapprenticed men)

Destruction of frames only began after negotiations and appeal to Parliament had failed. In fact, it began only after certain hosiers had practically invited some such thing. For in the spring of 1811, at a conference between some hosiers and stockingsors, the hosiers agreed "to give the men unabated wages, provided they would join in bringing up the under-paying masters to the same standard, and to put down cut-up work." (This significant statement, quoted in "The Stilled Labourer", comes originally from Gravener Henson, who led negotiations on the men's behalf.)

Soon after this, a very discriminating campaign of frame-breaking began. Only the offending wide frames used for "cut-ups", and lace-frames used for the inferior kind of lace, were broken. In the whole main period of Luddism (i.e. during March 1811, and again from November 1811 to February 1812) a thousand frames, out of a total of about 25,000, were destroyed.

One of many accounts given in the "Times" of the raids on houses (for the industry was entirely a domestic one) is typical of the method:

"At Basford" (on Sunday evening) "while three soldiers were in the house of one William Barns, to protect three frames, a party of Luddites entered the house and immediately confined the soldiers; and while two of the party stood sentry at the door with the soldiers' muskets, others demolished the frames; and when the mischief was done, the muskets were discharged and the soldiers liberated, the depredators wishing them a good night." (Times, 31/1/1812)

"Friends of the poor man"

During the frame-breaking campaign, negotiations for higher wages were conducted by an organisation which, in spite of the Combination Acts, was practically a trade union committee. On December 28th, 1811, an agreed price-list was published for the hosiery trade. In the meantime various hosiers had increased wages to save their own frames from destruction.

What was the relationship between the frame-breaking campaign and these negotiations? Gravener Henson denied any connection.

The Luddites were a comparatively small number of men, acting in a disciplined manner as guerrillas. They sometimes went armed, but the only casualty in the whole campaign was a Luddite, shot dead by a frame-owner. Like guerrillas in enemy-occupied territory (for the whole district was patrolled by troops), they were admired and cherished by the rest of the population. The Hammonds quote a clergyman who wrote to the Home Office!

"There is scarcely a stockinger who will not give half his victuals or his money to those 'friends of the poor man' as they are styled."

There were no betrayals, and the main argument used by those M.P.s and peers who opposed the "Framebreakers' Bill" in February 1812, which imposed the death penalty, was that if the Government had failed to secure any convictions when the penalty was only 14 years transportation, they were even less likely to succeed now that a man's life was at stake.

As for the efficacy of this method of direct action, the wage increases speak for themselves. The "cut-up" trade was checked, and in February 1812 (before the death penalty was imposed) the Luddites ceased their work. It was generally believed by this time that Parliament was now ready to listen to their complaints. An advertisement for a delegate meeting of framework knitters to formulate their statement ready for the expected Parliamentary inquiry begins

"The troubled state to which the above places are reduced by the pressure of the times and the operations of the frame-breakers, having at length excited the attention of the Legislature....."

But all they got from Parliament was the death penalty. In the discussion on this Bill, Mr. Lambe (later Lord Melbourne) said:

"As to the disputes between the masters and the manufacturers" (hand-workers) "I do not think it right to inquire into them as causes of the riots - such inquiry only tends to inflame the minds of the workingmen, who generally conclude that they have rights which are infringed upon by the masters, and that they are justifiable in retaliating violence on them for the infringement of those supposed rights."

* * * * *

The struggle for a living wage continued in Nottinghamshire, by trade union organisation (although still illegal), by negotiation, and by spasmodic frame-breaking.

As in the case of the Yorkshire shearmen, the Luddite campaign was later marred by a violent incident with tragic consequences, which, by confusion with the earlier period, has discredited the ~~true~~ Luddite campaign of 1811-12.

The circumstances of this incident were altogether different. A certain Heathcote had built a factory for making bobbin-net by machine. Several other manufacturers pirated his invention and began to undersell him. He then reduced his wages (which were, for the district, exceptionally good) by one-third. To prevent his underselling his rivals and so