

The Luddites.

BY JOHN RUSSELL.

AN examination of the papers found after his death in the possession of the late Mr. Richard Enfield of Bramcote brought to light several interesting documents relating to the history of Nottingham and the neighbourhood. Through the courteous kindness of Mr. H. H. Enfield, these documents have been made available for use and reproduction in the transactions of the Thoroton Society, and it is from them that the facsimiles and transcripts accompanying this paper have been taken. They deal, as will be at once apparent, with the Luddite outrages of 1811 and 1812. It has been thought reasonable that some short account of these outrages should appear with the illustrations, though it may be objected that such an account is more suitable to a historical than an archaeological publication, and again that the proceedings of the Luddites have been described in such fulness of detail by several of our local historians that any further description of them is unnecessary. But archaeology and history are the handmaids of each other, and mutually illustrative; while, in addition to the fact that the present generation of Nottingham people is nearly 100 years removed from the date of the disturbances and so somewhat unfamiliar with them, these disturbances have in our day of trades-union development and labour organisation acquired a fresh interest. They were the first steps in that progress from degrading and oppressive conditions

of almost servile labour to a state of society when the worker, who contributes so large a share to the strength and welfare of the community, has a dignified and self-respecting position, and takes his due part in the work of responsible and impartial government.

The name Luddite was derived from a Leicestershire imbecile, named Ned Lud, who is said to have destroyed in a fit of mad passion some stocking-frames belonging to his father. He had nothing to do with the Luddite mischief proper ; but his name was chosen as eponymous by the frame-breakers of 1811, just as "Rebecca and her daughters" was by the toll-gate breakers of South Wales some thirty years later.

Several causes combined to produce misery and discontent ; an increase in the population, the high price of wheat consequent on the stoppage of supplies from abroad during the war, and the improvements in machinery, which, "destined in the long run to benefit the labouring classes, seemed at first rather to depress them," and "were the ruin of a number of small trades which were carried on at home," and so caused the pauperisation of families who relied on them for support. Sir Robert Peel said that "England had continued flourishing while foreign nations were decaying, and that the only alteration had been the substitution of machinery for manual labour ;" yet eighteen months later he said "that no time, since the present state of society had existed, had ever witnessed such distress as was then prevalent." The fact was that "though the increase of wealth was enormous, its distribution was partial. During the fifteen years which preceded Waterloo, the number of the population rose from ten to thirteen millions, and this rapid increase kept down the rate of wages." In a "Statement of the transactions in Nottingham and the Neighbourhood

I do hereby discharge all
 Persons what-soever from
 takeing out work Call'd
 the Single Tref, or the two
 Coarse, of which is Condemn'd
 by Law, any Persons Found
 so doing to the great
 injury of our Trade
 such People so found
 out shall be shot
 any Persons will bring
 me information of the
 offenders shall receive a
 reward of one Guinea
 to be Paid by me, M^r Pitt

1812

from the commencement of the disturbances 11th March 1811, to the 8th February 1812" (among the Enfield papers), it is said that "the Frameworkers were very vociferous in condemnation of their employers, and clamorous for work at a more liberal Price," and from the same document it appears that some frames at Kimberley "were destroyed on the Alledgement that the Person in whose possession they were had been in the habit of teaching Framework knitting without being bound apprentice"—a rather curious contrast to the present state of feeling as regards apprenticeship. As to the machines "the wide frames used for cut-ups were the most obnoxious." The writer of this paper assumes that these are the frames described in the facsimiles as "two-course holes or single press;" but it is not within his competence to affirm this positively. "The introduction of the 'Old Loughborough' Machine, patented by Heathcote & Lacey in 1809, from the increased width of the articles produced, formed a new epoch in the lace trade of Nottingham." So much for the causes of the riots. For some time the destruction of frames appears to have been confined to the villages round the town, Arnold, Bulwell, Lambley, and others. The operations of the Luddites were conducted with such swiftness, secrecy, and sureness, that they completely terrorized the districts in which they were displayed, and partially paralysed the energies of the authorities responsible for checking them. When the outrages manifested themselves in the Town, the Town Clerk and the Magistrates appear to have used all the means at their disposal to discover and prevent the perpetration of them; but to very little purpose, and on the 17th December, 1811, a secret Committee was formed and £2000

FACSIMILES
A AND B.

FACSIMILE
C.

TRANSCRIPT
2.

voted for its use, to be applied as it might deem best for checking the mischief and discovering the authors: this Committee was "to have full power and authority to dispose and apply the said sum of £2000 without rendering any account thereof." A bill was introduced into Parliament to make machine-breaking a capital offence, and it is interesting to recall the fact that it was in connexion with this bill, that the poet Byron made his first speech in the House of Lords, in which speech he pleaded cleverly, but perhaps, in the circumstances, somewhat inopportunistly, the cause of the distressed workpeople, and declared that for the conviction of a frame-breaker it would be necessary to have "twelve butchers for a jury and a Jefferies for a judge." Some 30 years after this, in 1846, eight men were executed for destroying about 37 lace machines in the factory belonging to Heathcoat and Boden at Loughborough. The repressive measures, however, adopted by the authorities do not appear to have been very effective in stamping out the disturbances. "The Committee of the Corporation have pursued their labours with considerable attention, but the extent of the information they have acquired has not corresponded with their wishes for the publick Tranquillity." "Several frames were broken notwithstanding the issuing of his Majesty's Proclamation and in open defiance of the measures adopted by the corporate body and the Magistrates." So run two pathetic sentences in the Statement above referred to, in which it is also stated that the Magistrates heard a Deputation "to attend them separately from both the Hosiers and the Framework Knitters, and then endeavoured to suggest some plan of conciliation which might at once and for ever put an end to the present spirit of Discontent active in

FACSIMILE

D.

Mr. Hoxsey

This is to inform you that
 if you do make any
 more ~~two~~ courses ~~Woll~~, you will
 have all your Frames broken
 and your Goods too, though you
 may think you have made your
 Loan fast I shall know how to
 break your frames, we will not
 suffer you to ruin the Trade
 wills has first, if we cant
 do it just to night, we will
 break them yet, and if we cant
 break them we can break something
 better and we will do it too
 in spite of the Devil
 Remember I shall send

Attacks upon the property of the Hosier. This utterly failed, and the attempt appeared to have caused such Dissatisfaction on the part of the Hosiers that it has never since been renewed by either of the order of Magistrates." The cessation of frame-breaking was probably due less to the display and exercise of force than to an improvement in social conditions, which made life more tolerable for the operatives and their families.

Some reflexions, naturally arising out of the history of the Luddites, may perhaps not unfitly conclude the paper.

A consideration of it will serve as a useful antidote to pessimism. There is much in the present conditions of English life to cause disquiet to thoughtful minds. But if, in spite of the acute and wide-spread misery and riotous destruction of a hundred years ago, there emerged a freer, happier, and more prosperous England, it is not unreasonable to hope that, if present conditions are carefully and impartially pondered, and handled honestly and courageously, they will issue in a state of greater comfort, more widely diffused thoughtfulness and prosperity, and a higher conception of patriotism as related to international duties and to the cause of ordered freedom, human brotherhood, enlightenment and solidarity throughout the world. Again the record of the doings and fate of individual Luddites calls up feelings of tolerant sympathy and pity for men who were goaded by intolerable sufferings into the commission of intolerable crimes. When the records tell of their inaccessibility to bribes at a time of distress, of their unflinching fidelity to each other, of the cheerful courage with which they faced death in what they believed to be a righteous cause, and how one of them, who was transported, left to his relations a

large sum of money earned by honest industry and enterprise in the colony to which he was sent, the reflexion inevitably arises that these men were naturally inclined to virtue rather than to vice, and that in happier circumstances they would most of them have refrained from doing any injury to their fellows. Reasonable conditions of material comfort are necessary for the sustenance of virtue in weak humanity. Lastly, the history of Luddism should teach trade-unionists, anarchists, and all who are striving, in however mistaken a way, to advance mankind, as well as those who strive to repress them, how little is accomplished by ignorant unreasonable violence. "At the end of February 1812 it was found that no less than 624 frames had been destroyed." Strange and pitiful madness this which in destroying the prosperity of the Masters, partly from a desire of revenge, destroyed at the same time the means of production and of life, and increased the distress which it was ostensibly the object of the destroyers to remove or relieve. "Inventions and improvements caused larger demand, employment to a large capital and thousands of work-people in the bobbin-net trade." The mistaken policy of frame-breaking did no more than arrest for a time the advancing tide of scientific industry. Violence begets violence, and "the pen is mightier than the sword." A thoughtful study of difficulties and methods for their solution, quiet but uncompromising resistance in spirit and in life to any arguments based on privilege and injustice will, as Tolstoy urges, act in the end as a sure solvent of moral and social wrong. But such a method of improving life needs both faith and patience. For the evolution of the moral perfection of man is not likely to be more rapid than was the evolution of the orb on which he dwells.

Declaration, Extraordinary.

Justice.

Death, or Revenge.

To our well beloved Brother, and Captain in Chief, Edward Ludd.

Whereas, it hath been represented to us; the General Agitators, for the Northern Counties, assembled to redress the Grievances of the Operative Mechanics, That Charles Lacy, of the Town of Nottingham, British Lace Manufacturer, has been guilty of divers Fraudulent, and oppressive Acts - whereby he has reduced to poverty and Misery Seven Hundred of our beloved Brethren; moreover, it hath been represented to us that the said Charles Lacy, by making Fraudulent Cotton Print Kett, of One Pound Stuff, has obtained the Sum of Fifty Thousand Pounds, whereby he has ruined the Cotton-Lace Trade, and consequently our worthy and wellbelov'd Brethren; whose support and comfort depended on the continuance of that manufacture.

It appeareth to us that the said Charles Lacy, was actuated by the most diabolical motives, namely to ~~gain~~ gain riches by the misery of his Fellow Creatures, we therefore wishing to make an example of the said Charles Lacy, do adjudge the said Fifty Thousand Pounds to be forfeited, and we do hereby authorize, empower, and enjoin you, to command Charles Lacy to disburse the said sum, in equal shares among the Workmen, who made Cotton Kett in the Year 1807, within six Days from the Date hereof.

In default whereof, we do command that you inflict the Punishment of Death on the said Charles Lacy, and we do authorize you to distribute, among the Parties you may employ for that purpose the Sum of Fifty Pounds, we enjoin you to cause this our Order to be presented to the said Charles Lacy without Delay, November 1811 - By Order *John P. [Signature]*

Luddite Transcripts.

(1)

“ Robin Hoods Cave,
Feby. 16.

To Mr. Trevit Biddles Bowler and all
others concerned in similar practices.

We are much concerned to find that you and your neighbours Biddles and Bowler continue to oppose the publick good by working those bad articles Single Press & 2 Course Warp —————

Now do you think that we who have encountered such difficulties & hazarded our lives for the good of the Trade are to be opposed & our past efforts made of no effect by your mean obstinacy no it shall not be so you may think that because your frames are secured by the presence of so large a civil & military force you have nothing to *fear* but can defy us with impunity but you must understand there are more methods of revenge than frame-breaking to be resorted to when that is not practicable! *for our past labours shall not be in vain.* In order that it may not be the case it is thought proper to inform you what will be done to such of you that persist in making the aforementioned Articles.

This information is designed for your good that no Children may perish which if they do blame your own obstinacy not us: as we have at all times manifested a disposition to spare life we wished still to show the same especially where Innocent Blood is concerned. You may think we shall not be able to fire your houses but the means which will be used will be so effectual that the flame will rise to the

highest room in the house in a moment, the composition to be used is Spirits of Turpentine Tar & Powdered Gunpowder mixed together a proper Quantity of this mixture powered in at the bottom of the door & lighted by the application of a bit of Touchpaper will do the business instantly. But there are many other modes of revenge or rather punishment to be inflicted on the obstinate equally injurious to Life which will be used where this is not practicable—to prevent any of which evils take the timely warning as 14 days will be allowed to finish Warps &c., before execution—Mr. Trevit you may get in a mender, go to the Warehouse when others do not & give a charge of secrecy to your men but it will not do for do how you will we shall be sure to get to know how you act in this matter. This warning is intended for all making the same kind of work.

Signed Joe Firebrand

Secretary.

Addressed to

Master Biddles, Mr. Bowler
and Mr. Trevit.”

Copy of a Proclamation by Ned Ludd.

No date but published

23 Decr. 1811.

(2)

“Ned Ludd

Proclamation.

I do hereby discharge all manner of Persons, who has been employed by me in giving any information of breaking frames to the Town Clerk or to the Corporation Silley Committee, any person found out in so doing or attempting to give any information,

FACSIMILE D.

Ned Lud Gives Notice to the

COOPERATION

if the Cooperation does not take means to call a
Meeting With the Masses About the "James' Gang"

Should Ned Will Assemble 20,000 Men Together in a few days

and Will Destroy the town in spite of the Soldiers &
NO KING

will be punished with death or any Constable found out making inquiries so has to hurt the cause of Ned or any of his Army, Death

By order of
King Ludd

S.

(with the Prince & 2

Thousand Pounds 2 Hundred Pounds Reward."
at their Ace.)

(3)

"Gentlemen

I prosum you are desireus of A sitiatio hin the fugoffis and you may Rest ashured nothing shall be wonting hon My part to procure you the sitiatiois you Apply for but I doubt I shall not be able to provide for you all in the fugoffice, as som of you willnot alltogether be wiling To stop there hon A Count of the dangeours Disorder you seem to Laber hunder, it aperes from the simtoms of youre disorder that another full moon or two will make som of you fit objects for the Hous in snenton Fields, but if it shud plese devin provedenc to render any of you unfit to discharg the dutys Which Mr. Coldham has imposed hon youre Commitey befor the 12th of february 1812 I will get Docr. Willis to atend hon you but At the A bov date Mr. Willis will be wanted at Saint Lukes as it may be Expected he wil have Ocation to meet King Percevell and the rest of youre Coleges there.

I am yours faithfully

Ned Lud ———

Nottingham

December the 21 1811 "

NOTES ON TRANSCRIPT No. 3.

Fug-offis—Perhaps the same as “fog-office,” and used as a description of the meeting-place of the special committee, by way of a gibe at the inability of the authorities, either by vigilance or reward, to discover perpetrators of outrages.

Dr. Willis—John Willis, M.D., was called in 1811 to attend George III. His father Francis Willis, originally a clergyman, became a physician, and was an expert in mental diseases. He had a large house for the reception of patients at Gretford in Lincolnshire. ¹

George Coldham was Town Clerk of Nottingham. He was killed in a carriage accident at Brighton in 1815.

St. Luke's—Probably St. Luke's Hospital for Lunatics, in Old Street Road, London, instituted in 1751.

Spencer Perceval, Prime Minister, was assassinated in 1812. He was an amiable man in private life, a sound lawyer, “a keen debater, and a fluent and graceful speaker, but was shallow and intolerant, unequal to the task of leading the councils of a great nation.”



(¹) I am indebted to Dr. Morley Willis of Regent Street, Nottingham, for the clue that led up to this note.—J. R.