

"Machine breaking and strike action were characteristic of unruly and undisciplined Labourers"

Violence, protest and machine breaking were all characteristic of the late 18th and early 19th century. Employers seeking to make more off less, drove down workers wages with the more widespread use of machines, such as the gig mill. After failed attempts at lawfully seeking and upholding statutes which protected the outworking system from newly mechanised 'factory' industry, where products were of a lesser quality, the workers were left with little choice but to resist with violence. This happened at a time when bad harvests had caused an acute increase in food prices, and foreign wars had damaged foreign trade. Not only did they resent this tide of cheaper, faster and less-skilled change, but also to the greater shift in change to 'Laissez-faire' capitalism which left them completely unprotected. Although the assumption that the act of deliberate wrecking of industrial machines was born with the Luddites, this is not the case, moreover the assumption that these violent outbursts were committed by the un-skilled lower class 'mob' are also untrue. This Luddite myth is one that needs addressing, as it has fallen into lore. However it can not be ignored that the violence did sometimes escalate out of control (ending in death) yet this serves to prove just how frustrated and desperate these people were.

Accounts of skilled workers having their livelihoods destroyed by the introduction of machine(s) go back far and wide in History. In Spitalfields in 1675, well over a hundred years before the invention of General Ludd, narrow weavers vented their aggression at new "engines" that could do the work of several people. Also in 1710 a London hosier employing too many apprentices in violation of the Framework Knitters Charter had his machines broken by angry Stockingers . As we can see machine breaking had been used as a weapon used by workers to protest against radical and resentful change within their trade.

Yet these workers were in no way unruly and undisciplined, far from it, they were skilled workers, artizans, proud and reasonably educated, they were the lifeblood of the northern economy and they felt themselves being slowly eradicated in favour of machines that not did the work faster but cheaper and in a poor fashion.

1779 saw Nottingham framework knitters petition parliament for a bill to regulate their trade, this along with a bill the previous year to regulate their wages were thrown out by parliament. As soon as news of this reached the framework knitters violent protest was directed at Samuel Need, the leading opposition of the bill. Samuel Need was a powerful master hosier and joint owner of Arkwright's cotton mill , he obviously did not see fit to grant the knitters their demands at the loss of his own interests.

Riots against Need lasted almost 2 weeks with attacks made on his mill, the destruction of "...some fifty stocking frames...and the burning of the house of the master Hosier" . The dispute ended with troops being deployed, however agreements were made between the master hosiers and the framework knitters on wages which lasted for over 20 years, also those arrested for the vandalism were given "light sentences" .

The knitters then actually succeeded in achieving their demands, and those convicted of crimes against property were given fairly mild sentences considering their actions. I feel this dispute was extremely influential and sent

out a message to the textile workers (esp. 30 years later the Luddites) that the use of violent protest in obtaining their demands actually worked, especially when trying to protect working rights by use of the legal parliamentary method, proved pointless.

Between 1793 and 1801, Priminister Pitt introduced a serious of repressive legislations aimed at crushing revolutionary and potentially threatening intent within Britain. Of those the 1795 Treasonable Practices and Seditious meetings acts, and also the Combination acts of 1799 and 1800 had a great impact on the increasingly troubled working classes. The combination acts essentially banned trade union activity therefore turning all hopes of worker initiatives into clandestine secret groups whom had to express their anger at their employees not only secretly but also illegally.

However despite this new oppressive combination act, there is little evidence to support that it was actually used very much, John Rule flags up case in point where a Shearmen's (also known as Croppers) union headquarters in Leeds, was reported to have been known about by the Home Secretary. However the Home Secretary was advised not to intervene as so not to "...afford them ground of complaint against the Constitution that we should not drive them into the service of the true Jacobin" Caution was shown against the Shearmen's union as it was perceived that no inconvenience was being caused, that they were being just in their meetings, and that no revolutionary activity would become of it. I feel this should be addressed as many are quick to see Pitt's legislation as

extreme, and carried out mercilessly upon the afflicted workers, however there is a lot of evidence to support the fact that the authorities were aware that being too oppressive would in fact fuel a revolutionary fire.

The Luddite disturbances started within Nottingham in 1811, they initially arose out of wage disputes , and underpaying Hosiers were attempting to lower production costs by heavier use of machinery. Framework Knitters objected to the increasing use of machinery in their trade. Originally the Knitters worked from home or in small shops upon rented frames, the new machines and factory system of employment completely went against this traditional method of Hosiery production. This new method meant that wages were cut, the employment of 'Colts' and that the finished product was inferior. This debasing

of their trade caused great distress to the skilled workers, this new cheaper and

quicker method of Hosiery production went against old statutes granted to the trade under Charles II, which prohibited all engines that fabricated articles in a

'deceitful manner.

Workers clung to this statute, yet this paternalist provision was considered obsolete in this new Industrial age, the government turned its back on the renters/workers, handing over more control to the frame/factory owners in the move to a more Laissez-faire based economy. The Luddite reactions were because of this, these new economic and moral values, which essentially abandoned them in the crisis of food shortage. Their skilled work was being undermined at a very difficult time, and there was nothing they could about this gradual but overbearing wave of industrial change.

The 'solicitor to General Ludd' wrote a letter to Joseph Radcliffe, the magistrate of Huddersfield, informing him that since cloth-dressers of that area had spent

£7000 petitioning the government to uphold legislation against shearing frames and gig mills, and all to no purpose, then they were trying another 'method' This exact sentiment was expressed to the Home Secretary by workers in Bolton, and again all to avail. The workers had no choice, but to resist using violent force, "luddism was a last resort when other techniques had been tried and proved useless"

Malcolm I. Thomis has written that he believes had there been agreements between workers and employers then there would of been "no need to resort to physical violence and illegal enterprises of Luddism" . I agree with this statement, these men were not undisciplined and unruly, they were not against capitalism per se', (capitalism had ruled their trade for over a century) it was the that they were not being heard in an extremely distressing time of food shortage, wage cuts and poor foreign trade.

In the north food prices were never higher in the period 1792-1829 . In May 1812 General Maitland in Manchester found "considerable degrees of distress" had afflicted the people by way of the price of potatoes trebling and the rate of wages falling "by almost the same degree as prices had risen" . Not surprisingly we can see a clear parallel between this and the actions of the Luddites, proof again of just how desperate the period of the Luddites was.

The Framework Knitters in Nottingham constituted half of the Nottingham electorate , yet this power that they held was relatively useless in gaining what they desired from their work. The power that could be obviously and immediately wielded by the worker was the "...power to damage or destroy the property of his employer. " Again we see the 'last resort' mentality that was employed by the workers to make their grievances known.

By 1812 machine breaking was at its peak, new activities in Cheshire and southeast Lancashire with its cotton workers who were using machine breaking as their weapon against wage cuts, rising food prices. Rioting was widespread throughout April, however there were also many food riots happening at the same time, these were perceived by government as the same problem and dealt with the riots by use of the military. A good example of the scale of the rioting of April 1812 can be seen in this passage from Charlesworth, Gilbert and Randall:

"Led by General Ludd, riots broke out at Bredbury, Gee cross and Stalybride. Colliers and Weavers from Ashton, Hollinwood and Saddleworth joined with Oldham workers and rioted over food, proceeding thence to Middleton to attack a steam loom factory."

This great wave of rioting lasted for 3 days and ended with one of the biggest attacks on textile machinery. The Westhoughton Steam loom factory was burned to the ground after several attempts during these few days. This attack on Westhoughton is seen as the beginning of the end of Luddite disturbances. After this, authorities used armed protection on the bigger factories. One can see by the passage quoted that Luddites became a symbol of the unrest at the time, what once began as clandestine small scale attacks on factory property quickly became the general feeling of northern England's workforce. Now we see a more "mobbish" side to the unrest, with food rioters joining forces with the Luddites each group sympathising with the next and demanding an end to

starvation level food prices and wages. We also see very destructive and violent protest aimed at people and even their houses as opposed to machines. The effects of the Luddites were quite broad, they destroyed something over £100,000 worth of property in just 14 months, the government spent at least £500,000 in salaries alone for its military force . In terms of actually securing better wages results were mixed, with also some manufacturers not implementing more machinery for fear of attacks. More importantly though is the political effects of the Luddites, the failure of direct and violent action channelled workers' grievances into conventional reformist actions, leading to a revival of pressure for trade unions and workplace improvement on the one hand, and for parliamentary reform on the other. Also we have the eventual rise of chartists, who campaign for better industrial rights and reform.

The Industrial revolution brought with it a completely new basis of work practice and displaced thousands from their working routines, causing huge distress and confusion and casualties. A move from the wealthier employers to the introduction of more machinery into the textile industry meant cloth could be made far quicker and cheaper, without the use of as many men. Textile workers were of an extremely broad range, from the extremely skilled framework knitters in Nottingham to the lesser skilled cotton spinners in Manchester, yet each was proud of his or her skill, having spent the majority of his/her life perfecting and honing their craft and reaping the wage that they worked for. The industrial revolution was not rejected by the textiles workers, it was the uncertainty that machines such as the newer shearing frames and power looms brought, these new machines drove down their wages in a time of immensely increased food prices brought on by bad harvests. Any means of trying to protect their trade by appealing to Parliament to uphold statutes that prevented the use of machines producing goods in a 'deceitful manner' proved useless, thousands of pounds were spent on petitioning Westminster, but all was futile. 'Laissez-Faire' was favoured by parliament in this burgeoning industrial age, these skilled workers were now somewhat expendable, their security in skilled work now somewhat lessened. Machine breaking and strike action were not characteristic of 'Unruly and Unskilled workers', they were the last resort they were the last resort by skilled workers desperate to hold onto their livelihood when other methods of protest had failed.

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Leslie Clarkson "British Trade Union And Labour History: A Compendium" (Macmillan, London 1990)

Andrew Charlesworth, David Gilbert, Adrian Randall et al, "An Atlas Of Industrial Protest in Britain 1750 - 1990"  
(Macmillan, London 1996) pg 19

Ibid pg20

Ibid pg 20

John Rule "British Trade Unionism 1750-1850 (Longman House, England 1988) pg 86

Malcolm I. Thomis "The Luddites" (David and Charles ltd Great Britain, 1970)  
Pg 48

Colts were workers who had not completed their 7-year apprenticeship required by law.

Adrian Randall et al, "An Atlas Of Industrial Protest in Britain 1750 - 1990"  
Pg 32

Malcolm I. Thomis "The Luddites" pg 67

Ibid pg 67

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Ibid pg 44

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<http://www.mindfully.org/Reform/Luddite-History.htm>