

The Luddite Risings of 1812

We are coming up to the 200th anniversary of the Luddite Risings in West Yorkshire in 1812, which have had a very bad press for most of that time.

But far from being the mindless wreckers that history has characterised them; they were skilled textile workers whose livelihood was threatened by inferior cloth produced by machines. The shearmen, as they were known, spent years trying to protect their families and communities by both collecting petitions of tens of thousands of names to present to Parliament and raising thousands of pounds in tiny individual donations to sponsor legislation in Parliament. But these constitutional paths were slammed in their face when a Royal Commission under William Wilberforce upheld all the ancient statutes that benefited the machinery owners and struck out all those that gave any protection to the Shearmen.

They were, in my view, driven to direct action. This usually took the form of breaking the hated shearing frames, usually after giving a warning to the mill owner first. The nearest the action came to Wakefield was Fosters Mill at Horbury Bridge; this was later taken over by Messrs. R. Baines and Co. and was later a Storage Depot for Lee & Briggs Ironmongers of Horbury, before being demolished some years ago.

The attack also demonstrates another feature of the Luddite attacks; that is with only isolated exceptions, the lack of physical violence against the person.

A magistrate at Horbury had urged the owners to pull down their obnoxious machinery; whether this was because he sympathised with the workers' cause or because he realised that he had not the means to protect them is not known.

But whilst some complied, Mr. Joseph Foster owner of the mill at Horbury refused to heed the suggestion.

So on 9th April his mill where his four sons Thomas, John, Josiah and Joseph were sleeping were visited by the frame breakers at midnight; contemporary accounts suggest that there were about 300 of them. Two sons Thomas and Joseph were kept in bed but guarded; John and Joseph were made to come downstairs with the object of them opening the doors. Josiah opened the wrong door much to the anger of the Luddites who then broke down the door of the cropping shop and destroyed the shears and machinery. When the work of destruction was done John and Josiah whose legs had been tied were guarded by one man when the rest of the frame breakers slipped away; he then wished them good night and melted into the dark night.

The identification of the attackers was impossible for in these midnight raids they were always disguised by blacked faces or masks.

That the action may have been viewed not unsympathetically by the locals is suggested by the fact that the event was celebrated by a popular ballad that has come down through the years to us.

Foster's Mill

A Luddite song

Come all you croppers stout and bold
Let your faith grow stronger still
Oh the cropper lads in the County of York
They broke the shears at Foster's Mill

The wind it blew the sparks they flew
Which alarmed the town full soon
And out of bed poor people did creep
And run by the light of the moon

Around and around they all did stand
And solemnly did swear
Neither bucket nor kit nor any such thing
Should be of assistance there

Around and around we all will stand
And sternly swear we will
We'll break the shears and the windows too
And set fire to the tazzling mill

The government, terrified by the spectre of the French Revolution, eventually crushed the Luddites and extracted terrible revenge at York Assizes in 1813 when, 14 men were hung and many more transported for life.

Ken Rowley, 2012