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# The life and death of Ned Lud

—By John Radford—

Throughout Britain and much of the English-speaking world, the name of Ned Lud is almost as familiar as that of Robin Hood. His followers, the Luddites, are invoked by newspapers when writing about anything from printers resisting new technology to sheer vandalism. They are portrayed as reactionary, bloody-minded destroyers of progress, but this is a rather simplistic view of history.

Lud, whoever he may have been, had such support amongst the working people of Nottingham in his day that rewards of up to £600 — perhaps £150,000 in 1982 money — went unclaimed.

Nottingham at the turn of the nineteenth century was a turbulent town. A nonconformist minister called Beaumont reported in 1799 that he had lived here for seventeen years, and in that time had witnessed seventeen riots. Most of these were to do with the price of food: England was at war with France, taxes were high, and between 1792 and 1829 prices had doubled, whilst wages for a journeyman stockinger had halved, from seventeen shillings to eight shillings a week. During one disturbance at the Goose Fair, the unfortunate mayor of Nottingham was pursued down Goosegate by a huge cheese, heaved after him by the rioters. Poverty was rife, and tempers ran high.

It was against this background that the new automatic stocking-frame was being introduced. Now it was possible for women and children to do the work formerly done by skilled men who had served a seven-year apprenticeship.

The first action by people styling themselves "Luddites" took place on the 4th of November, 1811. They attacked the house of a Mr. Hollingworth, in Bulwell, and smashed his

furniture. John Westby, of Arnold, was killed in the raid, but urged his compatriots on with his dying breath. Luddism had its first martyr.

In the days that followed, stocking frames were destroyed in Arnold and Sutton-in-Ashfield. The magistracy clamped down: public houses were closed at 10 p.m., and a curfew was declared.

However, at the end of November, 1811, more frames were broken in Basford, within ten yards of an inn where a company of dragoons, sent in by the government, were stationed. No-one could — or would — give any information.

By December, the Luddites were openly passing the hat round in local inns, and getting handsome contributions. Constables were sworn in, and Bow Street Runners came up from London, but nothing seemed to be able to stop the growth of the movement. It was around this time that the notion that Luddites were anti-machinery was getting common currency. On the 6th of December, the *Nottingham Review* published a correction:

"Nottingham stands second to no town in the kingdom for the invention of new machinery, whilst it stands the last on the list for the destruction of the works of genius . . ." So the Luddites were fighting poor wages and sharp practice, rather



than machinery; or so they claimed.

On Christmas eve, 1811, Ned Lud himself issued a "proclamation", warning that anyone passing information to the authorities about his men's activities would be "punished with death". Perhaps this marks the point at which Luddism changed from being a popular movement, fuelled by anger and genuine hardship, into a kind of Mafia organisation. Whoever issued this message styled himself "King Lud" — a hardly democratic title.

In January of 1812, Nottingham's Town Clerk announced that he had discovered "a Ludding industry" in which money changed hands for breaking the frames of particular employers. The Luddites claimed that this was sheer propaganda, and this may have been true: even the Town Clerk had to admit that there were unscrupulous employers who paid their workmen in goods of inferior value, rather than coin of the realm.

On the 26th January, the Luddites attacked the premises of a Mr. Barnes, in Basford. In spite of having two dragoons to help guard his property, frames belonging to Barnes' sub-contractors were smashed. In many cases, the frames were rented to workmen who were, in effect, self-employed. Barnes accused the dragoons of inciting the violence by their presence, and subsequent enquiries revealed that frames belonging to Barnes himself had remained undamaged, but no conclusions were drawn.

The 5th of February was the date on which a frame belonging to a Mr. Hollingsworth, of Heanor, was destroyed at the home of a young woman called Sarah Wilde, at Eastwood. The man responsible turned out to be one of Sarah's suitors, John Osborne, of Heanor, but, again, no-one investigated this strange coincidence.

Still, on the whole, the hosier's life was one of ill-paid and unremitting toil. In February, 1812, over 15,000 people were unemployed in Nottingham — something approaching half the then population of the town. These were the times

when men pleaded: "Give us work at any price! Half a loaf is better than no bread!"

At the end of the month, Lud wrote to the Prime Minister and the Prince Regent demanding a better deal for hosiery workers. Parliament responded almost immediately. They introduced a bill to make frame-breaking punishable by execution. Lord Byron spoke against the bill in the House of Lords, but no-one paid any attention to the fey, twenty-four-year-old poet.

In May a poster appeared in the town centre, praising the Luddites, and pointing out that since the penalty for frame-breaking was now the same as for murder, there was nothing to stop the Luddites conducting a reign of terror against the detested employers. But, by now, intellectual opinion, which had favoured the Luddites at the start, was beginning to wane in the face of the Mafia-like raids the Luddites had mounted in recent weeks. Meanwhile, the government kept up its propaganda campaign, even suggesting that Napoleon himself had sent £4,000 to support the movement, in order to keep soldiers in Nottingham, rather than France.

Nevertheless, in May, 1814, William Matthews of Nottingham had a visit from the Luddites, during which his frames were smashed, and in October of the same year Thomas Garton of Basford had a fierce gun-battle with them. One of his neighbours was killed in the crossfire.

Luddism died in August, 1816, when eight Luddites were publicly hanged in Nottingham. They had been convicted of destroying lace machines on the 28th June, at the factory of Heathcoat, Lacy and Boden, in Loughborough. The total damage exceeded £10,000.

So who was Ned Lud? If, in reality, there never was just one man who held that pseudonym. There are old tales that, somewhere in Nottingham, there is a box of papers that will finally tell the truth about the Luddites, but it has never been found. If, one day, it turns up, we shall all learn the truth . . . Perhaps.

