

Luddites and Luddism History

This historical overview is an extract from Kevin Binfield, ed., Writings of the Luddites (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004). No part of this page may be reproduced in any form without the written permission of Kevin Binfield.

Few groups have been more misunderstood and have had their image and name more frequently misappropriated and distorted than the Luddites. The Luddites were not, as not only popularizers of theories of technology but also capitalist apologists for unregulated innovation claim, universally technophobes. The Luddites were artisans -- primarily skilled workers in the textile industries in Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire, Leicestershire, Cheshire, the West Riding of Yorkshire, Lancashire and Flintshire in the years between March 1811 and April 1817 -- who when faced with the use of machines (operated by less-skilled labor, typically apprentices, unapprenticed workers, and women) to drive down their wages and to produce inferior goods (thereby damaging their trades' reputations), turned to wrecking the offensive machines and terrorizing the offending owners in order to preserve their wages, their jobs, and their trades. Machines were not the only, or even the major, threat to the textile workers of the Midlands and North. The Prince Regent's Orders in Council, barring trade with Napoleonic France and nations friendly to France, cut off foreign markets for the British textile industry. Even more importantly, famine and high food prices required more of each laborer's shrinking wages. Machines and the use of machines to drive down wages were simply the most accessible targets for expressions of anger and direct action.

The Luddites were not the first or only machine wreckers. Because organized, large-scale strikes were impractical due to the scattering of manufactories throughout different regions, machine wrecking, which E. J. Hobsbawm calls "collective bargaining by riot," had occurred in Britain since the Restoration. For example, in 1675 Spitalfields narrow weavers destroyed "engines," power machines that could each do the work of several people, and in 1710 a London hosier employing too many apprentices in violation of the Framework Knitters Charter had his machines broken by angry stockingers. Even parliamentary action in 1727, making the destruction of machines a capital felony, did little to stop the activity. In 1768 London sawyers attacked a mechanized sawmill. Following the failure in 1778 of the stockingers' petitions to Parliament to enact a law regulating "the Art and Mystery of Framework Knitting," Nottingham workers rioted, flinging machines into the streets. In 1792 Manchester weavers destroyed two dozen Cartwright steam looms owned by George Grimshaw. Sporadic attacks on machines (wide knitting frames, gig mills, shearing frames, and steam-powered looms and spinning jennies) continued, especially from 1799 to 1802 and through the period of economic distress after 1808.

The first incident during the years of the most intense Luddite activity, 1811-13, was the 11 March 1811 attack upon wide knitting frames in a shop in the Nottinghamshire village of Arnold, following a peaceful gathering of framework knitters near the Exchange Hall at Nottingham. In the preceding month, framework knitters, also called stockingers, had broken into shops and removed jack wires from wide knitting frames, rendering them useless without inflicting great violence upon the owners or incurring risk to the stockingers themselves; the 11 March attack was the first in which frames were actually smashed and the name "Ludd" was used. The grievances consisted, first, of the use of wide stocking

frames to produce large amounts of cheap, shoddy stocking material that was cut and sewn into stockings rather than completely fashioned (knit in one piece without seams) and, second, of the employment of "colts," workers who had not completed the seven-year apprenticeship required by law. (For those laws, see the page on "Interpretations.")

Frames continued to be broken in many of the villages surrounding Nottingham. The 23 March 1811 and 20 April 1811 Nottingham Journal reports several weeks of almost nightly attacks in the villages, all successful and carried out without one attacker's being arrested. The summer of 1811 was quiet, but a bad harvest helped to renew disturbances in November, when, as the story goes, stockingers assembled in the wooded lands near Bulwell and were led in attacks on a number of shops by a commander calling himself Ned Ludd.

Letters from Midlands correspondents to the Home Office report a number of riotous disturbances, including the burning of haystacks and "an anonymous letter received by a Magistrate threatening still greater acts of violence by fire." Letters dated 13 and 14 November 1811 request that the government dispatch military aid because "2000 men, many of them armed, were riotously traversing the County of Nottingham." In December 1811 public negotiations between the framework knitters and their employers, the hosiers, some of which were carried out in the two Nottingham newspapers, failed to result in the return of wages, piece rates, and frame rents to earlier levels or in any satisfactory amelioration of the framework knitters' economic circumstances. Frame breaking continued in the Midlands counties of Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire, and Leicestershire through the winter and early spring of 1812. It resurfaced in 1814 and again in Leicestershire in the autumn of 1816.

The first signs of the spread of Luddism to the cotton-manufacturing center of Manchester and its environs in Lancashire, Cheshire, and Flintshire materialized in December 1811 and January 1812. Manchester Luddism has traditionally been understood as having centered on the cotton-weaving trade, which had failed in an attempt to organize in 1808, and which was suffering from the use of steam-powered looms to decrease the wages of skilled weavers at a time of rising food prices and depressed trade; however, documents that I have discovered in the McConnell, Kennedy and Company papers and Home Office documents that have been entirely overlooked by previous scholars indicate that Luddites were active in defense of the spinning trade, too. (For those documents, see Chapter 3 of Writings of the Luddites.) In Manchester, unlike Nottingham, the offensive machinery was housed in large factories. Luddite raids in and around Manchester tended to be carried out by large numbers of attackers and also often coincided with food riots, which provided crowds that were large enough to carry out the factory attacks and that came from a broadly distressed population ready to take action. Luddite activity continued in Lancashire and Cheshire into the summer of 1812 and blended into efforts to establish larger trade combinations and into political reform, but the force of Luddism dissipated following the acquittal of dozens of accused Luddites in Lancaster later that year and the administration of loyalty oaths coupled with royal pardons conditioned upon the taking of those oaths.

The factory owners and cloth merchants of the woolen industry in the West Riding of Yorkshire were the targets of Luddism in that county. Although West Riding Luddites represented a variety of skilled trades, the most active and numerous by far were the cloth dressers, called croppers, whose work was threatened by the introduction of the shearing

frame. The croppers' work consisted of using forty- or fifty-pound handheld shears to cut, or crop, the nap from woven woolen cloth in order to make a smooth and salable article. They were threatened by two types of machines. The gig mill, which had been prohibited by law since the rule of Edward VI, was a machine that raised the nap on woolen cloth so that it might be sheared more easily. The shearing frames actually mechanized the process of shearing and reduced the level of skill and experience necessary to finish an article of woolen cloth, even though the machines could not attain the quality of hand-cropped cloth. From January 1812 through midspring, Luddite attacks in Yorkshire concentrated on small cropping shops as well as large mills where frames were used. In April Luddites began to attack mill owners and raided houses and buildings for arms and lead. Luddism began to fail after the failed attack upon Rawfolds Mill and the murder of mill owner William Horsfall by George Mellor and other Luddites. By the next winter, West Riding Luddism had run its course, even though after the January 1813 executions of Mellor and other Luddites a few more threatening letters were sent to public officials.

In all three regions, Luddites responded to the distressing concurrence of high food prices, depressed trade caused by the wars and by the trade prohibitions imposed under the Orders in Council, and by changes in the use of machinery so as to reduce wages for the amount of work done. That machinery alone was not the primary cause of Luddite anger is evident in the cessation of Luddism. Luddite activities ended as a result of the rescinding of the Orders in Council, the suppression of the riots by the government's use of spies and the military, some wage and usage concessions, and some reduction in food prices. Despite its brief run, Luddism ought to be understood as E. P. Thompson and J. L. and Barbara Hammond have argued, as an important step in the formation of a class consciousness and the development of labor unions in Britain. Both the appropriation of the term Luddism and the use of the term as an epithet are erroneous; to use the term other than in its historical context is to display ignorance of the particularity of historical conditions.

A number of excellent published histories of Luddism are available and are far more reliable and accurate than anything appearing on the internet. J. L. Hammond and Barbara Hammond gleaned the Home Office Papers for their treatment of Luddism in The Skilled Labourer (1919 -- indispensable). E. P. Thompson's landmark study, The Making of the English Working Class (1963 -- indispensable), considers Luddism in its relationship to coterminous Radical and labor movements. Malcolm Thomis's The Luddites (1970 -- indispensable) was the first major study devoted solely to the Luddites. John Rule surveys the various scholarly treatments of Luddism in a chapter of his book The Labouring Classes in Early Industrial England (1986 -- supplemental). Adrian Randall's Before the Luddites (1991 -- indispensable) explores the philosophy of Luddism in its nascent form and considers the differences between the woollen industry in the West of England and the Yorkshire industry, where Luddism flourished. Kirkpatrick Sale's Rebels against the Future (1995 -- cautiously recommended) reinterprets Luddism as a general resistance to technology. The most recent complete history of Luddism is Brian Bailey's The Luddite Rebellion (1998 -- cautiously recommended). The first collection of actual Luddite writings is Kevin Binfield's Writings of the Luddites (forthcoming Spring 2004). Many of these books are available from major booksellers.