

The Original Black Spider Letters

Pentrich April 1817

Whilst we're waiting for spring, and its not stopped raining yet, yo get t'feelin' that some things are t'same and some are changin'. Tom's still talkin' about his trip to London in January and meeting all t'delegates from Manchester, Nottingham, Birmingham and all over. If he's not spending his naights catch-mudgin' with old Ludlam and a few others, chadgin' money for his trips then he's nowhere to be seen. He gets about for an old man.

Frame knitters are moaning about lack of good trade and being forced to do bad work with bigger machines. Farmers canna get to set crops cos it's rained for ages and folks at Butterley are still being laid off after t'war ending. Worst'a all is that everything costs more - food, grain, building stuff. Me, well I'm finding bits and bobs to repair but it's a blessin' I dunna employ anybody - I couldna afford to pay 'em.

Most folks got to know about Blanket March and how many got thesens locked up. Somebody brought a newspaper into t'pub about a new law called The Seditious Meetings Act that made it illegal to hold a meeting of more than 50 people. It came a law in March and some said it were to stop any more Blanket Marches and reform meetings.

The law banned all meetings of more than 50 people - and I copied the bits into me notes - 'for the purpose...of deliberating upon any grievance, in church or state," unless the meeting had been summoned by an authorised official, or sufficient notice was provided by its organizers. In the latter (I dunna know what this word means) case, the organizers were required at least five days prior to the meeting to either publicly advertise in a newspaper the time, place and purpose the event, or submit a notice to a clerk of the peace. The advertisement or notice needed to be signed by seven local persons, and a copy was to be forwarded to a justice of the peace. Justices of the peace, sheriffs and other officials were authorised to attend any meetings held within their

jurisdictions. In the event that the meeting was found to be unlawful, they could order its participants to disperse. Anyone who ignored such an order was to be found guilty of a felony without benefit of clergy and put to death.'

Yo read it and think that it's not much until yo arrive at th'end - put to death. It seems that t'government were really after anybody who wants to protest. Yo can imagine it caused a lotta talk in White 'Ose. Some are really gerrin' wound up.

Mind yo, I've never seen anywhere near to 50 at our Hampden Club in Pentrich.

The report rambled on with more bans but we did laugh at one bit were it said that it didna apply to Freemasons and Quakers - I'm not sure what they do but I dunna think they're frame knitters or labourers. One o'lads said it meant cheap builders and ducks.

One o'frame knitters had took some goods to Nottingham and he were tellin' us that the town were disturbed wi soldiers everywhere. Apparently there'd bin some executions at th'end of March and troubles were expected. He said that some of the trial witnesses were known to be old Luddites who'd turned informers - probably to save their necks.

There were a secret Hampden Club at t'White 'Orse last week. Tom and Nancy Weightman were particular as to who got in. Tom told us that he knew there were secret meeting in Nottingham and Derby but also in Manchester, Birmingham, Leeds, Sheffield, Wakefield, Huddersfield and, he thinks, in London as well. He also said, wi a bit a pride, that he'd bin to quite a few hissen.

We knew about Blanket March, as I telled thee, but what we didna know was that there was a big rising planned in Manchester on Sunday night 30th March. Tom said there'd bin meetings and, it were thought that they were got

in by spies. On 28th March several key men were arrested, including a man called Samuel Bamford who Tom Bacon knew pretty well. Well, as yo can imagine, as some o'leaders were in jail t'whole job fell through. Apparently, a notorious magistrate by t' name of Mr. Hay had spies everywhere and knew all that were going on.

Tom told us he were due to go to a meeting up there in a few days and hoped to get to know a bit more.

Mind you, Tom took his chance to remind us all that there were spies everywhere, even in places like Pentrich and South Wingfield and, wos of all, there'd be some who we knew and perhaps them as drink locally. This sempt to shock everybody and they all looked around.

After a minute or two, Tom said, "I'll tell thee one other thing. Yo must be careful when yo see strangers, particularly if there's a meeting. But," and he peered around t'bar room, "them as might report on what we're talking about might just as well be men yo know, dunna forget that." He sat down and said no more.

Tom Bacon and the elder Ludlam sat in corner talking for quite a while.

Well, all that's bin happenin' over last couple months makes me wonder what'll be next. I think the older men trust me but only to a point and they dunna tell me everything. Not even Owd Tom. It's a bit worryin', yo dunna know who to really trust.

I don't have a wife and kids and I can live on building jobs around local area so maybe they think I'm not gerrin'; things as bad as most. Well they'd be true but that dusna mean I don't know what they're going through. Me last note this month is to scribble down that folks are gerrin' serious. I really think sommat is afoot.