

The Original Black Spider Letters

Pentrích January 1816

It had bin fóst Christmas I can remember wi'out me dad. Although he wor a miserable bugger he wor allus there and he sometimes made a few dry remarks that made us laugh. Mam saíd a prayer for 'im.

I managed to get a good size chicken for patchin' up one o'our neighbour's roof so we had a good feast. Some kids went about carol singing and it wor allus an excuse for drinking by t'men in village. There wer a football match between some from t'Dog Inn and White Horse. It were so sludgy that I dunna thícK anyone kicked a goal - it were another excuse for a few beers.

Nanny Weightman had brewed a special Christmas Ale and it were as strong as you líke. I dunna thícK many o'wives were very pleased it dídna half cause a few thícK heads in t'morning.

Some youngsters got excited when Christmas was coming and rest of us wonder where t'extra money is coming from. Then it all passes away as fast as it arrived.

I went forra couple o'hours at t'White Horse just after New Year's Day looking for some peace as me mam wor looking after some kids - it were bedlam at home.

There wor only a few in but I found a copy o'Derby Mercury from Thursday 28th December 1815 - somebody musta left it there. I made a few notes on a scrap a'paper.

I noticed they were going to hold an auction for some bugger to sit and take tolls on the turnpike at Four Lane Ends near Oakerthorpe. I dunnow how much it cost to buy but it seems a good job, but I suppose you'd need to be there all day or pay some other to do it for thee.

There were a notice by a 'Derbyshire Farmer' moanin' that "immense quantities of barley from Norfolk were bein' sold in Derbyshire when barley grown in Derbyshire could scarcely find purchasers". I bet the greedy buggers were askin' too much.

It didna tek me long to read through most of it, it were no interest to me. Apart from things for sale, cattle markets, New Year Balls and land for sale that wor it. Yet somebody had paid seven pence for it.

Anyhow, I got talkin' to Will Hardwick, he's a young miner from Pentrich. He wa tellin' me that a bloke called Humphry Davyⁱ had invented a new lamp that could be used in gas underground. He'd not seen one yet but they all hoped there be some locally soon. I never wanted to go underground – it'd tek more than a new-fangled lamp.

After a couple o'glasses we agreed it had bin a strange year. T'weather had bin wet and cold. A few men had come back from t'war against Napoleon and one or two of 'em ended up beggin'. Jobs for men were few and far between. It were not much use flittin' to town as most o'jobs in factories were for women and kids. If you moved outta your own parish and fell on hard times you were stuffed – no relief.

We couldn't remember much that happened in 1815 other than givin' Boney a thrashing at Waterloo. Kids used to run around playin' at being Wellington. I'd spotted a lot more whisperin' in corners between t'men and a lot of 'em sempt to be angry. Mind you it were better in one way that there'd bin no more frame breakin' – not as I got to know about anyhow.

I noticed it were startin' to snow outside so I decided it were time to get 'ome before it settled.

I had no wok on and it were too cold to go seekin' it so I sat by t'fire thinkin' about the year just gone by. Me mam come back from tekkin' the kids back to their cottages and sat in front o'fire.

"Well lad, it's time to think wot you'll be doin' wi thesen now its 1816. Yo don't want to die in Pentrich like your dad, there's nowt here for a young man like thee."

Mam had never talked like that to me – I felt she were talkin' like an equal, it seemed strange. Maybe it were t'new year that got her a bit thoughtful.

"I dunna know, mam, I've got you to think about. I'd hate to see thee in t'wokhouse."

"Now, thee listen to me. I'm not too old to look after folk's kids, mek clothes and get a few bob from here and there. There's not a woman as can patch-up a

pair o'breeches like I can and they'd pay for that. Anyhow, I'm still young enough to get married agin."

I looked at her in shock at that but I didna say owt.

"Don't find a lass around here, get theself away somewhere and mek a life for theesen."

She stood up and began to stir the pot sittin' on t'fire. I knew this was t'end of this conversation. But I didn't forget wot she said.

It were lyin' in bed that night that I decided to get away this year and find a better life - I had no idea where or wot. I suppose time will tell. At the end of a restless night I decided to talk t'Owd Thomas Bacon about it, he'd know!

¹ Humphry Davy (1769-1830) experimented with lamps for use in coal mines. There had been many mining explosions caused by firedamp or methane often ignited by open flames of the lamps then used by miners. In November 1815, Davy conceived of using an iron gauze to enclose a lamp's flame, and so prevent the methane burning inside the lamp from passing out to the general atmosphere. Davy's use of wire gauze to prevent the spread of flame was used by many other inventors in their later designs. Unfortunately, although the new design of gauze lamp initially did seem to offer protection, it gave much less light, and quickly deteriorated in the wet conditions of most pits. Rusting of the gauze quickly made the lamp unsafe, and the number of deaths from firedamp explosions rose yet further. Davy refused to patent the lamp, and its invention led to his being awarded the Rumford medal in 1816.