

# The Original Black Spider Letters

Pentrich July 1815

Yo might like to know that there were a bit of a c'fuffle at the White Horse t'other naight when some men from Butterley Works come in. They'd bin playing football<sup>1</sup> on top field and were covered in mud. They ordered a load'a ale and when Nancy pulled their pints they tried to pay in Butterley Tokens. Well, she refused their tokens and started to grab hold of the ale pots.

Well, if it hadn't bin for John Onions, he was a local who woked at Butterley, there'd a bin trouble, mark my words. Anyway he stepped in and explained to Nancy that Butterley Company had started t'pay their men in tokens and notes which they could exchange for stuff at t'company shops. Apparently there'd bin a shortage of proper coins during Napoleonic War and they had to pay in tokens<sup>2</sup>. It turned out alraight when she understood; mind you I reckon she over-charged them a bit – yo had to watch old Nancy!

It were beginning to get through why food had been so expensive for years, Napoleon had been setting up a blockade for a few years<sup>3</sup>. Corn and other food stuffs could not get through from t'continent and nothing we were selling could get to them. It sempt a dirty way of fightin' but Wellington had stopped it and that should be good. Mind you, we didn't know how much the bloody Corn Laws would keep things as bad as ever wi bread even more expensive. That's it tha sees, as soon as you get to know about sommat, it's already changed!

---

<sup>1</sup> There is evidence a 'kicking' game was regularly played from, perhaps, as early as 1300's. It was common in the period we are writing of. However, formal codification of common rules was not until the 1860's.

<sup>2</sup> During the Napoleonic Wars there was a shortage of coins and for a time Butterley Co issued tokens and notes to be exchanged at the company shops.

<sup>3</sup> The Continental System or Continental Blockade (known in French as Blocus continental) was the foreign policy of Napoleon I of France in his struggle against Great Britain during the Napoleonic Wars. As a response to the naval blockade of the French coasts enacted by the British government on 16 May 1806, Napoleon issued the Berlin Decree on 21 November 1806, which brought into effect a large-scale embargo against British trade. This embargo ended on April 11, 1814 after Napoleon's first abdication.

On another subject, I haven't heard of any frame-breaking for months now and there's bin nothing in any newspaper. Men still talk about it in whispers; making it a hanging job seemed to have put an end to it. But it didn't make life any easier for the frame knitters who were being stuffed good and proper by greedy frame-masters and bag-men. I even heard somebody saying that they'd heard that some mills were using steam engines to drive the machines and didn't even need a river nearby.

I ort to mention one thing that happened. A couple a'days ago I were asked by Tommy Bacon to go to a meeting at his home. "Sit thee sen in t'corner lad and say nowt," he said, so I did. Six men turned up and were squashed into his living room. I knew most o'them apart from a fellow from Nottingham, I think his name were Gravemor Henson or some'at like that. Tom told em that I were keen to join in and would be useful to run messages and the like. I was going to ask him what he meant but I remembered what he had said and I kept quiet.

I learnt they were planning to form a club to discuss the state of things in t'village and abouts. It were to be called a Hampden Club<sup>4</sup> and he said they planned to meet at Nancy's pub across the road or even in a barn somewhere if things got hot. Tom told us how the magistrate had spies everywhere and they'd need to be crafty. Tom said as how he'd bin to a new club at t'Cock Inn at Ripley. I couldn't hold me tongue anymore, "Is this against t'law, Tom?" I asked.

Tom looked at me and I knew should'a said nowt. "No, its not against t'law but we dunna want authorities to know everything we talk about, they might get t'wrong idea. We shall need to get every member to swear an oath to keep secrets, especially as to t'members." I must admit that Tom's answer didn't really make much sense to me.

---

<sup>4</sup> The Hampden Clubs were political campaigning and debating societies formed in England in the early 19th century as part of the Radical Movement. They were particularly concentrated in the Midlands and the northern counties, and were closely associated with the popular movements for social and political reform that arose in the years following the end of the Napoleonic wars. They were forced underground, and eventually disbanded, in the face of legislation and pressure from the authorities.

Mr Ludlam spoke briefly, "It's a fact that sommat needs doing about the state of food prices, work for knitters and weavers, and sum buggar needs to listen to us."

It went on like that for a while until they decided to drift across to White Horse. Tom suggested that we say nowt to nobody at this stage.

I could tell that things were getting bad, me dad were still in t'dumps and din't want to do owt. Me mam does what she can but nobody seems happy like they used to be when I were a boy.

Mind you, them that had stuff to sell, like weavers, blacksmith, Mrs Abbot's glove shop and some o'tenant farmers could get it to turnpike at either end'o Pentrich. There were the old turnpike at Buckland Hollow and new un at Swanwick. They were betting busy and so was Cromford Canal that was in full swing. I fancied a job going up and down t'canal but me dad said I should stick wi building, so I did. Some o'me mates had gone down t'pit but I never realty fancied that. Mind you it did pay well so long as you didn't get killed or injured as a good many did. There's one or two in t'churchyard as did.

Anyway that's as much as I can think of at t'moment, I've got to go and rebuild a wall knocked over by old Sidney's sow what got over-excited wi her new litter.