

The Original Black Spider Letters

Pentrich September 1816

Livin' in a village means yo know everybody and their ups and downs, including death of babies and old'ens, although me mam weren't that old. Yo just have to ger on wí it.

Well, to start off, the wos thing that came about this month were t'Game Laws. Tom had bin to a meeting and then he told a crowd in t'White Horse what it were about.

Tom said that the Game Laws were class based legislation forbidding the rural poor from taking pheasant, partridge, hares and rabbits from the lands of the aristocracy. These laws banned hunting of pheasant, partridge, hares and rabbits except by landowners or their mates. It had been a way for poor folk to eat sommat different every now and again. The sentence for poaching, and that meant even having a net at night, were transportation for 7 years. This were another blow after t'Corn Laws put prices up.

Somebody found a paper cutting and showed it to us in t'pub.

"The strong belief seemed to be that the poor only worked if they had to; starvation was motivation; those who plundered the aristocratic estates would not want to work again; they would end up being transported and depriving the country of their labour, or worse still, hanged. If they were in prison then their relatives would have to be supported by charity. People had to be punished to protect property and morality, not to help the hare. The poor could not eat the game, but the game could eat the poor. Peasants and partridges would eat his grain; rabbits would consume his grass and hares would attack his parsnips and he could do nothing about it."

There were some big words but we all knew wor it meant.

Some local landlords even put up fences round common land and set on game keepers; we heard that some even put man-traps in runs.

On a different story, one a'local framework knitters used to collect goods from them as weren't tied into a bag man or frame-master and went off to try and sell t'goods up north. He used to pack a four-wheel wagon and set off behind a couple old ponies and he's often be gone for a couple a'weeks. He'd collect some money to pay turnpikes and buy food. We all reckoned he used to sleep in cloth on his wagon. Anyroad, he were tellin' us a strange tale about his trip in July. He'd bin gone for nearly four weeks and some thought he'd done a runner wi t'goods.

He told us that he'd gone on t'turnpike up through Derbyshire, heading towards Manchester. When he got towards Buxton he said that there were a foot or more a'snow and even more on t'hills; he'd never seen owt like it. We knew it had bin a bad winter but it never lasted to July. Mind you th'old bugger struggled to Manchester to sell his stuff - they're tough men in Derbyshire.

At one meeting of t'Hamden Club, Tom brought a notice from labourers in Norfolk t'gentlemen of the area^[1]. He'd written it out and he said there were a few words he couldna mek out but he sat and read it out loud as we sat there. I read it again when we got home and copied it in me letter.

To the Gentlemen of the parish of Ashill, Norfolk.

This is to inform you that you have by this time brought us under the heaviest burden & into the hardest yoke be ever **knoved**, it is too hard for us to bear; you have oftentimes heeded us saying the fault was all in the Place - men of Parliament; but now you have opened our eyes, we know they have a great power, but they have nothing to do with the regulation of their Parish.

You do as you like, you rob the poor of their Common right, plough the grass up that God sent to grow, that a poor man may not feed a Cow, Pig, Horse, nor Ass, lay muck and stones on the Road to prevent grass growing.

If a poor man is out of work, and wants a day or two's work, you will give him 6 per week, and then a little [XXXX] that does not employ a labourer at all, must help to pay for your work doing, which will bring them chargeable to the Parish. There is 5 or 6 of you have gotten all the whole of the Land in this Parish in your own hands & you should wish to be sick & starve all the other part of the poor of the Parish: If any poor man [XXXX] any thing, there you will call a Town meeting, to hear which could continue to help him the most, which have caused us to have a County meeting, to see if we cannot gain some Redress.

Gentlemen these few lines are to inform you that forthrightly have brought our blood to a proper circulation, that have been in a very bad state a long time, and now without an alteration of the foresaid, we mean to circulate your blood with the leave of God. And we do not intend to give you but a very short time to consider about it, as we have gotten one or two of the **Lead**, on our side. There was 2 cows and an ass feeding on the road last Saturday & there was 2 farmers went to the keepers & said they would pound them if they did not drive them away; one of them candidly **beat him**, got a plough & horses and ploughed the grass up, that **passed** on the road. We deem the killer to be full as big a [XXXX] as your farmers for if the wheat **raise I** [XXXX], then I will raise 2 [XXXX]. So we shall drive the whole [XXXX] & knock down the hill, **set fire to ill beggars legs** [XXXX] houses & **thanks us he for a day**, we shall begin at night.

And the first man that refuse to join the Combination shall suffer death in a moment, or the first person that is catched saying anything against the same, shall suffer death. He have had private ambushers round us for some time, and by this time you will find it is coming to a point.

Take notice that this is a private letter wrote at this time, but [XXXX] fear its too public for your profits, so we wish to prepare yourselves ready for action; for we intend to have things as we like, you have had a good long turn. We have counted up that we have gotten about 60 of us to 1 of you. Therefore, should you go **seek** so many to 1. No. We will fight for it, and if you gain the day, so be it.

Tom told us wot he thought it all meant. "Yo should see that there's more folks feelin' as we do. Men as is trying to form secret combinations to get what they deserve and be treated fair and proper." That gev me lots to think about, it really did.

[\[i\]](#) Nation Archives. Catalogue reference: HO 42/150, folio 130v-13 May 1816.