

The Original Black Spider Letters

Pentrich June 1815

It's end a'June now and we've just heard that Duke o'Wellington has beat Napoleon Bonaparte and brought t'war to an end. Its good news but some of men in t'village are not so sure about that. Them soldiers who are still alive and not cut up will be back hom looking for wok and, as Owd Tom says, there ain't any to be found around here – mebbe they'll get to t'mills at Belper and Cromford or go down a pit. There's some work for children and women but not so much for men.

Mind you, they might not get back, there's allis a war to faight somewhere. I dunna think I'd like to be a soldier. Why can't Kings and lords sort out their differences like working men do; we don't involve them, why do they involve us?

One or two families from Pentrich and South Wingfield have flitted to Cromford, Belper or even Derby looking for work at t'mills. There's bin adverts¹ for families with kids and housing given. I'm not surprised as most o'frame knitters are short a'wok. It's a big problem for some as they have old'ens to look after and you can't drag them across fields. An another thing, as soon as anybody leaves their cottage, t'Duke's agent puts somebody else in. So they've nowhere to go to if they come back – it's a one-way road. I don't think I'd do it and I'm not married.

There's more bad news, my mate Jo told me he has been laid off from Jessop's at Butterley cos th'army has cancelled all the contracts. I don't really understand this but I can see that if there's no war they'll not need cannon shot and ironwork.

¹ Factory did present adverts for workers, including opportunities for children. It was not uncommon for housing to also be offered.

One or two of me uncles have been in th'army for years – I hope they come back, nobody's heard a dicky bird from them for donkey's. It makes you wonder if it wer all worth it for a shilling² a day.

I think I told you me dad is a strict churchman, well he's not been too well lately. He goes to church regular but it does him no good and a raight grumpy bugger he is. He's 45 now and quite a old man, probably working outside too much didn't help. It's a good job he taught me to build like 'im. I can make a few shillings but it's hard. Me mam looks after a few babies for women who work wi their husbands on frames. I like to get out'a t'house – kids is allus screamin'. I'm working on a new forge for t'blacksmith and it's rough work – he's never pleased wi how it's going and he keeps changing his mind.

Tommy Bacon were tellin' us t'other naight that as well as the Frenchies, who we've just beat, we're at war with America³ and have been for years. That's one of problems living in t'sticks. It takes ages to find out what's going off. It took a fortnaighth to get to know that one of me mates had been locked up for stealing bread at Ripley market and that's only a hours walk away. I hope Ripley magistrates doesn't take it too serious. These days a body could be hanged or transported, just for pinching bread to feed t'kids. I sometimes wonder where Tom gets his news from. He seems to disappear every now and agin. He might have a woman somewhere but I've never saïn him wi one.

Ever since Arkwright and Strutt opened their mills there's been less work spinning. They still mek a few Derbyshire Rib stockings but people don't want 'em anymore. I don't know what it's coming to, some are really struggling. It the devil's job to get a handout from t'parish.

T'other day I were walking to a job at Blake's farm when I had to go alongside t'turnpike at Buckland Hollow. I saw a open four-wheel cart full'o kids going north. There were a couple a'dozen at least – boys and girls. When

² Typical private's pay, equivalent to 5p in to-days currency.

³ United States declared war against Britain in 1812. It was not settled until the Treaty of Ghent in 1814.

I got to pub later somebody told me they were London orphan apprentices going t'mills in north Derbyshire or Manchester. They did look a miserable, ill-fed bunch. Apparently some London orphan houses sells the kids to mill owners for a few pence an then forgets about 'em. It's a bloody shame that it's got to that. I hear t'men in the pub talk about it. They all think that t'government are more interested in makin' sure their friends who own mills are makin' a profit - they're not interested in working folks.

I dunna go to church nowadays, me dad used to force me but he's not interested in much nowadays. Last time I went t'preacher were telling us to say prayers for King George and Duke of Devonshire. I'm bloody sure he wont be saying any prayers for me mam and dad. I'm just beginning to realise that Owd Tom talks a lot a'sense. It aint fair and it aint right that our lot should struggle when others can't eat all that's put in front o'em.

What can we do? Tom tells us about t'French Revolution when people chopped t'heads of the rich and powerful. He says hundred were put down. I dunno know as I believe all he says but he swears by it. T'other naight he were reading from a newspaper called Tuppenny Trash and it says that there should be people in Parliament to talk for working folk; I can see t'sense in that. Trouble is that it's not everybody who's struggling. Frame knitters and some o'others are doing badly. Some are doing alraight. Farmers, some miners and shopkeepers seem to be doing well.

We don't get beggars in Pentrich but some sit outside t'pubs on turnpikes until they get shooed off by t'publican.

If I find owt else out about t'war ending and t'soldiers I'll let thee know when I find time to write agin.