

The Original Black Spider Letters

Pentrich February 1816

There's one or two things I think worthy of mekin' a note of to tell thee about and, especially, there's sommat that meks me feel a lot better for sortin' it's sen out.

I must mention t'weather; its freezing and more snow than I can remember. It's a nightmare gerrin' about and everybodies togged up as best they can in coats, mufflers, hats and gloves. I've no good buildin' wok to do - it's too bad to be outside all day. I've put Ma Turner a new door frame and built a retaining wall behind one a' Nancy Weightman's barrel stores. A few of us from t'village helped clear a walking path for t'women to get to shop.

If you read any o'me paper notes you might remember how I told thee about Colonel Halton's clerk who wanted me to spy on t'locals in White Horse, I imagine he were expectin' em to cause trouble. I think it were September but it might a'bin October last year. Any road, I've found out that t'clerk's flitted out of t'county. Somebody sed he's gone to London, one said he's bin sacked - I dunna give a bugger. I've bin fretting about tellin' Tom Bacon and now I dunna ha to. That's one less thing I have to worry about - I'm not about to mek that mistake agin. Tom told me never to trust anybody I don't know, he said it's safer to say nowt. I decided a long time ago to mek sure nobody would ever find me paper notes.

Last Sunday, me and a couple a'mates took a few bags down t'bell mine t'other side a'Swanwick and we managed to scrounge a few cobbles a'coal whilst there were nobody about. We took

them to old folks to bon and keep warm - all t'wood stocks were under snow and soaked through.

Mind you I moan about living a Derbyshire but we aint gorra sea and that's a blessin'. I were reading in Derby Mercury¹ that a ship named 'The Richmond' was sailing from Cork to Bristol foundered in Bridgwater Bay and every soul on board perished - there were 100 passengers. It gus on to sey that all that were left was some cabin furniture and a dog belonging to t'vessel. I dunna know t'dog's name, mebbe it were Nelson.

I found another bit I told me mates about, it made 'em laff. It were about Honey Moon. It seys it were t'custom of the higher orders of Teutones (whatever that means), the ancient people who inhabited the northern parts of Germany, to drink mead, a beverage made from honey, for thirty days after every wedding. From this we get the word Honey Moon. Anyway Attila, King of Hungary, drank so freely of this liquor on his wedding day, that he was later found suffocated. Well, if yo believe that yo'll believe owt. I reckon he might abin being too lively in bed.

I went across t'White Horse t'other naight to find Tom Bacon holding forth to his mates. It might abin a Hampton Club meeting. I knew he wouldna mind me if I sat at t'back and said nowt, so I did.

Old Tom were tellin' em about some riots in Nottingham and that he'd met a fella from Manchester who told him there'd bin some disturbances there as well.

"I've bin talking to a delegate who knows what's what. You gotta realise that them in London don't give a toss about us, not a toss! This fella told me there'd bin a report of a Secret Committee of Parliament that he'd got hold of."

¹ Derby Mercury of Thursday 11th January 1816

Tom pulled a tattered piece of paper out of his waistcoat. "The government reckon that 'the rioters were to a great extent tools in the hands of those whose turbulence and disloyalty derived no provocation from poverty²' what do yo think a'that", said Tom looking around.

Young Turner piped up the corner, "I dunna understand a word you're on about, Tom."

"Well," said Tom with a sign and after tekin' a good draft of ale, "It's like this. They were talkin' about Luddite disturbances, one or two of you here might know a bit about them, but nuff said. They say that the trouble were nowt to do wi being hungry and out a work, being cheated by bag-masters and every bugger else. It were about us, I mean them, being used by some gentlemen who were intent on trouble."

"That's not true," said a voice from side a'fire.

"No, John, it weren't. We were never under anybody's control and we never will be. But you can all see how they view us. We don't bloody well count as owt and that's it. Mark my words, they'll know t'truth one day."

Tom sat down and it went quiet. As I looked round the room some were nodding, some muttering and some, and I've got to be raight wi thee ere, looked as though they d'aint hav'a cue what were being talked about. All I could hear for a few minutes were sticks crackling in t'fire and Nancy collected ale pots.

Eventually, one o'Weightman's stood up and said, "I think enoughts bin said, tha never know who's listening. Let's drink."

2 Quoted in C.D. Yonge "Life and Administration of Robert Banks Jenkinson, Second Earl of Liverpool" (1868), vol. 11, p.140

I sat thinking about what I'd heard and what might happen. Maybe nowt, after all said and done there're nowt but empty pots themsens.

A few days later I sat at home scribbling me paper notes. I wanted to write what had happened last month, what I might want to read to me kids, if I ever had any. It weren't all trouble, argument and moanin' but, to be honest, whenever I got to t'White Horse it were like that. At least until they had a pot a two to loosen up.

Pentrich had grown over last few years, more folks had moved in and a few more cottages had bin built - in fact I'd built a couple messen. Mind you, one two families had left end gon to Derby, Belper or Cromford to t'mills. But it weren't happy village, nobody sempt to be well off, everybody were scrambling about to mek ends meet. I suppose winter-time is when you've less wok and more idle time to think about things. But when you've thought about things were does it set you, wot change can yo mek?

That's enough, I feel messen gerrin' miserable. I'll cheer up next time.