

The Original Black Spider Letters

Pentrích March 1816

I were tekín' a drink at t'Peacock when I found a newspaper some traveller had left. A piece by Reverend Thomas Robbins caught me eye. It said that, 'as he had done since 1796, Robbins recorded in his diary the weather and, if not the weather, his activities that revealed the weather. In the first days of March 1816, Robbins planted peas. A week later he noted that the day was "quite warm." Three days later, on March 12, he noted that it was "cold and wet." It snowed, and two days later the ground was "considerably frozen." He would not attempt to replant peas until the end of April.'

I know it sounds a bit posh but I had been thinking a'plantín' tators and peas in me mam's bita garden but it where freezing. When it weren't freezing it were raining.

Another bit in t'paper said that there'd bin the greatest flood ever remembered in Northumberland and Durham in February, that's somewhere up north I think.

I must be getting' abit serious, I found another piece inside about income tax - although it's norra thing that bothers the likes a'me. It said, "The government were defeated by a huge majority in February 1816, Income Tax was repealed, keeping Prime Minister's Pitt's promise. This was unfair because the burden shifted to indirect taxation which fell proportionately more heavily on the poor. These taxes were used to pay off the interest on the national debt, effectively going into pockets of the rich who had loaned money to government, and who were not hit now by income tax either. Repeal also caused problems for the government in terms of revenue, as Lord Castlereagh told the Prince Regent in a letter."

I couldna mek head nor tail so I asked Owd Tom Bacon what it all meant when he come in t'pub a bit later.

He sat down wi his pint and filled his pipe, "well lad," he began, "what it means to me and thee is that we're all goin' to pay more for bread and likes. It means that the taxes paid by t'well-to-do paid for beatin' Napoleon are going to paid by us and every bugger in Pentrích and South Wingfield. Them wi money are

goin' to be better off." Tom sat back in his chair, "And, it's not raight not raight at all. Tek my word for it lad, summats going to be done and done soon."

I could tell that he said enough about politics. One or two strangers were in t'pub so I got the message; I'm not as dumb as yo might think!"

Over th'last few weeks we've seen a few more soldiers coming back from t'war. I know it ended in June last year but it musta took time to drag em all back. One or two used to enjoy tellin' their tales but most kept their counsel. What were clear was that it were a close run thing – it coulda gone either way. One soldier told me that if it hadna bin for Prussian soldiers popping up over t'hill a t'last minute, Napoleon mighta took the day and we mighta all bin French by now!

I walked home wi Owd Tom along back lane and down t'turnpike back to Pentrich. For once it had stopped rainin. "Ha yo heard about loss a'wok for frameworkers?"

"Well no, I've seen that some are hanging about t'village looking for bits a work. They even ask me if I need a labourer. I took Samuel on for a day or two passing bricks and digging footings. But, to be honest, wokin' a frame dunna give a man the strength I need in buildin'."

"Folks dunna want the fancy Derbyshire rib and some are making cut-ups now and its undercutting those doing a good job."

"What's a cut-up, Tom?"

"It's bin happenin' for some time and it even caused some frame-breaking until they made it a hanging matter. It's still goin' on and cos some folks are covering up socks with trousers an' that they dunna want the fancy ribs and what. It means they lose a lot a'money. Small frames can only produce small amounts of quality goods at a time as the new bigger frames could produce wider lengths of material. The use of 'cut ups' is a big problem for the knitters. It's a threat to their skills and a fall in standards. We seein' traditional crafts goin' t'wall."

"It's a big thing then Tom, I thought it were just until folks bought the goods agin."

"No, it's more than that, lad. Men or earning less now than they were 20 year ago. An' its not just around here. I know that lads in Nottingham and Manchester is feelin' same. Trouble is nobodies listening, they don't want to know."

"What's goin' to happen then Tom?"

"I know yo're a sharp lad, so watch who yo talk to. We'll get nowhere wi talkin' and there's plenty a'that goin' on. I went to a secret meetin' last wek at Nottingham. There were lads from all round and all ay'in' rough tales to tell. There were a chap called Gravenor Henson, a Nottingham lad, a good un at that. He said what're we goin' to do? Then there were sílence all round."

"You've gotta realise that the place is full o'spies and sometimes they're people you know yersen and don't suspect. It's all about money. Yo should know yo almost get caught up last year."

I knew what Tom were on about so I just kept walking and said nowt.

On another thing. Me mam were badly last month, she kept being sick and collapsin', she couldna keep any snap down - I thought she were goin' to die, I really did.

In th'end we had to summon old Ma Hardwick from Swanwick, she's a healer. Mind yo, some folks say she's a witch. When she come in her husband's cart she brought a wooden box full of bottle and potions. She gev me mam some peppermint water which she said were to deal with her being sick and a little bottle to drink from every few hours.

She wanted 2 shillings for her treatment. Me mam said she'd only got a shilling and, if she got better, she'd pay another shilling when she could. Ma Hardwick took the shilling and told her to rest. She told her not to drink any beer and be careful what she had to eat.

When she'd gone I took a look at t'label on the bottle, it were Tincture of Fine Turkey Rhubarb. I know wot turkey is and I know wot rhubarb is but I've never had em at t'same time.

Any road, she picked up after a day or two. Whether it were t'physic or just gerrin' better I don't know. I'm pleased she's ok.