

# The Original Black Spider Letters

Pentrích May 1815

I wor wí'men as set out on the Pentrích Rísing in 1817. Never mind what me name is, it dun't matter. I managed to run off when t'Hussars<sup>1</sup> arrived and I never said another word about it. I was 22 and me life affront of me. I'll tell thee about it if you dunna say where you got it from.

I've bin blessed with a good memory and I can take meself back to the first time I heard Tom Bacon talking about politics. It was in May 1815, soldiers were still fightin' t'Frenchies<sup>2</sup> and times were tough. Of course it took days, and sometimes weeks, to get to know what were happening around. That were a problem and it were a problem later on.

This particular night, after I'd bin courtin' a lass in South Wingfield, I come home and ended up at t'White Horse pub in Pentrích. I'd walked across t'fields and I fancied a jug. Me dad had only just let me go to pub a month or two back, he dint drink much, he were a church man.

As usual I sat wí t'village men drinkin' in side room. Béing no more than twenty at that time, I knew as I was expected to say nowt unless I were spoke to. Owd Tom Bacon were pontificatin' as usual. I settled down in a dark corner wí me jug o'rough. It were first time I'd really sat and listened. The thing about Tom were that when he opened his mouth men stopped talking and listened, it were strange the power he had.

I like Tom, it were 'im as learnt me to write. I did reading at Sunday School but it were Tom as did writin'. Not many in 't village could write and most of old ens couldn't read either.

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<sup>1</sup> The 15<sup>th</sup> (The Kings) Regiment of (Light) Dragoons (Hussars) – the same regiment was deployed at the Peterloo Massacre in 1819 when soldiers who committed an atrocity were wearing their Waterloo medals.

<sup>2</sup> The Napoleonic Wars were still on-going at this time of this letter.

There were only locals in and them that were frame knitters were moanin' as usual. The bag man had not turned up with new work nor wí any money from week before – that meant no wages. You could tell they were sippin' ale to make it last. Nanny Weightman, Owd Tom's sister and landlady were handin' around a few knobs o'bread and cheese. A couple of farmers and pitmen sat at back and didn't say much – they didn't rely on others bringing them work. They weren't rich tha noes but not as poor as t'framemen.

Isaac said, "Tha knows that some hand weavers were earnin' 30 bob a week ten year ago and now it's no more than 5 bob. I'm only getting work three weeks out a four. If it weren't for me bit a garden I'd be lost. One a'two lads have lost their pieces a'land after enclosures. Some farmers planted corn in big fields and it didn't grow cos the land were only good enough for sheep."

Tom pulled out a tattered book, "Wot dost tha' think a'this lads?" he began to wave it in the air, "This is a book written by a fellow named Thomas Paine, he talks a lot of sense. He tells us to think about our position. Why should Prince Regent and t'Duke<sup>3</sup> ride in a coach and four while we canna fill our bellies. Why should men be prosecuted for taking wild creatures like pheasants and deer, and some hung an all! What rights should they have just because they were born to a particular women – does that make 'em any better than you or me – aren't we all men?"

Tom went on for a while reading quotes he had carefully underlined in his old book<sup>4</sup>.

"Summat's got to be done about this. T'Frenchies did it and they're no match for a true Englishman. Ther'll come a time when some men will take no more. Mebbe this year, mebbe not but it will happen."

There were general nods and grunts.

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<sup>3</sup> Doubtless a reference to the Duke of Devonshire, who's land encompassed Pentrich.

<sup>4</sup> Tom Bacon was quoting from books by Thomas Paine (1737-1809) maybe "Common Sense" (1776), "The Right of Man" (1791) or "The Age of Reason" (1794)

"When we had a go at t'frame masters and broke a few frames a year or two back wot did they do? They made it a capital offence and began to hang as many as they could an as fast as they could."

"Not all toffs are agin us; tha knows Lord Byron. He lives t'other side o' Nottingham<sup>5</sup>." Tom pulled another sheet of paper out of his coat pocket.

"When parliament were talking about passing a law to hang working men, Byron spoke out for us – listen.

". . . it cannot be denied that they have arisen from circumstances of the most unparalleled distress: the perseverance of these miserable men in their proceedings, tends to prove that nothing but absolute want could have driven a large, and once honest and industrious, body of the people, into the commission of excesses so hazardous to themselves, their families, and the community.

They were not ashamed to beg, but there was none to relieve them: their own means of subsistence were cut off, all other employment preoccupied; and their excesses, however to be deplored and condemned, can hardly be subject to surprise.<sup>6</sup>"

"And the worst thing is that no bugger else were listening!"

Tom did most o'talkin and it went on for a while. I heard Nanny shout, "Bloody raight an all!"

Eventually we all went home; most of the men had run out of money before the beer took effect.

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<sup>5</sup> Lord George Byron, one of the 'romantic poets' had an estate at Newstead Abbey near Nottingham.

<sup>6</sup> A quote from Lord Byron's first speech before the Lords, on 27 February, 1812 during a debate on the bill to make frame-breaking a capital offence – his contribution was unsuccessful.

Tom drained his mug and looked at me, "Mark me words lad, summat's going to happen one of these days, thou just wait and see." I didn't really know what he meant but he were serious, I could tell that.

It were all above me head at that time but it keep me awake and I remembered. I had a feeling that summat would happen.

I'll tell thee what happened when I have time.