

The Original Black Spider Letters

Pentrích May 1816

I allus saíd that I'd never work down t'pit and after what I saw t'other day, I'll stíck by that as rule for messen. One of t'bosses asked me to build a brick shed round top of a shaft at Pentrích Pít. They'd got plenty a'bricks so I walked down from t'village wí me tools and some stuff in me little cart. It were raining, as usual, but that dídna matter, it's nice to get a bit of steady work for a few days.

They wanted a tall brick buílding to cover some o'windín' apparatus. They'd managed to get some líme, sand and clay. I díd what me father had taught me and I set a fire to burn some o'líme with clay. I dun know how it works but when you míx this burnt stuff wí sand and then some water it serves as a paste to go ínbetween t'bricks and, íf yo are lucky, it sets and stícks.

Anyroad, while I were díing thís they were wínding men down and tubs o'coal up from t'bowels of t'earth. On one journey up there were a young lad sat on t'top of a tub of coal. He jumped off and come across to where I was wokín'. I had to smíle at his black face, all I could see were t'white of his eyes

"Wot yo doín' míster?" I noticed he were a lad not much more than a toddler.

"How old are you? What you díing there?" I saíd, leavíng off me work.

"I'm eíght but as I'm líttle I can't pull tubs."

"What do you do then?"

The líttle lad, no hígher than a píle a'penníes, stood up wíth príd, "I'm a trapper. I sít by a bíg door and open ít for them as wants to go through to work or pulling tubs. It's an ímportant job to mek sure good aír gets around workíns. Íf I'm not there men could be gassed"

"Is ít dark down there."

"Cause ít dark, ít's darker than yo know. Sometimes one o'men, maybe be dad or me uncle, leaves me the dog end of a candle and I keep that untl t'wínd comes through t'door and blows ít out. I have to waít tíl somebody comes past we a flint to líght ít agáín. Dust tha want to come down and look, my grandad works that wínding máchine wíth hosses, he'll not mínd."

I looked at him and thought about his kind offer for a second or two. "No thanks, I'm too busy." What I shoulda said was I'm too scared.

I know lads and some lasses worked down t'pit but it's only when you get there does it seem real.

Me job at Pentrich Pit lasted four days. I never saw me new friend agin and it made me mind up never to go back there - nor did I.

Whist I were there it were a real busy place all day. Tubs full o'coal were being rasied up and tipping into carts which were then dragged by horses probably to new canal. Wooden stakes, they called 'em props, were being sent down t'shaft and every now and agin some men travelled up or down. Them that came up looked rough, covered in dust, dirt and some were ringin' wet. I recognised some men, I'd seen 'em in White Horse.

During the morning one cage (that's what they call the contraption that goes up and down the shaft) came up wi two men on. I saw that one chap had a real deep gash across his back and blood were pourin' out and seepin' through t'coal dust on his body. I heard somebody say that he bin trapped when a slab o'coal fell from t'face while he were clearin' coal out. They took him down the yard, I don't know what happened but he were really poorly. I already knew that several men had been killed at this same pit. What a place to work! Well, that's enough o'that tale.

I must say that I thought this Luddite nonsense had all stopped as nobody were talkin' about it in t'pub since they started to hang 'em. I found a newspaper in t'Peacock when I were roamín' around, there were a story about trouble in Suffolk. I think Suffolk is on coast but I've never bin.

Anyroad it were talkin' that on Friday 26th April 1816¹ some serious disturbances took place. I've copied it out for yo, I've tried to get the words the same, yo'll have t'bear wi me.

About two o'clock on Friday morning an alarming fire broke out on the premises of Mr. Kingsbury, of Bungay, which, from the quantity of tallow, tar, oil, &c. therein, threatened total destruction to the adjoining buildings, but was fortunately got under by the very prompt and active exertions of the inhabitants, though not until the offices were destroyed.

¹ We are indebted to the excellent work by <http://ludditebicentenary.blogspot.co.uk/>

Same day a fire was discovered in two barns occupied by Mr. Scott, of Kettlebaston, during the time the men who had been threshing therein were gone to breakfast, which circumstance leads to a strong suspicion they were wilfully set on fire. The flames raged so furiously, that the whole were destroyed in a short time, together with a stable, cowhouse, and a stack of stover.

Same morning a fire broke out in a cottage in the occupation of Mr. Rosier, of Grundisburgh, which was entirely consumed, and not an article of the furniture saved. It then mentioned several other incidents in and around that area. It didn't say what caused it all but it proves that folk aren't happy there.

I think most o't'words are right. Mind you, they use words that yo wouldna use normally. I reckon that they write stuff in these newspapers that they don't really want likes o'me to read. I bet there's no more than a handful in Pentrich as can read and write. Let me think, there's vicar and his curate, there's Owd Tom Bacon, rent collector for t'Duke but I think he only writes numbers and I think Nancy Weightman at t'White Horse can. Anyhow yo often see her sat in corner wí a paper, perhaps she's pretending or maybe Tom learnt her, she is his sister after all.

I'd better leave off, me mam's bin moanin' about a leak in corner, I'd berra ger it fixed afor she cuts me snap off.