HISTORY This Week EP 316: The Luddites Attack
EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

NOTE: This transcript may contain errors.

Sally Helm: HISTORY This Week. April 20, 1812. I'm Sally Helm.

There are about 50 men stationed at the mill in Lancashire, England. Armed and waiting. And at around 5 pm, they see a crowd of people approaching. Angry people. Ready to attack.

This place is known as Burton's mill, owned by one Daniel Burton. And inside it is the latest in industrial technology—a loom, but, as a newspaper at the time put it, "a species of loom worked by power." The word "power" is italicized, as if to say...can you believe this? The loom moves by itself. It's driven not by human hands, but by steam. It weaves threads together in the intricate patterns that people have been using to make cloth for generations.

And it's those very people—the workers—who now approach the guards at Burton’s mill. They throw rocks to smash the windows. Fire shots into the factory. Try to break down the door. These machines are costing them their jobs. And so, they’ve decided to destroy the machines.

They call themselves the Luddites. It’s said that as they swarm Burton’s mill, they carry a straw effigy representing their leader. A shadowy, legendary figure known as General Ludd.

The men guarding the mill shoot off some blanks to try to scare the mob away...but it doesn't work. And so...they switch to real ammunition. More than a dozen are wounded. And some people end up dead.

Today: The Luddites. Their name is now invoked to talk about anyone who is anti-technology. But what actually drove this group of knitters to take up arms against their employers? And what does their struggle show us about the relationship between workers and employers today?

(PRE-ROLL)

Sally Helm: The story of the Luddites begins in a small town in the heart of England called Nottingham. Home of Robin Hood, the outlaw of legend who lived in Sherwood Forest with his band of Merry Men and stole from the rich to give to the poor.

Today, Nottingham is home to over a dozen corporate headquarters, a bustling retail scene and world-class universities. One person who works at one of those Universities is Richard Gaunt, an associate professor of British history at the University of Nottingham. When he walks around the modern city, he sees the history of the Luddites *everywhere*

Richard Gaunt: The Luddite traces are there to look for, if you, if you know where to look for them sort of nooks and crannies of Nottingham
Sally Helm: Like for instance, there's Shire Hall:

Richard Gaunt: Which was in the Luddite time, where many suspected Luddites were executed outside, and you can still see the holes in the ground where the scaffold was erected for public executions.

Sally Helm: Before the time of the Luddites, Nottingham had been a peaceful place, described by some writers as a "garden town." Most of the town’s residents worked in Nottingham’s main industry:

Richard Gaunt: Producing a fabric, cloth, woolen goods, we know it by a variety of different terms, but it's hosiery basically.

Sally Helm: Hosiery is the forerunner of underwear. At this time, in the 1700s, it basically means woolen undergarments, like stockings. And a lot of the labor to make hosiery is done in the home. People called knitters do really detailed work, stitching the stockings together. Some of them had apprenticed in the trade for seven years.

Richard Gaunt: At the end of which you would be entered or recognized as a knitter of distinction.

Sally Helm: And becoming a knitter of distinction meant you joined a community. You could say they were tight knit.

Richard Gaunt: There was something in the 1770s called the stocking makers association for mutual protection, which is a lovely name. And the title is significant. I think. So, it's about mutual protection. It's about looking after one another.

Sally Helm: And it’s not just the knitters looking after each other. They also have a strong, interdependent relationship with their employer, who's known as a master or a hosier.

Here’s how it works. The knitters rent a machine from the hosiers. It's called a stocking frame. It had been on the market for over a hundred years. It helps mechanize knitting, but it doesn't move on its own. Knitters have to operate it. And that takes skill. They get a fixed fee for every piece they make. And the master gets the remaining profit, plus a rental fee for the use of the machine. Everyone’s making good money. Employee and employer don’t have much trouble with each other. They may even be friends.

But towards the end of the 1700s all this starts to change. For one thing, trousers come along and replace stockings for men. That’s a blow to the whole hosiery industry. Plus, a new kind of machine for making hosiery begins to get popular. It’s similar...but wider.

Richard Gaunt: The so-called wide frame. Allowed the knitters on that frame \ produce a much wider piece of cloth. So, you got more cloth out of your yarn.
Sally Helm: More bang for your buck.

Richard Gaunt: And what that meant for the Hosiers was that you could start to cut corners.

Sally Helm: Instead of making pieces one at a time, you could make this big piece of cloth. Then cut out the pieces of, say, a pair of woolen stockings, and just sew them together.

Richard Gaunt: And these were called, at the time cut ups, literally cut ups.

Sally Helm: They're not as high quality...but people will still buy them. And so, this system means more profit for the hosiers. It’s now MUCH faster to make the clothes. And the hosiers can employ less skilled workers. So, they don’t have to pay them as much. Which is, of course, very bad for the workers who have put in seven years to become a knitter of distinction.

Richard Gaunt: So, the workers want to maintain their highly regulated, highly skilled craft traditions, but the employers and the masters want to, as it were maximize their profit margins.

Sally Helm: And so, the skilled knitters find themselves out of a job. The few who can still get work have to do it for a lower wage. And the knitters begin to get angry.

Craftsmen in Nottingham and neighboring villages sign petitions for a minimum wage bill. Others try striking, refusing to work.

And they bring their case to Parliament. They have requests: regulate wages, so they can't go this low. Make a rule about how employers have to use skilled labor to make better products. But:

Richard Gaunt: The reception is a cold one, either they're not listened to, or they might be given sort of a degree of tolerance and listened to, but then no effective measures are introduced.

Sally Helm: Parliament basically says, we’ll let the buyers and sellers of hosiery figure this out on their own. We don’t want to get involved. The knitters' petitions have fallen on deaf ears. And so, they decide to take matters into their own hands.

Their families have been thrown into poverty. And it feels like they don’t have a lot of options. Collective bargaining had recently been banned in England. But you can’t stop people from, as historian Eric Hobsbawm put it, “bargaining by riot.”

On a Monday in early March of 1811, a large group of knitters and their supporters gather in Nottingham's central marketplace for a protest. Some say there are as many as a thousand people in the crowd. They carry banners made of silk and lace bearing slogans: "fair price for the loaf." They give speeches, calling for change. And threatening to destroy the wide frames.
A local militia breaks up the protest and patrols the streets afterwards. But most of the protesters manage to slip away.

They gather around dusk in a village on the outskirts of Nottingham. It's a place where many hosiers live. Their wide-frame looms stand unguarded in their homes. And the protesters go from threatening these new machines…to actually destroying them.

**Richard Gaunt:** It all just became too much for the workers and they resorted to violence. Quite large numbers of knitters and, and sympathizers, destroyed some 63 frames.

**Sally Helm:** Just the wide frames. They leave the traditional stocking frames alone.

**Richard Gaunt:** They're not just going on a rampage against all machinery. They know, you know, which are the offensive ones.

**Sally Helm:** They also don't attack the frames of masters who hadn't cut wages. The townspeople cheer them on. In the aftermath, the authorities offer a reward to anyone who's willing to rat out an attacker. But no one gives any names.

**Richard Gaunt:** And over the course of the next three weeks, they're almost nightly attacks in different villages. There's something like 200 or so frames have been destroyed and the important thing is they're all successful.

**Sally Helm:** No one is apprehended in this first wave of attacks.

But then, the cold spring of 1811 gives way to a warm summer. And for a time, these frame-breaking attacks recede. Gaunt says that might be because it's a good harvest. There's food around. The wage issue feels less dire. But in the fall, food becomes scarce again, And the attacks pick back up. The disgruntled knitters are also resorting to other forms of intimidation.

Like writing threatening letters. Saying things like:

**Richard Gaunt:** We know where you live. We know who you are. We know what you are doing. I mean, they wouldn't necessarily spell it out in quite so many words as that, but basically beware, you know, amend your ways or else you will be visited by General Ludd.

**Sally Helm:** General Ludd.

The fall is when these groups of knitters become known as the Luddites. The name stems from this mysterious figure, General Ned Ludd. In whispers among locals or anonymous letters to the newspaper, he looms large.
Richard Gaunt: He certainly gigantic, literally is portrayed as a giant in a long smock, open sandals, quite a strong, featured face, with a beard, hair flying carrying a steak, and leading-- sort of putting his handout, for his followers.

Sally Helm: The Luddites often invoke their leader. Some accounts say he's real, others that he’s purely mythical. Regardless, his signature is on some of those threatening letters. He often signs them from his office in Sherwood Forest.

Richard Gaunt: There's a natural comparison between, General Ludd and Robin hood as sort of leading, armies of the dispossessed who are trying to seek a redress from those who have wronged them.

Sally Helm: Armies of the dispossessed. Gaunt does refer to the Luddites as a "workers army." They're disciplined, coordinated, and they operate in secrecy...which means they all have to keep their mouths shut. To become a Luddite is not easy. You have to take an oath—which is actually illegal in England at the time.

Richard Gaunt: I, then you would say your name, of my own free will do promise. And solemnly swear that I will never reveal to any person the names of any of this secret committee under the penalty of being sent out to this world by the first brother that may meet me. And if ever I disclose them, my name and character will be blotted out of existence and never remembered, but with contempt and abhorrence,

Sally Helm: These are the fighting words of 1811. And they’re pretty harsh. So maybe it's no wonder that people didn't talk.

To communicate with a fellow Luddite, you had to know the secret signal.

Richard Gaunt: If you're in the company of another of the Luddite, you must raise your right hand over your right eye.

Sally Helm: He'll put his left hand over his left eye.

Richard Gaunt: Then you must raise a forefinger of your right hand to the right side of your mouth.

Sally Helm: He'll raise the little finger of his left hand to the left side of his mouth. And will say, "what are you?"

Richard Gaunt: You answer determiner. He will say, what for you? You answer, free liberty, then he will converse with you and tell you all he knows,

Sally Helm: Like, where is the next attack going to happen?
Sally Helm: Luddites are giving each other secret signals in other neighboring counties now, too. Like in Manchester, where the calico trade is being taken over by power-loomss. And in Yorkshire, where the wool industry is being taken over by those wide frames.

Between November of 1811 and January of 1812, the Luddites across these counties destroy an estimated 175 frames every month.

Richard Gaunt: Masters, we're naturally, perturbed and, anxious and also, pretty angry in their own right.

Sally Helm: The government isn't happy either. Historians debate the exact cost of the damage, but by the end of the whole movement, some estimates say the Luddites will have destroyed several million dollars’ worth of machinery in today’s value. So, pretty quickly, the government begins to see the Luddites as a serious threat to the economy. In an attempt to enforce order, they send a few thousand troops to the "trouble" districts and offer hefty rewards for anyone who rats someone else out.

But...who's going to do that, and risk being blotted out of existence and never remembered but with regret and abhorrence?!

Richard Gaunt: Luddism really certainly in this high point, is quite impervious to infiltration. It may be because of the use of, secret signs and owes and all the forms of solidarity. But it may just be the simple thing that, again, it's a community of workers who basically know one another and they will know a stranger in their midst.

Sally Helm: In March of 1812, the government raises the stakes. They pass the frame breaking prevention bill.

Richard Gaunt: Which not only outlawed the breaking of frames but made it a crime punishable by death.

Sally Helm: Nevertheless...the luddites continue their attacks. And in Yorkshire, one famous attack at a wool mill is the first to turn deadly.

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: It’s a Saturday in early April of 1812 and Yorkshire County is abuzz with rumors about an impending Luddite attack. Possibly directed at a mill owned by a man named William Cartwright. Cartwright is taking these rumors seriously. He’s preparing for the worst. Armed guards are stationed around the mill, carrying muskets and ammunition. A guard dog sits on the ground floor. An alarm bell is installed on the roof to ring in the event of an attack. Cartwright also allegedly places rollers with metal spikes on the staircases going up to the mill, so that any attackers will find themselves impaled if they try to climb. He even has a vat of acid at the ready. He plans to use it as a weapon.
Just after midnight on April 12th, Cartwright is awoken by gunshots. Over a hundred luddites have marched miles through the night. And now they’re here. Attacking his mill. Cartwright is still in the clothes he slept in as a shootout begins. When one of his men goes to pull a rope to sound that alarm bell, and call reinforcements, the rope breaks. Cartwright yells for his men to run up to the roof and ring the bell by hand. They do. And from their perch up there, they start throwing rocks at the Luddites below. Some of the attackers are banging on the mill’s doors, trying to get in. And Cartwright’s men start firing their muskets.

One luddite is shot, and then another. Both men will end up dead.

The successful hits shock the Luddites, and they retreat. None of the men guarding the mill are killed. Although according to one source, Cartwright himself is injured when he collides with his own spikes.

News of the two Luddite deaths spreads rapidly, and sparks angry riots. And just a few days later, on April 20th, 1812, there's another attack at Burton's Mill in Lancashire. Where the mill men begin by shooting off blanks, but then turn to real ammunition. A handful of Luddites are killed. More than a dozen are wounded. And in retaliation, the Luddites join up with over a hundred men with miners’ picks and muskets to burn down the house of one of Burton's sons.

The military has to come in to put down the rebellion—shooting five rioters in the process. Burton’s son is not hurt, though in other Luddite attacks, some people associated with mills aren’t as lucky.

After all this chaos, something surprising happens. the Luddites actually get what they want.

Daniel Burton and his family announce they will no longer use mechanized looms—in part because the attack did so much damage. The cost of repair was too great.

Richard Gaunt: So that's a sort of major victory, a major success. The objective of the Luddites has been achieved. You know, the heated machines are going to be no more. But unfortunately, things have consequences, not just the people that were killed. In that attack. But also, as a result of the withdrawal of that mechanization, Burton's actually dismissed some 400 workers. So, you know, success came with a bitter aftertaste really

Sally Helm: Burton did stop using the power looms but did NOT revert back to using the old machines. Instead, he just stopped his business altogether.

Gaunt says, this just goes to show that even when the Luddites are successful. They can’t get to the root of the problem. Because the changes going on—they’re just too big. We’re talking about the beginning of THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION.

Richard Gaunt: There was a general feeling that, you know, industrialization and mechanization were rendering. Industries more prosperous and they certainly weren't going to, disinvest the wheel, as a result of Luddite attacks.
Sally Helm: The British government continues to use the military to crack down on the Luddites.

Richard Gaunt: And it was set in 1812. So, about a year into the disturbance is really that there were, more troops stationed in the Northern districts of England than there were fighting against Napoleon's supporters in Spain and Portugal. Which gives you a, a sense of the degree of seriousness with which, Luddism, forced its way to the center of the attention of government ministers at the time.

Sally Helm: By that spring of 1812, the Luddite movement does start to die out.

Richard Gaunt: It's one of the things I think that historians are still debating and trying to puzzle over is exactly why and when it finishes.

Sally Helm: There's not some obvious resolution. There's certainly no big law passed to address the workers' concerns. Maybe things quiet down because the summer comes, and another good harvest keeps people from going hungry. Maybe it is because some frame breakers really are put to death and would be frame-breakers are afraid. There's a small resurgence of Luddite attacks in 1814, but it doesn't last long. And soon, the flames really have gone out.

When you look at the Luddites' legacy, at first it seems like there isn't one. Nothing concrete really came of their smashing. Except that they broke a lot of looms. the industrial revolution, of course, marches on in spite of them. And it will bring new prosperity to England. But that prosperity doesn’t reach these workers.

Richard Gaunt: What lay ahead for them was penury, certainly a more impoverished lifestyle, for them and their family. You know, those old glory days were never going to be recovered.

Sally Helm: But Gaunt says, the Luddite uprisings do have an impact on workers in the UK. And specifically on the future of unionization. The combinations act—which made unionization and collective bargaining illegal in 1799—it is dropped in the 1820s, not long after the Luddites had made their mark.

Richard Gaunt: The Luddites are really, I think, central to that, they show you what organized a working resistance can do, even if the objective isn't necessarily achieved.

Sally Helm: Because even in the face of something as big as the Industrial Revolution—the Luddites still found a way to make their frustrations known.

Richard Gaunt: It's this notion, which I think was always there underneath the attacks on machinery, which was the, you know, you need to have dialogue between everyone in the workforce, be an employer or an employee. And in a way Luddism was a manifestation of what can happen when that dialogue disappears or goes badly awry.
Sally Helm: The Luddites couldn’t stop their industry from evolving. They couldn’t get their jobs back. But they were far from the last workers to band together collectively when they got fed up with their working conditions.

Just recently, the global pandemic has led record numbers of Americans to just quit. It’s being called “the Great Resignation.” And in a way…it has something in common with Luddism. Because quitting your job won’t solve global supply chain issues. It won’t end a pandemic. But it is one way of raising your voice—exercising your power—in a system that’s much bigger than any of us.

Though, luckily for computers, and cash registers and smartphones, there’s no mass movement to smashing today’s machines. At least…not yet.

CREDITS:

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This episode was produced by Julie Magruder, sound designed by Brian Flood, and story edited by Jimmy Guitierrez. HISTORY This Week is also produced by Ben Dickstein, Julia Press, and me, Sally Helm. Our associate producer is Emma Fredericks. Our executive producers are McCamey Lynn and Jessie Katz. Thanks for listening and we will see you next week.