

# People's Histreh

Nottingham & Notts Radical History Group



## Home of an 'Infuriated Rabble'? *Militant direct action in Nottingham 1766-1831*



During the early days of the Industrial Revolution, **Nottingham's inhabitants enjoyed a well-earned reputation of being a 'combustible mob'**, used to taking matters 'into their own hands when the occasion demanded it'. Defying patriarchal standards, women always actively participated in, and often led, protests and riots.

This turbulent period of Nottingham's history was marked by incredible hardship and deprivation suffered by workers of all ages and genders. **Poverty, politics and religion fuelled social tensions** and riots occurred regularly, averaging almost one a year at the turn of the (nineteenth) century.

Young people were of course involved in these events. That fact alone is less remarkable than the way this was reported. Similarly to sexist notions about women being unable to think and act 'reasonably', young people were widely seen as 'ignorant'. E.g. newspapers reporting on riots often emphasise the actions of young people. This can be interpreted as a tool to delegitimise the social unrest by implying that no-one in their right mind would join militant direct action and those who did had no idea what they were doing.

# Partial Timeline

<b>October 1766</b>	High cheese prices result in severe <b>Food Riots</b> . One person is shot dead by the military. The events become known as the 'Great Cheese Riot'.
<b>1767</b>	The introduction of the 'spinning jenny', enabling a single worker to spin a multitude of threads, causes riots as workers fear for their livelihoods. The prototype and a number of <b>machines are destroyed</b> .
<b>June 1779</b>	The rejection of a bill to regulate the framework knitters' trade triggers serious riots. Over five days, <b>workers</b> from town and county <b>damage hosiers' houses and break frames</b> . The promise of negotiations ends the riots, but the hosiers' subsequent refusal to compromise leads to further direct action, only quelled after a large scale mobilisation of troops and special constables.
<b>June 1780</b>	During celebrations staged for the king's birthday, <b>armed military officers and locals clash</b> on Market Square, leaving a number of people severely injured.
<b>June 1783</b>	A drop in the rates of pay causes a riot by framework knitters. Over two days, <b>hosiers' windows are smashed</b> etc. Military repeatedly attack the rioters and although the crowds resist fiercely, they are finally subdued by the soldiers' swords and bullets. At least one person is killed, others severely wounded.
<b>October 1787</b>	A number of framework knitters <b>break a hosier's frame</b> .
<b>May 1788</b>	High prices trigger a <b>Food Riot</b> . 'Great quantities' of meat are taken.
<b>June 1790</b>	Quarrels over an <b>election</b> cause <b>rioting</b> . Soldiers fire into crowds, killing one man and wounding a number of other persons.
<b>October 1790</b>	Having their income yet again reduced by hosiers, framework knitters <b>attack several houses</b> . Troops arrest numerous rioters.
<b>Autumn 1791</b>	A number of framework knitters from the county assemble and try to negotiate with a hosier. Though unprovoked, <b>soldiers charge into the crowd of workers who fight back</b> , reinforced by numerous town dwellers. A brutal engagement leaves a number of people injured.
<b>May 1792</b>	High prices for meat trigger a <b>Food Riot</b> . Temporarily dispersed by military, rioters later reassemble, trash the Shambles and use the debris to create a huge bonfire in Market Square.
<b>June 1793</b>	A number of persons suspected of being supporters of the French Revolution are attacked in a field near the town. The same <b>royalists attack</b> the mayor's home. One is shot dead, others injured.
<b>July 1794</b>	Over the course of a few weeks, <b>royalists attack</b> suspected radicals and democrats, e.g. laying siege to a cotton mill where republicans sought refuge. Royalists round up their opponents and 'duck' them under pumps on Market Square and in the Leen, torturing and almost drowning many persons. At least one dies following this ordeal.
<b>April 1795</b>	A <b>Food Riot</b> caused by high prices of meat is quelled by Yeomanry and Dragoons.

<b>July 1795</b>	Another <b>Food Riot</b> occurs, this time due to the high price of wheat. Rioters go round bakers' shops, setting and enforcing what they deem appropriate prices.
<b>April 1796</b>	Suspicion that a baker is hoarding grain to raise the price cause yet another <b>Food Riot</b> . It is quelled by Yeomanry and Dragoons. The crowd is fired upon and one person wounded, others are arrested.
<b>May 1796</b>	A heated <b>election escalates into a riot</b> . Following clashes with royalists, supporters of the radical candidate escort him out of town. A fierce fight in Chapel-bar ends as the royalists are routed.
<b>April 1800</b>	High prices cause a <b>Food Riot</b> in which large amounts of provisions are taken. A number of people are arrested by the military and imprisoned.
<b>August 1800</b>	Over the course of four days, <b>Food Rioters</b> seize highly priced provisions all over town, the military being unable to stop them. Only a heavy storm can put an end to the expropriations.
<b>1811-2 and 1816-7</b>	These years are marked by the widespread <b>frame breaking by 'Luddites'</b> who carry out well organised armed raids in the town and the county. Specific models of frames, thought to be putting people out of work, and frames owned by hosiers cutting workers' incomes are systematically smashed. As local law enforcers are outsmarted and the practice rapidly spreads throughout the region, large numbers of soldiers are deployed. Some raids escalate, causing deaths and serious injuries on both sides. Eventually the repression succeeds. Numerous people are imprisoned, transported or hung.
<b>May 1812</b>	The <b>assassination of the Prime Minister causes jubilation</b> in the streets until soldiers disperse crowds.
<b>June 1812</b>	On-going <b>tensions between royalists and radicals</b> escalate into a riot in a theatre as the latter refuse the royalists' command to take off their hats to sing the national anthem.
<b>June 1812</b>	Famine causes two days of <b>Food Riots</b> . They start as a person carries a loaf on a stick over the market. One person is carried aloft by the crowd in a chair, dubbed 'Lady Ludd'. Rioters are joined by militia troops.
<b>June 1817</b>	An ill-fated attempt at armed insurrection, later known as the <b>'Pentrich rebellion'</b> , is swiftly ended and a number of persons executed. The uprising had been egged on and betrayed by a government agent provocateur known as 'Oliver' (who subsequently emigrated).
<b>October 1831</b>	Following the defeat of a very moderate parliamentary reform bill in the House of Lords, the <b>'Reform Riots'</b> erupt as large numbers of people militantly respond to the hated 'boroughmongers' yet again succeeding in defending their privileges. Houses of known Tories, as well as dwellings and shops of their supporters and various law enforcers are attacked all over Nottingham. Crowds target the property of local grandees, such as the 4 <sup>th</sup> Duke of Newcastle. Colwick Hall is trashed, Nottingham Castle and a silk mill in Beeston burned down. An attempt to liberate prisoners from the House of Correction is thwarted by the military. Following the mobilisation of Yeomanry and large numbers of special constables, an attack on Wollaton Hall is also repelled. In the end two people are shot and wounded by the military. Three persons are subsequently hanged on the steps of Shire Hall (known today as the Galleries of Justice).

# Recommended reading

## To the Castle!

### Nottingham's crowds in the Reform Riots

By Valentine Yarnspinner (Loaf On A Stick Press; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2011)

In October 1831 Nottingham Castle was burned down during the Reform Riots. Although this event is often referred to, little is known about who the rioters were and what may have motivated them.

This pamphlet takes a close look at the direct action of these 'misguided rascals' and discusses their identities, motives as well as living and working conditions in early nineteenth century Nottingham.

## Damn his Charity, we'll have the Cheese for nought!

### Nottingham's Great Cheese Riot & other 1766 Food Riots

By Valentine Yarnspinner (Loaf On A Stick Press; 2011)

In 1766 a riot broke out during Nottingham's Goose Fair. Large cheeses were snatched and rolled down Wheeler Gate and Peck Lane, apparently bowling over the mayor. This pamphlet looks into the story behind this tale and places the Great Cheese Riot within the context of the wave of Food Riots which took place that autumn.

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- Engels**, Friedrich (2009): *The Condition of the Working Class in England*; Penguin; London.
- Field**, Henry (ed.; 1884): *The Date Book of remarkable and memorable events...*; Nottingham.
- Hernon**, Ian (2006): *Riot! Civil Insurrection from Peterloo to the Present Day*; Pluto Press; London.
- Hobsbawm** (a), Eric (1964): *The Age of Revolution – Europe 1789-1848*; Weidenfeld & Nicolson; London.
- O'Brien**, Jo: *Women's Liberation in Labour History – A case study from Nottingham*; Spokesman Pamphlet No. 24; Nottingham.
- Pinchbeck**, Ivy (1981): *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution 1750-1850*; Virago; London.
- Thomis**, Malcolm I. (1969): *Politics and Society in Nottingham 1785-1835*; Basil Blackwell; Oxford.
- Thompson**, E.P. (1980): *The Making of the English Working Class*; Victor Gollancz; London.

We are a group of people with different political backgrounds, interested in what has been called 'history from below', 'grassroots history' or 'social history'.

As Nottingham and Nottinghamshire have such a long and turbulent history of socioeconomic transformation, disturbance and conflict, there is a lot to be unearthed. In fact, the most amazing, inspiring, shocking and outrageous stories leap out wherever the surface is scratched.

For information, images, maps, audio files, documents, etc. regarding all our past activities please visit our online presence:

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