

## THREE NOTTINGHAM REBELS IN THE AGE OF REFORM, c.1800-1832

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This article considers Nottingham's reputation for rebellious political activity during the first three decades of the nineteenth century, with reference to three individual case studies. The chosen examples intersect with the histories of Luddism, the Pentrich Rebellion (which had a strong Nottingham dimension) and the Reform Bill Riots of 1831. The article arises out of a three-year ACE (Arts Council England) funded academic residency as 'Curator of Rebellion' with Nottingham City Museums and Galleries at Nottingham Castle. The work underpins the interpretation and exhibition strategy for the new Rebellion Gallery, which is at the heart of the Nottingham Castle Transformation Project. By exploring the motivations, actions and consequences relating to three men who became prominent rebels, during this period, the article shows how documentary evidence and printed sources can help to illuminate the physical remains represented in museum objects of the sort which will be featured in the Rebellion Gallery.<sup>1</sup> **[Plate 1, near here, full page, colour]**

Nottingham's reputation for riotous behaviour, during this period, is well-established in the literature, not least in terms of its propensity for food riots (especially in 1800 and 1812), the impact of the French Revolution on the town, riots at election times and so forth. The extent to which these various activities shared aims, and personnel, in common, has also been addressed by historians. Nottingham possessed advantageous open space - the Market Place - which provided a focal point for crowd gatherings, and protests were often linked to other activities in the town's calendar, such as Goose Fair, or 'Saint Monday', the traditional workers' day off. During the first-half of the nineteenth century, there were also a range of pressing socio-economic challenges facing the town, many of which spilled over into riotous activity in support of change.<sup>2</sup>

## **Nottingham, c.1800-1832**

Nottingham in the first three decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was undergoing structural changes of a profound nature. The population of the town almost doubled in thirty years, rising from 29,000 in 1801 to 34,000 a decade later, then to 40,000 by 1821 and reaching 50,000 in the year of the Reform Bill riots. However, the boundaries of Nottingham remained much as they had been for centuries, until the passage of the General Enclosure Act of 1845. Although pressure to enclose the open fields surrounding the town, and to make them available for building purposes, went back to the 1780s, a successful resistance was maintained by the burgesses who held common rights in the fields and by the owners of sites in Nottingham who profited from rising land values. Alas, there was no Civic Society in Nottingham in the 1820s to fight the battle against local monopoly and speculation. Rather, building was focused on Radford, New Lenton, Hyson Green, Sneinton and Carrington, but the houses were generally too expensive for the great mass of Nottingham's population – a problem of housing stock which seems familiar to modern eyes.<sup>3</sup>

The principal form of manufacture in Nottingham remained framework-knitting – a trade which had expanded in good times through high demand and productivity, to the point where about 2000 frames were located in the town by 1812. However, with changing fashions – notably the move away from woollen hose towards trousers, the de-skilling of the labour market through the abolition of regulations on apprenticeship and the widespread use of unapprenticed labour or ‘colts’, as well as the growth in the production of poor-quality ‘cut-ups’, which lacked the strength and durability of fully-wrought hose – the trade entered a period of prolonged decline. Around two-thirds of knitters were employed in the plain or coarse branches of the trade, which were the least well-remunerated. By comparison, the finer and better-paid branches of the trade, including the lace trade, were flourishing. Unlike framework knitting, which remained essentially a domestic occupation, undertaken in

labourers' cottages of the sort which are preserved at Ruddington Framework Knitters museum, the lace industry was focussing on small, often steam-driven factories, mostly manufacturing in suburbs like Beeston and Stapleford, and marketing through the lace market district of Nottingham.<sup>4</sup>

The declining conditions of the framework knitter affected the whole family unit, for male knitters were supported in their work by their wives and children as winders, seamers and cheveners (who embroidered hosiery). The average wage of a knitter in the coarser branches of the industry was calculated at seven shillings a week, at a time when the quarter loaf sold for a shilling. Knitters were forced to take lower piece-rates for their work by the middlemen or 'bag hosiers' whose job it was to distribute and collect their work. There were few alternative sources of employment to hand, resulting in levels of distress which stimulated various forms of protest. In 1812, there were food riots in Nottingham – by no means the first example of such activity in the town. The same year witnessed an epidemic of machine-breaking or 'Luddism' – a form of popular protest for which Nottingham has become world-renowned.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Luddite: 'General' John Blackburn (1794-1872)**

Like Robin Hood before him, the leader of the Luddite army – who was variously styled Ned Ludd, King Ludd, General Ludd and, on occasion, Lady Ludd – was a mythical figure of uncertain identity. Sometimes he was Ned Ludlam, a disobedient youth from Anstey in Leicestershire, but local campaigners for improving the condition of the framework knitters, such as Gravenor Henson, were also regarded as possible culprits. Luddism first commenced in Arnold, on 11 March 1811. This is significant. Luddism was principally centred on the towns and villages around Nottingham, and by far the greatest number of frames operating at this time were in those districts.<sup>6</sup>

One of the reasons for the greater incidence of Luddism outside Nottingham was the unprecedented steps which the local Corporation took to secure the town from attack. They instituted the Watch and Ward Act (otherwise known as the Nottingham Peace Bill), under which all men over the age of 17 paying poor rates were liable to serve as a policeman. The Watch and Ward patrolled the town between 11 at night and 3 in the morning, in parties of 25, in pursuit of trouble. Fines of between £2 and £10 were levied on those who refused to serve or defaulted. Likewise, the breaking of frames was made a capital offence, carrying the death penalty. The local authorities opposed this draconian measure, fearing that it would discourage informers. Lord Byron famously used his maiden speech in the House of Lords to defend the Luddites - 'these miserable men' - from the excessive restraints placed upon them, by poverty and distress on the one hand, and the forces of law and order on the other.<sup>7</sup>

Since 1792, there had been an army barracks in Nottingham, in the north-west corner of the Park, and this, coupled with the anxious and frequent enquiries instituted by the Home Office, were sufficient to keep the state of the town under constant vigilance. Two police magistrates – Messrs Conant and Baker – were despatched to Nottingham in 1812 to report its condition. At the same time, Sir Thomas Maitland was sent to command the large number of troops which were stationed in the disturbed districts of the North. The Midland District, including Nottingham, contained some 4,000 men under General Hawker. This was about one-third of the total forces available to Maitland, and more than Sir Arthur Wellesley took with him to recover Spain and Portugal from Napoleon in the Peninsular Wars.<sup>8</sup>

The characteristic activity we associate with Luddism - night-time assaults on knitting frames by groups of heavily disguised and organised men - was concentrated in the period from 1811-14 but incidents continued, albeit less frequently, through to the end of 1816. The authorities were faced with a movement which took its oaths of secrecy and its motto 'Taisez-vous' (Keep Quiet) quite literally. The high-degree of self-reliance and independence

manifested by the Luddites have elevated it, in the eyes of historians, to the status of an exemplary working-class organisation. Suspected Luddites were tried before sympathetic juries, with large crowds of Nottingham inhabitants regularly threatening vengeance against anyone – be they judge, juror, victim or witness – who condemned the accused.<sup>9</sup>

Matters peaked with the so-called ‘Loughborough Job’ of 28 June 1816 – an attack on Heathcote and Boden’s lace factory; they were targeted for paying wages below the agreed rates. The accounts agree that some 17 men came from the vicinity of Nottingham, armed with guns, hammers and axes. They kept their anonymity through turning their coats inside out, wearing smocks, and addressing themselves as ‘Ned’. Having broken into the factory, one of the armed watchmen, John Asher, was shot and wounded. 55 machines were destroyed in the attack, which Boden valued at £7,500. The Luddites then dispersed and returned to Nottingham. Thirty-six year old James Towle was identified as one of the leaders of the attack and, after his arrest and trial on 10 August, was hanged on newly-built gallows at Leicester on 20 November 1816. Two other men, Benjamin Badder and Samuel Slater, avoided a similar fate; in Slater’s case, with the assistance of 56 witnesses who testified to his innocence.<sup>10</sup>

The solidarity of the Luddites was beginning to break down from inside their ranks, a process which accelerated as a result of events the following year. On 3 January 1817, about 20 men from Basford, armed with guns and swords, went to Shortwood, near Trowell, to attack the home of Lord Middleton’s gamekeeper, William Cook. The assailants found their intended victim well-armed with ammunition and courage. As the contemporary diarist Joseph Burdet observed, the attackers feared that Cook ‘might kill many of them before they could get to him for they knew he was a dead shot’. In the ensuing affray, Cook’s neighbour, Francis Thorley, was shot at, as was Cook himself.<sup>11</sup>

In the ‘terrible squander’ which followed, one of the attackers, John Blackburn, either ‘could not or would not try to get away but lay down under a bush and let the pursuers take him prisoner. His weapon, a sword, lay a short distance from where he lay’. Blackburn’s weapon came up for auction in 2017 and was purchased by Nottingham City Museums Service, with the generous assistance of Nottingham Civic Society. It will be a key artefact in telling the story of the Luddites in the new Rebellion Gallery at Nottingham Castle after 2020.<sup>12</sup> **[Plate 2 near here, ½ page, colour]**

Blackburn himself offers an interesting example of the consequences for those participating in the Luddite rebellion, in terms of imprisonment, transportation and execution. Blackburn avoided this fate, as a rebel who turned informer. It was the testimony which he offered the authorities, after being captured with his sword at Cossall, which led directly to the conviction of eight men for the ‘Loughborough Job’, six of whom were subsequently hanged on the gallows at Leicester on 17 April 1817. The significance of this act was appreciated by Lancelot Rolleston, the energetic local magistrate from Watnall, who informed the 4<sup>th</sup> Duke of Newcastle that Blackburn had been taken ‘in a daring attack upon the house of William Cook’ and that this had led to the arrest of ‘those individuals, who have for so many years infested this County, under the name of Luddites’.<sup>13</sup>

Blackburn openly admitted that he was saving his neck by turning King’s informer. James Towle had made a full confession about the ‘Loughborough Job’, before his execution in November 1816, but it required independent corroboration to bring in the men whom he named as accomplices. Towle had stated that ‘it must have been’ Blackburn or his brother Christopher ‘that fired the Pistol [at Asher] in the Casting house...as he heard some of the gang on their road home say they should have nobody to thank but Blackburn if any of them got hanged’. By February 1817, Blackburn had made a full, voluntary, confession to Rolleston, naming 13 other members of the gang. He claimed to have been recruited by a

Nottingham framework knitter, William Withers, who had promised £40 plus expenses. As a result of this testimony, another man, William Burton, also turned informer. This provided enough evidence to hang their fellow Luddites.<sup>14</sup>

What do we know of the man himself? John Clement Blackburn was born at Kettering in Northamptonshire on 29 March 1794 to William and Mary Blackburn, and was baptised in the town on 17 September. His Nottinghamshire connections began with his marriage to Ann Burton at Lambley Church on 15 April 1816. Ann, commonly known as Nancy, was 21 and the daughter of Susannah Glover and William Burton. The Blackburns had a daughter, Mary, the same year and it was during this period that Blackburn's career as a Luddite seems to have begun.<sup>15</sup>

On 18 June 1816, Blackburn acted as a sentry, during a frame-breaking episode at New Radford. Ten days later, he participated in the 'Loughborough Job'. Having evaded capture, Blackburn was out again, during Goose Fair, in frame-breaking at Woolpack Lane in Nottingham. Blackburn's situation changed in the autumn. After claiming to be the victim of a Luddite attack, rumours spread that he had staged the attack himself. He and his family appear to have left Lambley shortly afterwards. Blackburn refused to join a party of Luddites who attacked the home of George Kerry at Radford, before Christmas 1816. It was this incident, during which Kerry was shot and left for dead, which led to the apprehension – and subsequent execution – of 21-year old Daniel Diggle (tried 18 March, executed 2 April 1817). Diggle was also charged with the attack on Cook's house at Cossall but Lord Middleton asked that no further action be taken against him or the three men who stood alongside him (Joseph Mellers, Nathan Diggle and Jonathan Austin) and 'The judge very pointedly complimented Lord Middleton upon the propriety of his conduct on the occasion'.<sup>16</sup>

At the end of March 1817, Blackburn gave evidence at Leicester Assizes. A week later, the Home Office reminded local magistrate Charles Mundy of the need to place Blackburn and his fellow informer Burton in a 'situation where they can achieve a livelihood in a state of secrecy'. The authorities were already aware, from their local informers, of plans to exact violent revenge on Blackburn. Even before the trials, he and his family, together with Burton, his wife Leah and daughter Charlotte, were moved to the House of Correction in Leicester for their safety. By August, having expressed a wish to go to America, the Home Office had authorised their emigration to Canada with arrangements made to embark from Falmouth.

John Blackburn thus established a new life for himself far away from Nottinghamshire. Between 1820 and 1832, John and Nancy had two more sons and four more daughters. Their lives were not devoid of tragedy, because at least three of their children predeceased them, although all of them had reached adulthood. There is some evidence that Blackburn wished to return to England, but he never did so. By 1851, the family was living at Bathurst in Ontario. Blackburn was still living in Lanark County when he died from cancer on 22 August 1872; he was buried at Perth. Today, his sword, emblazoned with an ill-fitting description of 'General Blackburn', is the last tangible reminder of his youthful exploits as a rebel, a Luddite, and an informer.<sup>17</sup>

### **The 'Nottingham Captain': Jeremiah Brandreth (1785-1817)**

Whilst John Blackburn was a rebel who turned informer, it was Jeremiah Brandreth's fate to be undone by informers. Brandreth is better remembered than Blackburn because he has become the folk-hero of the Pentrich Rebellion, a poster-boy beloved by historians sympathetic to the rebels cause and disliked in equal measure by those who thought him little better than a murderer. Though Brandreth was habitually styled the 'Nottingham Captain' by



his followers, his subsequent fame as the leader of the 'Pentrich Rebellion' owed a great deal to how he was represented in court after his trial as well as in the manner of his death.<sup>18</sup>

Brandreth was the leader of a group of about 50 men who set out from the Derbyshire villages of Pentrich and South Wingfield on the night of 9-10 June on a fourteen-mile march towards Nottingham. There, on the Forest, they hoped to meet tens of thousands of like-minded rebels, whom they had been led to believe would be marching, in a similar vein, towards this rendezvous. According to those who gave evidence at Brandreth's trial, the men had been promised a ration of rum and beef and £100 for which purpose they were to take the Banks, that from Nottingham they were to send an Expedition to Newark to seize the depot of arms & the revenue there. It was their intention to make Nottingham their headquarters, to seize all public property, extinguish taxation and the National Debt and issue new currency and coinage in place of the old.<sup>19</sup>

The Rebellion failed when a detachment of Hussars, accompanied by the county magistrates Rolleston and Mundy, intercepted them near Giltbrook on the morning of 10 June. Brandreth fled the scene, hoping to board a ship for America. Having failed to do so, he returned to Nottinghamshire. On 22 July, two days after a reward was issued for his capture, Brandreth was arrested at the home of his erstwhile friend Henry Sampson in Bulwell. Sampson was a member of the North Midlands Committee which had helped to plan the Rebellion, but, unbeknown to Brandreth, was the paid informer of Nottingham's Town Clerk, Henry Enfield. Sampson, vilified as a turn-coat after the truth emerged, later emigrated to the South African Cape. Brandreth, meanwhile, stood trial at Derby on the charge of High Treason.<sup>20</sup>

Having been found guilty, he was executed outside the County Gaol in Derby, on Friday 7 November 1817, before a crowd some 6,000 strong. After being drawn on a hurdle around the prison yard, he was taken to the specially-erected gallows. There he was hanged by the

short-drop method, which slowly strangled him to death, before having his body taken down and placed upon a simple, wooden bench, constructed by a local carpenter, Mr Finney. Brandreth was then beheaded with an axe, in the manner prescribed for felons convicted of High Treason. The bench survives and, like Blackburn's sword, will be exhibited in the new Rebellion Gallery at Nottingham Castle. The very ordinariness of the object betrays the bloody purpose for which it was constructed.<sup>21</sup>

Brandreth's head and body were placed in a coffin and deposited, alongside those of two of his associates, William Turner and Isaac Ludlam Senior, in an unmarked grave at St Werburgh's church on Friar Gate. The church – which had witnessed Dr Johnson's marriage in 1735 - still stands, but the grave has never been excavated. However, archaeologists may one day be tempted to look underneath the modern multi-storey car park, adjoining the churchyard, which might yield the resting place of the 'Nottingham Captain'.<sup>22</sup>

The picture of Brandreth's severed head, as retailed in a range of contemporary prints, drawings and broadsheets, and the dreadful exhortation of the executioner, 'behold the head of the traitor Jeremiah Brandreth', raised its hirsute profile to a level of interest not witnessed since the deaths of Charles I in 1649 and Louis XVI of France in 1793. **[Plate 3 near here, ½ page, black and white]** But they were kings whilst Brandreth was an unemployed artisan and a failed revolutionary. Perhaps the artist wanted to draw a comparison with other decapitated martyrs but, in its delineation of Brandreth's head, we see some of the early signs of his subsequent martyrdom. Even Sir Henry Fitzherbert of Tissington Hall, who was a member of the Derbyshire Grand Jury, thought of Brandreth as 'a man of the most undaunted courage and firmness, [who] possessed every talent and qualification for high enterprise...with a very strong expression of countenance'.<sup>23</sup>

Who was this man and why did he attain this level of popular interest? Brandreth was born at Fetter Lane in London. He was baptised at St Andrew's Church, Holborn, on 26 June 1785. His formative years were spent in Devon. By 1803, he was a reservist in the 28<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot (North Gloucestershire) regiment. The same year saw the execution of Colonel Edward Despard. In November 1802, Despard led an ill-fated rebellion against prominent sites including the Tower of London and the Bank of England. Brandreth claimed to have witnessed Despard's execution. It may well be that Despard's dignified acceptance of his fate on the gallows was the model to which Brandreth aspired, when he met the same end, fourteen years later.<sup>24</sup>

Brandreth settled in Nottinghamshire in 1811, after marrying Ann Bridget, from Sutton-in-Ashfield; their two children, Elizabeth, and Timothy, were born in 1813 and 1815. He had already tried his hand at a variety of trades, including whitesmith, sailor and stocking maker. In September 1816, during the severe post-war depression which followed the Napoleonic Wars, the family were issued with a settlement order, removing them to Wilford. However, at the time of the Pentrich Rebellion, Brandreth was living in the Lace Market (various addresses were given, including Cross Court, Mount East Street and Butcher's Close), working a frame. As such, he was amongst those householders required to perform Watch and Ward, during the renewed Luddite disturbances. Later, after his conviction for High Treason, Brandreth was accused of being a Luddite himself, and of having shot someone in the course of a raid.<sup>25</sup>

Accusing Brandreth of murder became important because, in the course of the Pentrich Rebellion, Robert Walters, a servant of Mary Hepworth in Wingfield Park, had been shot and killed. Though the evidence was inconclusive, it is likely that Brandreth was responsible. However, it was for High Treason rather than murder that Brandreth was tried in Derby, from Thursday 16 to Saturday 18 October 1817.<sup>26</sup>

Seventeen prosecution witnesses gave evidence. Time and again, the prosecution cited Brandreth's lines of doggerel, which he had proclaimed at *The White Horse* public house in Pentrich, on the evening before the rebellion:

Every man his skill must try,  
He must turn out and not deny;  
No bloody soldier must he dread,  
He must turn out and fight for bread;  
The time is come, you plainly see,  
When Government opposed must be.

Attention was also drawn to a map which Brandreth was supposed to have displayed, in spite of the fact that two special constables (Anthony Martin and Shirley Asbury) were in the room at the time. The two men testified that, on being discovered, they had been threatened with being pushed up the chimney in the tap-room.<sup>27</sup>

However, whilst Brandreth was the subject of his trial, his character and motivations only became central in the subsequent trials of his associates. In defending Brandreth, the Nottingham attorney Thomas Denman argued that the government had grossly exaggerated the significance of the Rebellion, proclaiming it an act of High Treason rather than 'one of those heedless and mad riots which have often been excited by hunger in all countries and in all ages'. The prominent radical, Henry Hunt, was moved to comment that:

The whole of the evidence merely went to establish the fact, that one of the most contemptible riots took place that ever deserved the name of a riot, whether with respect to the numbers engaged, or the total want of influence of those who took a lead in it. As for poor Brandreth, who was called the Captain of the Insurrection, he was nothing more nor less

than a contemptible pauper, without power, or talent, or courage; and it was distinctly sworn that the whole gang fled upon the appearance of one soldier!<sup>28</sup>

But Brandreth was condemned to death, regardless, and the trials of his associates now followed. Rather than continuing with the defence of aggravated riot, Denman now centred his attentions on Brandreth's commanding presence and personality, arguing that it was his charismatic and powerful influence which led the Pentrich men to their doom:

Like the captain of a band of pirates or the head of a troop of banditti, he was obviously one of those persons who have in all ages exercised the most absolute control over people in their condition, and to whose natural superiority their moral and physical forces have ever yielded implicit homage. He was the leader – a stranger in the midst of them, sent over from Nottingham or some other place to delude these miserable men. You hear the tales, the wretched tales that he told of a rising in one place, and a rising in another, whether he believed them or not, we know they are entirely false, but they proceeded from him alone, and such are the means by which a few starving villagers were urged to commit all these outrages for bread.

In a famous comparison, Denman proceeded to read out a long passage from Lord Byron's poem *The Corsair*, drawing a direct analogy between Conrad, the tortured, brooding hero of the tale, and Brandreth, which Denman thought 'as minute, as accurate, as powerful, [a likeness] as if the first of painters had seen him in his hour of exertion'.<sup>29</sup>

The consequence was clear: having lost Brandreth to the gallows, Denman was now magnifying his character and influence in order to try and save his co-defendants. It was an effort which did not yield salvation for either Turner or Ludlam, who joined Brandreth on the gallows, but it materially contributed to the subsequent mythology surrounding the figure of the 'Nottingham Captain'.<sup>30</sup>

On Tuesday 28 October, three days after sentence of death was passed on her husband, Ann Brandreth, heavily pregnant with their third child, made the fifteen mile journey from Sutton-in-Ashfield to Derby to see her husband. A subscription was raised to pay for her travel, but, such was the family's impoverished situation, that she kept the money to support them and made the journey on foot. After Brandreth's death, she gave birth to a daughter, Mary, who was baptised on 12 January 1818. In the days before her husband's execution, the fate of Ann Brandreth and her three children were a matter of sympathetic curiosity in the newspapers, with the prominent radical, William Cobbett, advancing a public requisition to support her family.<sup>31</sup>

Brandreth's reputation, which had already risen as a result of his trial and execution, was amplified still further, by the publication of a final letter, written to his wife from prison, on the morning before his execution. This amounted to his last will and testament:

My beloved, I received a letter this morning with a pound note in it which I leave for you in the jailer's hands with the other things which will be sent to you...one work-bag, two balls of worsted and one of cotton and a handkerchief, an old pair of stockings and shirt and the letter I received from my beloved sister with the following sum of money - £1 12s 7d...my blessing attend you and the children and the blessing of God be with you all now and ever more. Adieu! Adieu to all for ever! Your most affectionate husband, Jeremiah Brandreth.<sup>32</sup>

We know from the reports filed by Enfield's informant, Henry Sampson, that Ann Brandreth was fully aware of her husband's activities as a rebel and, if those reports are accurate, encouraged them.<sup>33</sup> She continued to live in Sutton as Jeremiah Brandreth's widow for seven years, before marrying Henry Taylor and moving the family to Mansfield, where she had another daughter, Harriet.

Brandreth's two existing children, at the time of his death, suffered their own personal tragedies. His eldest daughter Elizabeth, who was baptised on 10 October 1813, died on 18

May 1840 from cancer. His son Timothy, born a fortnight before the Battle of Waterloo (4 June 1815), married twice. His first wife, Mary Rosworth, whom he married at Mansfield on 12 December 1835, gave birth to three children. A son, John, was born in 1838, a daughter, Eliza, died before she was a year old, and their third child, Timothy, was born in 1840. Mary died shortly after giving birth to him whilst the child itself died four years later from a throat infection.

Timothy Brandreth married for a second time in February 1842. Tragically, his new wife, Ann Ellis, who had attended his first wife during her final illness, died eight months later from consumption. By 1844, the only survival of Timothy's two marriages and three children was his son John.

In 1847, Timothy and his son John joined Mary Brandreth and her family in emigrating to the United States of America. Mary, the daughter born two months after her father's execution at Derby, married William Trueman on 23 September 1841. Her two children, William Henry and Emiline, followed in 1842 and 1846. It is somehow fitting that it was the child conceived, carried and born in the shadow of her father's role in the Pentrich Rebellion, who should be the one to maintain the family line, posthumously, and to carve out a new history for their descendants in America. So, whilst there are undoubtedly Brandreths in Nottinghamshire, Devon and elsewhere who can claim descent from the 'Nottingham Captain', the strongest connections today are undoubtedly transatlantic ones.<sup>34</sup>

Dramatists have been carried away by the exotic figure of Jeremiah Brandreth, but he was probably best described by Thomas Bailey, the Nottingham historian, as 'one of those original characters for whom nature had done much, and education nothing'.<sup>35</sup> Brandreth was a short man, standing 5 feet 5 inches tall, with a dark complexion. On the night of the rebellion, he wore a dark coloured long great coat, dark pantaloons tied at the bottom, a light

coloured waistcoat and a white neckerchief. His correspondence shows that, like John Blackburn, he was both literate and numerate, and he clearly possessed enough qualities to act as the leader of a group of men to whom, in every other respect, he was a stranger.<sup>36</sup>

It was the revelation of the activities of 'Oliver the Spy', during the autumn of 1817, which also served to burnish Brandreth's reputation as a rebel martyr. Oliver, a paid Home Office informer, had infiltrated the secret network of clubs from which the Rebellion had sprung and assumed authority amongst them as a well-placed connection with London. It was easy to argue, in the aftermath of his exposure as a government agent, that local support for the Rebellion had been orchestrated, or at least fanned, through the interventions of a paid *agent provocateur*. Whether Brandreth ever met Oliver is still a matter of debate but Oliver had certainly met those men, in Nottingham, who matured the plans for the Rebellion and despatched Brandreth to Pentrich as their chosen leader. But, whatever expectations the plotters may have had of Nottingham's willingness to join the Rebellion, the town was noticeably quiet on the evening of 9-10 June, aside from rumours of trouble on the Derbyshire border, and the presence of a larger-than-usual number of Special Constables patrolling the streets of the town.<sup>37</sup>

### **The Reform Bill Rioter: George 'Curly' Hearson (1810-32)**

The mood of Nottingham was markedly different during the Reform Bill riots of October 1831. The violent reaction to the rejection of the Parliamentary Reform Bill, by the House of Lords, on 8 October 1831, is well-known. There were isolated incidents of trouble in the town, during the weekend following news of the bill's defeat. However, whilst the peaceful meeting held in the Market Square, on Monday 10 October, following the end of Goose Fair, demonstrated Nottingham's overwhelming support for the Bill, it was not enough to satisfy some of the town's more rebellious spirits. Over the course of the next 48 hours, the



properties of well-known opponents of the Bill – Nottingham Castle, the unoccupied mansion house of the fourth Duke of Newcastle, Colwick Hall, the home of Sir John Musters, and William Lowe’s silk mill at Beeston – were subjected to violent assault, whilst an attack on Lord Middleton’s property was repulsed at the gates of Wollaton Hall.<sup>38</sup>

As with the Luddites, the authorities faced considerable difficulties in securing the convictions of those involved in the Riots. In spite of a reward of £500 (with a pardon for any one whose information lead to convictions), nobody was ever successfully prosecuted for the burning of Nottingham Castle. However, a number of men, who were believed to have played a part in multiple attacks, were eventually brought to court. Five men, Beck, Hearson, Armstrong, Berkins, and Shelton, were sentenced to death for their part in the attacks at Colwick and Beeston. Another four, Kitchen, Thurman, Marshall, and Whittaker, were sentenced to death but their sentences were later commuted to transportation.<sup>39</sup>

On 1 February 1832, George Beck, George Hearson, and John Armstrong, were executed in front of the county gaol, for their part in burning Lowe’s Mill at Beeston. Ten days before their death, a gaol-breakout was attempted by Beck and Hearson, who planned to use 27 yards of slit blankets to descend the cliff into Narrow Marsh. This action probably contributed to the fact that, unlike Berkins and Shelton, neither of these men were reprieved.<sup>40</sup>

Hearson provides a particularly affecting case-study of the condemned men. He had been convicted on the evidence of Henry Dodsley, who had given evidence against him in return for immunity, and also on the testimony of 16-year old Charles Slater. Both these men placed Hearson in the vicinity of Lowe’s Mill and testified that he had boasted of his part in its destruction. Hearson protested that he had not received details of the charges against him, before his trial, and had been unable to call witnesses in his defence. In his appeal for

clemency, Hearson produced affidavits from John Pearson and William Street, who stated that he had been collecting rubble from the ruins of Nottingham Castle at the time when the Mill was being set alight. But the appeal was dismissed and Hearson went to the gallows.<sup>41</sup>

Hearson punctured the solemnity of his execution by running up to and jumping on the scaffold and calling to his friends in the crowd. He twirled his cap and his neckerchief around his hand, and did a little dance, before being calmed and readied for death. As one contemporary song proclaimed:

Hearson, Beck, and Armstrong boldly,  
Met their fates beneath the [hanging] tree;  
Villains swore against them coldly,  
And their doom we all shall see.

The halters used in the execution of the three men became an object of local curiosity and were on display in the Governor's House years after the event.<sup>42</sup>

Hearson was 21-years old at the time of his death, with the reputation of being something of a local bad-boy. In a memoir published in 1901, one resident of Nottingham described him as a 'well known [figure] amongst the rough population of the town, of bad repute, [who] had a few months previously fought in the prize ring'. By contrast, a contemporary obituary noted that 'We never heard of any impeachment of [Hearson's] honesty and integrity, but he was unfortunately too fond of pugilistic contests, and was thus frequently led into intercourse with idle and disorderly persons'.<sup>43</sup>

Indeed, it was as 'Curly' Hearson, the bare knuckle fighter, that George Hearson was probably best known to locals. He was part of the Nottingham School of boxers who trained at Bill Broadhead's gym at the *Butcher's Arms*, and were noted for fighting with a sense of

decency. Hearson fought on at least eight occasions, in the three-years before his death. At 5 feet 6 inches tall and weighing 136 lbs, he was classed as a 'lightweight' (max. limit 147 lbs). There is no evidence that he ever fought 'Bendigo', who was his contemporary.<sup>44</sup>

Hearson worked as a bobbin and carriage-maker and, later, as a lace-hand. At the time of his death, he was living in Mount East Court [off Mount East Street]. According to his obituary, 'He possessed an unconquerable spirit, which nothing could daunt. His manner to a stranger would appear rather volatile, his temperament was very mercurial and he was of an active turn of mind'.<sup>45</sup>

Hearson was the son of Thomas Hearson and Frances King, who had married on 12 May 1793 in Arnold. His mother was still alive, at the time of his death, living in Ram Yard, off Long Row. At their last meeting in prison, she pleaded for access to her son, who was separated from her by an iron gate. This was denied her and Hearson fainted from the emotion of the occasion.

Like Jeremiah Brandreth before him, Hearson wrote a letter to his family on the eve of his execution. It was addressed to his mother and to his wife, Charlotte Arnold, whom he had married at St Nicholas's church on 26 June 1830, the same day on which King William IV acceded to the throne. Charlotte was two years younger than Hearson and, in widowhood, lived in Datchet Lane as a Lace Runner.<sup>46</sup>

Hearson's letter was subsequently published, together with his portrait, on a Broadside which will feature in the Rebellion Gallery at Nottingham Castle. **[Plate 4 near here, full page, colour]** The letter was principally concerned with detailing the precise arrangements of his funeral, but it also revealed the fact that Hearson had a daughter. This was Mary Ann Hearson, who was baptised on 20 September 1830 but was buried barely two months later

(27 November 1830). Hearson's instructions for the disposal of his physical remains were clear:

I should like my companions to be my bearers, and should like all of them to be clothed in black, black hatbands, and white gloves, with a knot of white ribbon attached to each breast, with one leaf of laurel to the same...As soon as you get possession of my body, you will see that I am well-scrubbed, until I become my natural colour...It is my particular desire that you will keep me till the following Sunday after my death...I wish that all my friends and companions may see me when dead, if you consider it prudent so to do, if I am anywhere near my own colour...I wish you to tie my black handkerchief twice round my neck, with a bunch in front, until my burial takes place, and then to remove it, or take it off, and give it to my wife...I desire all my relations and friends may be requested to follow me to my grave, and some of my companions to be so kind as to watch me, and see that I am not took up, or stole, for one week, as I have been informed something of this sort will be tried at...You will see that the sexton bury me in the same grave as my child is buried in; you will take it up, and lay it upon me...I subscribe myself, with my dying breath, a murdered man.<sup>47</sup>

Hearson's determination to have his body protected from Nottingham's notorious grave snatchers, the Resurrectionists, and to be interred in a decent state, was significant. He was buried in a grave 12 foot deep and his coffin was covered with thorns and straw 'to prevent disinterment'. At this time, the bodies of anyone but convicted murderers could be claimed by friends and relatives, for burial in consecrated ground. However, given the disturbed state of Nottingham, the Sheriff ordered that Hearson should not be buried on Sunday 5, but before midday on Monday 6 February. As it was observed at the time:

This peremptory order was complied with, and accordingly, at 25 minutes past 11, the procession moved towards the burial-ground [no.2] of St. Mary's Church, in Barker-Gate, where the remains of this unfortunate young man was interred, in the presence of at least 15,000 spectators, who all deplored the cause of his premature death. His followers and

bearers were dressed most respectably, and the solemn scene was one that will never be forgotten in Nottingham.

The arrangements were entrusted to Hearson's older brother, Thomas (1800-36), a Bobbin and Carriage-Maker and Commission-Agent for lace, living in George Street. Though Thomas was a Methodist, it was subsequently observed that the hymn sung at Hearson's funeral, 'Rejoice for a brother deceased', was performed without the presence or approval of the two Methodist ministers, Robert Pilter and Thomas Harris, who left the burial ground immediately after performing the funeral rites :

Rejoice for a brother deceased,

Our loss is his infinite gain;

A soul out of prison released,

And freed from its bodily chain;

With songs let us follow his flight,

And mount with his spirit above,

Escaped to the mansions of light,

And lodged in the Eden of love.<sup>48</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I have used the lives of three men, during three rebellious moments in the history of Nottingham, represented through three artefacts from the new Rebellion Gallery at Nottingham Castle, to say something about the human consequences of protest. John Blackburn, Jeremiah Brandreth and George Hearson were three individuals united in their rebelliousness during a period in Nottingham's history when it faced profound changes in its social and political fortunes. One of the three (Blackburn) turned informer, the other two

(Brandreth and Hearson) were convicted by informers, or by witnesses who gained immunity as a result of their evidence. All three were young - Hearson, at 21, was the youngest, Brandreth, at 31, the oldest – and each of them was married, with small children. As we have seen, Ann and Mary Brandreth and Frances and Charlotte Hearson, the wives, mothers and daughters of these men, suffered the consequences of their rebellion just as much as if they had been rebels themselves.<sup>49</sup>

Assembling a rogues' gallery of individual rebels does not make them the only examples of Nottingham's rebel culture, during this period, but it does suggest that they may be representative ones. Within the last five years, Nottingham's historical reputation for riotous activity has been the focus for research by a wide range of organisations with contemporary political objectives. Much of this work has extended the range of information about the reasons for rebellion, during this period, and the reaction of the authorities against it. The continuing currency and salience of rebellion is thus apparent – not least, given its centrality to the heritage-led regeneration of the modern city.<sup>50</sup>

But, looked at through the prism of the individual lives affected by these events, how much did Rebellion achieve in Nottingham during this period? The answer, based on the evidence presented here, must be a mixed one. Rebellion requires courage of a sort which tests human resources to their limit. Blackburn, Brandreth and Hearson stand out from the crowd, because a combination of accident, design and circumstances led to their contemporary prominence and posthumous fame. None of these men were blameless figures but neither were they the black demons of legend suggested by commentators at the time or by subsequent historians. Who might not be tempted to act the part of John Blackburn, if the alternative was grim death and impoverishment for their family? Did Jeremiah Brandreth's silent dignity on the scaffold signify subtle qualities of leadership or did it mask a guilty conscience for the death of Robert Walters? As George Hearson's affecting concern for the proper treatment of his body after

death reminds us, at least during this period, rebels who went to the scaffold for their beliefs recognised that the true moment of judgement faced them once human intervention had ceased.<sup>51</sup>

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## **Plates and Captions**

Plate 1: Personal and Political Papers of Fred Westacott, FW/C/9/3/56. Reproduced with permission, Manuscripts and Special Collections, the University of Nottingham.

Plate 2: John Blackburn’s Sword, © Nottingham City Museums and Galleries, reference NCMG 2017-36.

Plate 3: Contemporary illustration of Jeremiah Brandreth’s severed head (Author’s collection).

Plate 4: 'Nottingham Tragedy', © Nottingham City Museums and Galleries, reference NCM 1929-3.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the project, see <http://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/arts/tag/curator-of-rebellion-and-social-justice/> [accessed: 19 November 2018] and the regular project newsletter at <https://www.nottinghamcastle.org.uk/latest-updates/> [accessed: 19 November 2018].

<sup>2</sup> See John Beckett, 'Responses to War: Nottingham in the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, 1793-1815, *Midland History*, 22 (1997), 71-94; Mark Pottle, *Loyalty and Patriotism in Nottingham 1792-1816* (DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 1988); Mark Harrison, *Crowds and History: Mass Phenomena in English Towns, 1790-1835* (Cambridge, 1988); Douglas A. Reid, 'The Decline of Saint Monday, 1766-1876', *Past and Present*, 71 (1976), 76-101.

<sup>3</sup> See Roy Church, *Economic and Social Change in a Midland Town: Victorian Nottingham, 1815-1900* (1966); J.V. Beckett and Ken Brand, 'Enclosure, Improvement and the Rise of "New Nottingham"', *TTS*, 98, 1994, 92-111.

<sup>4</sup> For contemporary accounts of the state of the trade, see Gravenor Henson, *History of the Framework Knitters* [1831], ed. S.D. Chapman (Newton Abbot, 1970); William Felkin, *A History of the Machine-wrought Hosiery And Lace Manufactures* (1867). There is some dispute as to how much lace was actually manufactured in the lace market, and what sort: see Sheila A. Mason, *Nottingham Lace: 1760s-1950s - The Machine-made Lace Industry in Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire and Leicestershire* (Stroud, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Malcolm Thomis, *The Luddites. Machine-Breaking in Regency England* (Newton Abbot, 1970).

<sup>6</sup> Katrina Navickas, 'The search for "General Ludd": the mythology of Luddism', *Social History*, 30 (2005), 281-95; Matthew Roberts, 'Rural Luddism and the makeshift economy of the Nottinghamshire Framework Knitters', *Social History*, 42 (2017), 365-98.

<sup>7</sup> *Nottingham watch and ward lists, 1812 and 1816*, ed. Peter Hammond (Nottinghamshire Family History Society, Record Series), 136 (2001); *Nottingham watch and ward substitute books, November 1816-May 1817*, ed. Peter Hammond (Nottinghamshire Family History Society, Record Series), 124 (1999); J.V. Beckett, 'Politician or Poet? The 6th Lord Byron in the House of Lords, 1809-13', *Parliamentary History*, 34 (2015), 201-17.

<sup>8</sup> 'The Story of Nottingham's Barracks', *The Lenton Listener*, 21 (November-December 1982), available at: [http://www.lentontimes.co.uk/images/gallery/barrack\\_lane/barrack\\_lane\\_listener\\_21.htm](http://www.lentontimes.co.uk/images/gallery/barrack_lane/barrack_lane_listener_21.htm) [accessed: 19 November 2018]; Nottinghamshire Archives [NA], M 429, Letters of Conant and Baker reporting on Luddism.

<sup>9</sup> For a recent exploration, see Julian Atkinson and Roger Tanner, *Luddism in the East Midlands: Riots and Negotiations* (Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire Labour History Society, Occasional Pamphlets), 5 (2018).



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<sup>10</sup> See Ian Porter, *The Last of the Luddites* (Loughborough, 2015) for a full history of the episode.

<sup>11</sup> NA, DD 1177/1, Typescript copy of 'Recollections of a Journeymen Stockinger'; Nottingham Local Studies Library, Ref.L67.01.

<sup>12</sup> See <https://www.nottinghamcastle.org.uk/update/nottingham-castle-purchases-luddite-sword-at-auction/> [accessed: 19 November 2018] and <https://www.nottinghampost.com/news/nottingham-news/sword-involved-luddite-movement-unveiled-271720> [accessed: 19 November 2018].

<sup>13</sup> University of Nottingham Manuscripts and Special Collections [UNMASC], Ne C 4966, Rolleston to Newcastle, 16 February 1817; also see Rolleston to Newcastle, 11 January 1817, at: <http://ludditebicentenary.blogspot.com/search?q=11th+january+1817> [accessed: 19 November 2018].

<sup>14</sup> For the confessions and evidence of Towle and Blackburn, see Malcolm I. Thomis, *Luddism in Nottinghamshire* (Thoroton Society Record Series), 26 (1972), pp.82-6; *Cambridge Chronicle*, 11 April 1817.

<sup>15</sup> I am grateful to Yvonne Armitage (Nottingham Castle Transformation Programme) for providing information relating to Blackburn's ancestry based on work undertaken on [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com). Also see below, n.16.

<sup>16</sup> NA, DD 1177/1.

<sup>17</sup> The story can be followed through the posts on <http://ludditebicentenary.blogspot.com> (searching 'John Blackburn' and 'Blackburn') and through the 'Luddsgang Ancestry' profile on [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com).

<sup>18</sup> See John Dring, *Jeremiah Brandreth* (Pentrich, 2015); John Belchem, 'Jeremiah Brandreth', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, and John Young, *Jeremiah Brandreth: the 'Nottingham Captain' and the Derbyshire Rising of 1817* (1981). For a negative appraisal, see Malcolm Thomis, 'Jeremiah Brandreth', *Biographical Dictionary of Modern British Radicals, Volume 1: 1770-1830*, ed. J.O. Gossman and N.J. Baylen (1979), 62-64; Malcolm I. Thomis, 'The 'Nottingham Captain': A Portrait of Jeremiah Brandreth, The Rebel', *Nottinghamshire Historian*, 14 (Autumn 1974), 7-9.

<sup>19</sup> W.B. Gurney, *The Transcripts of the Trials of Jeremiah Brandreth, William Turner, Isaac Ludlam the Elder, and George Weightman*, 2 vols (1817), II, 36, 114, 369-70, 374-5.

<sup>20</sup> See Richard A. Gaunt, 'The Pentrich Rebellion – A Nottingham Affair?', *Midland History*, 43 (2018), 208-28.

<sup>21</sup> Derby Museums, object reference 1927-93, execution block and associated file relating to provenance. I am grateful to Derby Museums for access to this material.

<sup>22</sup> See *The Times*, 8 November 1817.

<sup>23</sup> See Marcia Pointon, *Hanging the Head: Portraiture and Social Formation in Eighteenth-century England* (New Haven, 1997); Derbyshire Record Office, D239 M/F/10229, Sir Henry Fitzherbert's Notebook.

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<sup>24</sup> Mike Jay, *The Unfortunate Colonel Despard* (2004).

<sup>25</sup> See NA, PR 9808; PR 9799; CA 1488, 1490; *Nottingham Review*, 7 November 1817.

<sup>26</sup> Walters' death during the 'Insurrection' is recorded in the registers of St Matthew's Church, Pentrich; see Julian Atkinson, *Bravery and Deception: The Pentrich Revolt of 1817* (Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire Labour History Society, Occasional Pamphlets), 4 (2016), 27.

<sup>27</sup> Gurney, *Trials*, I, 357-76.

<sup>28</sup> Gurney, *Trials*, I, 207; *The Memoirs of Henry Hunt*, Volume 3 (1822).

<sup>29</sup> Gurney, *Trials*, I, 509-10; II, 236-7.

<sup>30</sup> For example, Stanley Middleton's play, 'The Captain from Nottingham' (1970).

<sup>31</sup> *The Times*, 10 November 1817; NA, PR 9799 (Mary Brandreth).

<sup>32</sup> *The Times*, 10 November 1817.

<sup>33</sup> The National Archives, Home Office Papers [TNA, HO], 42/166, ff. 54-55, Sampson to Enfield, 5 June 1817.

<sup>34</sup> This section is based on the literature referenced above at n.17. Much of our knowledge of Brandreth's descendants arises from genealogical research undertaken recently by Sylvia Mason of the Pentrich and South Wingfield Revolution Group.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Bailey, *Annals of Nottinghamshire* (Nottingham, 1853), IV, 293.

<sup>36</sup> See the descriptions of him in the depositions taken after the Rebellion: UNMASC, Ne C 4995/1-14, examinations taken before Dr Charles Wylde, 13 June 1817.

<sup>37</sup> For a review of these events, see Gaunt, 'Nottingham Affair?'.

<sup>38</sup> See John Beckett, 'The Nottingham Reform Bill Riots of 1831', *Parliamentary History*, 24 (2005), 115-38.

<sup>39</sup> See UNMASC, Ne C 5052, 'Schedule of Prisoners Committed to take their Trials charged with being concerned in the riots & near Nottingham on the 10th and 11th October 1831 and the subsequent acts of Incendiarism'; *Report of the Proceedings against the parties charged with burning Nottingham Castle, Firing Lowe's Mill, and Sacking Colwick Hall, who were tried at the Special Assize, holden at Nottingham, January the fourth to the fourteenth, 1832* (Nottingham, 1832).

<sup>40</sup> *Nottingham Review*, 3 February 1832.

<sup>41</sup> *Nottingham Review*, 13 January 1832; TNA, HO 17/69, testimony of John Pearson and William Street, 25 January 1832; Steve Poole, "'Some examples should be made": prosecuting Reform Bill rioters in 1831-2' (forthcoming). I am grateful to Steve Poole for allowing me to see his essay prior to publication.

<sup>42</sup> *Some Particulars of the Life, Trial, Behaviour, and Execution of George Beck, George Hearson, and John Armstrong, who were Executed in front of the County Jail, Nottingham*,

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on Wednesday February 1, 1832, for burning Mr Lowe's Mill, at Beeston (Nottingham, 1832); *Nottingham Review*, 3 February 1832; William F. Patton, 'Political Expression through Song and Verse: Nottingham, 1780-1850' (unpublished PhD thesis, Queen's University of Belfast, 1983), p.384; James Orange, *History and Antiquities of Nottingham* (2 volumes, 1840), I, 441.

<sup>43</sup> 'Nottingham Old Boy', quoted in Patton, 'Song and Verse', p.384; *Nottingham Review*, 3 February 1832.

<sup>44</sup> I am indebted to Barbara Wadd, a descendant of George Hearson, for sharing her research with me: Barbara Wadd to the author (e-mail), 7 April 2018.

<sup>45</sup> *Nottingham Review*, 3 February 1832.

<sup>46</sup> See Tony Proctor, 'Where is Nottingham Castle?' <http://parallax-viewpoint.blogspot.com/search?q=nottingham+castle> and 'More on George Hearson' <http://parallax-viewpoint.blogspot.com/search?q=nottingham+castle&updated-max=2016-10-13T17:53:00%2B01:00&max-results=20&start=1&by-date=false> [accessed: 19 November 2018]. I am grateful to Tony Proctor for corresponding with me on this subject.

<sup>47</sup> *Nottingham Review*, 10 February 1832.

<sup>48</sup> *Nottingham Review*, 3, 10, and 17 February 1832; Nottingham City Museums, object reference 1929-3; Charles Wesley, 'Rejoice for a Brother Deceased' (1744).

<sup>49</sup> For women's activism in Nottingham Rebellion, see my 'Nottingham: City of Rebels, 1831-1914' (September 2016) at <http://www.nae.org.uk/blog/nottingham-city-of-rebels-1831---1914/63> [accessed: 19 November 2018]. Also see Val Wood, 'Women's History in Nottingham', in John Beckett, Denise Amos and Andy Nicholson, *The Nottinghamshire Heritage Gateway*, at <http://www.nottsheritagegateway.org.uk/people/nottinghamwomen.htm> [accessed: 19 November 2018].

<sup>50</sup> People's Histreh Group ['Valentine Yarnspinner'], *Nottingham Rising: The Great Cheese Riot of 1766 & the 1831 Reform Riots* (Nottingham, 2014); Christopher Richardson, *A City of Light: Socialism, Chartism and Co-operation - Nottingham, 1844* (Nottingham, 2013) and the publications by Atkinson and Tanner noted above at notes 9 and 26.

<sup>51</sup> On the continuing relevance of older attitudes, see J.A. Sharpe, "'Last Dying Speeches': Religion, Ideology and Public Execution in Seventeenth-Century England', *Past and Present*, 107 (1985), 144-67.