

LUDDITES, REVOLUTIONARIES AND CHARTISTS IN AND AROUND PENTRICH

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Introduction

191 years ago, men from Pentrich and surrounding villages set off for Nottingham to overthrow the Government. They thought, wrongly, that they were part of a large nationwide uprising. They got as far as Giltbrook just over the Nottinghamshire border and retreated in confusion pursued by Government forces. Three were executed and many more imprisoned or transported to Australia.

It is wrong to view the Revolution in isolation from the wider context of “working class” dissent and pressure for economic and social reform in the first half of the 19th Century. This note based on discussion at a meeting of the Society in June 2008 attempts to do just that. It remains work in progress and will be updated from time to time.

The direct documentary evidence of Pentrich’s involvement in Luddite attacks of 1811-13 and Chartist agitation between 1837 and 1860 is sparse; compared with that about the 1817 revolution.

The Pentrich Revolution

Most explanations of the Pentrich Revolution centre on a mix of factors including

The economic recession, especially in textiles and iron trades, which followed the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo in 1815;

Severe weather and the resultant crop failures following the eruption of the Tambora volcano (also in 1815);

The spread of new manufacturing technologies especially those that undermined the craft basis of framework knitting;

Rural poverty in the absence of an effective welfare system exacerbated by the enclosure of common lands; and

The absence of any voice in political or economic decision making for the bulk of the population and the effective ban on trade unions under the Combination Acts

This view is incomplete as it pays insufficient attention to wider patterns of social unrest and political agitation of the time. What happened in 1817 can only be understood as part of the evolution of the reform movement from the earlier periods of machine breaking during “luddite” attacks to the later “Chartist” agitation. Thus the Pentrich revolution was neither Luddite nor Chartist in nature, but part of an evolving pattern of pressure for economic, social and political reform. Nor can Chartism, Luddism and the Pentrich Revolution be explained exclusively in Marxist terms of an ongoing struggle by an oppressed working class against exploitation by the aristocracy and the rising capitalist class.

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Rather I am suggesting that the Pentrich revolution was an example of the middle stage in the evolving political consciousness of working people between 1800 and 1850.

- In the first stage action was concentrated in particular occupational and geographic areas with *direct action against what were seen as the immediate causes* of their distress and hardship – the factory system and new manufacturing technologies. There was no real coordination between unrest in various parts of the country; and no national movement emerged.
- The Pentrich Revolution demonstrated a different level of political consciousness in which *militant action* was directed towards overthrowing the government – and the *power relationships* it reflected. Other actions in Yorkshire, Lancashire and Scotland at around the same time had similar aims, again with relatively little coordination or central organisation.
- In the third stage the need for fundamental political change was again at the centre of thinking but the process was essentially peaceful and *evolutionary* rather than revolutionary – change by political action rather than by force.

This shift in consciousness happened within the adult lifetime of people born around 1790. In 1810 they would have been about 20; and about 70 in 1860 when the National Chartist Association was wound up.

The Luddites

The National Archives define Luddites as

*English **craftsmen** and other workers in the **northern and midland counties** who engaged in **destroying textile machinery** (1811-13), so called because their manifestos and handbills were sometimes signed 'Ned Ludd' or 'General Ludd'. The introduction and spread of the new textile technology reduced wages and standards of living. Initially the workers had sought government regulation of the technology; but when it became clear that the government favoured non-intervention, groups of organised workers began to destroy the machines.*

That is sort of true – as there are records of frame breaking in Leicestershire at least 120 years before the Luddite agitation began in 1811. Arracks on property in the Pentrich area were not unknown in the early 19th Century. For example, in December 1800 the following appeared in the Derby Mercury

Whereas the CORN MILL, the property of his Grace the Duke of Devonshire, situated at Pentrich, in the County of Derby, in the occupation of Mr Jonathan FLETCHER, was wilfully and maliciously set on fire in the morning of the 15th instant, and a large quantity of CORN and SACKS containing the same were either entirely consumed or otherwise greatly damaged, as well as great damage done to the Mill, &c. In order the most effectually to discover the Perpetrators of such Wicked Acts, a reward of TWENTY GUINEAS will be given by the said Jonathan FLETCHER

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In 1807 a barn and its contents were set alight and destroyed in Fritchley.

The Luddite attacks begin

So what actually happened in the main Luddite attacks?

In the early months of 1811 the first threatening letters from General Ned Ludd and the Army of Redressers, were sent to employers in Nottingham. Workers then began to break into factories at night to destroy the new machines employers were installing. Action was taken not only against the new factory machinery but also against frames used by home workers. These were often rented from middlemen who also acted as knitwear wholesalers. In one three-week period over two hundred stocking frames were destroyed.

By March, several attacks were taking place most nights and the Nottingham authorities enrolled 400 special constables to protect the factories. To help catch the culprits, the Prince Regent offered £50 to anyone '*giving information on any person or persons wickedly breaking the frames*'.

The attacks continued throughout 1811 – mostly in Nottinghamshire until 25th November when Heanor suffered the first attacks in Derbyshire. A week later attacks had spread across the Amber valley. On 3rd December 30 frames were broken in Ilkeston, 1 at South Wingfield and 1 at Wessington. On 11th December several frames were broken in Ripley and on 12th December attacks were reported from Ilkeston, Makeney, Heage, Holbrook, Crich, Swanwick and Ridings.

On 16th December the Times reported that

The latest accounts received from Nottingham state, that in the immediate vicinity, the only mischief recently done is one frame destroyed at Basford, three at Hucknall Torkard, four at Arnold, and five at Bulwell.

It has been more extensive in Derbyshire; for on Saturday se'n night, near Pentridge, 18 frames were broken; and several destroyed at Ripley on Wednesday night. The reason publicly circulated for the frame-breakers again visiting Pentridge, is, that some hosier had intimated his intention of fetching the whole of his frames from the village, and that their visit was to deter him. Two lace-frames at the house of Mr. B. TOPHAM were destroyed, and one of his own slightly injured, on account, as is supposed, of his going to the church, and ringing the bells to alarm the village'

B Topham was presumably Benjamin Topham who had married Ann Fletcher in St Matthews around 1795.

In 1812 machine breaking continued apace in Nottinghamshire with only sporadic attacks in Derbyshire at Stanton (17 February); Loscoe (7 March) and Pentrich (7 March – 10 frames); and Melbourne (December). Sporadic agitation and attacks continued for several years with some spectacular attacks on large textile factories in Yorkshire and elsewhere. The movement had largely died out by about 1813.

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Mill owners such as the Strutt in Belper incorporated defences into their new factories. Slits for use by riflemen can still be seen in the Belper North Mill by the footbridge over the road; but these were never used.

The government responds

In February 1812 the Government responded by announcing its intention to make machine breaking a capital offence. Famously this was the only occasion when Lord Byron spoke in the House of Lords. He was against the measure saying

As the sword is the worst argument than can be used, so should it be the last. In this instance it has been the first; but providentially as yet only in the scabbard. The present measure will, indeed, pluck it from the sheath; yet had proper meetings been held in the earlier stages of these riots, had the grievances of these men and their masters (for they also had their grievances) been fairly weighed and justly examined, I do think that means might have been devised to restore these workmen to their avocations, and tranquillity to the country.

..... but without success.

The Act was passed in haste – and in the next few years several men were hanged – mostly following attacks on large mills in Yorkshire – and large numbers of people transported.

Later Byron published his poem “Song of the Luddites” in 1816

*When the web that we weave is complete
And the shuttle exchanged for the sword
We will fling the winding sheet
Over the despot at our feet
And dye it deep in the gore he has poured.*

The Government also tried to stifle debate – even after the immediate threat of revolutionary ideas from the Continent had abated.

On 9 Feb. 1816 Charles Sutton was found guilty of political libel in publishing in the Nottingham Review an anonymous letter which compared unfavourably the activities of the British troops in the war against the U.S.A. with those of the Luddites. He was sentenced to imprisonment in Northampton County Gaol for a year and was ordered that at the end of his term he must enter into a bond of £500 himself and find two other persons to enter into bonds of £250 each to give security for his good behaviour for three years. His son Richard states that 'he suffered from confinement, had the jaundice and received a great shock to his health'

The causes of Luddism

Clearly the attacks had their roots in the economic, political and social context of the early nineteenth century.

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The principal causes included

Rapidly rising prices and **falling living standards** after about 1808 following a half a century of relative prosperity and economic growth, especially in Nottingham, notwithstanding the atrocious housing conditions as ever growing numbers people squeezed into the medieval City boundaries.

New **factory based manufacturing systems** along the Derwent Valley and elsewhere. By 1800 the factory system was spreading rapidly with much greater scale and consistency of production, especially after steam began to replace water wheels as the prime source of power. Steam powered mills opened in Fritchley (1798), Shirland (1809) and Wingfield Park (1814).

The factory system was also seen as **an attack on craft skills and the degree of control** home based framework knitters exercised over their lives. In good times a reasonable wage could be earned by two to three days a week work. George Elliott's novel, *Silas Marner*, published in 1860, looks back to rural industry of the past where its hero works incessantly and builds up a sizeable fortune, later stolen. Linked to this was resentment about the growing use of **apprenticeships** to lift some of the burden from ratepayers by placing children dependent on the parish with the new factories, for example with Lowe's in Shirland (1809). Similar deskilling processes were at work in large engineering works such as that opened at Butterley in the 1790s.

At the same time there was no effective **welfare system** to support people through economic downturns. The demands placed on parishes from such systems grew apace as the **enclosure** of common lands (in 1790 in Pentrich and 1820 in Alfreton) and loss of small plots increased the dependence of working people on income from employment – income that was increasingly vulnerable to economic downturns such as happened from around 1808.

Fashions were changing; especially men's fashions. Before the early 19th Century most men wore breeches and stockings. In the first decade of the century the wearing of trousers became widespread leading to a large fall in the demand for woven stockings. Slightly earlier the more complex and heavier machine produced weaves; especially the Derby rib had begun to take over from the more straight forward products from home based frames.

Ordinary people had acquired **a habit of dissent, new confidence and a greater willingness to challenge hierarchy** and associated privilege. There were several factors in this

- New *evangelical churches* were springing up without the hierarchies found in the catholic and Anglican traditions
- *Friendly Societies* were emerging, again giving ordinary folk experience of running their own affairs

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- Early *trades unions* notwithstanding the Combination Acts passed at the turn of the century and legislation against oaths.
- News of the *rights based* ideas underpinning the American and French revolutions had spread – for example Tom Paine’s Rights of Man (1791) – banned and declared to be “seditious libel” by the British Government - and to a lesser extent by Mary Wollstonecraft’s A Vindication of the Rights of Women (1792)
- *Improved Communications*, initially the turnpikes and the Cromford Canal (in Pentrich’s case) – and in time the railways (1839) and “penny postage” (1840) - aided the spread of new ideas.

It is noticeable that the focus of dissent was amongst the “better sort” of working people – people who often prided themselves in their craft skills and Christian values and were usually literate. All these factors contributed to a developing culture of “self help” and self reliance and found expression not only in support for reform but also in the early craft based trades unions, friendly societies and the emerging Cooperative Movement (such as the Rochdale Pioneers).

But it was not unusual to find evidence that Luddite attacks were ascribed to young unattached men (often in their early 20s) from other areas. However this may be overstated as transport, especially at night, was difficult and slow in the early 19th Century. The motivation for such statements would have been to prevent punitive actions by landlords against local communities, such as were seen following the Pentrich Revolution.

The Chartists

Twenty years after the Pentrich Revolution the Charter provided the focus of dissent and embodied the aspirations of ordinary people for further reform.

By the 1820s the Government began to recognise the need for reform. In the 1820s and 1830s landmark legislation brought about changes to the constitution - Catholic emancipation (1828), Police reform (1829); the Great Reform Act – of Parliament itself - (1832), Poor Law Reform and Local Government reform (mid 1830s).

The 1831/2 Poll Book for Derbyshire shows that several local voters – including William Lister of Amberley Farm - voted in 1831 for candidates supporting the Great Reform Act.

At roughly the same time Parliament began to take an active interest of conditions in the growing industrial areas - children and women working in factories and mines; industrial safety; payment by company tokens rather than cash (leading to the Truck Acts) and the like.

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To some extent these developments encouraged people to believe that evolutionary approaches could make a real difference and the idea of the Charter backed by a huge petition to Parliament began to take shape. .

What was the Charter? Essentially it was a document drawn up initially in February 1837 at London's Crown and Anchor public house by William Lovett, working on behalf of the London Working Men's Association. These demands were seen as dangerously radical by the Government and many middle class people.

The main demands in the Charter were that

- All males over 21 should be able to vote.
- Anyone should be able to become a Member of Parliament.
- Members of Parliament should be paid.
- New Parliaments should be held every year.
- Voting should be by secret ballot.
- The numbers of people represented by an M.P. should be about the same in all areas or Constituencies.

None of these demands seem particularly radical or revolutionary today when 5 of the 6 are part of our current system. It did not look like that to the Government of the time who were seriously alarmed by the Charter and the widespread support it gained.

So what actually happened in the 25 years (roughly 1835 to 1860) during which Chartism was a powerful force in British politics? Essentially three large petitions were presented to Parliament backed by demonstrations, mass rallies, meetings, strikes and occasional violence.

In 1838 the Charter was printed for the first time and supported by mass rallies in Glasgow, Birmingham, Manchester and elsewhere. In 1839 the first Chartist convention was held in London and the first Chartist petition with more than 1,280,000 names presented to Parliament. A debate on the motion that the petitioners be heard in the House of Commons (12 July) was rejected by 235 votes to 46.

Later in the year there were riots in Newcastle, Birmingham and Newport (Gwent). In Newport soldiers fired on the crowd killing at least 20 people and injuring 50 more. John Frost and other leaders of the Newport uprising were tried for high treason and sentenced to be hanged and their bodies quartered – but the sentences are commuted to transportation. A further petition with 1.3 million names sought a pardon for the Newport prisoners and large collections were raised to support the “victim's families”.

In 1840 there are abortive uprisings in support of the Newport Chartists occurred across the West Riding and North East of England. In the same year National Charter Association was founded to give leadership to the numerous local organisations.

In 1841 the Association agreed to launch second petition to test the attitudes of the new Government under Sir Robert Peel. The Second Chartist petition presented to

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Parliament in 1842 with more than 3.23m names was rejected by the House of Commons by 287 votes to 47. A general strike (otherwise known as the Plug Plot Riots (as plugs were removed from steam engine boilers to prevent their use during the strike) breaks out across Lancashire, Staffordshire and in other areas of Northern England and Scotland. Many leading Chartists were arrested. In total, 1,500 Chartists and strikers faced trial, and 79 were sentenced to transportation.

In 1848 a revolution in France led to the overthrow of the monarchy and attempted revolutions break out elsewhere in Continental Europe. In Britain the Government is fearful of mass action as a Third Chartist petition is presented to Parliament after a huge rally at Kennington Common (10 April). Fergus O'Connor MP for Nottingham claims it holds 5,706,000 signatures; other MPs say it had just 1,975,496 names, including many forgeries.

After the failure of the third Chartist petition several rival organisations were created and many taken over by Socialist groups. The level of general support declined rapidly in the 1850s and in 1860 the National Charter Association was formally wound up

What happened locally?

In 1837 Fergus O'Connor – later to be M.P. for Nottingham - launched the Northern Star newspaper in Leeds. Its pages give a good picture each week of what was happening in nearby areas including Swanwick, Belper and Alfreton.

The Northern Star newspaper has only one mention of Pentrich – an advertisement which read

PENTRICH COLLIERY." Messrs. Haslam think it right (to prevent mistake), to give notice that all men employed at their colliery will receive their wages wholly in money, and be at liberty to spend it where they like. If they buy at Messrs. Haslam's shop they will be supplied (as heretofore) at wholesale prices; but they are not expected to buy there, and will have the same work and wages whether they go to that shop or any other. April 9, 1844."

And what of local residents?

We have the text of a letter sent from Pentrich to Canada at the peak of the first wave of Chartist activity following the riot in Newport and dated 29th November 1839 contained a passage

"He says by all means stay where you are if your health will allow, for things will mend now both your rocky year & there is nothing to be done with this rebellion mounting, indeed if things do not improve. I do not know what is to become of this country for there is no corn fit to eat either last year or this & the season was so hot they cannot get the seed in.

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The rebels or chartists as they call themselves are at this moment holding the meetings nightly & not a fortnight ago about 10,000 came down from the mountains well armed to take possession of the town of Newport which you may recollect is near Cardiff. They had fixed themselves and though so many thousands knew of it, not one of the inhabitants had the least idea of the impending danger & I have no doubt they would have been all cut to pieces & their houses sacked had not one of their party risked to save a friend who of course told the Magistrates & they prepared for them as well as they could & with 30 military dispersed them all taking several of their leaders who I dare say will be hanged..... I do not know how it will end."

During the 1840s the Northern Star reports in detail on the activities of Chartists and associated groups. For example we find

- Frequent public meetings in Alfreton, Swanwick, Ripley, Holbrook, Belper and other places. These are addressed by well known national speakers such as James Bairstow (a former hand knitter from Leicester), William Roberts, Dean Taylor and others. Descriptions of these meetings included
 - *Mr. Vickers, of Belper, and Mr. Simmons, of Sutton-in-Ashfield, addressed a very large and attentive audience on the imperishable principles of the Charter, in this Tory seat of corruption, in powerful and animated strains, which produced great effect on the working men of Alfreton, who are about to form an interest here. A powerful feeling now exists. Many publications are being taken in here on the Charter, which will do great good [April 1841]*
 - *Mr. Bairstow will lecture at the following places at seven o'clock each eveningAt Loughborough, on Monday; Holbrook, on Tuesday, Duffield, on Wednesday; Ripley, on Thursday, Alfreton on Friday; South Winfield, on Saturday. He will preach in Belper Market Place, on Friday evening at half-past five o'clock. A collection will be made at the close of each lecture, to afford the friends of Chartism an opportunity of aiding the funds [August 1841]*
 - *SWANWICK.—A lecture was delivered here by Mr. Taylor. ALFRETON.—Mr. Taylor lectured here on Friday evening, but was compelled to desist on account of the rain. A sermon was also preached here on Sunday afternoon, in the Market-place, which made a great impression upon all present. A liberal collection was made. SOUTH WINGFIELD was visited without much hope of success, but the way was paved for an opening in Crich, by Mr. D Taylor. BELPER.—Mr. Dean Taylor preached a sermon here upon politics and religion, to an audience of about 2,000 people, when a collection was made of 12s. 1d. The most profound attention was paid throughout, and it is producing wonderful effects in the minds of the people in favour of the Charter. Lecture .On Monday, Mr. Dean Taylor delivered a truly spirited lecture at Belper, to a very large assembly. A liberal collection was made to assist in defraying the expenses of the delegates to York. [September 1841]*

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- *At a meeting of the female Chartists of Belper, on Monday night, Mrs. Birch in the chair, the following resolution was unanimously adopted; moved by Mrs. Belfield, and seconded by Mrs. Poole:—"that we, the female Chartists of Belper, feel it a duty incumbent on us, at the present crisis, to use our best exertions in raising funds for the defence of our incarcerated brethren, and the support of their suffering families, and call on our sisters in all parts of the kingdom to be up and doing their duty to their country, and their oppressed and suffering families." [October 1842]*
 - *Derby.—there will be a county delegate meeting of the Chartists, on Sunday the 25th inst., at 10 o'clock in the morning, at Mr Belfield's, Temperance House, Green-street. When the following places are requested to send a delegate: Belper, Alfreton, Ilkeston, Holbrook, Duffield, Swanwick, Codnor Park, Borrowash, Beeston, Tetbury, Church Gresley, Heanor, Melbourne, Butterley, to organise the above places, and for other important business.*
- Demonstrations in support of people arrested during the General Strike of 1842 were commonplace
- *Thomas Clark of Stockport, Vickers of Belper, and Harrison each addressed the meeting briefly. Three cheers were given for the Charter, three for O'Connor, and three for Frost.(at) four o'clock, when the trumpet again sounded the gathering note, and we started for Sutton, three miles of road, with thirty or forty thousand human beings, two military bands, and hundreds of banners. Belper sent twenty Nottingham, Calverton, Alfreton, Hucknall, Arnold, Chesterfield, Sheffield. Mansfield, Sutton, and several other localities lent their ensigns of Chartism for the occasion, and augmented their immense mass.*

➤ Collections where money from Swanwick included

A working man	0 - 1 - 0	3/6/1843	Defence Fund
A chartist	0 - 1 - 0	22/4/1843	National defence fund
Mr Wildgoose	0 - 6 - 0	28/1/1843	West's Defence Fund
Mr Smith	0 - 5 - 0	28/1/1843	West's defence Fund
W Williamson	0 - 3 - 9	3/4/1847	
Few Friends	0 - 1 - 10	5/2/1848	
Alfreton Old Guards	0 - 15 - 0	4/3/1848	
Belper per Lee	1 - 2 - 10	4/3/1848	
W Williamson	0 - 4 - 0	23/9/1848	For Families of victims
J Bryan	0 - 1 - 0	"	"
C Tinley	0 - 0 - 6	"	"

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The authorities react

Letters from local authorities - mayors and magistrates - held by the National Archives give a good idea of how people in authority viewed the Chartists. There was clearly a good deal of fear about the risks of extreme violence and a strong belief in the need for a robust response.

A few examples include

- BELPER Letter from the Magistrates of Belper, [Derbyshire], dated 30 March 1839, to Lord John Russell, [Home Secretary], requesting the provision of Special Constables and a troop of lancers to deal with anticipated Chartist disturbances and that an ill feeling exists in the town between men employed on the North Midland Railway and workmen erecting the [Poor Law] Union Workhouse. 2nd Letter reporting that the Chartist meeting of 1 April 1839 passed peaceably
- DERBY Letter from Mayor Douglas Fox, to Lord John Russell, [Home Secretary] (April 1839) stating that a meeting of the magistrates was held where concern was expressed at Sir Charles Napier's suggestion to move a permanent military force from Derby to Mansfield, Fox states that order is only maintained in Derby due to an effective civil and military force and that Chartist disorder could be increased by the presence of several thousand labourers in the area working on the railways. Also requesting arms for the use of the police, in the event of a Chartist rising. A month later Mayor Fox enquires whether the government will fund the conversion of the former borough gaol into barracks, stating that a 'highly respectable meeting of the principal inhabitants' resolved to form an armed association to counter Chartist uprising, asking whether the government will fund the arming of these men, and reporting that the magistrates require instructions on steps to take in relation to Chartist meetings.
- DUFFIELD Letter from Magistrates, Duffield, stating that they have nominated and appointed 85 persons in the Parish to act as Special Constables in response to Chartist meetings in the neighbourhood.
- SUTTON IN ASHFIELD 15 July 1839. Letter from Edward Unwin reporting that a [Chartist] meeting is due to be held despite a notice issued by Magistrates warning against unlawful assemblies. Unwin fears that a large armed crowd will gather and requests a military force to complement the civil authorities in the town, and instructions for the Magistrates.

Later Unwin reports women and children parading through the streets and pelting police officers with stones. Unwin believes they were encouraged by the Working Men's Association. Unwin also reports measures taken to combat possible Chartist disturbances, including putting Special Constables on active service during night hours, arrangements to pass on intelligence of Chartist activity to the commander of the military forces at

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Mansfield, and threatening to revoke the licence of a publican who allowed Chartist leaders to meet on his premises

Edward Unwin, reporting information received that two of the benefit societies in the town have directed their funds for the purchase of arms, and enquiring about powers the magistrates could exercise to prevent the circulation of papers addressed from the Chartists to the middle classes

- MANSFIELD Letter from Thomas Wildman, Newstead Abbey, reporting Nottinghamshire Magistrates' dissent towards the decision to send London Police Officers to Mansfield and that the threat of Chartist insurrection is exaggerated
- THURGARTON PRIORY Letter from H Bennett Martin, reporting that a body of 600 men plan to attend the Chartist meeting in Nottingham
- Letter from the Earl of Scarborough relating to the supply of arms for the Mansfield Association for the protection of property, a proposed Chartist meeting, and suitable buildings to accommodate a troop of cavalry near Mansfield,

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