

Trial and Retribution

The trials of the Yorkshire Luddites took place in front of a Special Commission at York Castle which commenced on 2nd January 1813. George Mellor a Huddersfield cropper and a prominent leader of the local Luddites, William Thorpe and Thomas Smith were found guilty of the murder of William Horsfall. Horsfall, a manufacturer from Marsden near Huddersfield, had employed the new machinery and was a rabidly vociferous opponent of Luddism. He was assassinated on 27th April 1812, a little over a fortnight after the failed attack on Rawfolds Mill near Cleckheaton which had been led by Mellor. A fourth assassin, Benjamin Walker, had earlier turned King's evidence, betraying his colleagues and thereby escaping punishment. *The Leeds Mercury*, revealing perhaps just a modicum of sympathy, observed the dignity of the three men sentenced, recording that

During the whole of the trial, and even while the solemn sentence of the law was passing, not one of the prisoners shed a tear, but their behaviour was perfectly free from any indecent boldness or unbecoming levity. The proceedings of the Court were conducted with unusual solemnity, and the behaviour of the spectators was strictly decorous and becoming.

There was the same atmosphere at the public execution which took place on 8th January behind the Castle. It was reported that although the 'number of people assembled was much greater than is usual ... not the slightest indication of tumult prevailed, and the greatest silence reigned during the whole of this solemn and painful scene.' The report also noted that before going to the noose, Mellor prayed and asked forgiveness for his sins but he did not refer in this to the act for which he was being executed. Nor did Thorpe or Smith confess. Benjamin Walker later applied for a £2,000 reward for his part in the three's downfall but this was unsuccessful and he was last heard of begging in London.

A total of sixty-four Luddites appeared at York. Eight were tried for their part in the assault on Rawfolds Mill, five were executed as were nine men for stealing arms or money. As with Mellor, Thorpe and Smith, they too conducted themselves with striking dignity. Six Luddites did escape the gallows for the taking of illegal oaths but were transported to Australia.

With the execution of Mellor and the other Yorkshire leaders, the authorities believed they had severed the head of Luddism in the county and had set an appropriately strong example to deter further incidents. Whether this was wholly true or whether, as is likely, falling food prices also played a part, the Luddite rising in Yorkshire was at an end.