

# THE LUDDITES

## *The Army That Became A Word*



Bruce Watson







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ABOUT THE AUTHOR  
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On a cold April night in England's Midlands, a band of defiant and determined men took up arms against the most relentless foe in history. Their enemy held no territory. It had no weapons or soldiers. It had no battle plans. But if these troops gave the slightest ground, the invader would sweep over them, stealing their food, their children, their livelihood.

All day, word spread throughout the rolling, green Spen Valley between Leeds and Manchester. Whispers passed through mills and pubs, among the anxious on muddy streets, down quaint country lanes that gave no hint of the desperation behind closed doors. With a wink of an eye, strangers recognized another secret soldier. With a hush, they gave the word: The general requires our services again. Meet at Dumb Steeple near on midnight. Bring a weapon. Here's a musket ball, a pint of gunpowder. If you know a lad you can trust, bring him to The Shears Inn and old John Baines'll see that he's "twisted in." Cartwright's mill is armed to the teeth, rumor has it. There'll be trouble, all right. But by the soul of Ned Ludd, this must be stopped.

Approaching midnight, 100 men were gathered in an open field. Some wore masks. Others blackened their faces. Disguised in coats turned inside out, checkered shirts, and smocks, they passed shots of rum to bolster their spirits. On command from their general, they lined

up in tight formation. The musketeers, 10 abreast, went first. Then came the pistolers. Pike and hatchet men filled the third ranks, and a gang armed with hedge stakes, bludgeons, and bare arms brought up the rear. Silently moving across the field and down into the sleeping valley, they marched towards a battle that, in some senses, has never ended. Their target: technology.

Here in the twenty-first century, an uneasy truce prevails between man and machine. Modern workers, rifling through arcane instruction manuals and cursing at last-minute breakdowns, might well dream of smashing a computer to bits, or bytes. But somehow, coaxing hardware and software, we get the job done. And in recent years, some of us have even admitted to being “in love” with this iGadget or that. But the men who marched through the Spenn Valley in 1811 stood eyeball-to-eyeball with technology and did not blink. Machines offered them no Faustian bargain, only repetitive labor at best, unemployment at worst. These first soldiers are nearly forgotten in our headlong rush towards a hi-tech future. They are remembered in name only - the Luddites.

Luddite, *n.* “Any opponent of industrial change or innovation.”

The word bantered these days around the office among enemies of the microprocessor and its offspring was once a call to arms. Between 1811 and 1816, to be a Luddite in England’s textile district was to stand for humanity, craftsmanship, and a way of life as endangered as any dinosaur. A Luddite was a brother, a father, a son, and a secret. A Luddite was a cropper, a weaver, a hero, and a soldier loyal to General Ludd. Against the largest force of British troops ever assembled on home territory, the Luddites waged an uncompromising guerilla war.