

Why were the Luddites angry?

In the 1700s people in Sutton made a living by farming and also by knitting on machines, spinning cotton and weaving in their homes. These were known as 'cottage industries'.

The framework knitters could produce lots of different types of fabric to make clothes, but stockings (long socks) were particularly in demand, which is why they were also called stockingers.

By the early 1800s the Industrial Revolution really took off and a new wide knitting frame was invented which meant that one man could now produce the same material as up to four men at a time.

For a time stockingers still continued their work in their homes, but they could not make much money as they were now paid for their output and could not compete with the speed of production on the bigger frames.

The stockingers were not just unhappy because they couldn't make stockings as quickly on their small frames at home as the workshops containing the wider frames could, they were also angry because the stockings made in the workshops were of an inferior quality.

The larger frames made big pieces of fabric from which a number of sock pieces were cut out and sewed together – known as 'cut ups' – but they often fell apart because they were not made with the same skill and care as the stockingers and their families.

The stockingers protested by going about smashing up the new larger frames in what were known as the Luddite riots.



A group of Luddites smashing up one of the frames.

Radical thinking

But there were other reasons why the working man (not just the Framework Knitters) began to question the way that society was run. This was known as radical thinking.



Only 3 percent of men could vote. Parliament was full of rich men, voted in by rich men, making decisions on behalf of rich men.



The government had protected the price of corn for the landowners, even though corn imported from abroad would be cheaper. This meant that bread was very expensive.

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Over 200 offences could be punished with hanging, including writing a threatening letter and stealing a rabbit.



England had been at war with France since 1793 and when all the soldiers returned home there weren't enough jobs to go around.

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The French Revolution between 1789 – 1799 inspired the radical thinkers across Europe. The poor people of France rioted to get a change in society and killed the King to get rid of the old system – known in France as the ‘ancien regime’.

The government in England was worried that the same thing would happen here, so anyone caught stirring up trouble would be fined or jailed.