

*A case of proto-Luddism;
the wrecking of London's first mechanical
saw-mill in 1768*

I read with great interest Adam Bowett's article, *London's First Commercial Sawmill*, in the RFS Journal XXII, 2008. It set me wondering whether the riot, of which Adam wrote, was mentioned in a fascinating resource for furniture history, namely the *Proceedings of the Old Bailey*. These are available at www.oldbaileyonline.org and they cover trials held in the Old Bailey, Newgate, London, from 1674 to 1913. Being curious I trawled through the Proceedings and eventually found the case, a copy of which is set out below.

Machine breaking had a long history before the luddites came to prominence in 1819. It had certainly occurred in London in the 17th century when silk-weavers broke machines in 1675 and again a number of times throughout the early 18th century. London has always had quite a volatile population and the introduction of profound changes to the way that people worked sometimes had unpredictable results. The hand-sawyers were just such a case.

The work of converting logs into boards of many various sizes and thicknesses was hard, arduous work. Logs were converted by placing them either over a specially dug pit, the saw-pit or, less commonly, by setting up the log on a framework high enough for a man to stand beneath. Pits were more popular because it was easier to roll the log onto two supports set across the pit than to try and lever a large baulk of timber up onto a six or eight foot high frame. Sawyers worked in pairs and often travelled from one job to another carrying their long tapering pit-saws. These were usually five to seven feet

long, although they could be as much 10 feet in length; they had sharp ripping teeth and tapered from about four inches at the toe to about ten inches at the heel and they had T-bar handles at either end (see R A Salaman's *Dictionary of Woodworking Tools*, London, 1989, for detailed information and descriptions of the various types of saw; what is described above was the typical pit saw for construction work).

The work was especially hard for the (usually) younger man who stood beneath the log, as it was he who provided the main cutting power as he pulled downwards, showering himself with sawdust in the process. The man on top of the log, the top-sawyer, was the experienced, skilled man who was responsible for the quality of the boards, quite literally 'the top man' in all senses. The introduction of mechanisation to this process threatened the livelihoods of many, as evidenced by the 'mob' of 500 or so who quite clearly knew what they were about and were equipped with the right tools for dismantling the mill.

The court proceedings of the Old Bailey put one in direct touch with the people of the time and the way they spoke, and are full of interesting details. Finally, the way in which the jury reached their conclusion was not always what was expected.

Treve Rosoman

Edward Castle, Breaking Peace > riot, 6th July 1768.

Reference Number: t17680706-47

Offence: Breaking Peace – riot

Verdict: Not Guilty

Edward Castle was indicted for that he, together with divers others to the number of one hundred or more, their names unknown, on the 10th of May unlawfully, tumultuously, and riotously assembled to the disturbance of the public peace, did demolish or pull down, or begin to pull down a certain out-house called a saw-mill, the property of Charles Dingley, Esq; against the peace of our Lord the King, his crown and dignity.

Christopher Richardson. I am principal clerk or superintendant of this work, that is Mr. Dingley's saw-mill, it is at Limehouse, almost in the center of his timber-yard; it had been erected about 14 months; there is a brick counting-house joins to it where the books are kept relating to the mill; there is a room under the mill for the two watchmen to sleep in by turns; there is a fire-place in each, and under it is a chest in which was a place to lay the arms; it is all one building, they opened one into the other; the mill was to saw large pieces of timber, oak, deal, or wainscot, it could saw larger quantities of timber than could be done any other way; the mill was built of wood,

the counting-house of brick. We had information on the Friday before Tuesday the 10th of May last, it was in writing sent to Mr. Dingley, to inform him a number of people were assembled together with intent to pull down this saw-mill; I immediately went down to Limehouse and got assistance; I had not been gone above half an hour before one of our servants came and told me they had entered the yard; I met the mob of sawyers and other people pretty near the mill; I asked their demands, what they came there for; they told me the saw-mill was at work when thousands of them were starving for want of bread; I then represented to them that the mill had done no kind of work that had injured them, or prevented their receiving any benefit; I desired to know which was their principal man to whom I might speak; I was shewed one; I had some conversation with him, and represented to him that it had not injured the sawyers; he said it possibly might be so, but it would hereafter if it had not, and they came with a resolution to pull it down, and it should come down.

Q. Should you know that man again?

Richardson. I should if I could see him again, but I have not seen him since.

Q. What time of the day was this?

Richardson. This was about eleven o'clock in the morning after they had entered the yard, when they were got pretty near the mill.

Q. What might the number of the people be?

Richardson. As near as I can guess there might be about 500 come into the yard; immediately they went to work and broke into the mill; they did not pull it down, but destroyed the inside; one man had a long adze, another a hatchet; I did not see a saw; one of our men says he saw a saw; I saw them at work demolishing the mill, they cut the shafts of the sail, and several other things; they destroyed all the saws and frames, and pretty near demolished the brick building, that is the counting-house; I cannot speak to the prisoner; they surrounded me immediately.

Benjamin King. To the best of my knowledge I saw the prisoner among the men that were destroying the mill; I think it was he that I saw with his head out at the place where the shaft came out at, with a cross cut saw in his hand, waving it about after the shaft came down; there were a great number of people about at the time, the greatest number were in the field or yard pulling at the sail; I saw the counting-house demolished.

Q. Did you ever see the prisoner before?

King. No, I never did.

Q. How far was you from him when you say you think you saw him?

King. Upwards of sixty yards.

Richard Johnson. I was at the mill at the time they were destroying it; I will not be sure of knowing the prisoner; I saw a man at the top of the window of the sails with a saw in his hand, some part of his body out of the mill; he pulled off his hat and waved it, it was like the prisoner, but I did not chuse to go very near the mob, because I am pretty well known among people.

James Brown. After the shaft was down I saw the prisoner with his head out at the window with one leg out and the other in, with a saw in his hand waving it about over the mill.

Q. How near was you to him at the time?

Brown. I might be about thirty yards from him.

Q. Did you know him before?

Brown. No, I did not; I never was in the yard before in my life.

Alexander Forbes. I was there at that time; I saw the prisoner, I am sure the prisoner is the person I saw out at the shaft window with a saw in his hand, waving it backwards and forwards, I was about thirty yards distance.

Acquitted