

NOTTINGHAM REVISITED (1)

Demilitarised zone

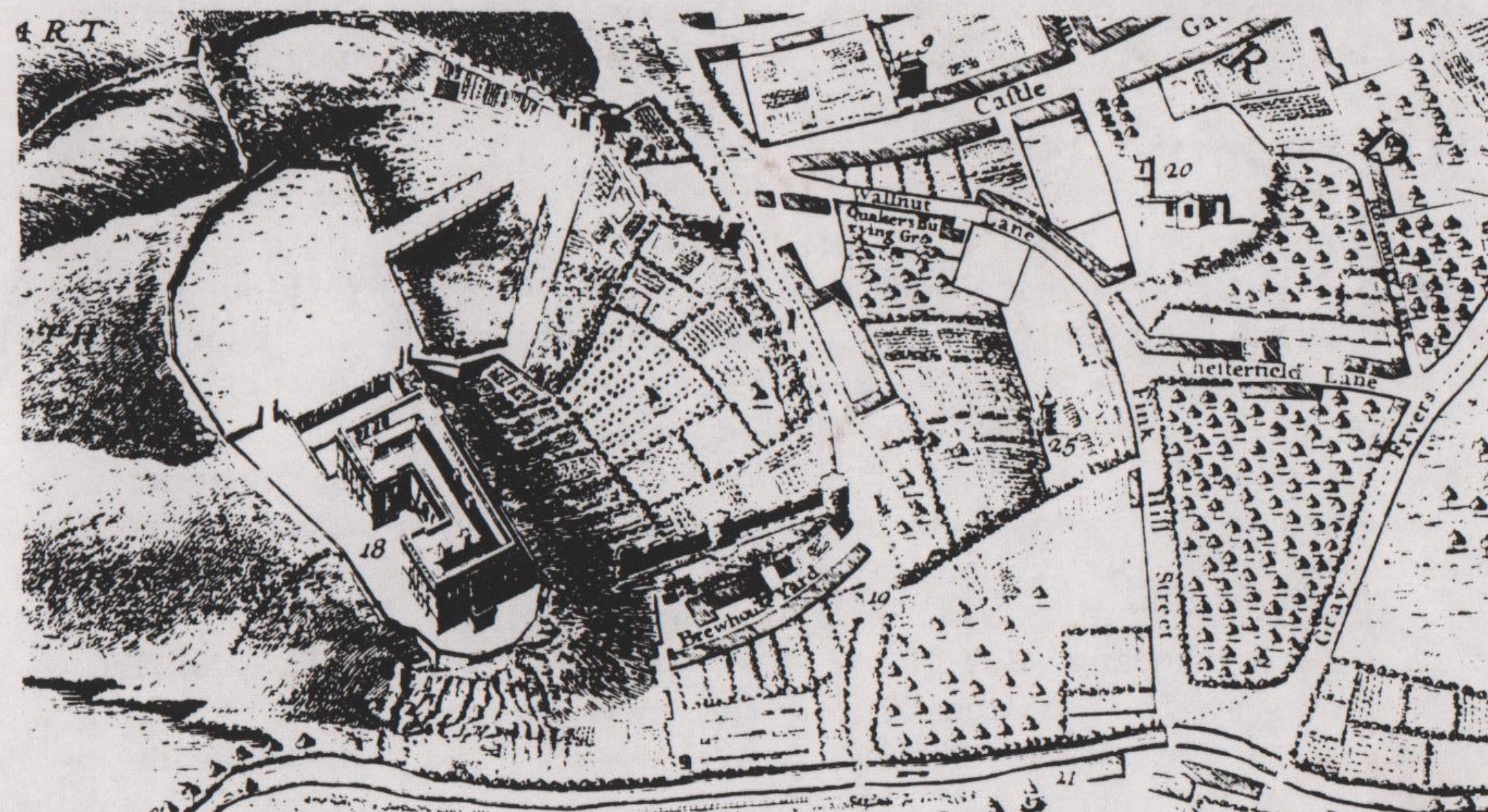
THIS WAS A FOREIGN military base. Today, the peace movement would be threading flowers between the stakes of the outer stockade (though the Normans had a short way with dissidents). So what did the townspeople of medieval Nottingham think of their royal castle? Were they as proud of its battlemented pomp as their modern descendants would like to have been? Or did they see it as Geoffrey Trease had them seeing it in *Bows against the Barons*, as the alien stronghold of the Norman tyrant, dark against the sky like a vampire sucking their blood?

Nor, in the three and a half centuries since it was converted to peaceful uses, has the Castle entirely thrown off its military character.

The strategic point of the site is still stunningly obvious from the windy terrace overlooking hundreds of square miles of the Trent Valley. Up there on the rock, the modern castle stands on precisely the same spot as its medieval predecessor, above the deep wooded cleft, which was once a vast defensive ditch, and the great sunken coachyard, which, like the moat it once was, still separates the site of the ancient keep, the heart of the military complex, from the castle green which used to be a courtyard. The massive outer walls are still formidable looking up from below, the drop still dizzying looking down from above.

And dotted around the grounds are epitaphs of more recent conflicts: plaque, bust, obelisk and statue. The most dramatic, in bronze luridly coated with verdigris, shows a female figure, symbolising the air, whispering into Albert Ball's ear, pointing him upward to forty-three enemy kills, the Victoria Cross and death at the age of twenty.

In the tranquillity of the gardens or the placid aristomunicipal grandeur of the building, how many remember that this has been a place of war and bitter social conflict? ■



The history. Stands on spectacular 130-foot sandstone rock. Principle royal fortress in Midlands in Middle Ages. Built by William the Conqueror in 1068, extended over next 400 years. Fell into disrepair after end of Wars of the Roses in 1485. Re-fortified for Parliament in 1643 by Colonel John Hutchinson. Demolished in 1651 by order of the Council of State. Site cleared and present building erected by 1st and 2nd Dukes of Newcastle, 1674-9. Burned out by Reform Bill

rioters, 10th October 1831. Leased by Nottingham Corporation, renovated and interior reconstructed as a municipal museum and art gallery, 1876-8 (architect, T.C. Hine). Purchased by city in 1952 for £16,000. Medieval survivals include outer walls and gatehouse (mid c13, much renovated); bases of Black Tower (c12) and King Richard's Tower (late c15); tunnels through rock, including Mortimer's Hole (supposed route when Edward III captured Mortimer and Queen Isabella in 1330). ■

Flypaper

30 APRIL 1988

A NOTTINGHAM
FORTNIGHTLY

NO. 4

PRICE 10p

Fellow travellers

AS A NON-DRIVER, I often travel on buses. Mostly I enjoy it - it's a relaxed, communal experience. Travelling on the same bus regularly, you soon recognise, nod to, smile at, occasionally even talk to some of the other regulars. Thus eighteen months ago, I found myself on the receiving end of some caustic comments by one of the City Council's female employees, a no-nonsense Geordie of about sixty. She was upset by the then ruling Labour group's anti-sexist code of conduct for council workers, which she thought was "stupid". I'm sorry to say I didn't conspicuously defend it - good manners, cowardice, something like that. A bus isn't the place for heated political argument with near strangers. It struck me also that someone somewhere hadn't done a very good PR job before the new code of conduct was introduced.

Many mornings and some evenings I find myself sitting next to a *Daily Mail* reader. I sit reading the *New Statesman*, *Tribune* or *Marxism for Beginners*, he sits reading the *Daily Mail*. I wonder if he sneaks a look at the rubbish I'm reading, just as I sneak a look at the rubbish he's reading. We are conspicuously pleasant and polite as we make way for each other getting on and off.

Better acquainted

Bus travelling has also better acquainted me with one of my neighbours, a former Conservative city councillor (committee chairman and ADC representative, moreover - a thinking Tory, not just one of your backbench lobby fodder) who isn't allowed to drive for medical reasons. We don't exactly agree politically, but we rub along pleasantly enough, and I've learned some interesting things about the drinking habits of prominent local politicians (which I couldn't possibly repeat).

The liveliest bus, of course, is the one immediately after closing time, a cheerful, boisterous cargo of the half-drunk and the completely legless. Oddly, the most awesomely legless usually try to stay standing (I suppose they know that once down they'd stay down). They like to jam themselves across the bottom of the stairs or have the same sort of love affair with the pole between the exit doors that cartoon drunks have with lampposts. Boringly enough, I have never seen a fight or, I'm delighted to say, an assault on the driver.

The two most revolting incidents I've seen involved drink but not violence. In the second most revolting, an utterly zonked student curled up in foetal position under the stairs on the raised luggage shelf with his bum outwards, and for the rest of the journey delivered a stream of



Tolpuddle Martyr John Stanfield; from a contemporary engraving (see page 2)

soft, poisonous farts into the packed lower deck. Most people pretended not to notice, though there was more coughing than usual.

The most revolting incident also involved a drunk, at the unusually early hour of three o'clock in the afternoon. I was on an otherwise empty upper deck when a young bloke of about nineteen plonked himself down on the front seat, put his head between his knees and began ridding himself enthusiastically of what must have been about two gallons of beer. Soon the upper deck was latticed with fast flowing rivulets. I escaped downstairs, but the relief was only temporary. After the bus had lurched round a few corners and up and down a few slopes, first a few trickles then a waterfall began to cascade down the steps. By the time the bus reached the Old Market

Square, the lower deck was awash and pale brown liquid was sloshing down the exit steps into the street. The driver 'phoned for a replacement and gave the order to abandon ship.

But mostly, apart from the odd Sony Walkman, buses are very civilised, and you overhear some interesting conversations. Last week, I was sitting in front of two young black women whose conversation turned to church-going. You could, they agreed, be a good Christian without going to church. In fact many of those who went to church were worse Christians than those who didn't.

"At my mum's church," one of them explained, "there were these two ladies who didn't speak to each other for nine months and if one of them was giving communion the other wouldn't take it. In the end, my mum said if you two don't start speaking to each other I'm going up in that pulpit next Sunday and telling everybody what's going on. So of course they started speaking to each other straight away, but they didn't really mean it, it

wasn't from the heart. And it was all over something really trivial. There was a church supper, and it was really badly organised - you know, black people - and there was too much food. One of the ladies was complaining that there were some potatoes left, and the other one said, well why don't you take them home and eat them. And that was all it was. They stopped speaking to each other for nine months just for that, until my mum told them."

Now, I thought hard before quoting this. I'm sure it's obvious why. Is it racist? Am I racist in quoting it? Was the speaker racist in saying it - racist about her own race? Is it a black person's negative self image? Is it no more than ironical self-deprecation, not to be taken seriously? Was the presence of white people, who could obviously overhear, a significant factor? Are these questions typically sterile white liberal anguish? Are they serious questions, or am I teasing? Answers on a postcard, please. ■

Presenting the past

A MAN LIES SPREADEAGLED in an orange plantation, pegged to the ground in the blazing Australian sun. An orange has been stuffed in his mouth. An aborigine approaches, coal black, decorated with brilliant white body paint, carrying a long slender spear. The captive looks at him in (necessarily) mute appeal ...

A convict gang works under a pitiless sun in the middle of a desert, prising rocks from the ground and breaking them to make markers for an arrow-straight track to the horizon. One of them, filthy, sobbing, bootless, falls to the ground unconscious. The brutal guard drinks from a water bottle and lets water spill from his mouth over the unconscious man's face. Later the gang circles the guard's solitary wooden sentry box. Their sledge hammers smash into the planks. The guard's dog streaks away across the desert. In the wreckage of the hut, we see a reclining skeleton, a vulture perched on its rib cage ...

Sold by auction

Muscles rippling (somewhat flabbily), a half-naked man is sold by auction. The bidding is between a young woman, licking her lips lasciviously, and an ageing fop, probably gay. He wins. She winks at the auctioneer ...

A wrinkled, shaven-headed man with a simple, engaging smile emerges from the jungle at the edge of a vast wooded canyon. He cups his hands round his mouth and yells: "We will, we will, we will be free." The echo bounces round the canyon like a miscued billiard ball: "We will, we will, we will, we will be free, be free, be free ..."

An old man, bald dome burnished brown, his remaining hair thick and lambswool white (an Old Testament patriarch in a renaissance painting), listens silently in a booklined study as the aristocratic governor tries to engage him in conversation: "I'm known as a liberal man. I'll talk to anyone who'll listen to me ..."

The handsome, dark-haired young man, stripped

to the waist in the boudoir, tells the governor's wild, estranged Irish wife: "But I love my wife, milady." With a sigh, she takes a letter from a desk drawer and reads out the news of his pardon.

These are the Tolpuddle Martyrs in Bill Douglas's film, *Comrades* (shown at City Lights on April 19th as part of Artwork, the East Midlands trade union festival). Their adventures in Australia have a bizarre, dissociated, post-modernist flavour, strikingly at odds with the restrained, largely naturalistic first half of the film, set in England. If you consult history (Joyce Marlow's excellent *The Tolpuddle Martyrs*, for example), you will be unsurprised to learn that these Australian episodes bear only a distant relationship to what actually happened (which was appalling enough).

Clearly, this is no attempt at documentary truth, but a brilliant collage, a lurid technicolor cartoon of convict Australia. These things did happen, or something like them, but not to these men. It's a risky procedure: for me, at least, the implausibility retrospectively subverted the first part of the film and sent me scuttling to the history books to check film against fact. All very educational - but should a film split at the seams like that?

It makes an interesting comparison with two other recreations of history shown in the last fortnight. First, Francesco Rosi's superlative *Salvatore Giuliano* (BBC2, April 24th), made in 1961. Giuliano was a Sicilian bandit and folk hero who carried out a massacre at a Communist May Day rally in 1948. Rosi centres the film on this and Giuliano's subsequent murder by his second-in-command. In contrast to *Comrades*, the documentary realism is absolute, the more so, perhaps, because it is shot in black and white, the medium of old news film.

The story is presented as a series of unraveling mysteries and uncertainties, with the ultimate mystery remaining unsolved (who the real instigators were: the Mafia or other powerful interests, perhaps involving the Italian state

itself - the same territory as two other Rosi films, *The Mattei Affair* and *Illustrious Corpses*). Scepticism is thus deflected away from the film and its techniques and towards the events themselves. The uncertainty principle works with the film rather than, as in *Comrades*, against it. The questions are political rather than artistic, not "Did this actually happen?" but "Who was responsible?"

There were also problems of presentation in Richard Broad's valiant attempt to rehabilitate the early 19th century Yorkshire machine breakers, *The Luddites* (ITV, April 19th). Like *Comrades*, it was costume drama, but like *Salvatore Giuliano* it was documentary - though in a different way. Billed as a "drama-documentary", it gave the events of 1812 a modern TV current affairs treatment, with authoritative voice over and partly improvised interviews. This stressed the contemporary relevance of the disruption and misery brought to established communities and patterns of work by technological change. But it was an uneasy compromise, with some scenes played consciously before the camera and others, like the night time machine-breaking episodes, played traditionally with the camera effectively disappearing.

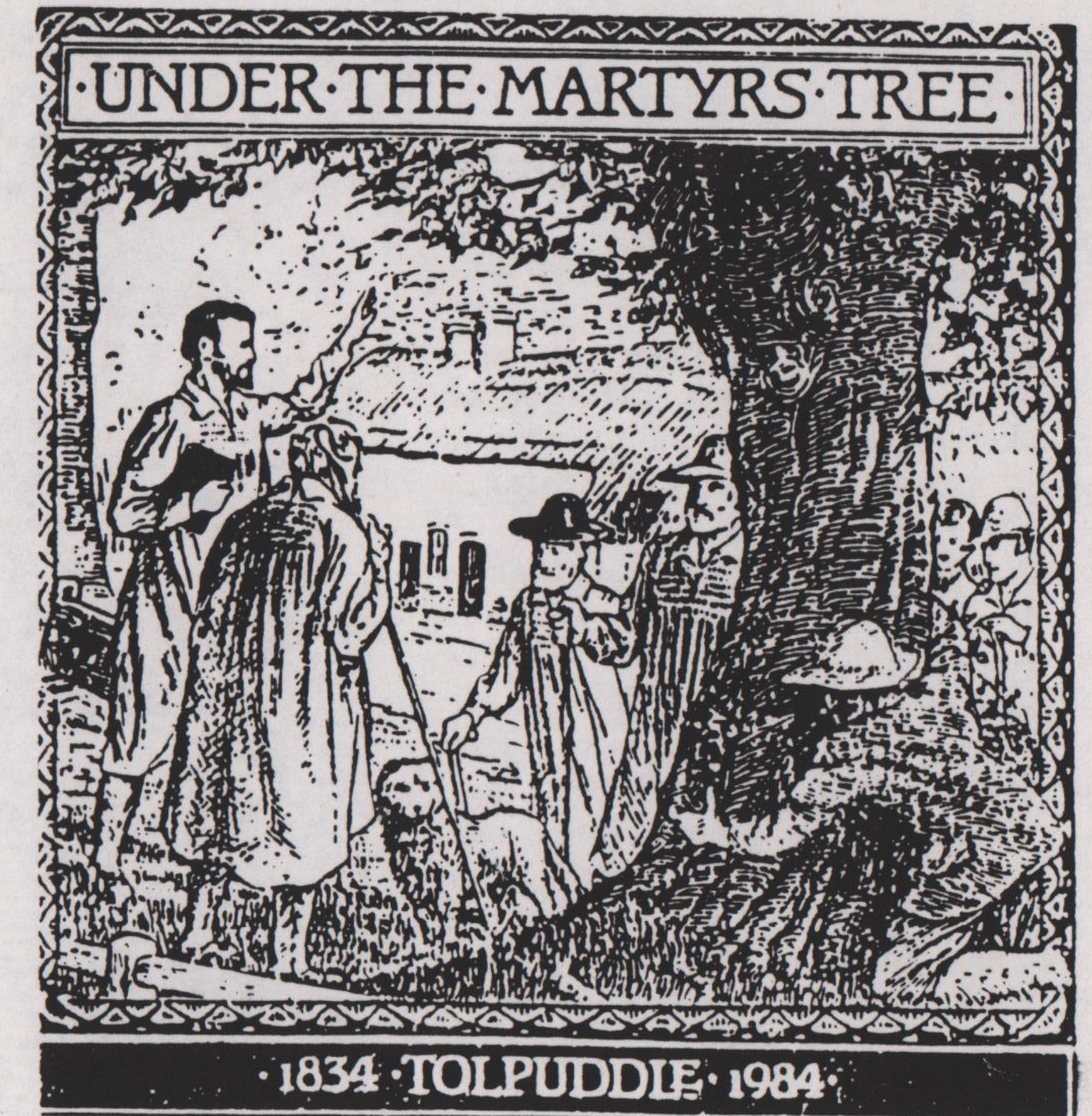
It should certainly have been longer. This was a complex affair, every bit as epic as Tolpuddle (*Comrades* is three hours long), and considerably more tragic: it ended in total defeat and a multiple hanging. With only an hour available, some of the more fascinating events and implications were inevitably left out, as was any detailed exploration of the personalities involved. And personalities were crucial - mill owners, working men, magistrates, military commanders, all gave a very individual twist to the sequence of events.

King's evidence

A good example is the relationship between Benjamin Walker and his workmate at John Wood's cropping shop, George Mellor, the Luddite leader - "my master's nephew," as Walker called him with ill-concealed jealousy. We saw Walker with Mellor, speaking vehemently against the owners and their new machines, but what was never said was that Walker betrayed Mellor, partly from fear, partly from spite, saving his own skin by turning King's evidence and sending Mellor to the gallows. (He was shunned by the community for the rest of his life and died destitute.) Perhaps there wasn't time to include this, perhaps it would have dented the heroic image of working-class solidarity.

Nor was it ever said that Mellor was almost certainly guilty of murdering William Horsfall, the most rancorous and combative of the mill owners. The question was evaded, leaving the viewer free to think that perhaps the whole thing was a fit-up.

On the other hand, if the intention was to draw modern parallels and show the brutality of capitalists and state, then a few tricks were missed. The affair was much, much nastier than this. The croppers' spirit was broken not only by military saturation, and by orthodox policing and questioning: they were terrorised into submission by a proto-SAS unit which ranged over the area mostly at night with a free hand to extract information by whatever means it pleased. One of



Tolpuddle Martyrs wall decoration, Wimborne, Dorset

these methods was torture - the sort of thing which most of the British think went out with the Middle Ages (or, despite occasional unpleasant rumours, never really happened in our colonial possessions and Northern Ireland).

For more details, and a thoroughly readable account of the entire episode and its aftermath (though with some dubious conclusions on the inevitability of technological change), see Robert Reid's *The Land of Lost Content* which, despite its Yorkshire location, can be found in the local studies sections of the county library system. But this is reasonable enough. There were also Nottinghamshire Luddites, and although the causes and the history were very different, there is a connection: the Yorkshire croppers took their inspiration from events in Nottinghamshire, and it is reasonably certain that delegates from Nottinghamshire went to Yorkshire to pass on information about how it was done. ■

QUIZ CORNER. Which of these two reviews of Kenneth Baker's *The Faber Book of English History in Verse* is by Peter Jones in *The Times* and which is by Richard Boston in *The Guardian*?

(1) "I must say that, to my surprise and delight, this is a most excellent anthology. It is in my view a fair-minded and balanced view of the history of England ... It is full of material which is unfamiliar (at least to me) and the running commentary is informed and often witty. And that's another surprise. I never thought I would write a rave review for a book by one of Mrs Thatcher's ministers."

(2) "... though this anthology improves with Victoria, when poems about 'the people' sharply increase, the rest is little more than a pious plod past the powerful with their boring bills and battles, and since the comment is so pedestrian, the reader is left groping for any purchase, historical or literary, on the enterprise."

You've guessed! (1) is Boston, (2) is Jones. ■