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# The English Rising of 1381

It has been remarked that, apart from William Morris's efforts to revive the message of John Ball, the British radical and labour movements have not received into their tradition a memory of the rising of 1381. This year, the 600th anniversary of the rising, there has for the first time been a considerable popular manifestation of interest. The event itself, its context and its consequences are worth considering here.

It was a remarkable episode for the period: A plebeian army, probably badly armed, numbering thousands rather than hundreds, entered the strongly defended capital and, on 13-14 June 1381, took over the principal fortress of the strongest feudal monarchy of 14th century Europe. Most of them came from Essex and Kent, where initially sporadic movements of resistance to the collection of the third poll tax had gained momentum and had acquired a sharpened edge as a result of resistance to special commissions of justices who were sent to punish the rebels. In addition to tax collectors and justices, other royal officials were attacked. The records of manorial courts were burned in large numbers partly, no doubt, because they contained the records of the unfree conditions of tenure of a substantial number of peasants, but more because they symbolised that exercise of 'lordship' by the landowning aristocracy over the tenantry which the rebel leadership attempted to

overthrow. It is worth remarking, however, that there was remarkably little violence offered to individual lords, other than those who were royal officials or who were specifically identified with the hated advisers of the young (14 years old) king, Richard II. These targets, together with the attacks on anybody connected with the judicial system, suggest the remarkable level of politicisation, unusual for a mass movement at this period.

The chief victims of rebel violence were executed in London, at the Tower of London, on June 14. These were Simon Sudbury, Archbishop of Canterbury and Thomas Hales, Prior of the order of the Knights Hospitallers. They were not killed because of their religious functions, but because Sudbury, as chancellor was the chief advisor to the Crown and Hales, as Treasurer, was identified with the exaction of taxes. With the help of the London poor and other discontented elements in the city there were other exemplary acts of destruction, such as the hated Duke of Lancaster's Savoy palace on the Strand and the Hospitallers' Priory at Clerkenwell. Lawyers were particular targets of popular dislike, and economic rivalries were expressed in the killing of Flemish weavers and clothmaking entrepreneurs.

## Continuing opposition

On 14 June the rebels met the king and his advisors at Mile End and put forward a

simple set of demands, the most important of which was the end of servile status and tenure. On the following day, when many rebels had dispersed, believing royal promises of enfranchisement, the remainder, under the leadership of Wat Tyler, put forward supplementary, and more radical demands. This meeting ended with the killing of Tyler by the Lord Mayor of London, and the dispersal of the rebels.

Meanwhile, up to the end of June, in the whole of East Anglia and the Home Counties, attacks on tax collectors, JPs, MPs and royal and estate officials continued. Dartford, Maidstone and Canterbury had been occupied before the entry into London, and some of their inhabitants rallied to the side of the rebels. St Albans, Bury St Edmunds and Cambridge took the rebel side subsequently. Although the central areas of revolt were pacified by the end of July, the example of rebellion was followed as far away as Worcestershire and Cheshire. Existing tensions in towns such as York, Beverley, Bridgwater and Winchester flared up again as the power of central government was seen to falter. Even after the general suppression, village resistance at a local level continued sporadically until 1450 and after. In these local confrontations, peasants demanded and often won important concessions. It could have been that prudent lords as well as defeated rebels heeded the warning expressed in the contemporary jingle:

Man beware and be no fool  
Think upon the axe and of the stool  
The stool was hard, the axe was sharp  
The fourth year of King Richard.

This is not the place to present a detailed account of the rising. What will be attempted will be the location of the rising in the specific conditions of the class structure and dynamic of late medieval feudal society, together with some indication of its place in the progress of human history.

## The breadth of social support

The first point to emphasise is that this was not simply a 'peasants' revolt. This impression was given by two of the most influential chroniclers of the time. Thomas Walsingham, monk of St Albans, said that the rebels were 'rustics whom we call serfs or bondmen' and 'not merely rustics but the most abject of rustics'. Jean Froissart, chronicler of the French and English aristocracies at war, began his account of the revolt with a by no means imperceptive analysis of landlord-peasant relationships. But the subsequent indictments of rebels and rebel leaders and the accounts by royal officials of the confiscated goods of those executed or in flight present a somewhat different picture. It is



*The death of Wat Tyler, from 'Froissart's Chronicles'.*

clear that rural and urban craftsmen, whether self-employed or wage earners, constituted an important element, as important in the ranks of the rebels as they were in the population as a whole, that is between 10% and 20%. One must also emphasise their leading role. Wat Tyler was (so the chroniclers said) indeed a 'tiler'; the Norfolk leader, Geoffrey Litster, as his surname indicates, a dyer.

Nor were the 'rustics' in any way 'abject'. Many of the most active were rich peasant employers of labour, some of them almost small landowners. Indeed, in East Anglia and Kent some discontented gentry took advantage of the rising to pay off scores against their enemies, especially the Duke of Lancaster. Their presence was mainly opportunist however. The general impression is that a wide spectrum of all social classes below the ranks of the nobility, the gentry and the merchant capitalist elites of the big towns (especially London) were either wholehearted or half-willing supporters. One element must be given particular emphasis, namely the parish clergy. Reference is often made to the similarity of the grievances of a 'clerical proletariat' to those of peasants and wage earners. This is demonstrable. But what also needs emphasis is that the numerous clergy who counselled the rebels and entered the active leadership should also be regarded as the medieval equivalent of a radical intelligentsia, bringing to the movement an ideological support which had deep roots in a heretical Christian tradition going back at least to the 11th century.

This realisation of the breadth of the social support for the rebellion has supported analyses which (to quote one example) 'refuse to interpret the great revolt in terms of a crude class struggle'.<sup>1</sup> Some historians, therefore, see it as a forerunner of all-class provincial protests against the encroachments of central government; others, more narrowly, as a collection of individual protests against individual acts of injustice. However, whatever the grievances of craftsmen, journeymen, small free landowners and burgesses, the basic motive force of discontent and action is to be found in the landlord-tenant relationship, which was as much the defining relationship of feudal society, as the capitalist-wage earner relationship is of capitalist society — even though in both cases many elements *seem* to be outside that relationship.

### The agrarian society

The economy was primarily agrarian. Probably three quarters of the population were peasants or in closely related occupations — agricultural labourers, village craftsmen. It was from this class of family-based cultiva-

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tors, rich, middling or poor, producing in the first instance the means of their own subsistence, that the income of the landowning ruling class and the revenue of the state was essentially derived. It came from rents in money and kind, unpaid labour service and profits of private jurisdiction for the landowners; taxes in cash, together with various arbitrary levies on livestock and other produce, for the state. A substantial minority — in some areas a majority — were villeins or serfs. Apart from heavier rent obligations than most free tenants, they were subject to restrictions on the freedom of movement, of marriage and of the sale of certain categories of goods. Heavy death duties had to be paid from their livestock and their heirs paid heavier entry fines than free tenants. The guarantee of all this economic and social exploitation was the exercise by their lords of private jurisdiction through the manorial courts, presided over by the lord's steward. Many lords also had private jurisdictional powers of a policing character together with control over petty trade, which affected free as well as unfree tenants. Private jurisdiction was the prop of landlord power, over the free as well as over the unfree. Hence the burning of the manorial court rolls in 1381.

On the other hand, the village economy of the peasants, with its communal rather than individual access to pasture and other natural resources, gave rise to considerable cohesion among the peasants, rich as well as poor. There was a contradictory element even in private jurisdiction. Although the manor court was presided over by the lord's steward, in practice it was run by the head-men of the tithing groups, or jurors, who were normally drawn from the village elite of richer peasants. It was they who presented — and in effect judged — offenders against the norms of village life, although they also had, to some extent, to cooperate in defending the interests of the lord. In practice the lords had relatively little entrepreneurial impact on the peasant economy. Their only success was to skim off the surplus of peasant production, guaranteed by superior force, the help they were given by officials of the state, the institution of servile villeinage and, not least, the power of ideas preached by the official church — ideas about social harmony and hierarchical subordination. Nevertheless the

cohesion of the village community was an important element in defence, and offence, for the maintenance of certain basic rights of the subordinated class. It should never be supposed that the most successful class struggles are waged by the totally suppressed and deprived. The day to day pressure on the lords by the peasant communities was a training ground for both small and larger scale action to come.

### The growth of industry

In addition to the fundamental contradiction between the payers and the receivers of feudal rent there were other tensions of particular relevance to the areas where the rising in 1381 was most successful. It was in East Anglia and the Home Counties that the feudal economy was most industrialised and most monetised. The evidence of the tax collectors of 1380-1 whose activities provoked the rebellion shows that these areas — especially East Anglia and Essex — were developing an important rural textile industry. This was a development which supplemented rather than supplanted and rivalled the older established urban textile industries. The basis for this knowledge is that in these tax returns the collectors had been instructed to put down the occupations of the taxpayers. We also have confirmation from the records of the taxes levied on cloth sales (the *ulnage*) that this was an area of precocious industrial development. But a developing industry, with a service element associated with it, generates two important consequences in a peasant society. First, the proportion of wage earners in the population increases. Now, since the population collapse associated with the Black Death of 1349, the government, faced with a labour shortage, had attempted to help employers by legislation (the Statute of Labourers) not merely to keep wages at the pre-Black Death level, but to hinder the free movement of labour so as to give advantage to manorial lords. This wage freeze had been enforced at the sessions of the Justices of the Peace, who were drawn from the landowning class, no doubt one of the reasons for the hostility to justices in 1381. The second consequence was that peasants had an expanding market for agricultural produce. The institution of serfdom, restrictions in marketing and the increasing fiscal burden, all operated against the rising expectations of the peasantry, just as the enforcement of the Statute of Labourers operated against the expectations of the wage-earners.

### The assertion of free status

It was not, however, only in the two or three decades preceding the revolt that the

peasants developed practices and ideas which helped them to mobilise in 1381, important though the experience of the post 1349 'feudal reaction' may have been. During the period of that reaction, lords attempted to compensate for falling rents (due to a shortage of tenants) by exploiting as far as they could the financial aspects of private jurisdiction over unfree tenants. But this was an old story for the villeins. Ever since the 12th century they had been attempting to combat demands for labour services, and those other earmarks of villeinage such as marriage fines, heriots (death duties) and arbitrary tallages. What is interesting about these conflicts is that the economic struggle to minimise these seigniorial levies on peasant production developed a highly significant ideological justification, namely the assertion of free status. If one was free, these demands were unjustified. The disputes were frequently referred to the public, or royal, courts. Here the peasants hired lawyers, who argued, no doubt in their presence, that freedom of status and tenure was their natural right. The assertion of freedom against feudal subordination was not, as is often supposed, a specific contribution of the bourgeoisie, but of the peasantry of the feudal era. Right up to the eve of the rebellion these claims were being fought for in the courts. In 1377 for example, the gentry petitioned Parliament to the effect that their unfree tenants were withholding rents and services, under the pretext that their ancestors in the time of Domesday Book (1086) — of which they had actually bought copies from the appropriate government department — had not been obliged to perform these services. A statute was therefore enacted that such rebellious persons should be imprisoned. And in fact we know that the gentry petitioners, mostly from Hampshire, Wiltshire and Surrey, were quite right. Their tenants *were* behaving in this way; these lords said that they feared a repetition of the French Jacquerie of 1358 — and they *were* right.

It is not surprising therefore, that freedom and the end of lordship were prominent demands in 1381, together with other remarkably radical demands, such as the confiscation of the property of the wealthy church landowners and its redistribution among the parishioners. Nor should it be surprising that these demands, which seem to emerge specifically from the conflict between landlords and tenants, should also be backed by the urban lower classes. Since 1349 the urban populations had been considerably sustained by rural immigrants who may well have retained rural links, and who may have been painfully aware of the hostility of urban

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oligarchs to persons of unfree status. But this far reaching programme was not simply a development from the experience of two centuries of localised conflict over terms of tenure in the law courts. The rebellion in 1381 is interesting, in comparison with many other peasant movements in medieval Europe, precisely because its leaders — and maybe many of the rank and file — made the leap from specific grievances about rents, wages and terms of tenure to a more generalised set of concepts. It might indeed be asked whether so widespread a movement would have been possible without the cohesion given to it by a leadership with an ideology which went beyond specific short term demands.

### John Ball



John Ball and his fellow clerics seem to have reinforced the peasant demands for freedom of status and tenure by a broader articulation of contemporary feelings. The fact that these expressions of basic attitudes and intentions now seem naive and Utopian is irrelevant. *Then* they challenged contemporary wisdom, and the fact that Ball was in and out of the Archbishop of Canterbury's prisons from the 1360s shows that the ruling class was taking him seriously. Freedom and equality were justified thus: 'We be all come from one father and one mother, Adam and Eve' . . . 'serfdom was brought by the unjust and evil oppression of men, against the will of God' . . . 'when Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?'. According to Jean Froissart, Ball also said 'matters goeth not well to pass in England nor shall do till every-thing be in common'. In spite of the demands

for the enjoyment of common access to pastures, hunting grounds and fisheries which were made in some areas (for instance, Hertfordshire) in 1381, one suspects that a return to primitive communism was something attributed to the rebels by hostile propagandists. It was not a normal, or natural peasant demand, though it might occur in the millenarian visions of some Christian heretics. It did not appear in the 1381 programmes.

John Ball was not a 'half-crazy hedge priest' as one historian has called him.<sup>2</sup> He had other members of the clerical intelligentsia at his side and he continued a strong European tradition. What is remarkable is the way that their vision of a society of free and equal men and women fused with the ancient peasant demand for freedom of status and tenure, in the formulation of a programme which, though entirely incapable of realisation, given the historical forces at work in the late middle ages, did challenge root and branch the ideas of the ruling class. These ideas were deeply rooted, preached from pulpits and accepted as truisms by even such unconventional thinkers as the poet William Langland. They asserted that society was composed of a harmonious inter-related body of orders or estates, into each of which men and women were born and in which they should remain, according to a divine plan. The original framework was that of the three orders, of those who pray (the churchmen), those who fight (the feudal aristocracy) and those who work (the peasantry). Between the 9th century, when this was formulated and the 14th, many other orders had to be accommodated, with the development of towns, commerce and industry. But the basic concept remained — each one to his or her calling, as ordered by God.

This social concept was radically challenged in 1381. The fact that masses of English plebeians, under the influence of clerical radical thinkers, were able to challenge so powerful a system of ruling ideas, is one of the most remarkable aspects of the rebellion. Attitudes were certainly changed. There are clear signs after 1381 of an end to deference — temporarily at any rate. It may be that the relaxation of the pressure of manorial lordship, in permitting the free development of petty commodity production, was a significant step forward towards agrarian capitalism. Is it possible that this was not only the result of demographic and economic developments, but also because, at a certain moment the ideas of the ruling class ceased to be the ruling ideas of society?

<sup>1</sup>R B Dobson, *The Peasants Revolt of 1381*, p17.

<sup>2</sup>K B Macfarlane, *Wycliffe and the Beginnings of English Nonconformity*.