

a history of the Peasants' Revolt of

1381

when

ADAM DELVED

and

EVE SPAN



MARK O'BRIEN

WHEN ADAM DELVED AND EVE SPAN

A HISTORY OF THE PEASANTS' REVOLT OF 1381

Mark O'Brien

New Clarion Press

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First published 2004

New Clarion Press
5 Church Row, Gretton
Cheltenham GL54 5HG
England

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 1 873797 45 1

For Kate and Rohina



Dedicated to all who rebel

When Adam delved and Eve span,
Who was then a gentleman?

A fourteenth-century rhyme

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PREFACE

The aim of this book is a modest one. It is to tell the story of one of the most extraordinary episodes in English history in a manner that is, hopefully, accessible, exciting and enjoyable to the reader. It does not offer new research drawn from recently discovered primary sources or anything of the like. Nor does it offer original analytical frameworks or perspectives. Indeed, the reliance on the work of others will be obvious and acknowledged throughout.

It is also beyond the scope of this book – as well as the competence of the author – to assess the accounts given in the early chronicles. As is well known amongst scholars of the period, the chronicles do not agree on some important details – the role of John Ball, the precise sequence of events on 13 June 1381, the location of the king at various points and so on. However, the general consensus given in the most authoritative histories has been taken at face value and presented in this historical introduction.

What is offered here is an account that is overwhelmingly sympathetic to the key actors in this unique historical drama – the peasants of late-fourteenth-century England. For what it is worth, also, it is an account told by someone who, on discovering the story for himself, was amazed and inspired. It is this sense of inspiration, and the desire to share the story with a wider audience, that has motivated the writing of this short book.

Mark O'Brien
Liverpool, 2004

CHAPTER 1

THE MEDIEVAL SCENE

Not seldom I please myself with trying to realize the face of medieval England; the many chases and great woods, the great stretches of common village and common pasture quite unenclosed; the rough husbandry of the tilled parts, the unimproved breeds of cattle, sheep and swine, especially the latter, so lank and long and lathy, looking so strange to us; the strings of packhorses along the bridle roads; the scantiness of the wheel roads, scarce any except those left by the Romans, and those made from monastery to monastery; the scarcity of bridges, and people using ferries instead, or fords where they could; the little towns well bechurched, often walled; the villages just where they are now (except for those that have nothing left but the church to tell of them), but better and more populous; their churches, some big and handsome, some small and curious, but all crowded with altars and furniture, and gay with pictures and ornament; the many religious houses with their glorious architecture; the beautiful manor houses, some of them castles once, and survivals from an earlier period; some new and elegant; some out of all proportion small for the importance of their lords.¹

In this passage William Morris knowingly idealizes the medieval world by way of contrast with the ugliness of the industrial towns of his own day. The scenic vista of feudal times in the eye of Morris's imagination of course disguises the grim realities of life for most people of the time. This passage, however, evokes something of the way things must have looked. With most of the country covered by wood and fen, this was indeed a more natural, a more nature-dominated, world than our own. The air the people breathed was clean and the water they drank was uncontaminated by chemical and human waste. But equally the diseases they contracted were debilitating, regular and frequently fatal. This was

an age of fears. Fears of the wildness of the woodlands, of the vagaries of climate, of the failure of harvest and of the dangers of childbirth. When times were good, when the harvest was successful, there could also be drunkenness, celebration and merriment within closed and strong village communities.

In our period, the mid to late fourteenth century, 95 per cent of the population was rural. People lived in small, scattered village communities that were sometimes located far from other settlements and were almost autonomous of their neighbours. They worked the *severalty* of small parcels of land divided amongst themselves. Increasingly, however, the villages clustered together, either near to, or certainly in the economic and social orbit of, one of the great manor houses of a region. Less often they would be located right alongside a manor house and its land or *demesne*. The boundaries of the *vill* might even enclose the manor house if they were large enough.

The life of the village was, compared to our own experience, claustrophobic and rule-bound. More often than not, these were exclusive communities with very clear demarcations as to who was and who was not a member of the village. A baker, for example, who was discovered to be withholding stock to raise the price, or a brewer who watered down their ale, could be expelled from the village. This was an age where standardization and issues of ownership and legal status were not as clearly defined as they were to become with the rise of capitalism, and squabbles between neighbours were constant. These were settled through the raising of the 'hue and cry' and the court of the manor. The range of 'hue and cry' disputes gives us an insight into what daily life in the village must have been like. Disputes arose over fences between holdings, over the trampling of crops by a neighbour's animals, over the bartering of goods, over theft, over slander and over matters of family and personal life. Violence within the village was common, and murder was not an infrequent means of settling disputes.²

The material aspect of the lives of these people was crude. The clothes they wore were made of rough woollen worsteds. The houses were of timber, the quality of the construction and materials varying somewhat from region to region and in terms of the specific circumstances of the family. A stone building, such as a granary, might exist here and there.³ The food of the peasants was, by our

own standards, monotonous and short on protein. Bacon and mutton were staple meats if the family was fortunate. Common vegetables were cabbages, leeks and pulses. Eggs and cheese provided some variety. The bread was made of barley.⁴ The peasants fared a little better when the harvest had to be brought in and the lord might be persuaded to show some pragmatic generosity. The picture we are given is one of 'harvest workers and their dependants of the thirteenth century sitting down to heavy meals of barley bread and cheese, accompanied by a little salt meat or preserved fish, with ale, milk and water to drink'.⁵

The manor, around which the medieval village revolved, was a highly organized economic unit. At the head of the manor were, of course, the lord and his family. But on a large manor several layers of administration might exist for the daily running of things. The most entrusted and powerful of the manorial administrators would be the *seneschal*, who would have full knowledge of all of the holdings and activities of the manorial estate. Work discipline on the lord's *demesne* was the special responsibility of the *bailiff*, who kept a sharp eye out for shirking or dodging of dues and rents. Enforcing punishments for such defaults was also the job of the bailiff. Beneath the bailiff was the *reeve*. The reeve took practical responsibility for such daily tasks as the feeding and tethering of livestock and general animal husbandry. Other specialized occupations included the plough driver, the baker, the shepherd, the carter, the dairymaid, the hayward, the carpenter and the potter – though some of these latter trades might be provided by surrounding villages.⁶ Of all of these, however:

The most important was the smith working in iron; he made or repaired the iron parts of ploughs or carts, shod horses and oxen, made or sharpened sickles, scythes, axes and knives, and provided hooks and nails for buildings. The ironsmith's forge was a focus of village life, and over and above this, the mysteries of his craft gave him an almost magical prestige.⁷

At the bottom of this social pyramid was the peasant, for whom the central fact of life was back-breaking, arduous and unremitting labour. And this was the great difference between the life of the manor and the life of the village. Far from the royal court, the



The unfree villeins led lives of back-breaking toil under the rod of the bailiff.

material surroundings of a local lord as well as his diet and material comforts were sometimes not so vastly different from those of his workers – except in quantity. But the lord and his family did not work. The freedom of the lord, of course, depended upon the unfreedom of the peasant – upon exploitation. The bonded serf and his family were required to pay rent for the land that they worked. The form of this rent varied from place to place and at different times of the year. There would be food to be given up in the form of food tribute. A proportion of the harvest was always handed over. More commonly, there was rent to be paid in the form of labour and services rendered to the lord's demesne. Increasingly by the fourteenth century there were money rents to be paid, such as the *tallage* – an annual rent paid by all peasants on the lord's estate. The lord took and the peasant paid.

The lives of the peasants were dominated by work. In between the harvests, the men would be turning over new land, digging ditches and weeding, and the land had to be cleared and ploughed. Women were found in the fields during the harvest. At other times they were cultivating the family croft to add fruit, vegetables and eggs to the family diet. They were spinning flax and dairying. They were mending garments and sacks. The work of the peasant family

was repetitive and cyclic, as it rotated around planting and harvesting the crop. If the peasant was able, he would put some labour into the piece of land put aside for his own subsistence and that of his family. The harsh reality was, however, that a full half of peasant families lived constantly on the edge of hunger.⁸

The legal position of peasants and their families fell broadly into two types: the free peasants and the unfree peasants. The free peasantry lived hard lives but they were less legally and materially oppressed. They worked on their own plots of land, the *allods*, and were not beholden to any particular lord. They paid taxes only to the Church and the monarch and, to protect their legal status, they had access to the royal court. Whether a family was free or not was largely a matter of historical accident, and disputes by a family over their status occurred frequently in the manorial and royal courts. But our greatest sympathy must go to the peasants who were unfree – the serfs or *villeins*.

The situation of the villeins was truly miserable. The essential primary producers of the feudal system, they were accorded a social status barely above that of the animal world. The Franciscan, Alvarus Pelagius, writing near the beginning of the fourteenth century, made his opinion of the lives of the peasants clear:

*For even as they plough and dig the earth all day long, so they become altogether earthy; they lick the earth, they eat the earth, they speak of earth; in the earth they have reposed all their hopes, nor do they care a jot for the heavenly substance that shall remain.*⁹

The lord had legal control and possession of every aspect of the villein's life. It was said of the villeins that they possessed 'nothing but their bellies'.¹⁰ In England the villeins had no right of migration. This contrasted with their French counterparts, who had the right to leave the estate on the condition that they relinquished all possessions. In England villeins were bonded with the land and were treated as being inseparable from it in law. There were no common rights in the sense that we understand today. Under feudalism the peasant family and the individuals within it were regarded only in their economic aspect, in terms of their productive value.

His progeny were not called familia in legal documents, but sequela — 'brood' or 'litter'. Again, since this little holding was not legally his own, and he was only a life tenant, therefore the lord took a fine to himself at every change of tenancy. At the serf's death . . . the lord could claim his best beast under the name of 'heriot'; and in many cases the priest took the second best as a 'mortuary'. If he died with less than three beasts, the best domestic possession could be claimed; a brass pot, for instance, or a cloak . . . Again, just as the serf was not permitted to leave the land, so neither was his offspring. If a girl married without leave, the father was fined; and in some cases a fine was taken even for marriage by permission. Still more odious and unpopular than the heriot was the 'merchet', or fine taken for a girl's marriage off the manor. By such marriages the lord lost the hope of her brood, and must therefore be indemnified in money . . . For the bondsman's whole position was such as to put economic questions in the foreground; therefore widows, like unmarried girls, were often treated as chattels. They were fined for marrying without the lord's leave; or again, they might be compelled to marry at his will, when he felt that the holding was being neglected for the lack of a strong labourer's arm. It may be that this did not happen very often; but certainly it was frequent enough everywhere to mark a strong distinction between medieval and modern society.¹¹

Feudalism may have treated the peasant as an animal. But the peasants, of course, were not animals and they needed more than fines and the bailiff's rod to keep them in their place. The medieval world was an ideological world and on a daily basis the priest played a much more central role than the soldier in maintaining the social order. By the beginning of the fourteenth century, England had around 9,000 parishes for a population of four and a half million. Each parish, then, possessed about 450 parishioners — perhaps 180 adults. Altogether there were probably something like 20,000 priests.¹² The Christian Church reached deep and capillary like into the social body of the medieval world. Through tithes and rents, masses, blessings and sacraments, from the pulpit and through the confessional, it encompassed the life experience of the peasant. Its constant and pervasive presence was felt socially, economically and

mentally. In many ways this is where the peasant might feel their oppression the most.

In the realm of religion we see exploitation intersect with belief. There is no question that the Church bore heavily down, in the most directly material sense, upon the life of the peasant. Frequently, by the late medieval period Church institutions might be the largest owners of serfs in a particular region. When Pope Gregory liberated two serfs from bondage, it was commonly said that the lofty rhetoric which accompanied the act betrayed a guilty conscience. The Papal estates were based on the labour of thousands of serfs and theological orthodoxy taught that hereditary serfdom was justified by the sins of the parents. But the clergy exploited all peasants. The priest took 10 per cent of all peasant income. But this was not the end of the matter. The peasant family would periodically also have to pay 'great tithes' on crops and cattle as well as 'lesser tithes' on everything else produced by the peasant and his family. These included tithes of wool, flax, pot-herbs, leeks, apples, cheese, butter, milk, eggs, calves, chickens, geese, hens, sucking pigs, bees and honey as well as the produce of the craftsmen of the village. A 'tithe' would be two-thirds of the peasant's holdings, an 'offering' one-fifth and a 'glebe' one-eighth. The village priest could also act on behalf of the lord. Through the power of the confessional, the priest ensured that tithes were paid and that the peasant did not work 'fervently before [the lord's] face, but feebly and remissly behind his back'. It was not unusual for penance to include the payment of goods to the lord or to the archbishop. And yet the economic aspect of the relationship between the peasant and the Church was only one part of what was happening in society.

By the late Middle Ages, people had long grouped themselves into 'those who work, those who fight and those who pray'. There was a sense of reciprocity. Whereas the lord exploited his peasants, he was also expected to provide protection against thieves and brigands, and to administer justice in the village. Similarly, the Church was expected to provide a moral authority, a just fear of the Lord, reassurance of the afterlife and an example of Christ's teachings on earth. By the fourteenth century, the Church was woefully in deficit on its side of the social bargain.

This was an age of ostentatious clerical wealth. There were monks who were local drunks and priests who sought sexual



For all its supposed piety, the Church of the late fourteenth century was corrupt and decadent.

favours. For a price, a couple could be illicitly wed, a blessing could be bought and the 'holiest' of relics could change hands for the right price. The Church of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries was, in its own terms, decadent and corrupt. This moral decay was reflected, unsurprisingly, in a widespread scepticism in the authority of the clergy and a corrosion of the respect that the Church needed in order to survive. By the later fourteenth century Church revenues were falling, churches closing and parishes being merged.

In the thirteenth century, mendicant orders such as the Franciscans had become enormously popular. The mendicants were seen as oppositional to the Church by virtue of their chosen poverty and the austerity of their lives. By the fourteenth century the success of the mendicants, and the wealth they had attracted, had corrupted them also. Stories abounded of the scandalous goings on behind the cloistered walls of the monasteries and nunneries.

Resentment was rising at the constant fleecing of parish flocks and the pressure to support the friars and monks. It was said that folk dreaded the appearance of monks more than beggars because of the expectation of sustenance and contributions.

It seemed also that the clergy were more interested in their social advancement than in the salvation of souls, either their own or those of others. Increasingly, the clergy took up positions in the estates and homes of the wealthy. This process of secularization of the clergy is well observed in the literature of the time. The friar of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is clearly a man of comfortable means. And Langland in *Piers Plowman* also makes clear his contempt for the hypocrisy of the friar:

*For I have seyn hym in sylke, and somme tyme in russet,
Bothe in grey and in grys [grey squirrel-fur] and in
gulte herneys [gilded armour]¹³*

Langland's opinion of the corruption of the Church as well as the final fate of the clergy is equally clear:

<i>Thus pey geuen here golde glotone to kepe, And leueth such loseles pat lecherye haunten. Were pe biscop yblissed and worth bothe his eres, His seel shulde nouzt be sent to deceyue pe pepl . . .</i>	<i>So people hand over their money to maintain gluttons and put their faith in wastrels who practise lechery. If the bishop were a holy man and worth his keep, his seal would not be sent out to deceive the people . . .</i>
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<i>Some seruen pe kyng and his siluer tellen, In cheker and in chancerye chalengen his dettes Of wardes and wardmotes, weyues and streyues. And some seruen as suruantz lordes and ladyes, And in stede of stuardes sytten and emen.</i>	<i>Some serve the king by reckoning up his money or by claiming, in the Exchequer or the Chancery, what is owing to him from wardships and ward-meetings, from property with no owner and from the estates left by aliens. Some take service with lords and ladies and act as judges in the manorial courts, in the place of stewards. Mass matins and many of</i>
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*Here messe and here matynes and
 many of here oures
 Arn don vndeoutlych; drede is at
 pe laste
 Lest Crist in constorie acorse ful
 manye . . .*

*their offices are said without
 devotion. It is to be feared that, on
 the Last Day, Christ, seated in His
 consistory court, will place many of
 them under His curse.¹⁴*

This degeneration of the Church and the consequent decay of its ideological hold on society was symptomatic of more fundamental changes that were occurring throughout the whole of society. Compared to the thirteenth century, society was becoming more complex. The ideological motif of the three groups in society – the workers, the fighters and the prayers – had given way to a new metaphor. People now spoke of society as a kind of mystical body. Thomas Brinton, the bishop of Rochester, described kings and princes as the head of society, judges as the eyes, clergy as the ears, doctors as the tongue, knights as the right hand, merchants and ‘faithful artisans’ as the left, burgesses and citizens as the heart, and the peasants, of course, as the feet ‘supporting the entire body’.¹⁵ There certainly was a greater social differentiation within feudal society by the fourteenth century. There were several distinct strata of traders, artisans and merchants. The peasants also were far more heterogeneous and there was even the phenomenon of the prosperous peasant family who were beginning to benefit from trade.

The slow cumulative changes and improvements in farming techniques and animal husbandry had by the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries created the conditions for a rapid growth of population. Population growth in turn stimulated productivity and had continued throughout the thirteenth century. In an age when human labour power was still a primary energy source, population growth was a driver of economic expansion. One result of this economic growth was a growth in trade. Many of the towns of modern-day England, with their town squares and triangles, began as the intersection of trading routes in the late medieval period. English merchants were trading way beyond English shores. From the ports of Bergen and Oslo came timber and fish, from Venice and Genoa came wines, silk, spices and glass, from Seville, Malaga and Lisbon came oil, iron, leather and wax, and from other parts of

Europe came rope, dyestuffs, cloth, salt, canvas, pitch and tar.¹⁶ Probably the most advanced manufacturing centre in the medieval world at this time was Flanders, whose exports of fine muslins and luxury goods were unrivalled. England was known for the quality of its wool, and a well-developed trade between Flanders and England had emerged.

The growth of the towns and cities was an important development in English society. Although the populations of the towns were still small compared with that of the country as a whole, nonetheless they began to emerge as powerful economic and political centres. The burghers and merchants of the new market towns as well as some of the older cities that were outgrowing their Roman walls began to push increasingly for political independence. The status of ‘free borough’ allowed a town to shake off manorial and royal domination to some degree, to set its own taxes and to establish independent courts. As the burgher families grew in economic power and influence, so the tensions between the new urban centres and the older powers of the royal court and the Church also became more pronounced.¹⁷

Within the towns themselves, social tensions were also apparent. By the fourteenth century, powerful guilds had emerged. These guilds had grown up from the increasing trade specializations within the general urban expansion of the time. The most powerful and wealthy of the masters within the trade guilds were now rivalling the old families that had dominated town and city life for centuries. They began to push increasingly for inclusion within the political structures, and in many cities tensions between the established authorities and the guilds came to dominate public life. Within the guilds, originally set up to protect trade members in times of hardship and to regulate wages and competition, fragmentation was also evident. Guild members consisted of the masters – an increasingly privileged social layer – the apprentices and the journeymen. The journeymen were those who had finished their apprenticeships but had not yet become masters of their own workshops. By the fourteenth century, the numbers of journeymen who had no real hope of becoming masters had grown significantly. Such journeymen were effectively wage labourers and their interests were for the first time becoming openly antagonistic to



By the time of the revolt, the traditional sense of reciprocity between lord and peasant had broken down.

those of the masters. In 1396 the saddlers' guild complained that its journeymen were organizing separately with their own colours and ceremonies in *covins* to raise their wages. In the late fourteenth century much of the urban unrest and rioting that occurred was associated with tensions within the guilds.

English society by the fourteenth century was one in which immense forces of economic, social and ideological antagonism had become locked together. The edifice of medieval society, with its abbeys and manor houses, bore down too hard on the body of the peasant. And to the eyes of the peasant, when they were able to look up for a moment from their toil, that edifice no longer presented a convincing picture, if it ever had. The wealth of the merchants as well as the corruption of the Church gave rise to growing social resentment and moral disgust. What the peasants saw gave the lie

more and more to what the priest preached to them from the pulpit. The contradictions of fourteenth-century society were setting the stage for revolution. These contradictions might have developed, with occasional outbursts of rebellion perhaps, but without revolution, for another century or two. The historical process was hastened, however, by the politics of the time and the actions of the ruling class – and by the forces of nature.