

CHAPTER 3

THE REVOLT BEGINS

By 1380 the costs of the wars in France were crippling the English state and the wars themselves had gone badly for Richard's armies. No thought of ending the campaigns troubled the minds of the good lords who assembled in Parliament that winter, however. Meeting in Northampton, for fear of the hostility of the London population, they discussed instead the ways by which they might raise more revenues for the further prosecution of the war. Two poll taxes, those of 1377 and 1379, had already been levied on the population and had provoked widespread resentment. A third tax was now proposed and, after some alternatives had been considered and dismissed, was agreed.

The tax was set at 3 groats – 1 shilling – for every person of the realm above the age of fifteen. This was far in excess of the previous two poll taxes. In 1377 a tax of 1 groat had been levied and in 1379 the tax had been graduated according to income. The new tax was also to be graduated according to the wealth of the area. But in 1381 the wealthy of most regions were not of a mind to be generous and were determined that the vast bulk of the revenue should come from the villeins. This meant that even the very poorest peasants would have to pay the same 3 groats as the richest landowners.

The first resistance to the poll tax of 1381 was massive evasion. The wastefulness of the war and the unfairness of the tax was producing a growing resentment amongst the villeins. As returns came in, the poll tax commissioners began to notice a remarkable fact. The population of England, it seemed, had fallen considerably! In Kent, for example, the roll of 1377 had shown a population of 56,557 whereas it now appeared to have fallen to 43,838. In Somerset it had fallen even more, from 54,604 in 1377 to 30,384. In Devon more than half the 1377 population had disappeared, the roll falling from 45,635 to 20,656. Across the whole country the population seemed to have fallen from 1,355,201 in 1377 to

896,481 in 1381.¹ This scale of evasion and the fact that it occurred over most of the country suggests more than a merely spontaneous response to this oppressive third tax. It seems likely that a level of organization and coordination was involved. This was something that the rich and well-to-do could barely conceive of – that these villeins, these barely human creatures, might be capable of such initiative and planning. And yet the returns suggested just that.

In fact, planning had been afoot for some time. The Magna Societas, or Great Society, had been plotting rebellion well before the revolt itself. Infused with a radical Christian levelling doctrine, its centre was almost certainly Colchester, the home town of John Ball. In some parts it was likely to have been organized with local leaderships and communication between towns. In other parts it was probably no more than an idea, an understanding that a great change was soon to come. But by the spring of 1381 it was no longer just a dream. The Great Society, the mass of feudal England, was on the move.

By March the king had been forced to dismiss the tax commissioners amidst accusations of corruption and collusion with the peasants. A new body of collectors was appointed with much greater powers of arrest and punishment, and the deadline for the return of the full amount of £66,666 was brought forward from 2 June to 21 April. By the end of May around 83 per cent of this had been collected.²

England was by now seething with unrest. Mass desertions had occurred from many villages, and groups of peasants began to merge and travel from town to town in great convoys. And as they moved along the country roads, they discussed their situation. Stories were swapped about the aggressive impositions of the tax collectors and the injustices that had been visited upon their villages. Some told of the lecherous manner in which some tax collectors had inquired after the ages of young women and carried out their 'puberty test' by checking the growth of pubic hair. Others told of how their neighbours had been imprisoned for refusing to pay the tax twice.

As they contemplated the state of England and their general condition, the peasants' sense of resentment and hatred of those who had done these things became more and more intense. We can imagine how they might have sung the popular songs of their day,

full of social anger and protest. Poems such as 'The Outlaw's Song of Trailbaston' described the injustice of false accusation and imprisonment by unscrupulous lords. 'Song of the Husbandman' spoke of the oppression of taxes in times of hardship for the peasants. The ballad of 'Adam Bell, Clim of the Clough and William of Cloudeley' celebrated the heroism of ordinary men who refuse to be put down by the rich and powerful. Some storytellers might have recounted the tales of Robin Hood.³

With every step they took and with every injustice remembered, these peasants gained in their sense of the righteousness of their actions. What also grew was their confidence. As each group of villages discovered that they were not alone, and as their realization of their strength also increased, they dared to imagine a final settling of things with those they now clearly saw as their social enemies. These peasants had gone beyond the point of no return. Already they were beyond the law. More and more they listened to the arguments of the radical voices amongst them and increasingly they began to share a vision of what might be.

In May 1381 electrical storms occurred across most of England and the thunder clouds and heavy air carried portent of what was to come. As the peasants marched and met by torchlight, they troubled the sleep of the rich. Amongst the ruling class a deep foreboding and depression descended. It was whispered that things were not well in the land and there were those who recalled the massacres of the nobles of France in 1358. Statutes passed in the period immediately before the revolt reflect these fears. One complained of

*Devisors of false news and reports of horrible and false lies concerning prelates, dukes, earls, barons, and other noble and great men of the realme, and also concerning the Chancellor, Treasurer, Clerk of the Privy Seal, Steward of the Kings House, Justice of the one Bench or the other and of other great offices of the realme about things, which by the said nobles, prelates, lords and officers aforesaid were never spoken done nor thought . . . whereby debates and discords might arise betwixt the said lords and Commons which God forbid, and whereby great mischief might come to all the realme and quick subversion and destruction of the said realme, if due remedy be not provided . . .*⁴

By late May the die was cast. The visionaries of the Great Society were no longer preaching to small groups on village greens. They were now talking, directly and indirectly, to the multitude of the poorest parts of the population. Even the middle layers of society were being won over as this movement-in-waiting swelled. It was against this background that the tax commissioner Thomas Bampton rode into Brentwood. Arriving with all the indifferent aloofness of his class, he summoned the people of the surrounding villages of Fobbing, Corringham and Stanford-le-Hope before him to account for their low returns. They arrived at his commission on 31 May, but not as he had expected. These fishing folk stood before him armed. When Thomas Baker of Fobbing spoke angrily to the London tax collector, denouncing the tax and refusing to pay, Bampton ordered his arrest. Immediately he and his entourage of clerks and soldiers were attacked and all were showered with stones as they fled from the town. The rising had begun.

With a speed that again suggests prior planning, word was sent to London and two emissaries of the Great Society, Adam Atwell and Roger Harry, soon after arrived to organize the revolt. All of the surrounding towns and villages were called upon to rise and by 1 June the rebels were meeting in the forests of Essex to arm themselves and discuss their strategy. The following day Sir Robert Belknap arrived with troops to impose order. Oblivious to the real scale of what was afoot and assuming this to be one more local nuisance to be solved with the usual judicious dose of floggings and perhaps a hanging, he was unprepared for what came next.

By messenger and hilltop fire, intelligence had been sent to the men of Kent that the Great Society was in motion. The military experience of the French wars, which until this time had only been good for public house boasting, was now put to different use. Swords came down from the wall, axes were sharpened, armour was cleaned and polished, and bows were re-strung. When Belknap arrived in Brentwood he was met by 500 peasants of Essex and Kent ready for battle. Belknap himself was tied to his horse backwards and ridden out of the town. The two ill-advised gentlemen who had volunteered as jurors to speak against the peasants were beheaded, their heads being tied to a horse and, in a manner of speaking, also run out of town.

Legend has it that the movement in Kent was started by a certain John Tyler of Dartford – not the Wat Tyler who is soon to play so prominent a part in our story. John Tyler, we are told, was at work when word came to him that his family and young daughter had been harassed by a tax collector, and so,

being at work in the same town tyling of an house, when he heard therof [of the tax-collecting], caught his lathing staff in his hand and ran reaking [riotously] home; where, reasoning with the collector who made him so bold, the collector answered with stout words and strake at the tyler; whereupon the tyler avoiding the blow, smote the collector with the lathing staff that the brains flew out of his head. Whereupon great noise arose in the street, and the poor people, being glad, everyone prepared to support the said John Tyler.⁵

All over Essex and Kent, villages and towns were now assembling under quickly established leaders. At Erith, Abel Ker led his followers into the monastery at Lesness and forced the abbot to swear the first recorded oath to the 'True Commons'. At Canterbury, John Legge, the devisor of the poll tax, arrived with the king's commission to levy the tax. Battle briefly ensued at the West Gate of the city and Legge was driven out. At each village they visited, the peasants searched and destroyed the manorial rolls. These were the legal documents that recorded the status of the local peasants – whether they were free or unfree, their tithes to the lord and their tribute to the abbey and so on. This was no blind rebellion. The peasants had a purpose and that purpose was to destroy serfdom – the very basis of the feudal order. Indeed, the rolls also recorded the obligations of the lord, what few there were, and it is an indication of just how far the peasants had come that they were no longer concerned with the protection of their 'rights' within the prison of feudalism. The flames that consumed the parchment rolls would also, they hoped, destroy the chains of bondage.

On 5 June the peasants of Essex and Kent were at Dartford, where more peasants of the locality joined the growing army. Now under the leadership of the baker Robert Cave, they set off to Rochester, where the population was already in a state of excitement. The cause of the commotion at Rochester was the

incarceration of one Robert Belling of nearby Gravesend. Sir Simon de Burley, a man notorious for his contempt towards the lower orders, claimed that Belling was a serf of his estate who had run away from bondage. The knight had had the man arrested and taken to the castle. It was a scene that must have been enacted over and over again in previous years. But now a different mood was abroad. The peasants of Gravesend were not of a mind to let such injustice prevail. As they combined with the Essex and Kent rebels, they became determined to free Belling and take the castle.

It is worth pausing for a moment on the significance of this early episode in the rebellion. Rochester Castle was no ordinary fortress. It had been the site of fortifications since Roman times and had always guarded the Medway bridge and the chief road for continental trade with London. The castle itself was one of the early achievements of the Norman military engineers, standing taller than any other castle in the land and with walls in places 4 metres thick. It was the boast of the English ruling class. It had never fallen to a foreign enemy and any French or other army seeking to invade England and reach London from the south would have to contend with its defences. To the local people Rochester Castle was a symbol of the power of the feudal system over their lives. It dominated the landscape and its dungeons were filled with those who had stolen from hunger or who had escaped bondage or who had simply and inadvertently fallen foul of the law. It now became the focus of a generation of social grievance against the feudal order.

Robert Cave and his men laid siege to Rochester Castle on the morning of 6 June. After several hours and a number of attempts upon the castle by the rebels, the constable, Sir John Newton, gave up the battle as lost and the peasant army charged through the gate to release Belling and the other prisoners.

They laid strong siege to the castle, and the constable defended himself vigorously for half a day, but at length for fear that he had of such tumult, and because of the mad multitude of folks from Essex and Kent, he yielded to them.⁶

John Newton himself was later to be used as a messenger to the king. The psychological impact of these events cannot be overstated

—both upon the ruling class as well as upon the peasants themselves. Only a few days before, the lords of England had regarded the peasants as little more than labouring beasts of the land. They had been outraged at the effrontery of the peasants when they had chafed at the economic and social restrictions put upon them and had demanded more from their lot. And now these very same peasants, not content with defying the king's tax and causing disturbance and riot within the realm, had stormed and taken one of the key fortresses of England. The shock this produced went to the gut of the English ruling class.

The peasants also were suddenly struck by the magnitude of their actions. Whether things had been planned to go in this fashion or whether the taking of the castle was an unexpected turn of events we will never know. But certainly from this point on the rising became a profoundly serious affair. The fall of Rochester Castle became a clarion call to the peasants throughout England to rise and it is from this moment that the rebellion became a threat to the ruling class, not just on a local but also on a national scale.

As the rising spread, all forces were now making their way towards Maidstone. They were heading there to free John Ball, the spiritual leader of the rebellion. He had been imprisoned in Maidstone jail in April by Simon Sudbury, who was both Archbishop of Canterbury and also the chancellor. When he had been sentenced, Ball had announced that he would soon be freed by 20,000 men.

Maidstone was already in the hands of local rebels when the armies of Kent and the surrounding districts converged there on 7 June. As the peasants had passed through the towns and villages of southern England, they had ransacked the manor houses they had come across and had systematically destroyed all legal documents and manor rolls pertaining to lord-tenant relations. The peasants had shown remarkable restraint in their dealings with the lords and their families, and deaths were few and far between. The most violent of the events of the rising were soon to occur in London against key individuals who had already been identified as enemies of the people. This was no blind bloodlust. This was a movement with a very clear aim — to end the social basis of serfdom.

Maidstone now became the site of a conference at which the rebels discussed their aims. The peasants' loyalty was not to the rotten clique who surrounded the 14-year-old king, but rather to

'King Richard and the Commons of England'. John of Gaunt was named as a chief enemy of the people — they would accept 'no king named John'. War was declared upon power and privilege. They would rid the king of his corrupt councillors and would put to death all who upheld the law of Gaunt. All manorial and court rolls were to be destroyed. Those responsible for administering the injustice of the Statute of Labourers and general feudal law would meet stern retribution at the hands of the revolutionaries.

It was at the Maidstone conference also that Wat Tyler stepped out of obscurity on to the pages of history. It is sometimes wrongly stated that the individual plays no decisive role in history, compared to the great underlying forces of the historical process. The example of Wat Tyler gives the lie to this, if any example were needed. His historical role was to last only nine days, from the time of his election as leader of the rebellion at Maidstone on 7 June to his murder on 15 June at Smithfield. But in those nine days he changed the course of English history.

We know astonishingly little about the Wat Tyler himself. It is thought that he had been a soldier in the French wars. Certainly he had military skill, as our story will show. It is probable that he was a workman of some kind. He may have been a tiler as his name suggests, although by the late fourteenth century a surname was not a reliable guide to a person's occupation. We have no likeness of him. We know from chronicles that he was a gifted orator and had a quick tongue. There is also a story that as a younger man he had been a page to Richard Lyons, who was later executed by the rebels. It is likely, however, that this was a tale put about to trivialize Tyler's motives. Whatever the truth, we can be sure of one thing. His followers trusted him completely and were right to do so. He was of them and for them. He had their passionate fury at the injustice of lordly oppression, but was also able to express it and harness it with brilliant tactical skill.

With the election of Wat Tyler the movement began to organize on a higher level. John Ball was by now sending out letters to counties all over England. These letters are interesting in themselves. They were instructions to rise, certainly. But they were more than that. They told the people how to rise. These bulletins conveyed the urgency of the situation without ambivalence. The style of the letters was allegorical and couched in religious

sentiments, but the message is clear: 'Now is the time', 'do not delay', 'organise yourselves' . . .

*John Ball greeteth you all,
And doth to understand he hath rung your bell,
Now with might and right, will and skill,
God speed every dell.*

He warns the peasants of each region to beware of betrayal, to stand together and to appoint only one leader to ensure the best possible discipline and organization:

John Shepe,⁷ sometime St Mary priest of York, and now in Colchester, greeteth well John Nameless and John Miller and John Carter, and biddeth them that they beware of guile in borough and standeth together in God's name and biddeth Piers Plowman to go to his work and chastise well Hob the Robber,⁸ and take with him John Trueman and all his fellows [trustworthy men] and no more, and look that ye shape to one head and no more.

Things are not right in England, he says. Corruption is everywhere. Money and acquisition are put before the needs of the people. The Church is full of self-seeking and hypocrisy:

*Now reigneth price in price,
Covetise is holden wise,
Lechery without shame,
Gluttony without blame,
Envy reigneth with reason
And sloth is taken in great season.
God do bote [exact the penalty] for now is time.*

The preparations have been made in fine detail, Ball explains to his reader. God is on our side and with steadfastness of purpose and the strength of our numbers we cannot fail. But they must keep a clear head and look out for traitors. They should choose only those they know to be loyal to the rising and no more. They should not look out

only for themselves, but should remain pure of purpose and 'do well' and 'do better':

*John Miller asketh help to turn his mill right:
He hath ground small, small,
The King's Son of Heaven will pay for it all,
Look the mill go right, with its four sails dight.
With right and with might, with skill and with will,
And let the post stand in steadfastness,
Let right help might, and skill go before will,
Then shall our mill go aright.
But if might go before right, and will go before skill
Then is our mill mis-a-dight.
Beware ere ye be woe.
Know your friend from your foe
Take enough and cry Ho!
And do well and better and flee from sin,⁹
And seek out peace and dwell therein,
So biddeth John Trueman and all his friends.*

And everyone must be clear, he insists, that there is no turning back:

Jack Carter prays you all that ye make good end of what ye have begun and doeth well and aye better and better.¹⁰

These letters and others like them were copied and distributed to all of the localities. They were carried in the pockets of peasants as they moved with increasing purpose towards the centres of power in fourteenth-century England, and must have been frequently taken out and read aloud to eager ears. Many were the peasants who went to the gallows after the suppression of the rising, carrying one of Ball's letters on their person.

The rebels now went about their business with a new clarity about the tasks they had set for themselves. A group of the rebels under Tyler's command set out to Canterbury where they hoped to find the Archbishop, Simon Sudbury, and settle accounts with him. As they travelled, they encountered pilgrims returning from the city, often having been to pay homage to the shrine of Thomas à

Becket. These pilgrims welcomed the message of the rebels, swore their oath to the commons and carried on their way, but now as emissaries of the peasants' cause.

Wat Tyler arrived in Canterbury on 10 June. The city rose up to welcome him and to declare themselves for the commons. After having feasted as guests of the city, the rebels headed for Sudbury's palace. The palace was ransacked and all of the palace documents and records were burned on a giant bonfire. Disappointed in not finding Sudbury himself, they next made for Canterbury Cathedral. The monks of the cathedral were terrified by the sight of Tyler and his men as they marched beneath the giant arches of the cathedral right up the aisle to where they were saying mass. The monks were spared, but the rebels announced that they should prepare for the coronation of a new archbishop very soon. Sudbury, they said, was to be executed, and John Ball, the priest of the common people, put in his place. Tyler now set out to rejoin the main peasant army still at Maidstone, but not before swearing the mayor and bailiffs of the city to uphold the principles of the Great Society. The town council took heed and began to organize things according to the new philosophy.

By this stage, all over Kent, the peasants had stamped their authority on the land. During the long summer days of 8, 9 and 10 June, manorial rolls had been destroyed in their thousands, prisoners had been released and the great houses of the lords had been set ablaze. The peasants were now ready to take their message to the king himself and to seek out those whom they regarded as the traitors of England. The peasants returned to Rochester and thence began their march to London.

The march to London was to take two days. These were two days during which the peasants again had the chance to contemplate what they had begun. With Canterbury, Dartford, Maidstone, Rochester and the other Kentish towns in peasant hands, they were now going to the capital to settle accounts with their enemies. Their minds were set on political ends. Again we have to stress that this was no irrational outburst of undirected anger. The peasants' consciousness of what they were doing and what they wanted to achieve was at a high level. The leaders had been able to communicate to their followers what was afoot and even the slowest of the peasants basically understood that their aims were social and political, and

that attempts to use the movement for looting and personal gain would be dealt with sternly in this revolutionary army. The peasants were very clear about whom their quarrel was with.

In a slightly bizarre twist to our story, it seems that the king's mother may have even owed her life to the sense of higher purpose with which the peasants marched. On their journey to Canterbury to do worship at the tomb of her dead husband, the Black Prince, she and her entourage crossed the path of the peasant army at Eltham. They were convinced that they would perish at the hands of the peasants and gave themselves up for lost. Instead, after some rough jest and ribaldry, to their amazement they were allowed to go on their way.

On the night of 12 June, Wat Tyler's army arrived at Blackheath, south of the Thames. At least 30,000 peasants made camp for the night there. On the other side of the river the Essex army, which was at least as large as the Kentish army, was encamped at Mile End under the leadership of Jack Straw. They knew that tomorrow they would enter London. Faces lit by their fires, the peasants talked into the night. The London population, itself no more than 50,000, they knew, supported them. They talked of those to whom they would dispense justice and reminded each other of the reasons. Perhaps they joked about whether the other army had done as well. Perhaps they quarrelled about how things would go the next day. Perhaps also, with a mixture of excitement and apprehension, they wondered about the new society that was to come.