

REPRESSION AND CONTINUING REVOLT

As news of Tyler's success in London and stories of the charters of freedom issued at Mile End spread beyond London, the surrounding shires rose up to join the revolt. Over 13 and 14 June, the high point of the rebels' control of London, risings began also at Bury, St Albans and Cambridge. On 16 June the rising in East Suffolk began, and it spread to West Suffolk the following day. Although Kent, Essex and London had been the storm centre of the revolt, its ripples spread as far as York and Scarborough, with final echoes being heard even as far away as the Wirral.

The leader of the revolt in the East Anglian counties was John Wraw. Wraw had been in London and in communication with Wat Tyler and other leading figures of the Kent and Essex armies when they had occupied the city. Now he returned to take the revolt to the outlying regions. On 12 June, Wraw led his forces from the Essex town of Liston to Overhall, where they sacked the home of Richard Lyons, who would be executed by the London rebels two days later. They then proceeded to the town of Cavendish on the Suffolk border to raid the property of the king's justice and local enforcer of the Statute of Labourers, the hated John de Cavendish. After fortifying themselves at the tavern of a certain Onewene of Melford, they set out to take the Suffolk capital of Bury St Edmunds.

At Bury, Wraw and his followers now sacked the house of the prior and the town house of John de Cavendish. Cavendish himself had fled. He was pursued through the parish of Lakenheath. Rushing along the river bank there, he had spied a boat with which he hoped to make good his get away. His hopes were frustrated, however, by one Katherine Gamen, who, standing near to the boat, observed Cavendish heading towards her with the rebels in hot pursuit. After a moment's reflection Katherine turned and pushed it firmly out into the river. Cavendish was swiftly caught and promptly

beheaded. Thus did Katherine Gamen of Lakenheath earn her place in the people's history of England!

Another hated figure in the town was the prior of the abbey, John de Cambridge. The town had long known tension between the abbey and the populace. The prior knew that to stay in the town was very dangerous for him and that fleeing was his only chance of surviving the town rising. He also was apprehended, however, on the word of a disloyal guide. Shortly after, he too was executed and his head displayed alongside that of his old friend Cavendish. The rebels made jest of the men who for too long had oppressed them, positioning their heads, first one whispering into the other's ear in confession, and then with kissing lips. The sacking of the homes of the wealthy and general rioting continued over several days. At every turn the manorial rolls were burned and with them centuries of feudal bondage. In the midst of these events Mettingham Castle was taken by Wraw's army on 19 June.

In Norfolk events were also proceeding apace. The leadership there consisted principally of the dyer, Geoffrey Litster, and, as his lieutenant, the knight, Sir Roger Bacon. Litster mustered his forces at Mousehold Heath¹ on 17 June. In great numbers the rebels now marched to the city walls of Norwich and demanded that the constable of the city, Robert Salle, come and speak to them. Salle was a figure who had come from humble beginnings, having himself been a bondsman, and had risen through military service to a position of considerable status and wealth. True to his breed, he had a haughty contempt for the background he had left behind and was certainly not about to bow to those whom he viewed as his social inferiors. He came out of the city walls to meet with the rebels, but he would not comply with their demand that he join them. After a struggle he paid for his high-handed behaviour towards the peasants with his life.

On seeing the death of Salle, the town burgesses put up no further resistance to Litster and he proceeded to occupy the city of Norwich. Taking up residence in Norwich Castle, Litster now set about spreading the revolt to all of the surrounding districts and adjudicating over disputes and matters brought to him by the people of the region. Again, manorial rolls all over the area were sought out and destroyed. The riches of the local gentry and nobility were taken to Norwich Castle, from where they would later be used by Litster in an attempt to buy the

freedom of the city. For six days Litster was in effective control of Norwich and its environs, earning the title 'King of the Commons' from his supporters – a title enhanced by his insistence that the captured lords of the region wait on him at his table.

Whilst Suffolk and Norfolk were ablaze, dramatic events were also unfolding in Cambridge. In the wider county, rioting had been occurring even since 9 June. Communications had been going on between the rebel leadership in London and the insurgents of Cambridgeshire. By 15 June, however, the revolt was in full flow. In all parts of Cambridgeshire, manor houses, abbeys and the estates of the famously rich and powerful were sacked and plundered, and the documents of feudal repression destroyed. In Cambridge itself, tensions between the town and the political power of the university provided a rich seam of local antagonism. There had already been disturbances in April of that year. Now with the revolt in full throttle, violence erupted once again. From 15 to 17 June the rebels had complete control of the city. The homes of all those associated with the implementation of the statutes or the poll tax were attacked. The college and hospital of Corpus Christi were attacked and ransacked, and the university's title and property deeds destroyed.

The rebel leaders now drew up a new charter to which the university was made to submit. It stripped the university of its old privileges and powers. The university's courts were abolished so that town folk would now have their cases heard in the borough courts. A bond of £3,000 was exacted in order to protect the inhabitants of the town against any attempt by the university authorities to obtain damages for the actions of the rebels.

According to the assizes that were written after the repression of the revolt, the rebels surrounded the mayor of the town and instructed him thus:

You are the mayor of this the King's town and governor of our community, if you do not consent to our will and commands and carrying out all that shall be said to you on behalf of the King and his faithful Commons, you will be at once beheaded.²

The mayor, Edmund Redmeadow, duly complied and became the reluctant 'leader' of an attack upon the local priory. There had been

a long-standing feud between local people and the prior over access to pasturage on priory land, the prior having effectively enclosed his fields. The rebels now set about the priory buildings:

They marched out over 1,000 strong by Barnwell Causeway, and fell upon the priory, pulling down walls and felling trees to the value of £400, draining fish ponds, and carrying off turfs for the winter. The enclosures round the Estenhall meadows were, of course, obliterated to the last stake.³

Despite this wave of revolt spreading outwards from the south-east, however, the counter-offensive of the ruling group around the king was already in full swing. On 15 June, Walworth had presented King Richard with the head of Wat Tyler. Richard now granted dictatorial powers to Walworth to win back control of London. Walworth was invested with the authority to dispense retribution for the impudence of the peasants, either within the law or 'by other ways and means'. If the rebels who had followed Tyler and Straw had any lingering illusions in the king as their friend, they were soon to be dispelled by the beheadings, torture and mutilation that characterized Walworth's Terror in London over the months of July and August. The tide had turned and was running powerfully against the rebels.

The leading figures of the revolt were now being rounded up and made to suffer Walworth's revenge. Jack Straw was an early victim. Before he was executed, he made a 'confession' that reveals a great deal about the intentions of the rebels. We have already had cause to mention Tyler's plan to take the young King Richard around England to use his authority to manumit villeinage in every region. Straw tells us, however, that it was also the intention of the rebel leadership to arrest and execute the wealthiest men in the land and to expropriate all the property of the Church. With the exception of the mendicant orders, the entire clerical hierarchy was to be abolished. England was to become a federation of self-governing communes. In the end, the king would have been executed and 'when there was no one greater or stronger or more learned than ourselves surviving, we would have made such laws as pleased us'.⁴

As the repression continued, the influence of class was apparent.

Those figures amongst the rebels who were of the gentry were punished differently from those who were of the people. Thomas Farrington, for example, who had taken the Tower and overseen the executions of Sudbury and Hales, was imprisoned but escaped execution. The aldermen who had allowed the peasant armies to enter the city were released on bail. Those greater and lesser leaders who were peasants themselves, or at least were not of high birth, aroused the greatest fear and loathing in their tormentors and were without exception sent to their deaths.

On 18 June a proclamation was made charging all sheriffs with responsibility for the punishment of rebels in their areas and with running down any rebels who were in hiding. On 20 June, Sir Thomas Trivet, constable of the castle at Dover, was charged with the pacification of Kent. The Earl of Suffolk, William Ufford, was dispatched to his county with 500 lances. It was in Essex, however, that the revolt was still rumbling. King Richard led his army there on 22 June and stopped at Waltham. Here a delegation of peasants from Essex came to speak to Richard to ask that he honour the promises that he himself had made to them regarding their freedom, and also to request that they no longer be obliged to attend the king's courts. Richard's answer expressed all the contempt, then and now, of the rich for the poor. In the same way that the words of John Ball ring down to us over the centuries as a clarion call of freedom, so do Richard's words ring down to us as a warning to all who suffer the delusion that there are 'friends of the people' amongst the rich and powerful in society. Coldly eyeing the peasants kneeling before him, he uttered these words:

O most vile and odious by land and sea, you who are not worthy to live when compared with the lords whom ye have attacked; you should be forthwith punished with vilest deaths were it not for the office ye bear. Go back to your comrades and bear the king's answer. You were and are serfs, and shall remain in bondage, not that of old, but in one infinitely worse, more vile without comparison. For as long as we live, and by God's help rule over this realm, we shall attempt by all our faculties, powers, and means to make you such an example of offence to the heirs of your servitude as that they may have you before their eyes, as in a mirror, and you may supply them with a

*perpetual ground for cursing and fearing you, and fear to commit the like.*⁵

The delegation who had heard these words reported to the waiting rebels of Essex. On hearing what had been said, they realized that they had two options. They could surrender and prostrate themselves at the mercy of the king or they could refuse to bow and so fight to defend their newly won freedom, even at the risk of their lives. They chose the latter course. The rebels gathered at Billericay. Reinforcements came from Great Baddow and Rettenden, south of Chelmsford. They chained carts together and dug ditches to provide a strong defensive position. They were ill armed, however, and no match for a disciplined fighting force.

On 28 June, Richard sent a large cavalry of heavily armoured soldiers against the rebels and they were routed in a short time. Five hundred died at Billericay and yet the rebels fought on. They retreated to Colchester and Huntingdon, where they attempted to rally the townsfolk. But news of the death of Tyler and the repression in London had dampened the tinder that had originally ignited the revolt. The Essex rebels hoped to join forces with Wraw's army in Suffolk but unbeknown to them Wraw had already been defeated. Richard pursued them into Colchester where, on 2 July, he issued a proclamation revoking all of the promises he had made at Mile End, as well as all of the manumissions conceded as a result of the revolt.

In other parts of the country, the repression continued. From Norwich, Litster had sent an 'embassy' of three of his lieutenants, Trunch, Skeet and Kybett, to try to meet with the king and buy the freedom of the city of Norwich. However, at Icklingham on 22 June they were intercepted by the soldier-priest, Bishop Despenser. Travelling with his murderous band, Despenser had first heard of the rebellion on his estates at Peterborough. He had proceeded to that town and put down the rebels by force before moving on to Ely and Cambridge to do the same in those towns. On encountering Litster's delegation, Despenser had them beheaded and now set off in the direction of Norwich.

Litster had moved his forces out of Norwich to North Walsham and fortified his position. Despenser reoccupied the city of Norwich and then moved forward to take up the attack. There followed a

swift battle that saw Litster's men massacred. Litster himself was condemned to be hanged by the bishop. Despenser then, having carried out one atrocity after another, suddenly decided that Litster was entitled to a Christian confession before his death. The fate of Litster's soul, it seems, was of concern to the bishop, who heard his confession himself and granted him absolution. He then, it is said, supported Litster's head whilst he was dragged to the gallows, so that it would not be dashed against the cobblestones. It is in acts such as these that our oppressors sometimes betray a guilty respect for people whom they know, deep down, to be better than themselves.

The judge appointed by Richard as his Lord Chief Justice to exact punishment from the rebels was Robert Tressilian. Tressilian was notorious for his harshness and he did not disappoint his paymasters now. Every accused person brought before him was condemned and swiftly dispatched at the gallows or the block. So zealous was he in his given task that sometimes nine or ten rebels were hanged at the same time. Tressilian moved his assizes from one place to the next, and in each place that he stopped, the wealthy of the area came forward to form juries and to point the finger of accusation – and in effect of death – at whomever they chose. 1381 became remembered in popular rhymes and ballads as the year of Richard's terrible retribution against the followers of Tyler:

Man beware and be no fool:

Think upon the axe and of the tool!

The stool [the block] was hard, the axe was sharp,

*The fourth year of King Richard.*⁶

Despite the terror unleashed by the king, the bearing of the peasants was still heroic. From the records of the assizes we know that the condemned did not beg their persecutors for forgiveness, but rather stood by their actions to the last.⁷

Face to face with the enemy, the rebels defied their tormentors. Standing in the dock with a horrid death awaiting them, they neither cringed nor did they beg for mercy. Proudly they had fought for their class, for justice and freedom, and as proudly did they march to their death. Of all of them, from the leaders

to the humblest of the rank and file, the same story is told. John Starling, who claimed that he had executed the Archbishop, was sentenced to death. Before his murder he said that he was a proud man to have been able to execute the traitor archbishop.⁸

In the royal reaction that followed the revolt, the chroniclers tell us that 7,000 perished by the axe and the noose. Reliable estimates since have reckoned the final toll to have been less than this – probably more in the region of 2,000. There is evidence that Richard knew not to push his revenge too far, for fear of further revolt. This figure is still many times greater than the number of people killed in the rising itself, however. We should also include the thousands imprisoned in the slow death conditions of medieval dungeons following the revolt.

The final act of the revolt took place at St Albans and it is with the Hertfordshire rebellion that we will end our story.⁹ St Albans had long known tension between the town and the abbey. During the reign of Edward II, the prior had seized most of the surrounding woodland and pasture. The forests, rivers and ponds had also been taken for game for the monks' table. Even by the standards of the late fourteenth century, the abbey had maintained a peculiarly powerful position with respect to its tenants, in effect enjoying the status of a manor in its own right. According to local legend, the town had been granted its independence by King Offa. Opinion had it that the monks were in possession of this charter and kept it hidden lest they lose their power and privilege. Three times the local people had risen against the monks – in 1274, 1314 and 1326 – in the name of this charter. When agents of the Great Society brought news of the first stirrings of the revolt, the peasants of St Albans saw another opportunity to shake the abbey off their backs.

On the evening of 13 June, word arrived of Tyler's entry into London. The following morning a deputation from the town went to speak to the abbot. It was led by William Grindecobbe. Grindecobbe had himself been educated at the abbey, but had fallen foul of the monks and had been excommunicated by them. He now informed the abbot, Thomas de la Mare, a noted lawyer and brother to the speaker of Parliament, that he was acting under instruction from Tyler. The delegation was to proceed that morning, he

explained, to London to swear allegiance to the 'True Commons' and to obtain the freedom of the town. They now set out on the road to London.

They entered London via Highbury and as they did so they happened across Straw and his army, burning down the home of Sir Robert Hales. After some fraternization and celebration of the events that were afoot, they carried on their way to Mile End where they knew they would find Tyler. They arrived in time to witness the meeting with the king. Soon afterwards Grindecobbe held conference with Tyler, who assured him that if the monks put up resistance against the king's charter of freedom, he would send 20,000 men to 'shave the monks' beards'. Grindecobbe now left the bulk of his delegation to wait for the charters of freedom for their town and its surrounding areas. Grindecobbe himself set off with a smaller group back towards St Albans to bring the news of freedom. He arrived in St Albans that evening, having travelled 30 miles since the early morning. A great crowd had gathered to hear what he had to say:

That evening in torchlight perhaps, the old market lit also from open windows – for who would grudge even wax on such a night? – was one of which it is pleasant to look back, even when we know the bloody sequel. For a brief time these men and women believed that they were free. Chains were soon to follow, death was to come to many, but even while they suffered, in their heart must have remained the memory of that moment when Grindecobbe cried the news of freedom, of freedom from villein's chain, of freedom to hunt, to fish, to pasture their cattle, of freedom to grind their own corn.¹⁰

The next day the townsfolk asserted their newly won freedom. Joined by rebels from Barnet, they tore down the hedges and fences with which the monks had enclosed the fields, they drained the abbot's fishpond and they divided the abbey's land between themselves. A rabbit was speared and displayed on a pole to mark the abolition of the game laws. The millstones, which had been confiscated by a previous prior to ensure that the local people paid the monks for their milling and which had been used to pave his parlour, were now dug up and returned to the families from whom

they had been taken. The abbey's prison was smashed open. The rebels held an open court to re-examine the cases of the prisoners. All those prisoners who had merely fallen into debt, or who had been unable to pay the monks their fines and tithes, were released. One fellow, who was known to be an unsavoury character and who had sought the protection of the monks to save him from the wrath of the town, was found guilty of his crimes and executed.

When Grindecobbe's delegation arrived back from Mile End with the charters of freedom carrying the king's seal, Grindecobbe went again to the abbot. He demanded that the abbot now acknowledge the freedom of the town. After some attempt at legal obfuscation, the abbot consented to give a statement that recognized the new situation. Still not satisfied, the rebels withdrew to draw up their own charter which would be free of the ambiguities with which the lawyer-abbot had filled his announcement. By this time deputations were arriving from all over Hertfordshire demanding charters for their villages and all over the county the abbeys and manor homes were in flames and the local charters of bondage were being destroyed.

On 16 June, the same day that the abbot sealed the new charter drawn up by the rebels, word came that the royal army was now heading for Hertfordshire. The St Albans rebels had already heard of Tyler's murder and now they contemplated their own battle with the king. Within the royal group, however, there was also some nervousness. Anxious to avoid a battle if they could, they sent forward Sir Walter Lee, a local knight, to attempt to pacify the town. Grindecobbe agreed to meet Lee, arguing that if he had not come in peace then he would be driven from the town 'with purpose'. Lee, however, arrived with threats. He pointed out that the king's army was a short distance behind him and described also the devastation that the royal repression was bringing in its wake:

*for miles around no fodder, nor any corn, no fruits of the earth, fresh or old are left, but all things are consumed or trodden down.*¹¹

Lee now summoned a jury of twelve men whom he thought he could rely on to hand over to him the rebel leaders. The twelve, however, refused to cooperate. Frustrated, Lee resorted to

cunning. In the dead of night, he and his men went to the homes of three of the rebel leaders, including Grindecobbe, and arrested them from their beds.

The next morning the townsfolk realized what had happened and prepared once more for battle. They seized their weapons, gathered in the town square and determined that they would lay siege to the abbey for the release of their leaders. The abbot, facing the destruction of his estate, got urgent word to Lee as to what was about to happen. Lee, who had been about to execute Grindecobbe and the other rebels, now realized that he had no choice but to release them. He told them to return to the town with the message that he would have a royal pardon granted if the townsfolk returned the abbey charters that they had taken, and surrendered to him. Grindecobbe returned to the town with Lee's communication and explained that if Lee's demands were not met then the rebel leaders, including himself, would be executed. Then, rising to the historical moment, Grindecobbe spoke as follows:

*Fellow citizens, who now a scanty liberty has relieved from long oppression, stand while you can stand, and fear nothing for my punishment, since I would die in the cause of the liberty we have gained, if it is now my fate to die, thinking myself happy to be able to finish my life by such a martyrdom. Act now as you ought to have done if I had been executed yesterday at Hertford; for nothing would have prevented my death if the abbot had not recalled his soldiers too soon. They had indeed brought many charges against me, and they had a judge, favourable to them, and eager for my blood.*¹²

There was nothing disingenuous in this. Grindecobbe had come close to death at Lee's hand the previous day and had obviously prepared himself well. His mind was clear and his words were truthful and honest. Putting aside all concern for his own fate, Grindecobbe was urging his followers to hold firm and defy the forces of reaction. Of all the moments of historical greatness that characterize the revolt, this must stand as one of the finest.

In the end, the St Albans people chose to attempt a compromise with the abbot. They may have been trying to save the necks of their leaders. They must have been all too aware of the superior forces

ranged against them just outside of the town. Whatever the reasons, a deal was struck. The abbey charters were to be given back in return for a promise of no retaliation from the monks. They had reckoned, however, without the royal group itself. Tressilian especially would have no truck with any deal to save the rebels. He swooped on the town and had sixteen of the rebels tried. The jury members were instructed to find the accused guilty. Having been told that the accused would be retried until a guilty verdict had been returned and on pain of being put on trial themselves, the jurors did Tressilian's bidding. On 15 July, Grindecobbe and the other condemned rebels were hanged and drawn.

Then they were left swinging, as a warning to other dreamers, on the gibbets for 'as long as they could last' – in other words, until they rotted, stinking, and fell to shreds, until the birds had plucked out their eyes, pecked away whatever flesh was left, until only bones rattled in chains.¹³

Grindecobbe's supporters could not stand to have their hero displayed with such indignity. At night they cut down Grindecobbe's body and those of the other rebels to give them a proper burial. Tressilian's revenge, however, was not finished:

When the authorities saw the fruitless gallows in the morning, they arrested a number of the town's most prominent citizens and forced them to dig up the corpses to hang the rotting vermin-crawling remains once more against the sky.¹⁴

Another was executed that day at St Albans. John Ball, the inspiration of the revolt, the priest with indignant anger at the social injustice of his world and a vision of how things might be different, was put to death by the rope and the disembowelling knife. He had been arrested at Coventry and then brought to Tressilian at St Albans on 13 June. Faced with the most gruesome of deaths, he refused to bow to Tressilian's court. He gladly accepted responsibility for his role in the revolt. He said that he had written the letters dispatched to the regions instructing them to rise and that he was right and proud to have done so. He refused to beg for a king's pardon. Tressilian could not break this priest. Ball had

been agitating for the vision that drove him for too long to give way now. After twenty years of preaching on village greens and inspiring his followers, he had reached out and fleetingly touched his dream. He had seen men and women who were once cowed under the bailiff's rod throw off their servility and walk on to the stage of history as human beings determined to change their world. No judge would make him flinch.

Ball's death was postponed for two days on the intervention of Bishop Courtenay of London, who had harassed Ball the whole of his politically active life. The authorities wanted more from Ball and in the abbey dungeon they interrogated him. Ball revealed that he had been influenced by some of the ideas of Wycliffe and that the intention of the revolt had been to turn the realm 'upside down' within two years. Now Ball was taken to the place of his execution. He was hanged till nearly dead, then his entrails were drawn and finally his corpse was hacked into four quarters and sent to different regions to be displayed as an example to all those who had shared his dream.

There is something in the grisly nature of Ball's execution that reflects the fear that England's rulers had of what he represented. For them his execution was a cathartic act, a venting of their fear of the masses. Although the revolt was over, they could not erase the fact that it had happened. The peasants, the lowest of the low, had risen and faced their rulers as equals. They had shown that they were neither mere chattel nor mere muscle and brawn. By rising, not just against this or that lord, but rather against feudalism itself, they had shown that they were men and women, human beings who longed with a passion to live differently and to live freely. The villeins of England had not won their freedom this time, but they had changed history – and themselves – forever.

In *The Dream of John Ball*, William Morris imagines himself talking to Ball on the morning of his execution. His words are a fine tribute to the rebels of 1381:

John Ball, be of good cheer; for once more thou knowest, as I know, that the Fellowship of Man shall endure, however many tribulations it may have to wear through . . . it may well be that this bright day of summer which is now dawning upon us is no image of the beginning of the day that shall be; but rather shall

that day dawn be cold and grey and surly; and yet by its light shall men see things as they verily are, and, no longer enchanted by the gleam of the moon and the glamour of the dream tide. By such grey light shall wise men and valiant souls see remedy, and deal with it, a real thing that may be touched and handled and no glory of the heavens to be worshipped from afar off. And what shall it be, as I told thee before, save that men shall be determined to be free; yea free as thou wouldst have them, when thine hope rises the highest, and thou art thinking, not of the king's uncles and the poll-groat bailiffs, and the villeinage of Essex, but of the end of it all, when men shall have the fruits of the earth and the fruits of their toil thereon, without money and without price. The time shall come, John Ball, when that dream of thine shall this one day be, shall be a thing that man shall talk of soberly, and as a thing soon to come about, as even with thee they talk of the villeins becoming tenants paying their lord quid-rent; therefore, hast thou done well to hope it . . . and thy name shall abide by thy hope in those days to come, and thou shall not be forgotten.¹⁵