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Planning Chaos: The Foundations and Organization of the 1381 Peasants' Revolt

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PLANNING CHAOS: THE FOUNDATIONS AND ORGANIZATION OF THE 1381
PEASANTS' REVOLT

By

Michael Robert Bartels

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For Dr. Thomas Grzebien, my diligent advisor

For my supportive parents Robert & Ruth

For my brother Daniel

And for my best friend Michael J. Maneri

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INTRODUCTION

Wherefore the commons rose against [Robert Belknap] and came before him to tell him that he was a traitor to the king and kingdom and was maliciously proposing to undo them by the use of the false inquests taken before him. Accordingly they made him swear on the Bible that never again would he hold such sessions nor act as a justice in such inquests. And they forced him to tell them the names of all the jurors. They captured all of these jurors that they could, beheaded them and threw their houses to the ground. And Sir Robert travelled home as quickly as possible. Afterwards...fifty thousand of the commons gathered, going to the various manors and townships of those who would not rise with them, throwing their buildings to the ground and setting them ablaze.¹

On May 30, 1381, a newly recruited tax commissioner summoned several English townships to pay their dues in Brentwood. When the township of Fobbing resisted this man, John Bampton, he threatened legal retribution. Fobbing then rallied the townships of Corringham and Stanford-le-Hope to resist as well. Bampton attempted to arrest the spokesmen who appeared to direct this, but was overpowered and driven back to London. After an appeal for help, Chief Justice Robert Belknap returned to the site to avenge the commissioner. The towns' spokesmen declared Belknap a traitor to the realm and an enemy to the king and commons. They declared the same of John Bampton's clerks, killing them as traitors to the king, and did the same to all lawyers and jurors who fell within their reach in the following days.²

Within the space of a week, the working classes of southeast England revolted against the actions of officials whom they perceived as enemies of their king, Richard II. The king was not perceived as an enemy to the resistance but rather as an ally to their grievances victimized by

¹ "The Outbreak of the Revolt according to the 'Anonimale Chronicle'" in *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, ed. R. B. Dobson (London, UK: St. Martin's Press. 1970). 125.

² *Ibid.*, 125.

corrupt counsel. Government officials suspected of contributing to this corruption met sudden deaths at the hands of mobs who destroyed their property. What the *Anonimale Chronicle* records here is only the first of many events which comprised the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.

In the late spring and early summer of 1381, a cascade of targeted violence swept southeastern England. It was neither the first nor last revolt by the lower strata of a European society. In 1358, the Jacquerie preceded the English movement by over two decades.³ A number of similar risings came after 1381, some inspired by it.⁴ The English uprising failed, at least initially, and did not accomplish its extreme goal of ending serfdom, though it discouraged further taxation.⁵ The revolt fell short in these respects, but remains the first popular uprising in which laborers, united by common grievances, threatened England's basic social hierarchy.⁶ The newly financially independent rustic population, now resembling a budding lower middle class, possessed more financial resources and legal savvy in the late 14th century than in previous centuries, enabling a nationally organized and targeted revolt for the first time.⁷ Jean Froissart, a Flemish chronicler who authored the most colorful, though perhaps not the most accurate, account of 1381, wrote: "It was because of the abundance and prosperity in which the common people then lived that this rebellion broke out".⁸

³ Jonathan Sumption, *The Hundred Years' War, Volume III: Divided Houses* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 419.

⁴ Alastair Dunn, *The Peasants' Revolt: England's Failed Revolution of 1381* (Stroud: Tempest Publishing, 2004), 11-12.

⁵ Richard W Kaeuper, "Peasants' Rebellion" in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages: Volume 9*. (New York: Scribner, 1989), 480.

⁶ Dunn, *Peasants' Revolt*, 12.

⁷ Dan Jones, *Summer of Blood: England's First Revolution*. (New York: Penguin, 2016), 16-17.

⁸ Jean Froissart, *Chronicles*. Trans. Geoffrey Brereton (London: Penguin Group, 1978), 211.

More than a breakdown in central and local governance, the uprising symbolized a primitive middle class outgrowing the old order and searching for something new. Without the insights of modern social sciences, however, the educated of late medieval Europe developed their own theories about the rising's origins. Contemporaries proposed numerous contrasting and, by modern standards, simplistic theories: "a sign from God, the work of Satan, a fit of lunacy, a monkish plot, a heretic crusade, a city siege and, in the words of the French chronicler Jean Froissart, 'a rustic tragedy'."⁹ The rising of so many in such a short time confused medieval observers. To some contemporaries, it could only be explained supernaturally. This uncertainty bred fear of the future, prompting Froissart to write: "Never was any land or realm in such great danger as England at that time."¹⁰

The English uprising's French predecessor was the Jacquerie. Scholarship remembers this continental disturbance as more of an indiscriminate riot than a targeted rebellion: "The rebels seemed to act without clear warning and lashed out against all the privileged-men, women, and children-in an awesome, if temporary, surge of killing and destruction."¹¹ The 1381 English revolt differed from the French in that it targeted specific institutions involved in the collection of taxes, enforcement of labor laws and judicial activity.¹² That some areas rose against specific legal targets at first call also indicates coordination by individuals who thoroughly understood the system of feudal governance.¹³

⁹ Jones, *Summer of Blood*, 14-15.

¹⁰ Froissart, *Chronicles*, 211.

¹¹ Kaeuper, "Peasants' Rebellion", 477-78.

¹² *Ibid.*, 480.

¹³ Dr. Charles Oman, *The Great Revolt of 1381* (New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1968), 33.

In spite of the targeted nature of the revolt, 1381 persists in popular memory as little more than a second Jacquerie in a different kingdom, a spontaneous uprising of anarchic peasants against the abusers of a legally constituted government, and in medieval chroniclers' accounts as a rebellion by rustic and uneducated commoners against the noble and pious. Along with chroniclers and historians, poets and playwrights' writings on the subject have also styled the revolt in accord with their own times' sensibilities. Ten years after the revolt, Geoffrey Chaucer's "Nun's Priest's Tale" alluded to one of its mythologized leaders: "So hideous was the noise-God bless us all/Jack Straw and all his followers in their brawl/Were never half so shrill, for all their noise/When they were murdering those Flemish boys, /As that day's hue and cry upon the fox."¹⁴ The fox, analogous in the fabliaux to Satan in the biblical book of Genesis, appears in "the month in which the world began/March, the first month, when God created man".¹⁵ The month again ties him to Satan. The cock of the barnyard sports a lavish, colorful display that would have been common to the nobles of the day.¹⁶ The fox, just like the rebels who claimed allegiance to King Richard II, or alternatively like the greedy officials the rebels imagined to be his court, boasts his allegiance to the rooster, which prompts the narrator to exclaim: "There's many a sycophant/And flatterer that fill your courts with cant/And give more pleasure with their zeal forsooth/Than he who speaks in soberness and truth."¹⁷ The story suggests that the pride of the aristocrats, such as John of Gaunt, led to the rebellion. Considering that King Richard II was fourteen at the time, the moral would not apply to

¹⁴ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, Trans. Nevill Coghill (New York: Penguin Books, 1951), 229-230.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 224.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 215.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 227-228.

him so much as the progression of monarchs who preceded him. The same cannot be said of his fully matured advisors.

One chronicler with connections to the “Flemish boys” referred to by Chaucer, Jean Froissart, played down the poll tax and blamed Londoners for inciting the revolt, drawing from his own experiences with movements in Flanders as a point of comparison.¹⁸ Elizabethan actors two centuries later performed plays about the rebellion, such as one which emphasized Wat Tyler’s Kentish force in a 1587 work which alluded to an artisanal uprising in 1586.¹⁹ Centuries later, Charles Oman’s work, which largely came to define modern scholarship on the subject, opens with an analogy to the contemporary British Empire’s colonial preoccupations with the 1857 Sepoy Rebellion in India.²⁰ He framed the movement as “the standing quarrel between employer and employed,”²¹ defaulting to the mindset of a rapidly industrializing 19th century world. In 2009, with his popular *Summer of Blood: England’s First Revolution*, Dan Jones contextualized the rebellion in modern terms: “it took aim at what ordinary people in England saw as a long and worsening period of corrupt, incompetent government and a wholesale failure of what we would today call social justice.”²² The term “social justice”, while absent from the chroniclers’ accounts and most medieval texts, resonates with discourse in modern politics and academia. Most secondary sources on the matter contextualize the rebellion within their own frame of reference.

¹⁸ R. B. Dobson, *The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1970), 137.

¹⁹ Adkins, Mary Grace Muse Adkins, "A Theory About "The Life and Death of Jack Straw" in *The University of Texas Studies in English* 28, (1949: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20775995>.), 59-60.

²⁰ Oman, *Great Revolt of 1381*, 2.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

²² Jones, *Summer of Blood*, 4.

These varied interpretations offer a diversity of viewpoints which ultimately enrich our understanding of the dynamics which drove the events of 1381.

This thesis will focus, when possible, on primary sources, the most reliable of which is the *Anonimalle Chronicle*. The unnamed *Anonimalle* author is the most trustworthy authority on the events of 1381, particularly as they related to Richard II and the chaos in London. He likely witnessed the final three days of the London revolt in person: “The range and depth of his knowledge is unrivalled and it seems virtually certain that he was an eye-witness, probably in the king’s entourage, of many of the episodes he describes.”²³ Outside evidence also confirms many assertions that he makes.²⁴ Consequently, his accounts of events in London, and especially his accounts of Richard II’s perspective, are generally the most trustworthy of the primary sources.

Jean Froissart is the chronicler whose background is best known. Born in Valenciennes, Froissart came from a bourgeois background that tended towards a pro-French bias and a contempt for the peasantry, possibly to please his aristocratic audience. He was also a poet and a traveler who traversed much of western Europe throughout his lifetime.²⁵ While more inventive in his account than other authors, he provides religious context to the rebellion. His analysis focused on the religious dynamics of the revolt, providing ample discussion of the religious background of the rebels not found in other sources. He relied on local connections to bolster his knowledge of events, combining eyewitness accounts with official accounts to create a narrative that remains imperfect yet unique. Again, this provided him with access to information not found in the other

²³ Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 155.

²⁴ “Outbreak...Anonimalle” in *Peasants' Revolt*, 123.

²⁵ Deborah A. Fraioli, *Joan of Arc and the Hundred Years War* (London: Greenwood Press, 2005). 96.

chronicles. Of his accounts, that of the Peasants' Revolt is one of the most impressive, and so, although he sometimes falters in accuracy, Froissart cannot be ignored in any analysis of 1381.²⁶

Thomas Walsingham's *Chronica Maiora* offers ample moral commentary to the rebels' actions. The Benedictine monk had personal interest in slandering the rebels, who attacked his abbey in St. Albans.²⁷ In light of this, he portrayed the movement within the framework of supernatural forces. Walsingham described "a mass peasant rising, at first alarmingly successful because it met with no organized opposition".²⁸ To Walsingham, the rising was in the divine order, "a punishment for [England's] sins."²⁹ Despite his hardness of attitude towards the rising, his work cannot be cast aside lightly; Walsingham was himself probably an eyewitness to the rebellion, albeit not with the same level of access as the *Anonimalle* author; he would have been among the monks coerced into joining the rebel mobs entering London from St Albans.³⁰

Henry Knighton's *Chronicon*, in contrast, views the rebels in a more sympathetic light, focusing as the *Anonimalle* did on the poll tax as its chief motive.³¹ He, like Walsingham, wrote from an abbey during the time of the revolt, St. Mary's in Leicester, although he died in 1396 before being able to finish this work. He portrays John of Gaunt more favorably than the other chronicles, possibly because Gaunt was Earl of Leicester as well as Duke of Lancaster.³² Knighton

²⁶ Froissart, *Chronicles*, 15-17.

²⁷ Thomas Walsingham, trans. David Preest & James G. Clark, *The Chronica Maiora of Thomas Walsingham* (Woodbridge: the Boydell Press, 2005). 131-2.

²⁸ Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 131.

²⁹ Walsingham, *Maiora*, 120.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 120N.

³¹ Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 135.

³² Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Henry Knighton" in *Britannica.com* (Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 2018). Accessed July 20, 2018.

also acts as an authority on Thomas Baker of Fobbing.³³ This man's initial involvement is corroborated by another source, the *Eulogium Historiarum*.³⁴ Knighton's sympathetic treatment of the rebels, as well as the larger details of his account, should be contrasted with other sources, but it must be observed that Knighton wrote the relevant section and therefore attached it to his name.³⁵

While these four chronicles are the most commonly discussed sources on 1381, non-narrative instruments and surviving legal documents such as jurors' indictments dating from after the suppression of the revolt, the *Eulogium*, the *Polychronicon*'s excerpt on the subject, and records of other official inquiries all deserve attention as well. Outside this body of evidence, researchers lack many statistical records from 1381. Most that existed were lost due to the rebels' destruction of many legal records, except for those used in their own communication.³⁶ Loss of these records deprives historian of potentially precious evidence relevant to the events of 1381 even as it points to the focused nature of the rebel actions.

Many of the primary sources discussed in this work are drawn from R. B. Dobson's *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, an anthology of 18th and 19th century material upon which many modern secondary authorities rely for the chronicles, minor documents and commentary it offers on the primary sources. Dobson's work re-opened the field of study for future researchers such as Alastair Dunn, Dan Jones and Juliet Barker, all of whom I cite extensively in these pages.³⁷ While Dobson's effort to summarize the primary source background to the revolt in one convenient work drastically

³³ Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 135.

³⁴ "The Peasants' Revolt according to the continuator of the 'Eulogium Historiarum'" in *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, ed. R. B. Dobson (London, UK: St. Martin's Press, 1970). 204.

³⁵ Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 6.

³⁶ Juliet Barker, *1381: The Year of the Peasants' Revolt*. Harvard University Press, 2014. 36-37.

³⁷ J. A. Raftis, "Review: The Peasants' Revolt of 1381" in *The Catholic Historical Review* 59, no. 2 (1973): 341-42.

eases the difficulty of research on this topic, the full primary sources, whenever possible, are contrasted with Dobson's excerpts for greater clarity.

Another reason for going beyond Dobson, whenever possible, is the variety that emerges in translations and different manuscripts of the chronicles, exemplified by the *Chronica Maiora* of Walsingham, specifically his account of Jack Straw. David Prest's translation, which is the primary source used in this thesis for Walsingham, translates the passage as "The people from St Albans were seen by a rebel leader called Jack Straw. He at once summoned them and called them over and they gave him their pledge that they would support King Richard and the commons."³⁸ Dobson's account and translation present a different situation. In the same paragraph describing the burning of St. John's Hospital, Dobson's translation reads: "*I myself* saw men summoned and forced before one of the leaders of the rebels, called 'John Strawe', who made them promise that they would adhere to King Richard and the commons."³⁹ Prest, fortunately, qualifies his account with a note confirming Walsingham's presence for the events which he recorded.⁴⁰ Accounts such as these demonstrate the potentiality for translations to mix facts, such as this one, where a single clarification establishes one of the few confirmations of Straw's existence. For this reason, other translations, when applicable, have been compared to Dobson's, and vice versa.

Secondary sources, such as Juliet Barker's *1381: The Year of the Peasants' Revolt*, Charles Oman's *The Great Revolt of 1381*, Jonathan Sumption's *The Hundred Years War*, Nigel Saul's *Richard II*, Alastair Dunn's *The Great Rising of 1381*, Dan Jones's *Summer of Blood* and others have also informed my reading of the primary source material and interpretation of the revolt's

³⁸ Walsingham, *Maiora*. 124.

³⁹ Thomas Walsingham, "The Rebels in London according to Thomas Walsingham" in *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, ed. R. B. Dobson (London: St. Martin's Press, 1970), 170. Emphasis mine.

⁴⁰ Walsingham, *Maiora*, 120N.

events. While source matter on the Peasants' Revolt has its limitations, and we have not been able to access all of the original literature from the time of the revolt, we do have enough information for an informed inquiry into exactly how the rebellion was organized and what roles the leaders played. Because the Kentish and Essex rebels were the first to take violent action, this work will primarily focus on them. I mean to explore the ways in which the peasants' revolt was more than a reaction to taxes, and was instead an organized resistance to the perceived perversions of the law and its enforcers, both secular and religious, resentment against which had accumulated for decades. I will also explore how the rise and fall of organizer Wat Tyler impacted the revolt's successes and failures in attaining its goals.

CHAPTER I: THE REVOLT

At this time the commons of southern England suddenly rose in two groups, one in Essex and the other in Kent. They directed their evil actions against the duke of Lancaster and the other lords of the realm because of the exceptionally severe tenths and fifteenths and other subsidies lightly conceded in parliaments and extortionately levied from the poor people. These subsidies did nothing for the profit of the kingdom but were spent badly and deceitfully to the great impoverishment of the commons – and it was for this reason, as you will now hear, that the commons rose.⁴¹

The infamous events began with an attempted collection of taxes. Between 1377 and 1380, parliament enacted several new taxes in England to fund the continual war against France, which we would today call the Hundred Years' War. Of these, the Northampton tax, approved in November 1380 and collected in 1381, delivered the most unbearable blow.⁴² John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster, had devoured the revenues of the first tax with unsuccessful wartime expeditions. A second tax, while more carefully and fairly implemented, proved insufficient in collecting its projected revenue.⁴³ By November of 1380, parliament took notice of the laboring classes' growing wealth and placed upon them a universal tax further funding the war effort. Before this, taxes had barely touched them, and the laborers themselves had no voice in the parliament that instituted the tax.⁴⁴ Now, a flat tax of three groats per laborer tripled the first tax in 1377 and ignored the carefully graduated tax of 1379. The Northampton Parliament urged

⁴¹ "Outbreak...Anonimalle" in *Peasants' Revolt*, 123.

⁴² Kaeuper, "Peasants' Rebellion", 480.

⁴³ Jones, *Summer of Blood*, 20-21.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 30-32.

wealthy landowners to help the poor voluntarily, which had the net effect of doing nearly nothing.⁴⁵ The laboring peasant class and artisanal classes, already hostile to a government that sought to keep them relatively poor through labor laws, were enraged by the imposition of yet another restrictive measure to fund what they saw as a failing war. More importantly, while the taxpayers saw no results from campaigns in France, they witnessed ample results in the palaces and properties of advisors to the King, most prominently in John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster. The rebellion emerged in areas within a few days' walk of London. Londoners themselves expressed some of the strongest sympathies towards the rebels. This may have stemmed from the perception, near the seat of government, that ministers and officials were gleaning profits off of a war tax at the expense of national security. The Northampton Poll Tax, in light of this corruption, would have only further confirmed their preconceptions, and so the stage for rebellion was set.⁴⁶

The government also assigned new commissioners to enforce the latest tax. Royal officials, accusing the old collectors of corruption, sent new commissioners to supervise local officials and scope out fraud. These agents resorted to extreme means to ascertain whether the peasants of England individually qualified for higher rates of pay.⁴⁷ To add insult to injury, the new commissioners came from the central government rather than locally, a measure to prevent collusion.⁴⁸ The accusations of corruption were grounded in reality. Laborers seeking to evade taxes hid their female dependents, which would explain a sudden majority of men in village

⁴⁵ Nigel Saul, *Richard II* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 56.

⁴⁶ Sumption, *Hundred Years War*, 419.

⁴⁷ Henry Knighton, "The Outbreak of the Revolt according to Henry Knighton" in *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, ed. R. B. Dobson (London: St. Martin's Press, 1970), 135.

⁴⁸ Sumption, *Hundred Years War*, 419.

populations and the disappearance of some 450,000 taxpayers between 1377 and 1381.⁴⁹ This might have been believable in 1351, after a major plague, but not in 1381. In some villages, more than half of the former taxpayers had vanished from the records, which indicated gross evasion of the collectors.⁵⁰ Eligibility for collection hinged partly on the marital status of women; consequently, one prominent means of evasion was to list married women as unmarried. To counter this means of evading taxes, the collectors, on at least one occasion, “shamelessly lifted the young girls to test whether they had enjoyed intercourse with men.”⁵¹ Friends and family paid the tax outright to save their colleagues from molestation, but the gross violation of the people’s dignity “much provoked the people” to anger.⁵²

Whether or not the egregious actions of which these commissioners were accused initially reflected isolated or extreme incidences, the commissioners evidently employed similarly aggressive methods of investigation with increasing frequency in the weeks and months to follow, further stoking public anger. In April of 1381, London sheriffs refused collection of the tax, afraid that it would provoke disorder.⁵³ On May 30, the tension broke into violence when villagers from Fobbing, Corringham and Stanford-le-Hope confronted the new commissioner, John Bampton, and drove him back to London from Brentwood.⁵⁴ One man, Thomas Baker of Fobbing, called for

⁴⁹ Saul, *Richard II*, 56-57.

⁵⁰ Sumption, *Hundred Years War*, 420.

⁵¹ Knighton, “Outbreak...Knighton” in *Peasants’ Revolt*, 135.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 135.

⁵³ Saul, *Richard II*, 57.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

the protest and acted as their spokesman. News of the disruption spread throughout eastern England, beginning the revolt.⁵⁵

The government, at first, seemed ignorant of the magnitude of the problem it faced. When news reached other royal officials that about a hundred defiant men had stoned Bampton's party out of Brentwood, the government sent Chief Justice Robert Belknap and a small entourage to punish the offenders. They arrived on June 2. The emboldened Brentwood resistance, now part of a movement reaching Kent and even some Londoners, seized Belknap and executed three jurors.⁵⁶ As this came to pass, another defiant leader, Abel Ker, mobilized a small armed force to the south and took Lesnes Abbey hostage in Kent.⁵⁷ Ker then moved quickly to Essex, crossing the Thames for reinforcements before crossing back to Dartford.⁵⁸ There, the party under Ker joined with yet another local leader, Robert Cave, who had already roused his own armed band to action. Like Thomas of Fobbing, Robert Cave had been a baker by trade, and had organized his resistance against the commissioners. Unlike Thomas of Fobbing, however, Cave's band's motivation was to avenge the arrest of a Gravesend collector, Robert Bellyng who had attempted, and failed, to resist the collectors as Baker had done.⁵⁹

After freeing the imprisoned Gravesend collector, Cave and Ker met with other leaders at Maidstone to decide how best to proceed from their position, including the selection of a more centralized leader to organize their movements.⁶⁰ By the end of that day, only a week after the first

⁵⁵ Knighton, "Outbreak...Knighton" in *Peasants' Revolt*, 135-36.

⁵⁶ Oman, *The Great Revolt*, 32-33.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁵⁸ Saul, *Richard II*, 62.

⁵⁹ Philip Lindsay and Groves, Reg. *The Peasants' Revolt 1381* (New York: Hutchinson & Co., 1951), 79.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 81.

stirrings in Brentwood, the rebel mob elected the mysterious Wat Tyler “to maintain them and act as their counsellor.”⁶¹ Tyler, possibly drawing from military experience on the continent, disciplined the mob into an organized movement with a solid chain of command.⁶² The movement now had one leader with a firm set of goals who could direct it, which at this point surpassed resistance to taxes. Only two more days passed before Tyler’s man departed towards their first target: Canterbury. Along the way they violated the homes and properties of lawyers, landlords, government officials and any and all ties to the hated John of Gaunt, on whose behalf the provocative taxes had been demanded.⁶³ This was a pattern followed throughout the entire revolt, which targeted any records, persons or properties associated with the financial or judicial systems. The most specific targets were sealed with green wax, a sign that they would have been connected with tax collection.⁶⁴

On the morning of June 10, Tyler’s army breached Canterbury, seeking another hated royal official, Archbishop and Chancellor Simon Sudbury.⁶⁵ Although, upon arrival, they found that Sudbury was absent and in London, rebels under Tyler’s command nonetheless articulated a series of demands in the cathedral: “Four thousand of them entered St. Thomas’s mother-church at the time of High Mass and, after kneeling, all cried to the monks with one voice asking them to elect a monk to be archbishop of Canterbury, ‘for he who is archbishop now is a traitor and will be beheaded for his iniquity’.”⁶⁶ Once established in the town, the rebels also organized from another

⁶¹ Oman, *The Great Revolt*, 35.

⁶² Oman, *The Great Revolt*, 36.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 38-39.

⁶⁴ Sumption, *Hundred Years War*, 422.

⁶⁵ Jean Froissart, “The Outbreak of the Revolt according to Froissart” in *The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381*, ed. R. B. Dobson (London: St. Martin’s Press, 1970), 139.

⁶⁶ “Outbreak...Anonimale” in *Peasants’ Revolt*, 127.

church, St. John's, to destroy legal records.⁶⁷ Following Abel Ker's example, the rebels summoned local officials and forced them to swear fealty to King Richard II and the commons, followed by another search for and execution of alleged traitors to the realm.⁶⁸ Froissart's account explained, in the rebels' words, how and why they sacked the Archbishop's palace: "This Chancellor of England got this furniture on the cheap. Soon he will have to render us an account of the revenue of England and the huge sums he has levied since the King's coronation."⁶⁹

The following day, royal messengers arrived in Canterbury. The rebels received them surprisingly well. The emissaries exchanged words with Tyler, who explained the mob's fears and aims. The messengers, who had been sent from the royal court at Windsor, agreed to a meeting with the rebels at Blackheath on the king's behalf.⁷⁰ They proceeded there as soon as they could, again under Tyler's command, for their first audience with Richard himself by June 13.⁷¹ Froissart's account adds that the rebels already intended to advance on London after the reverse pilgrimage to Canterbury. This explains why, although the royal messengers spoke to Tyler, the larger forces from other counties also arrived at the same time to surround the city.⁷²

Froissart recounts a slightly different view of the days and hours preceding the Blackheath meeting. The route he records the rebels taking bypassed Maidstone, choosing instead to take a

⁶⁷ "The Rebels in Canterbury according to Jurors' Presentments", trans. W. E. Flaherty, in *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, ed. R. B. Dobson (London: St. Martin's Press, 1970), 147.

⁶⁸ Jones, *Summer of Blood*, 64.

⁶⁹ Froissart, *Chronicles*, 214.

⁷⁰ Jones, *Summer of Blood*, 65-66.

⁷¹ Alastair Dunn, *The Great Rising of 1381* (Charleston: Tempus Publishing, 2002), 78.

⁷² Froissart, *Chronicles*, 214.

northern route along the banks of the Thames through Rochester and Dartford. This is important because, in Rochester, they conscripted the aid of another significant figure:

When they reached Rochester, they were greeted with enthusiasm, because the people of that town were of their party. They went to the castle and took prisoner its captain, Sir John Newton, who was also the governor of the town. They told him: 'You must come with us to be our leader and captain and do whatever we ask of you.' The knight tried to refuse, giving several reasons, but it was no good. They told him 'Sir John, if you will not do as we wish, you are a dead man.' The knight saw all those men in furious mood getting ready to kill him. He feared death and obeyed them, joining their march against his will.⁷³

In other accounts, the rebels seized Newton when they visited Rochester under Cave's direction.⁷⁴

Whenever he joined their party, however, Sir John Newton later returns in Froissart's version of the Blackheath meeting. In his account, instead of receiving royal emissaries at Canterbury, the rebels send Sir John to plead that the King respond, otherwise threatening to murder Newton's children. Newton himself became a hostage the following day, to ensure that the King would arrive and speak to the rebels, which he did.⁷⁵ The *Eulogium Historiarum* claims that, instead of Sir John Newton, the Rochester bishop was made to relate the rebels' concerns and desire for a meeting, this time convinced to do so of his own volition by "the tiler", referring to Wat Tyler, the rebels' organizer at that point. Either way, the *Eulogium* treats the Blackheath conference as the rebels' initiative.⁷⁶

The first indication that the Blackheath meeting on June 13 was doomed to fail came when, earlier on the day of the conference, King Richard II's council of advisors, including Archbishop Sudbury, set out on the Thames to meet the rebels instead of meeting on land. This arose from

⁷³ Ibid., 214-5.

⁷⁴ Froissart, *Chronicles*, 214-5

⁷⁵ Ibid., 216.

⁷⁶ "Eulogium" in *Peasants' Revolt*, 206.

concerns that a meeting without the separation of water would endanger their party; the immediate rebel call for the heads of some advisors in the king's barge confirmed this.⁷⁷ The fear such demands created was no doubt exacerbated when “[the rebels] all began to shout and raised such a din that it sounded as though all the devils in hell had been let loose.”⁷⁸ Fearing their intentions, Archbishop Sudbury recommended that the King avoid speaking to the rebels and risking a trap.⁷⁹ Any kind of clarifying communication would have been difficult, as only some of the rebels could even hear King Richard II shouting to them from his barge.⁸⁰ In the chaos, the exchange ended, having failed, by noon.⁸¹

After this failed attempt at negotiation, the rebels stormed London in the afternoon, receiving aid from Londoners who saw the rebels as friends.⁸² Because Southwark was outside the city wall, the rebels attacked that neighborhood first, breaking open the Marshalsea prison as another Essex detachment advanced from the north. London Mayor William Walworth ordered the city gates sealed and the drawbridge of London Bridge lifted. Despite these measures, the defenses of the city proved ineffective. Angry city dwellers compromised their integrity: “The hands of the bridge keepers appear to have been forced by an organized rising within the city.”⁸³ The rebels' swollen numbers caused them to run short of supplies, especially food. Charles Oman speculates that many of them would have deserted upon reaching the city walls had sympathizers

⁷⁷ Saul, *Richard II*, 63.

⁷⁸ Froissart, *Chronicles*, 216.

⁷⁹ “Eulogium” in *Peasants' Revolt*, 206.

⁸⁰ Froissart, *Chronicles*, 216.

⁸¹ Saul, *Richard II*, 63.

⁸² “Eulogium” in *Peasants' Revolt*, 206.

⁸³ Sumption, *Hundred Years War*, 424.

within the city not allowed the rebels to advance further. Walter Sibley, the alderman at London Bridge, dismissed aid offered to him to guard the bridge, then allowed the rebels to pass. William Tonge opened his gates to the Essex men from the north, but whether he sided with the rebels or acted out of fear is unknown.⁸⁴ Londoners then replenished the rebels with food and drink.⁸⁵

Wat Tyler, John Balle and Jack Straw targeted the Savoy, John of Gaunt's palace, as their first goal after entering the city.⁸⁶ The rebels displayed the restraint and focus of their organization in their attack on the most fantastic residence in England, intending not to loot but to methodically destroy the edifice and everything in it.⁸⁷ They discarded valuables into the Thames to differentiate themselves from thieves. The *Eulogium* takes this claim a step further, testifying that the locals had destroyed the Savoy before Tyler's men had reached it, although given the restraint they showed, this proved unlikely.⁸⁸ Just because the rebels had well formulated overall goals, however, did not mean that particular personal desires and grievances never crept into their actions. The *Anonimalle* author observed such motives among Londoners seeping into the rebel mob, who acted more out of hatred towards John of Gaunt than rebel sympathy.⁸⁹ In response to these issues, according to a short account from the *Polychronicon*, the rustics went to extreme lengths to ensure the compliance of their new urban allies: "the rustics did not dare to steal anything of value

⁸⁴ Oman, *Great Revolt*, 55-56.

⁸⁵ Froissart, *Chronicles*, 217

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁸⁷ Sumption, *Hundred Years War*, 425.

⁸⁸ "Eulogium" in *Peasants' Revolt*, 206.

⁸⁹ "The Rebels in London according to the 'Anonimalle Chronicle'" in *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*. Trans. W. E. Flaherty, ed. R. B. Dobson (London: St. Martin's Press, 1970). 157.

secretly; because if anyone had been caught in the act of stealing some object he would have been dragged off for execution without trial or judgment.”⁹⁰

By June 14, rustics and city dwellers alike had surrounded the Tower of London, and many targets took refuge inside, including Archbishop Simon Sudbury, John of Gaunt’s son Henry, Joan of Kent, mother of Richard II, and the king himself. Realizing the dire situation, Richard called a meeting with some of the rebel leaders in a field called Mile End.⁹¹ The meeting, while called by Richard, was executed with the counsel of his advisors: “The wiser heads, such as the Earl of Salisbury, told the King: ‘Sire, if you can appease them by fair words, that would be the better course. Promise them everything they are asking.’”⁹² The advisors aimed to draw the rebels outside the city walls and away from the tower. The advisors such as Sudbury could then escape. The plan almost succeeded; Archbishop Sudbury procured a boat during the Mile End meeting, however rebels guarding the Tower forced him to retreat back inside.⁹³

The rebels met with the king on the morning of June 14 at Mile End. Here they presented a solid list of goals: “Their main demands were the immediate abolition of serfdom; the repeal of all laws ‘except the statute of Winchester’ (which dealt with defence against foreign invasion); the end of the Statute of Laborers; and a universal rent for agricultural land fixed by law at four pence an acre. A number of lesser demands followed.”⁹⁴ These demands largely fell in line with

⁹⁰ “The Peasants’ Revolt According to the Monk of Westminster” in *The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381*, ed R. B. Dobson (London: St. Martin’s Press, 1970), 200.

⁹¹ Henry Knighton, “The Rebels in London according to Henry Knighton” in *The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381*. Trans. W. E. Flaherty, ed. R. B. Dobson (London: St. Martin’s Press, 1970), 182.

⁹² Froissart, *Chronicles*, 217.

⁹³ Oman, *Great Revolt*, 62-63. Oman’s writings state that the orders came from Tyler himself, but they also place Tyler at the Mile End meeting. The *Anonimale Chronicle*, while the most trustworthy and complete record of the revolt, is the only primary source record to involve Tyler at all with Mile End, even placing him as the spokesperson. Every other record mentioning Mile End removes Tyler from the scenario entirely. Rebels guarded the tower, but whether the orders came from Tyler, who might not have known about Mile End, is unknown.

⁹⁴ Sumption, *Hundred Years War*, 427.

commoners' concerns before the rebellion: a poorly prosecuted war, a final conclusion to serfdom and the hated Statute of Laborers' unenforceable wage controls, instituted thirty years prior in response to a labor shortage. Even when the king made these enormous concessions, the *Anonimalle* author records that the rebels pressed on with another demand for the heads of "traitors" within the royal court. This was the only demand Richard contested, imploring the rebels to respect the due process of law; "all traitors throughout the realm of England should be arrested and brought before him, and justice should be done on them as the law directed."⁹⁵

After this meeting, many moderate rebels, satisfied with the concessions and probably still fatigued from their two-week journey, dispersed. Clearly, some of the group took the meeting seriously and saw Richard's concessions as an end to their fight.⁹⁶ Froissart's account of the meeting offers a questionably positive account of a benevolent king serving justice to his subjects:

These words did much to calm those humble people, that is, the raw, simple, good folk who had flocked there without really knowing what they wanted, and they shouted: 'Hurrah! That's all we ask for!' So these people were placated and began to go back to London. The King said another thing which pleased them greatly: "Between you, good men of Kent, you shall have one of my banners, and you of Essex one, and you of Sussex another, and those of Bedford yet another...I pardon you everything you have done until now, provided that you follow my banners and go back to your own places in the way I told you."⁹⁷

For some of the rebels, however, even these drastic promises were not enough, nor did they recognize the rest of the Mile End meeting. Allegedly encouraging these were Wat Tyler, John Balle and Jack Straw, who declared that the concessions were not enough to appease them.⁹⁸ About

⁹⁵ Oman, *Great Revolt*, 64-65. The *Anonimalle* Author claims that this was Tyler's personal request, but every other record of the meeting, including those which exclude Tyler, include this demand and some kind of response from Richard II. Whether or not Wat Tyler attended the meeting at Mile End, somebody raised this concern and Richard II addressed it.

⁹⁶ Sumption, *Hundred Years War*, 427.

⁹⁷ Froissart, *Chronicles*, 221.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 221.

four hundred rebels entered the Tower of London, which had lowered its defenses awaiting Richard's return, and murdered many of the officials inside. After this, Tyler led the rebels around London, seeking out lawyers, tax commissioners and anybody associated with John of Gaunt, murdering them and mounting their heads on stakes around London Bridge.⁹⁹

As they did this, rumor spread through London that Richard had given his blessing to Tyler's actions. Royal scribes sent the call to seek out traitors around London as a proclamation, unintentionally legitimizing the anarchy unfolding around them. Faced with the vengeful swords of Tyler, Balle and their followers, Londoners hid in terror, afraid that an obscure or perceived tie to the hated Duke of Lancaster, or some other justification, would bring the accusers to their front doors. The rebels, by now, had split. The moderates headed home, their mission complete. The most extreme remained and saw the Mile End concessions as a sign of weakness rather than kindness.¹⁰⁰ As an example of the mayhem, an order spread about the city to murder any known Flemings found; as foreign merchants, royal officials had favored them at the expense of locals. Suspects were made to say "bread and cheese". If they replied with incorrect pronunciation, they faced death on the spot. In one well-documented case, a man by the name of John Greenfield questioned why some of the more high-profile murders had taken place. This ironically earned him enough suspicion to also be murdered.¹⁰¹ Even Wat Tyler was rumored to have allowed himself a moment of personal revenge against his alleged former commander in France, Richard Lyons.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Sumption, *Hundred Years War*, 427-28.

¹⁰⁰ Jones, *Summer of Blood*, 125-126.

¹⁰¹ Oman, *Great Revolt*, 69.

¹⁰² Froissart, *Chronicles*, 217.

Barker's account observes that Lyons could not have served in France, calling the episode a "typical Froissartian fabrication", although it still speaks to the anarchy of the day.¹⁰³

Facing an emboldened band of extremists, the king hid in the Royal Wardrobe with what remained of his court. William Walworth, who had proposed military actions against the rebel leaders, had protested Mile End; as the time passed and the blood ran thicker outside, his point of view gained more sympathy. Mile End became a more and more apparent mistake.¹⁰⁴ The court, now open to violent action, suggested that Richard call for another meeting with the rebels at Smithfield, also outside London. Within the city, the wealthier population, now driven closer to the King by fear of Tyler and his killers, was told to prepare for combat.¹⁰⁵

Richard, accompanied by Mayor Walworth, met with Tyler on June 15. Accounts vary but generally agree that Tyler's list of demands had expanded from the day before, now focusing on more intense versions of the previous day's demands and the disendowment of the Church. The *Anonimalle* writer, specifically, probably witnessed these events firsthand.¹⁰⁶ He claims that Tyler greeted King Richard as "brother", an affront to royal authority. He also demanded a jug of water and a flagon of ale. One of Richard's esquires heckled Tyler, who retaliated physically, only to be stabbed in the shoulder by Walworth. Froissart, Knighton, the *Anonimalle* and Walsingham all agree that Walworth struck the blow, making it one of the best corroborated details of the entire

¹⁰³ Barker, *1381*, 421.

¹⁰⁴ Jones, *Summer of Blood*, 128.

¹⁰⁵ Sumption, *Hundred Years War*, 428.

¹⁰⁶ Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 155.

rebellion.¹⁰⁷ Richard then rode out to the rebels and declared himself their new leader. He issued a general proclamation of mercy towards them, and sent knights to lead them home.¹⁰⁸

In this chaotic few minutes, sympathetic rebels somehow seized their dying leader and dragged him to the Hospital of St. Bartholomew for some kind of treatment of his wounds. Mayor Walworth soon found the leader in hiding, dragged him back to Smithfield, and beheaded him.¹⁰⁹ After the rebels reorganized, they would have realized that they were not uncontested; at a signal from Mayor Walworth, London's wealthier and better-armed loyalist retinues had surrounded the rebels. Soon Walworth himself had returned with Tyler's head, obtained from the Hospital of St. Bartholomew. The knights Richard sent to guide the remaining rebels home, at the king's orders, acted more as guards than guides. As they departed, King Richard commanded Walworth to don an armored basinet; the rebellion, though still raging in the countryside, had come to an end in London, and for executing the plan that ended it, Mayor Walworth would become a knight.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Saul, *Richard II*, 70-71.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 70-71.

¹⁰⁹ Lindsay, *Peasants' Revolt*, 131. Some evidence also mentions that Tyler might have been dragged to a church, not a hospital, before being found by Walworth.

¹¹⁰ Jones, *Summer of Blood*, 154-5.

CHAPTER II: PRECURSORS & CAUSES

Horrific and tragic though the high levels of mortality were for victims of the plague and their families, the financial circumstances of many of those who survived improved dramatically. As we shall see, shortage of manpower created opportunities for the ambitious and able to demand higher wages both in cash and in kind, to negotiate improved terms of employment (including better food), to exploit gaps in the market and to acquire more land.¹¹¹

The Peasants' Revolt of 1381, in and of itself, hardly lasted more than a month. Its social and economic roots formed decades before Thomas Baker of Fobbing raised his objections to John Bampton. A number of socioeconomic and political factors contributed not only to the grievances of the rebels, but to the wealth and status of the peasantry and England's subservient classes. These changes simultaneously uprooted many assumptions that reinforced the feudal order and invested in the population a greater ability to learn and coordinate action than ever before.

The Precedent of St Albans

The English lower classes had already expressed a desire to escape serfdom before 1381. In the years before the conflict, landholders recorded incidence of peasants neglecting their feudal obligations. Resistance rarely occurred in groups, but it did emerge from time to time during the fourteenth century.¹¹² One of the longest lasting cases actually emerged before plague ravaged Europe, in St. Albans, north of London. In 1314, locals refused to work with mills belonging to their abbey. In 1326, the locals revolted again, this time erecting a primitive guillotine and demanding recognition as townsmen. The *Domesday Book*, they claimed, identified them as burgesses who deserved special privileges not afforded to serfs. At the time, violence of the civil

¹¹¹ Barker, *1381*, 26.

¹¹² Dunn, *Great Rising*, 31.

war under Edward II spread to the town; locals besieged Abbot Hugh Eversdone's estate, but a county levy ended the physical resistance. Legal researchers, however, acquired an exemplification of the *Domesday Book* qualifying St Albans as a borough.¹¹³ Even before the Black Death exacerbated these conflicts, laborers knew that laws could be manipulated in favor of the laborers, and that a trend towards upward mobility had begun before the crisis. St Albans eventually became one of the most well-documented cases of the revolt in action, thanks to the work of chronicler Thomas Walsingham, who lived there to see it.¹¹⁴

Plagues and Labor Shortages

No factor contributed more to the social turbulence that led to the 1381 revolt than the Black Death, which swept through England from 1348 to 1349. Aside from social disruptions caused by fear of death, the pestilence nearly halved the population of England. This caused a labor shortage there and throughout Europe.¹¹⁵ In consequence, French peasants rose collectively a decade later in what became known as the Jacquerie. Like the 1381 revolt, historians blame it on shifts in the labor market brought about by the Black Death's thinning of the population, although English victories in France also played a role. Roving bands of soldiers, including recently unemployed English soldiers, only exacerbated the situation, giving military strength to a peasantry whom nobles had failed to protect from invaders. The Jacquerie, itself unprecedented even in France at the time, sparked fears of a similar revolt in England. Within the following three

¹¹³ Dunn, *Great Rising*, 32-33.

¹¹⁴ Walsingham, *Maiora*, 132N.

¹¹⁵ Dunn, *Great Rising*, 23.

decades, Tyler and his crew confirmed those fears.¹¹⁶ Unlike the Jacquerie, however, the 1381 revolt far surpassed the organization of any before it.

While the Black Death's ravaging of Europe destabilized the French labor market and agitated the peasantry, England experienced its own tensions between labor and capital. In the immediate aftermath of the Black Death, demand for field labor skyrocketed as supply declined. Peasants demanded higher prices for their now extremely valuable hands, prompting the 1351 Statute of Laborers to fix prices at pre-plague levels and furthermore prevent the peasants from denying labor when nobles requested it. Not only did the crackdown enrage the peasantry, but it also set unrealistic standards for the economy. Nobles who ignored the Statute of Laborers incentivized labor, disadvantaging those landowners who observed it, and causing both violations and punishment of violators to skyrocket. The statute, at best, was ineffective. At worst, it was unenforceable. In all cases, it was loathed.¹¹⁷

Three more outbreaks of plague, between 1361 and 1375 prevented population growth to assuage the labor shortage.¹¹⁸ As the population declined and stagnated, England also developed a need for more taxes. The Hundred Years' War approached a half-century in length with no signs of an immediate end, and England found itself financially drained of resources. By the late 1370s, parliaments resorted to new taxes on the lower classes to take advantage of their enriched status, the most inflammatory of which being the Northampton Parliament's poll tax in November of 1380. The tax was universally despised for its intrusiveness, flat but high rate of three groats per laborer, and reliance on outside commissioners to prevent tax evasion.¹¹⁹ For reference, a groat

¹¹⁶ Kaeuper, "Peasants' Rebellion", 477-8.

¹¹⁷ Jones, *Summer of Blood*, 14-15.

¹¹⁸ Barker, *1381*, 25.

¹¹⁹ Sumption, *Hundred Years War*, 419.

was valued at about four pennies in contemporary European currency.¹²⁰ It was also explicitly implemented to fund another French campaign in 1381, which infuriated laborers even more after the previous failures at the command of their hated governing officials, most notably the despised Duke of Lancaster, John of Gaunt.¹²¹

Gaunt and Sudbury: Figures of Growing Popular Resentment

John of Gaunt (1340-1399) embodied everything the rebels desired to change. During the actual revolt he was absent from London, conducting diplomacy in Scotland. Even in his absence, the rebels framed him as their primary foe. As the fourth son of Edward III and a potential heir to the throne, he was feared as a pretender when Richard II, his nephew, inherited it in 1377. He also led a failed military expedition to Bordeaux in 1373, which further exacerbated England's financial situation. The Savoy, his extravagant palace in London, stood as a public symbol of Gaunt's personal gain from the taxes even as he squandered them in military failure. It also represented the perceived privileges he gleaned from government help to foreign merchants against locals' desires.¹²² Although he had planned another expedition, for which he made payments on June 17 and 20, 1377, Edward III died on June 21, causing the paid for expedition to be cancelled.¹²³ Furthermore, three days after the King's death, the existing truce with France expired. France had prepared during the ceasefire to raze several of England's most prominent southern coastal ports, and French ships struck across the English Channel, at their first opportunity, wreaking havoc on

¹²⁰ Alan M. Stahl, "Groat" in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages: Volume 5*. (New York: Scribner, 1989), 680.

¹²¹ Anthony Goodman, *John of Gaunt: The Exercise of Princely Power in Fourteenth-Century Europe* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 77.

¹²² James L. Gillespie, "John of Gaunt" in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages, Volume 7* (New York: Scribner, 1986), 134.

¹²³ Goodman, *John of Gaunt*, 64-65.

the ports and their residents.¹²⁴ As all of this unfolded, John of Gaunt also faced a crisis in 1376 in which he acted in the interests of his friends and family, giving him a corrupt reputation in the years that followed.¹²⁵ Further compromising his image were his antipathetic relations with Church authorities, which included the invitation of John Wycliffe to London to call for confiscation of their property.¹²⁶ This included an episode of insults and threats hurled at the chief bishops of England during a convocation in St. Paul's Cathedral.¹²⁷ The Northampton poll tax in 1380 would itself have reinforced his reputation among the populace. Parliament also intended that funding for the French expedition would supply none other than Thomas of Woodstock, John of Gaunt's younger brother, who wintered his army in Brittany.¹²⁸ Thomas was also the newly created Earl of Buckingham, and his annuity depended on the success of the campaign.¹²⁹ Anyone who understood these connections would have seen the tax as a financial favor called for by John of Gaunt to bolster his family and friends.

The rebels' antipathy towards Gaunt was one of their driving motives. The 1380 Northampton Parliament which instituted its hated tax was moved outside of London at his request. Gaunt cited the "inveterate hatred" already present between Londoners and himself for the change, partly resulting from his campaign to execute Londoner John Kirkeby for the murder of a Genoese man.¹³⁰ The Kirkeby episode exemplified a government action validating the fears of the people;

¹²⁴ Barker, *1381*, 6-7.

¹²⁵ Goodman, *John of Gaunt*, 64-65.

¹²⁶ George Macaulay Trevelyan, *England in the Age of Wycliffe* (New York: Longmans Green & Co., 1929), 42.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 44-45.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹²⁹ Barker, *1381*, 15-16.

¹³⁰ Goodman, *John of Gaunt*, 77.

the merchant had promised the king advantages, and to bring trade to the port of Southampton, if he were allowed to use a new warehouse. Locals feared that these privileges would draw traders away from London. Two London merchants, one of whom was John Kirkby (or Kirkeby), murdered the merchant out of fear that government-sponsored privileges to a foreigner would ruin their markets. By siding with the Genoese merchant, John of Gaunt convinced the merchant classes of London that his own personal interest once again took precedent over that of theirs or their country.¹³¹ During the rebellion, Tyler and Straw's men made pilgrims to Canterbury swear opposition to John of Gaunt. Later, when Londoners obtained his jerkin, a piece of clothing, they used it to murder him in effigy.¹³²

While John of Gaunt symbolized everything hated in civil authority, religious discontent was directed at Archbishop Simon Sudbury. Far from being restricted to a clerical role, Sudbury, as part of standing tradition dating back to Thomas Becket two hundred years prior, was the chancellor of England at the time, one of the most important positions as an advisor directly adjacent to the king. The local population resented Sudbury's lavish Canterbury residence just as Londoners hated John of Gaunt's Savoy palace. Rebels touted its sacking as an excuse for the chancellor to give an account of exactly how much he had siphoned from tax revenue.¹³³ Exacerbating this discontent was the fact that Simon Sudbury had been selected as Chancellor in January 1380 precisely because his predecessor, Lord Scrope of Bolton, had failed to resolve the realm's finances with the previous graduated poll tax. Despite his selection being considered a victory for the Commons, he called for the hated flat tax in November of that same year.¹³⁴

¹³¹ Walsingham, *Maiora*, 90.

¹³² Goodman, *John of Gaunt*, 78-79.

¹³³ Froissart, *Chronicles*, 214.

¹³⁴ Trevelyan, *Wycliffe*, 100-101.

Gaunt had connections with John Wycliffe, a notable theologian of the time who would become most prominent after the revolt, hailed by some as a precursor to the Protestant Reformation. At the time, however, Wycliffe was one of the more prominent theologians of Oxford. He responded to the tension by calling for confiscation of Church property; his followers also despised the clerical opulence displayed by Sudbury. He had many such followers, including a significant number who accompanied him when making demands for disendowment of the Church against Sudbury in London in 1377. Ironically, John of Gaunt had invited Wycliffe to make these demands.¹³⁵ Even in the face of these threats, Sudbury responded lethargically when called by his colleagues in the clergy to denounce John of Gaunt for backing Wycliffe. His reluctance angered his contemporaries, who sought quick retribution against Wycliffe, and, by extension, Gaunt. Despite what the rebels and community thought of him, Sudbury believed that the Church should be open to criticism, and George Trevelyan stated that “he was no aristocrat, but a humble and peaceable servant of the Church”.¹³⁶ The resistance saw Gaunt, Sudbury and others like them as perverters of the justice that was supposed to rule over England’s government and church.

The Two-Sided Sword of Law

The St. Albans development previously mentioned is just one example of the tendency in this period towards a greater popular understanding of the rule of law. Peasant actions during the mid-fourteenth century, especially in the decade before the 1381 movement, indicated that common people saw the elite landowners, as opposed to law itself, as the main source of oppression. Laborers saw the legal system as a weapon which, if wielded skillfully, could be used

¹³⁵ Trevelyan, *Wycliffe*, 42-44.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

to uphold their rights. This resulted, in part, from politics in the years preceding the revolt. 1376, for instance, marked the first “Good Parliament”, which held John of Gaunt accountable to implement reforms in order to fund his wartime expeditions. Despite a number of concessions, such as the appointment of a new advisory council to Gaunt’s dying father, the parliament refused his requested tax anyway.¹³⁷ As the year drew to a close, communities began to employ legal counsel to secure copies of the *Domesday Book*. Between then and 1377, nearly a hundred villages requested such copies, hoping the legal document would prove the invalidity of lordship over their lands. To even attempt the process of an exemplification required an understanding of how law functioned that normally came only with wealth and influence.¹³⁸ As the continuing labor shortage enriched the peasants, some former serfs and artisans also gained familiarity with the legal system through education. Their unrest derived from a sense that the original, pure law had been corrupted.

Just because common people saw the potential utility of the law did not render it sacred to them. If anything, physical defiance of laws seen as unjust became more prominent in the years before 1381. Enforcement of the Statute of Laborers specifically often sparked resistance, sometimes violent. Usually, these disturbances were small, local riots that had no known connections between them. After 1377 brought a particularly destructive bout of these disturbances, the Commons of Richard II’s first Parliament gave accounts of “sworn associations to oppose the demands of their lords and...openly resisting the bailiffs of the manors. They voiced their fear of rural revolution ‘as happened some time ago in France’, even as they called for stronger measures of repression.”¹³⁹

¹³⁷ Barker, *1381*, 111.

¹³⁸ Jones, *Summer of Blood*, 16-17, Barker, *1381*, 66-67.

¹³⁹ Sumption, *Hundred Years War*, 419.

When, in 1380, the Northampton Parliament passed yet another tax on the peasantry, now at a flat rate irrespective of wealth, the laborers resorted to one last measure. When collection of the tax began in January 1381, returns fell far short of the expected amount. Sir Charles Oman, in his famed commentary on the revolt, agreed with the medieval officials that the dismal numbers were not merely the fault of individual peasant evasion: “The constables must have been either willing party to the fraud, or have been coaxed or forced into it by their neighbours.”¹⁴⁰ In response to these dismal returns and questionable circumstances, the local collectors were ordered to speed up their work. When the taxes continued to trickle in at a dismal rate, a new treasurer, Sir Robert Hales, prior of the Knights Hospitaller, was appointed on February 1.¹⁴¹ He reviewed the tax receipts and found flagrant evasion in each of the counties and towns.¹⁴² The receipts are preserved for us in the Lord Treasurer’s Remembrancer’s records, where any researcher can see the skewed numbers presented to Hales and the royal government. Despite the widespread destruction of most such data, these flawed numbers survived.¹⁴³

Seeking legal aid, some more conscientious, or perhaps cautious, collectors presented to the Parliament that they suspected widespread fraud and evasion, although given the tax accounts being presented, this was something that could be seen by anyone with knowledge of the numbers. On March 16, Hales appointed new commissioners to oversee the local collectors.¹⁴⁴ Knighton’s

¹⁴⁰ Oman, *Great Revolt*, 27.

¹⁴¹ Barker, *1381*, 31, 109, 197.

¹⁴² Jones, *Summer of Blood*, 43.

¹⁴³ Oman, *Great Revolt*, 162-163. In the key revolt areas, the receipts read as follows: the Kentish population, 56,307 in 1377 under Edward III, was reported as only 43,838 in 1381. The population of Essex declined from 47,962 to 30,748. The Sussex population declined from 35,326 to 26,616. Other parts of England sometimes saw more severe drops. Devon fell from 45,635 to 20,656. Cornwall’s losses exceeded anything brought about by the Black Death, losing almost two-thirds of its population of 34,274 and leaving only 12,056 in their place.

¹⁴⁴ Saul, *Richard II*, 57.

chronicle records the situation in detail: “the king’s ministers were surprised and complained that the collection of the tax had been badly and dishonestly managed. Therefore a certain John Leg with three colleagues asked the king to give him a commission to investigate the collectors of this tax in Kent, Norfolk and other parts of the country.”¹⁴⁵ The jobs of these new collectors were “to search out all those liable to the tax, inspect the collectors’ indentures and certify to the exchequer the number and names of the taxable. At the same time, the deadline for final payments by the collectors was brought forward from 2 June to 21 April.”¹⁴⁶ The local collectors were blamed for the evasion along with local officials. The commissions were supervisors of duties usually carried out on a more local scale. Any taxes that had already been collected and fell short were to be revisited.¹⁴⁷

Throughout the following month of April, the new commissioners revealed tens of thousands of taxpayers who had previously been concealed. They also uncovered signs of brewing disaster. The tax was not collected in London for fear of inciting a revolt.¹⁴⁸ To see how problematic this collection was, consider that the collection was supposed to end on April 21, yet as late as May 30, Commissioner Belknap was still trying to collect the tax when he was chased from Brentwood in Essex. He was ousted by a crowd spurred to action by Thomas, a Fobbing baker. This was not his only occupation. The *Eulogium Historiarum* affirms that Thomas the baker was also Thomas the collector, one of the same local officials imposed upon by the commissioners.¹⁴⁹ If the commissioners angered him, he had been part of the legal evasion only

¹⁴⁵ Knighton, “Outbreak...Knighton” in *Peasants’ Revolt*, 135.

¹⁴⁶ Saul, *Richard II*, 57.

¹⁴⁷ Jones, *Summer of Blood*, 43-44.

¹⁴⁸ Saul, *Richard II*, 57.

¹⁴⁹ “Eulogium” in *Peasants’ Revolt*, 204.

months before. He had helped evade a tax that took advantage of an emerging middle class, which itself was empowered and educated through newfound wealth acquired in the market and labor conflicts following the Black Death.

CHAPTER III: THE ORGANIZERS

Oftentimes, the leaders of the 1381 revolt are wrongly depicted as individuals who came together to form a ragtag band of rustic Robin Hoods. The features of the 1381 revolt that made it such a landmark event were its organizers, figures who possessed significant power in themselves and deserve special attention for their own roles. More recent, nuanced scholarship points to a network of persons with clear interests and shared goals too similar to attribute to pure chance. The leaders themselves also possessed unique traits that made them ideally suited candidates for the leadership of a rebellion on that magnitude.

Thomas Baker of Fobbing: The Initiator

Thomas Baker of Fobbing is almost unanimously identified as the first to openly resist the collectors sent from London. The most detailed account of Baker comes from a section of the *Eulogium Historiarum* written in the decades following the revolt.¹⁵⁰ This manuscript is the most salient for Thomas Baker in that it links him to a larger network, clarifying that he was part of a larger movement rather than a lone actor:

But in Essex a judge held his session with others and summoned a certain baker, the collector of that place. The baker said to his fellows, "What has been collected does not satisfy them, and now they have come to help collect a new tax; if I have help, I will oppose them." Immediately all took up their tools and went to the spot ready to fight; on which the justice and his men fled forthwith. "Behold", said the baker, "it is clear that they did come for a new tax". Then the people of that township crossed to a neighboring one and caused it to rise, and then both did the same to a third. And so they passed through the whole county and that of Hertford; and afterwards they passed through Erith to Maidstone in Kent...And when they

¹⁵⁰ Dobson, 204. The commentary provided by Dobson claims that the *Eulogium* sections involving the revolt would have been written in the late fourteenth century, putting the account at less than twenty years after the revolt. More recent research, however, puts the writing later, into the fifteenth.

were asked who their captain was, they mockingly replied that they did not have one.¹⁵¹

Thomas Baker of Fobbing instigated the first act of rebellion. This does not, however, make him the architect of all resistance in England. The chief architect could just as easily have been the judge, or more likely some other unknown figure. Whoever the original organizer was, it was clear that after June 7, Wat Tyler had become the face of the rebellion.

Wat Tyler: The Commander

Instead of Baker, Wat Tyler is most often identified as the revolt's leader, at least between June 7 and 15. Despite the general consensus about his significance at the rebellion's peak, a number of contradictory claims are made about his origins. The *Anonimale Chronicle* identifies him as being from Maidstone, where he first appears in most records. Most accounts trace his origins here, except, ironically, for those from Maidstone itself. The town's jurors insist he was from Colchester in Essex. Inquisitions made immediately after the revolt also pointed to Essex as his place of origin. The townsmen would have recognized Tyler had he been from Maidstone; their word should be trusted over that of the detached chroniclers. Tyler almost definitely hailed from Colchester. As a contradictory point, one of the only surviving rolls from Colchester comes from 1377 and Wat Tyler is excluded from it. Of course, this could be the result of skillful tax evasion; after all, someone who networked against taxes in 1381 could have resisted them in 1377.¹⁵²

If Tyler was from Colchester, his appearance could have connections to Abel Ker's Essex crossing. Tyler originated from Essex,¹⁵³ and Barker's analysis agrees with the assessment,

¹⁵¹ "Eulogium" in *Peasants' Revolt*, 204.

¹⁵² Barker, *1381*, 420.

¹⁵³ Saul, *Richard II*, 62.

weighing the possibility against others: “He may have been one of the band of Essex men recruited by Abel Ker and brought over to Kent at the beginning of the revolt, but there was considerable movement between the counties long before this, and he may have simply been living in Maidstone by 1381”.¹⁵⁴ Against Barker’s views, the native residents of Maidstone who knew him testified otherwise, placing him in Colchester.¹⁵⁵ Another possibility is that Tyler had recently arrived and stayed there for a short time, not long enough to establish a permanent identity in Maidstone. This satisfies Tyler’s origins, but leaves us without an answer as to why Abel Ker reinforced in Essex. Barker has an explanation for Ker as well, which will be discussed later in the chapter.

Regardless of his nebulous origins, we can discern a few facts about Tyler. Oman, in his account, explains that Wat Tyler was not the master of the rebellion, at least at first. Initially, he was “a mere opportunist, whose designs expanded with the unexpected growth of his short-lived empire over the multitude.”¹⁵⁶ Oman’s account also distills Tyler’s persona into one sentence: “we know that he was a quick-witted, self-reliant, ambitious fellow, with an insolent tongue, and the gift of magniloquence, which a mob orator needs.”¹⁵⁷ Tyler also possessed the capability to organize people on a large scale, possibly the result of service in France.¹⁵⁸ A myth that Wat Tyler’s revolutionary activity aimed to avenge his daughter’s violation by the collectors lacks any real backing or evidence, although its existence is worth mentioning. If Tyler avenged his daughter through his rebel activities, he did not begin the entire movement by doing so, nor was this his

¹⁵⁴ Barker, *1381*, 420.

¹⁵⁵ Walsingham, *Maiores*, 128N.

¹⁵⁶ Oman, *Great Revolt*, 37.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁵⁸ Barker, *1381*, 421.

only motive in the movement.¹⁵⁹ Whatever his role in planning the revolt, Tyler ultimately occupied a chief role, especially at the end of the London episodes, as an extremist. Even after Richard agreed to all but one of the demands made at Mile End, Tyler instigated general anarchy in London. Some sources even indicate that, if he was aware of Mile End, Tyler took advantage of Richard's absence and attacked the Tower of London while Richard distributed banners at Mile End.¹⁶⁰

Tyler is usually portrayed as the head of the revolt as a whole, which is sometimes even referred to as not only the Peasants' Revolt, but Wat Tyler's Revolt. The latter seems to be a misnomer. Tyler remained unnamed in the revolt until June 7 at the earliest. Walsingham makes no mention of his origins, introducing him as Wat, the chief of the rebels and a roof tiler.¹⁶¹ Knighton pursues the claim that Wat Tyler is the real name of Jack Straw, which throws most of his observations into question.¹⁶² Froissart identifies him as the leader alongside Jack Straw and John Balle, but fails to mention exactly when he entered the revolt. Even so, he specifies that "Wat Tyler was the greatest of them."¹⁶³ The *Anonimale Chronicle*, the most reliable of the chronicles, pinpoints his ascension as being 7 June at Maidstone: "they made their chief one Watt Teghler of Maidstone".¹⁶⁴ The only account we have of Tyler's origins, and the most reliable at that, claims that he had no actual power before June 7. This contextualizes the other four, which abstain from discussing his origins entirely and identify him as the sole leader.

¹⁵⁹ Trevelyan, *Wycliffe*, 210.

¹⁶⁰ Oman, *Great Revolt*, 37.

¹⁶¹ Walsingham, *Maiora*, 128.

¹⁶² Knighton, "London...Knighton" in *Peasants' Revolt*, 186.

¹⁶³ Froissart, *Chronicles*, 213.

¹⁶⁴ "Outbreak...Anonimale" in *Peasants' Revolt*, 127.

We already know from the *Eulogium* that the leader as of the revolt's first day was Thomas Baker of Fobbing.¹⁶⁵ Froissart, Walsingham and Knighton identify Wat Tyler (or, in Knighton's case, Wat Tyler through Jack Straw) as the chief rebel leader. These two claims are not mutually exclusive. Leadership could have changed hands during the conflict, perhaps in the form of an election, which is exactly what the *Anonimalle* author tells us happened in Maidstone on June 7.¹⁶⁶ Thomas Baker of Fobbing, with the assistance of local officials previously complacent with tax evasion, called on the discontented network to act, making him the single instigator of the revolt. Whether or not it was meant as a mocking gesture or an evasive, legally savvy strategy of insurance against individual retribution, the rebels identified as leaderless, pushing the baker, voluntarily or not, into the background. It must also be considered that Thomas Baker of Fobbing instigated the rebel network to violent action; that by no means makes him its leader, architect or mastermind.¹⁶⁷ He could have summoned the local mayor's help to leverage the mayor's connections rather than his own, one of whom might very well have been Abel Ker, or even Wat Tyler. All of these actors, however, were tied together by the ideology of John Balle.

John Balle: The Moral Authority

Of all the rebel leaders, Balle has the clearest background, thanks largely to the preservation of some of his writings. Like Tyler, rebel leader John Balle identified himself as from Colchester in one of his preserved letters. He also served as a cleric in York beforehand. Barker elaborates on how his origins contributed to his radicalism: "As a 'St Mary priest', Balle may have been either

¹⁶⁵ "Eulogium" in *Peasants' Revolt*, 204. This fact is corroborated by Knighton's records, where he identified ambiguous baker of this source as Thomas Baker of Fobbing.

¹⁶⁶ "Outbreak...Anonimalle" in *Peasants' Revolt*, 127.

¹⁶⁷ "Eulogium" in *Peasants' Revolt*, 204.

a vicar in one of the many churches owned by the abbey...or, more likely, a chaplain or chantry priest associated with the abbey – all professions which tended to foster religious radicalism and were well represented among the rebels in 1381.”¹⁶⁸ His quarrels with the government stemmed back at least to 1364, when King Edward III rescinded protections against physical harm previously afforded to Balle. The reason he gave for this was that Balle “wanders from country to country [sic] preaching articles contrary to the faith of the church to the peril of his soul and the souls of others, especially of laymen.”¹⁶⁹

Whatever his origin, Balle provided religious legitimacy to the rebels. As a comparison, the infamous John Wycliffe had emerged at this time and was well known, involved in government affairs, and had aristocratic connections, including past ties to John of Gaunt.¹⁷⁰ While Wycliffe operated through Oxford, John Balle had spent several years preaching to the peasants as a wandering radical. While Balle lacked the sophistication of an Oxford academic and Wycliffe’s connections to the highest echelons of church and state, he had more direct access to the common people.¹⁷¹ Balle also enjoyed the unwitting aid of itinerant friars, who preached ideas similar to his own.¹⁷²

The influences exerted by Balle are found in his letters, which are relics of a call to action. Walsingham preserves one, which he claims was found on a condemned man, and Knighton preserves two along others that might be attributed to Balle indirectly. One letter reads: “Jon Balle greeteth you all well and doth you to understand he hath rung your bell. Now right and might, will

¹⁶⁸ Barker, *1381*, 426.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 427-8.

¹⁷⁰ Trevelyan, *Wycliffe*, 42.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 196.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 198.

and skill. God speed every idle person [‘dele’/’ydele’]. Now is time lady help to Jesu thy son, and thy son to his father, to make a good end, in the name of the Trinity of that is begun. Amen amen for charity’s sake amen.”¹⁷³ Of the preserved letters, Barker claims that this one, attributed to Balle directly, could describe a prayer if taken out of context of 1381.¹⁷⁴ Even so, that context cannot be ignored. The letter proves three things. Firstly, Balle authored some of the correspondence circulating among the rebels. Presuming that the thinly veiled call to action is not a prayer, it also proves that the rebels receiving the letters had previously arranged signals towards which to respond, evidencing a prior network of resistance. Perhaps most tellingly, Balle wrote this letter and others in the English vernacular. This set him apart from other churchmen of the time, who wrote primarily in Latin, and marked him in his writings to the people: “Perhaps more important than any of this, even more important than any covert or radical message he intended to convey, is that he chose to write, as he preached, in English: the language of the people. That in itself was sufficient to condemn him in the eyes of the authorities of the Church and state as an agent provocateur.”¹⁷⁵ From the letters attributed to him, popular accounts, and the general religious aims attributed to the rebels, Balle and his ideology are perhaps the most solidly known details of the revolt.

Jack Straw: The Enigma

Jack Straw, on the other hand, is a mystery. Popular culture has immortalized Jack Straw alongside Wat Tyler as a main leader of the revolt.¹⁷⁶ In the *Canterbury Tales*, written shortly after

¹⁷³ Barker, *1381*, 433.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 433-4.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 435.

¹⁷⁶ Dunn, *Great Rising*, 57.

the revolt, Geoffrey Chaucer mentioned Straw alone by name when alluding to the revolt.¹⁷⁷ Knighton even claimed that Straw was Wat Tyler's pseudonym, a claim endorsed by Friedrich Brie centuries later in a scholarly article. Brie fully articulated the best case that Straw and Tyler are one and the same, or, at least, that their accounts are so conflated that they should be treated in this manner.¹⁷⁸ In spite of this claim, a few writings, all in Walsingham's account, establish Straw as an independent actor.

The first is an account of rebels traveling from Walsingham's home of St. Albans to London, who placed themselves under his direct command: "The people from St. Albans were seen by a rebel leader called Jack Straw. He at once summoned and called them over and they gave him their pledge that they would support King Richard and the commons."¹⁷⁹ Dobson's translation of Walsingham uses stronger language: "I myself saw men summoned and forced before one of the leaders of the rebels, called 'John Strawe'".¹⁸⁰ This alone establishes his identity as distinct from Tyler. Walsingham might be a heavily biased source with personal animosity against the rebels, but when his accounts involve St. Albans men they gain the credibility of the *Anonimale* author. Not only did Walsingham witness the revolt in his town, but he, like his fellow monks, had personal connections to the community: "The monastic community was recruited primarily from within the liberty of St Albans and thus many of the tenants and townsmen were...kinsmen of the monks."¹⁸¹ Some of the rebels who came under Straw's command could have been his friends or

¹⁷⁷ Chaucer, *Canterbury*, 229.

¹⁷⁸ Friederich W. D. Brie, "Wat Tyler and Jack Straw" in *The English Historical Review* 21, no. 81 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1906), 107.

¹⁷⁹ Walsingham, *Maiora*, 124. Although it avoids the first person, Preest's translation also notes Walsingham's presence at the revolt as an eyewitness to Straw and the events surrounding the St. Albans men.

¹⁸⁰ Walsingham, "London...Walsingham" in *Peasants' Revolt*, 171.

¹⁸¹ Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 132N

extended family. That Walsingham clearly distinguishes Straw from Tyler reinforces his authenticity as an individual.

Walsingham also alleges that Straw beheaded John Lakenheath, a monk who possessed baronial powers in St. Edmunds, after the murder of Wat Tyler. This account in Walsingham can be dismissed, as the chronicler erroneously equated Jack Straw and John Wrawe, the most significant detail calling the claim into question.¹⁸² John Wrawe was a well-documented leader of his own right in Suffolk and more broadly in East Anglia, where St Edmunds is located.¹⁸³ While Walsingham testifies that “Straw’s” mob arrived there after previous activity on June 15, those activities were in Norfolk, multiple days’ journey from London. Moreover, the chronicle identifies Jack Straw as “the wicked priest Jack Straw”, confirming that Walsingham must have meant John Wrawe.¹⁸⁴ Wrawe’s origins are well documented as a priest, as are his reasons for joining the revolt and selecting his varied targets. Straw, as far as we know, was not a priest.¹⁸⁵

The third and final action attributed to Jack Straw, and also his most famous, is his confession to Mayor William Walworth shortly before his death. The speech outlines the rebels’ plans and strategy, including the capture and eventual murder of Richard II.¹⁸⁶ The speech proves useful in discussing possible plans laid by the rebel leaders, but its authenticity as a personal testimony of Straw is doubtful. The confession focuses on the concerns of Walsingham. Each of the other major chroniclers ignores the speech, even with ten to twenty years of ample time to investigate the story. If the gallows speech was factually accurate, and confessed the same goals

¹⁸² Walsingham, *Maiora*, 143.

¹⁸³ Dunn, *Great Rising*, 63.

¹⁸⁴ Walsingham, *Maiora*, 142.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 142N.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 147-48.

Walsingham attributed to the rebel leadership, contemporary chroniclers would have been hard pressed to exclude it from mention entirely. The most dubious claim is that, given the opportunity, the rebels planned to take Richard II hostage, killing his guards if necessary at Blackheath on June 13. Rebel leaders had this opportunity at Mile End when Richard, still a teenage boy, traveled out among the rebels to hear their concerns. If their plan was to capture or murder the king, why did they not elect to do so at Mile End, or even at Smithfield in the aftermath of Tyler's death, when a single arrow could have felled him? These objections cast the authenticity of the speech into doubt.¹⁸⁷

A final reference to Straw's identity came about after the rebellion, establishing some clarity about his role in the uprising. A parliamentary petition three years after the rising "lists 'Jakke Strawe' as Captain, leader and chief 'in Essex' after Wat Tyler 'of the county of Kent'."¹⁸⁸ The governing officials of this time would have had little reason to attribute a false name to a leader; this would have impeded efforts at prosecution. Given the evidence available at that time, the parliament identified Jack Straw as the chief of the Essex rebels, although, as every chronicle except Knighton's agrees, he was still subordinate to Tyler. It also establishes his status independently of John Wrawe, the Essex leader and rogue priest also subordinate to Tyler, confirming that the two are different individuals and not just the product of mistaken identity by Walsingham.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷ Walsingham, *Maiora*, 147N. As a possible counterpoint to the Preest footnote, the rebels might have surrendered the opportunity if they remained unsure of the plan's success, for instance, being able to capture the king without killing him. This objection, however, risks speculation without documentary backing.

¹⁸⁸ Barker, *1381*, 424-25.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 425.

Abel Ker

Although he was only truly significant in the early days of the uprising, another minor leader, Abel Ker, is worth discussing. He can be traced to Erith, near Dartford, a town in northern Kent.¹⁹⁰ The town borders Essex and was not far from the all-important Colchester, its location near the Thames made it an important crossing point for anyone traveling between the counties. Movement between Kent and Essex, through Dartford, was also common at the time.¹⁹¹ This included the Kentish rebels, who had received reinforcements at Bocking before crossing the Thames at Dartford to take the Norman keep at Rochester, before heading to Maidstone, where Balle was imprisoned.¹⁹² As a native of the area, Abel Ker would have been instrumental to the revolt's earliest days in such a key location.¹⁹³

¹⁹⁰ Barker, *1381*, 171.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 421.

¹⁹² Sumption, *Hundred Years War*, 421.

¹⁹³ Barker, *1381*, 420.

CHAPTER IV: GROWING THE REBELLION

To give their plans a greater chance of fulfillment, men of just two villages, who were the originators and prime movers of this evil, began by getting messages sent immediately to every small village, asking all, old men as well as those in the prime of life, to put aside all excuses and to come and meet them, equipped with weapons as best they could. Those who refrained from coming or ignored them or who despised the idea should realise that their goods would be ransacked, their homes burnt or knocked down, their heads cut off. Such frightening threats compelled all of them to run to join the leaders.¹⁹⁴

Before examining the revolt's network, the religious climate of dissatisfaction and dissent merits discussion. The most dramatic explanation of the religious radicalism of the rebels comes from Froissart's extensive account of John Balle. Jean Froissart, in his chronicle, argues that Balle might have been a more prominent influence than is commonly perceived. Many of his claims about Balle warrant serious skepticism; he blames Balle's followers in London for inciting an uprising at his bidding, putting more responsibility on Balle than is warranted.¹⁹⁵ Froissart's attention to Balle, combined with a conflation of Balle and Wycliffe, could explain Kaeuper's assertion that Lollardy and its influence are overplayed.¹⁹⁶

Wycliffe did not mentor Balle, but Balle likely had encountered his teachings, as Wycliffe was also active in the years preceding 1381. During the revolt, Balle taught Wycliffe's doctrines on the Eucharist.¹⁹⁷ Even so, Balle alone legitimized the rising through his religious activity. Froissart alleged that Balle appealed to the laborer directly: "they said, they were held too much

¹⁹⁴ Walsingham, *Maiora*, 121.

¹⁹⁵ Froissart, *Peasants' Revolt*, 137.

¹⁹⁶ Kaeuper, "Peasants' Rebellion", 479.

¹⁹⁷ Trevelyan, *Wycliffe*, 197.

in subjugation, and when the world began there had been no serfs and could not be, unless they had rebelled against their lord, as Lucifer did against God".¹⁹⁸ That Balle targeted the laborers can further be proven by his letters, which are written in the English vernacular instead of ecclesiastical Latin.¹⁹⁹

Balle gave detailed sermons that not only made theological arguments, but also called for rebellion and articulated what would become the goals of the rebels:

If we all spring from a single father and mother, Adam and Eve, how can they claim or prove that they are lords more than us, except by making us produce and grow the wealth which they spend...Let us go to the King – he is young – and show him how we are oppressed, and tell him that we want things to be changed, or else we will change them ourselves. If we go in good earnest and all together...when the King sees us and hears us, he will remedy the evil, either willingly or otherwise.²⁰⁰

Consider that this presentation of relatively simplistic theological arguments to less educated citizenry came during a time when criticism of the Church traditionally took place in clerical settings and in Latin. Parish priests were encouraged to focus on their parishioners rather than attack the Church from the pulpit. Many churches, owing to a lack of local priests willing to say masses, had areas where traveling preachers spoke at will, called preaching crosses. These platforms, outside the buildings themselves in churchyards, were originally intended to address vast numbers of people when the churches themselves proved insufficient, but gradually evolved into a platform for itinerants, especially friars. Dissidents and traveling preachers who disapproved of their hosts, such as Balle, used these platforms to speak against the church. Balle, for example, demanded that listeners refuse to pay tithes to wealthy or sinful priests.²⁰¹ Common people were

¹⁹⁸ Froissart, *Chronicles*, 211.

¹⁹⁹ Barker, *1381*, 435.

²⁰⁰ Froissart, *Chronicles*, 212-3.

²⁰¹ Barker, *1381*, 31-32.

not familiar with the theological defenses of Church property, expounded in Latin and exchanged within limited, learned circles. Such abstruse elitist reasoning could not compete with Balle's simplistic preaching in the vernacular. To the laborers, Balle's accusations represented simple but insightful truths: "out in the fields, or walking together from one village to another or in their homes, they whispered and repeated among themselves: 'that's what John Ball says, and he's right.'"²⁰²

Wandering friars echoed the teachings of Balle. When Lollardy later arose in England, some Lollards held the friars responsible for stoking class tensions, again establishing the difference between Wycliffe and preachers like Balle.²⁰³ Orthodox Catholics joined the Lollards in blaming the friars. The Benedictine Walsingham, in his account of the revolt, spared mendicants no blame for encouraging the chaos:

So to acquire possessions and to amass money, these mendicants, who have renounced possessions and sworn to persevere in poverty, say that good is bad and bad good, leading the nobles astray by flattery and the people by lies, and leading both classes off the straight and narrow way together with themselves. By their perverse lives they have so spotted their profession of truth that in these days on anybody's lips the sentence 'He is a mendicant, therefore he is a liar' is as good an argument, in subject matter as well as in form, as though one were to say, 'This is white, therefore coloured.'²⁰⁴

Eventually, the socially leveling argument manifested itself in a single couplet, which Balle allegedly recited to the rebels: "When Adam delved and Eve span / Who was then a gentleman?"²⁰⁵ The couplet aimed at the very idea of hierarchical government in England at the time, as discussed by contemporary Bishop Thomas Brinton of Rochester, who exalted hierarchy in the Church and

²⁰² Froissart, *Chronicles*, 213.

²⁰³ Trevelyan, *Wycliffe*, 198.

²⁰⁴ Walsingham, *Maiores*, 150.

²⁰⁵ Trevelyan, *Wycliffe*, 196.

state as natural functions of society, comparing levels to organs of the human body.²⁰⁶ While not orchestrated by rebels coordinating resistance to taxes, the gradual erosion of respect for religious authority and its special status in the social order partly enabled the 1381 revolt.

Robert Hales' appointment of new commissioners also likely sharpened some of the rebellion's organizational focus. One of the few primary records from the months before the rebellion was that of Hales appointing newer, more aggressive commissioners to supervise collectors. The king's orders placed the blame for the tax shortages squarely on the local governments:

As is fully revealed by trustworthy and notable evidence, the men commissioned by us as taxers and collectors of the subsidy of three groats...have spared many persons of the county: they have omitted some deliberately, some through negligence and others through favour. The result is that a large part of the said subsidy in the county of Norfolk is concealed and withheld from us by the negligence and failings of the said taxers and collectors although it ought to have been raised for our needs if the taxation and assessment had been well and honestly carried out...You are to seize and arrest all those whom you find acting in opposition or rebellion to the above commands; such men are to be held in our prisons where they are to stay until we make provision for their punishment.²⁰⁷

For local authorities, constables and collectors, this read as a choice between imprisonment or action. The *Eulogium* account records exactly how this reaction came about in Essex, where a local judge summoned a baker, one of the local collectors accused in the fine rolls. Considering how closely the story that follows aligns with Thomas Baker of Fobbing's, we can draw from this that Baker, like some of the initial rebels, was a tax collector.²⁰⁸ Another figure involved in the rebellion, even perceived as a sympathetic figure in the correspondence of Abel Ker, was John

²⁰⁶ Barker, *1381*, 42.

²⁰⁷ "Appointment of Commissioners to enforce payment of the Third Poll Tax, March 1381" in *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, ed. R. B. Dobson (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1970), 120-121.

²⁰⁸ "Eulogium" in *Peasants' Revolt*, 205.

Prittlewell senior, a former commissioner of the 1379 poll tax, and William Berland, a third figure also perceived sympathetically, served on the same commissions as Prittlewell did. At least in Abel Ker's case, these two commissioners were approached as though they would give a sympathetic response, giving rise to the possibility that these were pre-notified conspirators in the revolt.²⁰⁹ The Gravesend collector imprisoned in Rochester had attempted to imitate Thomas of Fobbing, adding a fourth example of a collector among minor rebel leaders.²¹⁰

That local governments were complacent in the rebellion explains some of the problems the rebels should have faced but did not, such as identifying exact targets only local officials would have known of. For instance, one rebel indicted, Walter atte Keye, sought to destroy a book, *le Jubyle*, with legal documents concerning London; other than that, little else about the book is known.²¹¹ On a larger scale, Nigel Saul saw the concentration of the revolt's targets as evidence of a controlled background: "They did not indulge in indiscriminate looting or pillaging. They singled out for destruction the property of local office-holders, poll tax collectors and gentry connected with the central government. It is hard not to conclude that a considerable measure of central control was asserted over the progress of the Revolt."²¹² Not only did local governments aid the rebels, but central government officials also played a role in some cases. In Dartford, the hometown of Abel Ker, rebel Thomas atte Raven had served in the House of Commons alongside John Legge, one of the rebels' targets for suggesting Hales' supervisory commissioners. When the

²⁰⁹ Barker, *1381*, 172-3.

²¹⁰ Lindsay, *Peasants' Revolt*, 79.

²¹¹ "The Indictment of Walter atte Keye, Brewer, of Wood Street, London" in *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, ed. R. B. Dobson (London: St. Martin's Press, 1970), 227-228.

²¹² Saul, *Richard II*, 62.

rebels marched on London, he became one of the more prominent figures involved.²¹³ That former members of the House of Commons led the rebels against political foes challenges the traditional notion that this was a rising of the poor against the wealthy; while one side of the conflict favored the emerging middle class, it too had its share of elites seeking to procure their share of the spoils.

Regardless of how it initially unfolded in Fobbing and Essex, the rebellion, it can be noted, spread from its initial organizers to thousands of recruits in a week. The rebels accomplished this through correspondence: “emissaries, some of them local men, others strangers from London, were riding up and down on June 1, rousing all malcontents and bidding them ready to offer armed resistance when the judge should appear.”²¹⁴ The rebels also sent living representatives to reinforce the authenticity of the message. Thomas Walsingham gives a great deal of detail as to what these letters contained, and why the living representation would have been so important. The letters also warned dissenters that those who neglected the rebellion would be considered against it and fair game for ransacking.²¹⁵ If the rebels indeed sent living representatives to deliver even some of these letters, it would have added weight to the message. Join the rebels or join the damned. This would explain how Abel Ker, three days after Bampton’s rejection, had rallied troops and seized Lesnes Abbey. If the Commons of Richard II’s first parliament in 1377’s claims that sworn associations had already emerged against tax collection were true, such a threats would not only drive the fearful to the rebels’ side, but would also ensure the compliance of those who rested quietly in waiting.²¹⁶

²¹³ Barker, *1381*, 176.

²¹⁴ Oman, *Great Revolt*, 33.

²¹⁵ Walsingham, *Maiora*, 121.

²¹⁶ Sumption, *Hundred Years War*, 419.

These more threatening instructions in direct vernacular were accompanied by at least a few of Balle's letters. Written with nuance, and perhaps with deliberately ambiguous subterfuge, their tone contradicts the direct threats of the earlier letters, beginning with a set of instructions "to chastise well Hobb the robber, and to take with the John Trueman and all his fellows and no more."²¹⁷ Juliet Barker's recent account of the revolt identifies in its letters a text that "could just as easily be the sort of vernacular prayer or devotional rhyme popular among the laity", and calls into question whether the papers were actually signals for a network to rise.²¹⁸ Letters cited by Walsingham show why this doubt is unjustified. The clear, direct message instructed rebels to target Robert Hales as "Hob the robber". Walsingham identified these as the letters used "to encourage [the rebels] to carry through what they had begun."²¹⁹

As to the origins of the letters, Froissart and Walsingham appear to conflict. Walsingham identified "men of just two villages" as the composers.²²⁰ Froissart gives a different account: "these wicked men in London started to become disaffected and to rebel and they sent word to the people in the counties mentioned to come boldly to London with all their followers".²²¹ These are not truly contrasting views, except for Walsingham's assertion that the letters originated from "just" two villages. That some of the letters were authored by Balle shows that letters were sent, not only at the start of the revolt, but after his release from the Maidstone prison, an action recorded in Knighton's account.²²² The earliest possible date of the Maidstone release, recorded in the

²¹⁷ Walsingham, *Maiora*, 163.

²¹⁸ Barker, *1381*, 433.

²¹⁹ Walsingham, *Maiora*, 163.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 121.

²²¹ Froissart, *Peasants' Revolt*, 213.

²²² Knighton, "Outbreak...Knighton" in *Peasants' Revolt*, 136.

Anonimalle Chronicle, was June 7, when the resistance had already escalated into a full-scale revolt.²²³ So long as he could not have written them from prison, which is doubtful considering the reasons for his imprisonment, Balle must have authored the letters after June 7.

Once the revolt was called into action by Thomas Baker, word spread, not just from two villages, but by multiple authors acting on the same order in different places. The system could have resembled a modern phone tree, with prearranged receivers, composers and senders of letters instead of telephone lines to spread word through a delegated system. As word spread of the rebellion, individuals likely took initiative to spread it further, giving the movement a mind of its own. It seems that many would have done this; Walsingham alleges that the Kentish saw the rebellion as “a happening which they had often wished and prayed for in the past.”²²⁴ Even with his clear desire to align the peasantry with what he saw as an evil movement, the tax rolls’ skewed figures prove that Kent, like the rest of England, desired an end to the tax. Some such individuals likely took up the cause of rousing the people themselves.

One such recipient of the news, Abel Ker, exemplified in the first week of the revolt what would become practice for other rebels across England. When they received the signal of revolt on June 2, Abel Ker’s initial band of men, prepared with a plan for action, seized Lesnes Abbey. They there coerced an endorsement out of the abbot. After this, he crossed the Thames to Essex in order to receive reinforcements.²²⁵ Juliet Barker, drawing together evidence from several sources, proposes an explanation: “What [Lesnes] did have, however, was extensive property in Essex, including the churches of Elmdon, Ramsden Bellhouse and Rainham...We can speculate that the

²²³ “Outbreak...Anonimalle” in *Peasants’ Revolt*, 127.

²²⁴ Walsingham, *Maiora*, 121.

²²⁵ Saul, *Richard II*, 62.

abbot was forced to either provide shipping for the rebels or to lend his authority to recruit in the towns where he held property.”²²⁶ Barker makes a convincing case that Ker made the crossing to acquire reinforcements from Essex, but this may not have been his only motive. Robert Cave, at Dartmouth, already had several hundred men under his command, albeit ill-armed and poorly supplied. Even if Abel Ker lacked manpower, which is doubtful considering his success at Lesnes Abbey, the other leaders in this coordinated revolt did not.²²⁷ Furthermore, immediately after Ker received the reinforcements near Barking, he headed back south to rally more men in Dartford. The Essex crossing only gained him about a hundred supporters for his trouble.²²⁸

The crossing could also have been a reception for Wat Tyler, sent from rebel hotbed Colchester to direct movements in Kent. Barker hesitates to endorse the idea, pointing out that Tyler could have moved to Maidstone and lived there for a time before the uprising.²²⁹ While not eliminating all other possibilities besides escort by Abel Ker, the denizens of Maidstone itself identified Tyler as being from Colchester. While no evidence directly rules out Tyler living in Maidstone before June 7, no evidence suggests it either besides secondary source speculation.²³⁰ There also remain some problems with Ker’s journey that a connection to Tyler would resolve. Even if the proprietors of Lesnes Abbey sympathized with the cause, a two-day journey across the Thames for a hundred men would be pointless. Abel Ker already had contact with Cave’s force of several hundred, which, as Barker records, was not actually necessary to take Rochester Castle, where “Either the constable and his garrison were taken by surprise and were therefore remiss in

²²⁶ Barker, *1381*, 172.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 177.

²²⁸ Oman, *Great Revolt*, 34.

²²⁹ Barker, *1381*, 420.

²³⁰ Saul, *Richard II*, 62N.

their duty, or they must have actively colluded with the rebels.”²³¹ The move would have made more sense, however, if Tyler was sent from the rebellion’s point of origin to take command and was therefore among the hundred.

This would also explain how Tyler rose seemingly from nowhere to unquestioned prominence as leader and organizer at Maidstone, instead of Abel Ker or John Balle. Robert Cave’s disappearance might come from the personal nature of his mission to liberate prisoner Robert Bellyng. There is no evidence that he joined the rebels after his own mission, meaning that he could have departed from them.²³² Even so, Tyler would have had to contend with Abel Ker, the man who had already commanded the Kentish for a week. He also would have contended with the native Kentishmen, who might have preferred one of their own to someone from Essex. Although medieval society was highly mobile at this time, and much travel took place between counties, his identification by the residents as somebody from Essex would put Tyler at a disadvantage; that is, unless he was already designated to organize things in the south.²³³ The word choice in Walsingham’s account allows for this possibility:

They sent messengers to Kent to inform them of their hopes and plans and to invite the men of Kent to join them in gaining their freedom, in considering the best course of action, and finally in bringing about change in the kingdom and its evil customs...[the Kentish] themselves also, putting aside all delay, collected together a large band of people and peasants, using the same lies with which, as I have described, the men of Essex assembled their crowds, and in a short time had raised almost the whole county in a similar revolt.²³⁴

²³¹ Barker, *1381*, 178.

²³² *Ibid.*, 177.

²³³ Walsingham, *Maiora*, 128N.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 121.

Instead of saying that Fobbing and **its** allies sent messages, a word that could lend itself to paper letters, Walsingham refers to messengers, a word that denotes people, and is further denoted by their description as recruiters and organizers of the revolt. In theory, if such messengers fulfilled their duty correctly, they would “maintain and advise” the rebels in their area, exactly as Tyler was directed to according to the *Anonimalle* author who gives record of his origins.²³⁵ Also important would be if, as Oman speculates, he had a regional or even personal connection to John Balle, lending him social as well as organizational legitimacy.²³⁶

Either way, by the end of June 7, Wat Tyler had taken charge of the fight. Thomas Baker of Fobbing and his compatriots had faded into the background; as the *Eulogium* author recalls, “when they were asked who their captain was, they mockingly replied that they did not have one.”²³⁷ After June 7, that was no longer the case. The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 had become Wat Tyler’s rebellion.

²³⁵ “Outbreak...Anonimalle” in *Peasants’ Revolt*, 127.

²³⁶ Oman, *Great Revolt*, 36.

²³⁷ “Eulogium” in *Peasants’ Revolt*, 205.

CHAPTER V: WAT TYLER'S REBELLION

To attain their desired ends more quickly, some sang the praises of Wat Tyler and went to see this leader of the peasant riff-raff of Kent. They thought that there would never be any man in the kingdom greater than him, and that the laws of the land would have no validity in the future, as most of the judiciary had already been killed and the rest, so they thought, should be on the list for killing. So they would obtain authority from Tyler, go back home and demand what they wanted under the strictest conditions. Indeed, should the abbot decide to refuse their demands, they would immediately threaten his house with fire, the monks with death, and finally a demolition of the monastery so total that not one stone would be left upon another.²³⁸

The extent to which Wat Tyler's persona directed the 1381 rising is exemplified by the reactions of the men of St Albans, preserved by Thomas Walsingham in this quote from the *Chronica Maiora*. After his ascension, the rebellion's organization fell into his hands, although possibly shared with the incendiary John Balle. The rebellion, which consisted of several independent actors before June 7, albeit following specific rules, adopted a much more centrally organized character once Wat Tyler became the known leader. He appears to have been the chief coordinator of the rebels, and the reason why the Essex and Kentish groups operated in tandem once they reached London; even as the various subordinate leaders in Essex, Kent and the other counties carried out their own duties, they all arrived in London at the same time.²³⁹

Adding to the evidence that the rebellion centralized around Tyler is the deference towards him and Balle expressed by other rebel leaders at Blackheath. The most prominent of the Suffolk rebels consulted with Tyler at Blackheath as to the ideal course of action. John Horne, one of three

²³⁸ Walsingham, *Maiora*, 132.

²³⁹ Saul, *Richard II*, 62.

aldermen sent by Mayor Walworth to confer with the rebels in advance of the June 13 meeting, remained with Tyler after the rebels departed, leading author Philip Lindsay to conclude that he too had conspired in advance of the rebellion.²⁴⁰ Envoys from Hertford met first with the leaders from Essex,²⁴¹ however, as has been discussed, the parliament would in the following years officially identify “Jakke Strawe” as the “captain, leader and chief ‘in Essex’”.²⁴² Given the proximity of Hertford to Essex rather than Kent, such a meeting would have been appropriate, especially if Jack Straw was Tyler’s immediate subordinate, which evidence suggests he was.²⁴³

Even so, as newly selected leader, Tyler faced competing influences, one of which was John Balle. Much of the confusion and uncertainty surrounding Balle’s role in the leadership comes from confusion about exactly when he entered the narrative, a claim that varies between June 7, before Canterbury, and June 12, after Canterbury. Kaeuper follows the Canterbury eruption in his narrative by saying that the rebels freed John Balle from imprisonment at Maidstone on the way to Blackheath. The account fails to mention that Tyler and the rebel mob had been in Maidstone before Canterbury, and opens Tyler’s narrative with a march there from an unspecified place of origin.²⁴⁴ The rebels could have passed again through Maidstone, lending some credence to this theory, however this was probably not the case, as other accounts put them along a different route to London, instead passing again through Rochester and Dartford.²⁴⁵ While Froissart’s knowledge of English geography is also in itself spotty at best, he is corroborated by the

²⁴⁰ Lindsay, *Peasants’ Revolt*, 88-89.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

²⁴² Barker, *1381*, 424-5.

²⁴³ Froissart, *Chronicles*, 213.

²⁴⁴ Kaeuper, “Peasants’ Rebellion”, 478-9.

²⁴⁵ Froissart, *Chronicles*, 214-15.

trustworthy *Anonimalle* author, who confirms that Balle was among the rebels in Canterbury. Kaeuper's entry omits most of what the *Anonimalle* offers in information, which not only explained in detail the rebel congregation at Maidstone but also remarked that local prisoners were freed. While the *Anonimalle Chronicle* makes no mention of Balle on June 7, he was definitely with them in Canterbury. By this account, he was the chief proponent of deposing Archbishop Sudbury, as well as "all the lords, archbishops, bishops, abbots and priors as well as most of the monks and canons."²⁴⁶ Froissart's account also pins the mock pilgrimage on Balle's command before the revolt touched Canterbury, meaning at Maidstone.²⁴⁷ Knighton records the jailbreak that freed Balle as well, but fails to specify when it occurred.²⁴⁸ In contrast to the pre-Canterbury accounts is a juror's presentment claiming that at least some rebels also freed prisoners in Maidstone on June 11: "Also they say that on Tuesday next after the feast of Holy Trinity [June 11, 1381] Henry Twysdenn, John Twysdenn [and others] of Canterbury went to the gaol of Maidstone and feloniously broke into the same, and took out and feloniously set at liberty all the prisoners there imprisoned..."²⁴⁹ While the jurors' presentments do not mention Balle by name (which, given his prominent status in other chronicles, is a generous oversight) the mention of a prison break in Maidstone after June 7 evidences two liberations. Either one, it may seem, could have been Balle's.

From this tentative timeline, however, some general inferences may be made. While sources disagree on whether John Balle was freed on the way to Canterbury or London, there is a

²⁴⁶ "Outbreak...Anonimalle" in *Peasants' Revolt*, 128.

²⁴⁷ Froissart, *Chronicles*, 214.

²⁴⁸ Knighton, "Outbreak...Knighton" in *Peasants' Revolt*, 136-7.

²⁴⁹ "Jurors' Presentments" in *Peasants' Revolt*, 146.

general consensus that he was imprisoned in Maidstone.²⁵⁰ The primary source accounts that claim he joined the rebels on the march to London discount the entire Canterbury episode, claiming the rebels traveled straight to Blackheath instead. Some secondary sources, such as Sumption's volume, do this as well.²⁵¹ So long as Maidstone was occupied by June 7, and considering Balle's impact on the rebels, Abel Ker and later Wat Tyler's forces would not have passed through Maidstone, the town imprisoning Balle, traveled to Canterbury, a religious target by Balle's decree, and left the spiritual leader of the rebellion imprisoned only to free him later. Philip Lindsay discusses this in his narrative of the rebellion, even as he qualifies that the rebels could have marched through both towns on the way to Blackheath.²⁵² If we are to believe that the rebels traveled to Canterbury after deciding their leadership on June 7, then we must also believe that the rebels freed Balle there.

Froissart's claim that John Balle was freed around June 7, as opposed to being freed on the way to London, also offers a useful explanation of the initial push to Canterbury: "And so first they came to Saint Thomas of Canterbury, and there John Balle sought to have found the bishop [sic] of Canterbury, but he was at London with the King. Wat Tyler and Jack Straw were also at Canterbury."²⁵³ Froissart's language implies that Balle's initiative and mission, not Tyler's, were carried out in Canterbury. This would have made sense in the context of Balle's life. He had just escaped the archbishop's prison: "He...was accordingly tried and lawfully convicted by the clergy who committed him to perpetual imprisonment in [the archbishop's prison]. But the people broke

²⁵⁰ Sumption, *Hundred Years War*, 422.

²⁵¹ Sumption. *Hundred Years War*, 422. In his account, Jonathan Sumption claims that the rebels, on 10 June, organized a march directly on London from Maidstone. However, like many other authors who tackle this quandry, any mention of the well-documented march to Canterbury by Tyler and Balle is eschewed.

²⁵² Lindsay, *Peasants' Revolt*, 85.

²⁵³ Froissart, *Peasants' Revolt*, 139.

into the prison, brought him out and made him go with them, for they proposed to promote him to archbishop.”²⁵⁴ Balle had every initiative to eliminate his rival in Archbishop Sudbury, if not to seek revenge on the established church as an institution.

Either way, by June 11, the rebels had established themselves in Canterbury at Balle’s bequest. The rebels destroyed any records they could find and compelled Sheriff William Septvans to turn over anything within his reach, all remaining in line with the original goals of the rebellion.²⁵⁵ The targeted destruction of records continued for the rest of the rebellion, with individual bands being dispatched from the main mob to destroy specific targets. This coordination required knowledge of where such things would be found, and further lends credence to the idea that the rebels were coordinating with local governing officials in at least some of the towns.²⁵⁶

While Froissart and the *Eulogium* author describe the siege of Rochester as necessary for a liason to the crown, the *Anonimalle* introduces another catalyst and identified leader of the rebels: King Richard II. There is reason to believe that the fourteen-year-old king would have wanted to hear from the rebels. This was not the first time that the lower classes claimed to defend Richard from corrupt advisors; mere days after his father’s death, a fear that John of Gaunt desired the crown for himself resulted in the boy king being brought before parliament.²⁵⁷ His advisors also involved themselves heavily in directing the king’s policy, going so far as to alter the oath he swore upon ascending to the throne to satisfy their needs. Even with this interference, Richard II was denied a regency and deemed fully capable of governing. This would have been empowering had he actually been able to govern, but in reality, advisors and officials executed most of his powers

²⁵⁴ Knighton, “Outbreak...Knighton” in *Peasants’ Revolt*, 137.

²⁵⁵ Lindsay, *Peasants’ Revolt*, 84.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

²⁵⁷ Saul, *Richard II*, 17.

in his name. If anything, this conflict between the king's nominal full title and his restricted power would have generated friction between the advisors and the boy.²⁵⁸

Richard had been moving between Windsor and Henley-on-the-Heath as the uprising continued to swell, and he opened communications with the rebels on June 11, the same day that he had been moved to the Tower of London by his counsel.²⁵⁹ It must also be remembered that, in the midst of the unrest, Richard II was not an adult but rather a fourteen-year-old boy. About his personal experience of the revolt, the eyewitness *Anonimalle* author is the most trustworthy source. Richard's experience was one of a child trying to prove himself to adults:

At this time the King was in a turret of the great Tower of London, and saw the manner of the Savoy and the Hospital of Clerkenwell, and the houses of Simon Hosteler near the Newgate and John Butterwick's place, all in flames. He called all the lords about him into a chamber, and asked their counsel as to what should be done in such a crisis. But none of them could or would give him any counsel...the king, remaining anxiously and sadly in the Tower, climbed on to a little turret facing St. Katherine's, where a large number of the commons were lying. He had it proclaimed to them that they should all go peaceably to their homes, and he would pardon them from all their different offences. But all cried with one voice that they would not go before they had captured the traitors within the Tower, and obtained charters to free them from all manner of serfdom, and certain other points which they wished to demand.²⁶⁰

Consider these events as seen by Richard II. A teenage boy, who understands that he is king, sees his city ablaze and understands his government to be the target of the arsonists. He asks for help; his caretakers and advisors refuse it. Upon consulting with the crowds, they inform Richard that his caretakers are a threat to him. While the commons did not actively help Richard, at least they spoke with him. He proposed, in response to this conversation, that they petition him with their grievances by writing, and that he would work with them, taking their side. The

²⁵⁸ Saul, *Richard II*, 25.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

²⁶⁰ "London...Anonimalle" in *Peasants' Revolt*, 158-9.

proclamation was dismissed as a hoax, because it was presented by someone else, one of the “traitors” the rebels sought to kill. When Richard again asked his advisors how to go about this differently, he received no answer once again.²⁶¹

Richard II had by this point been faced with nothing but resistance and failed proposals from his counsel and told by the rebels that his advisors were traitors. When added to the suspicions about Richard’s safety around his advisors prior to the revolt, about which he must have been aware, he might have, within reason, suspected his advisors of undermining his rule. There would have been no way to fully ascertain whether or not this were true. The situation fully understood, it comes as no surprise what Richard II declared at the Mile End meeting on the following day:

The king granted that they could freely seize all who were traitors and could be proved to be such by process of law...And at this time the king had the commons arrayed in two lines, and had it proclaimed before them that he would confirm and grant that they should be free, and generally should have their will; and that they could go through all the realm of England and catch all traitors and bring them to him in safety, and then he would deal with them as the law demanded.²⁶²

If Richard II suspected that traitors existed of whom he was unaware, this would have been one way to handle his suspicions. Richard’s orders were to find the accused of treachery and bring them forward for investigation under the customs of law. In other words, he gave the accusers a chance to identify and prove individuals to be traitors. This would also explain why the soldiers at the Tower failed to defend it before the slaughter that occurred there; if the rebels merely intended to identify traitors, and did so under the king’s orders, a defense was not in compliance with their orders. This was the message that the rebels sent. In Lindsay’s narrative, they “fraternized cheerily, shaking hands, while the rebels, in crude friendship, stroked the soldiers’ beards, assuring them

²⁶¹ “London...Anonimalle” in *Peasants’ Revolt*, 160.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 161.

that from now they were all brothers and equals and that they had no unfriendly intentions towards the garrison but only towards the “traitors’ within.”²⁶³

Although a number of men, in accordance with the king’s wishes, faced trial on June 14, a number of them did not. Rebels killed Chancellor Sudbury and Treasurer Hales without due process, as well as John Legge, Richard Lyons, John Greenfield, lawyers, tax commissioners, Flemish merchants, and anybody even remotely associated with John of Gaunt. It was likely in response to Sudbury’s death in the tower that the king fled to the Royal Wardrobe. The king had lost his former trust in the good will of the rebels, likely replaced with fear for his life and the lives of his surviving counsel.²⁶⁴

The king’s intuition regarding the Mile End rebels, it must be noted, was probably accurate. Accounts of the Mile End meeting suffer from inconsistencies regarding the involvement of some rebels, especially Tyler. Only the *Anonimalle* author puts Tyler in charge both at Mile End and Smithfield. All other accounts only put him at Smithfield. While the *Anonimalle* blames the chaos on Richard’s declaration that Tyler could “bring [traitors] to him in safety”, the Tower massacre contradicted Richard’s orders. Tyler would not have agreed to the orders only to immediately break them; this would have dwindled the numbers of his own men while defeating the entire purpose of Mile End. If Tyler was present at Mile End, he must have departed before the end of the meeting, disagreed with the outcome, and could not discourage other unnamed leaders who did.²⁶⁵ The other chronicles’ accounts of the meeting also make no sense if the rebel chiefs intended to defy Richard’s orders, something all of them agreed upon. Froissart writes that the meeting ended

²⁶³ Lindsay, *Peasants’ Revolt*, 118.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 118-9.

²⁶⁵ Dobson, *Peasants’ Revolt*, 161N

happily, and that Richard spoke directly to enthralled county delegations. He also claims that Tyler saw Richard's approval as unimportant: "they stayed in London and did not press very hard to have the King's letters of authority, but were chiefly intent on spreading such unrest through the town that the rich and noble would be killed and their houses looted."²⁶⁶

Some secondary authors, like Sir Charles Oman, take the *Anonimalle's* word that Tyler spoke for the rebels.²⁶⁷ Barker's more recent scholarly commentary takes the more cautious approach of not discussing Tyler's role, only pointing out, after citing the *Anonimalle* passage which mentions him, that "This is the only evidence we have that Wat Tyler was even present at Mile End."²⁶⁸ While the safest option would be abstention from this discussion, Tyler's presence or lack thereof denotes whether the leaders negotiating there worked under his command or independently: an important distinction. If the leaders went under Tyler's orders, Mile End had a minimal impact on the revolt. If they negotiated independently, this meant that Tyler's authority was shared with them. Their departure, then would put Tyler in a unilateral position which did not exist before, creating a "head of the snake" for the royal forces to cut off. Given the evidence of all sources, Tyler most likely did not attend Mile End, and might not even have been aware of it.

After the meeting, while Richard hid, the more extreme leaders of the rebellion stoked anarchy. No longer accompanied by their more moderate colleagues, the radicals, mostly Kentishmen, took to the streets to serve their special brand of justice. Alastair Dunn pins Tyler's true ascension as rebel leader on June 14; his movements after this point are better recorded and his orders more visibly control the rebels. The moderates, who merely sought liberty from feudal

²⁶⁶ Froissart, *Chronicles*, 221-222.

²⁶⁷ Oman, *Great Revolt*, 64.

²⁶⁸ Barker, *1381*, 250.

obligations or resistance to extortionary tax burdens, departed after Richard's initial promises, leaving Tyler's plans unobstructed by concerns of other leaders. Although Tyler had advised the rebels for a week by June 14, the Mile End meeting triggered a change in attitude on the part of the rebels from resistance to full revolution, as would be demonstrated the following evening.²⁶⁹

The Smithfield meeting further established Tyler's prominence as sole leader in London. As the *Anonimalle* author was likely an eyewitness to the events there, his claims about the meeting take precedence over other reports. Tyler showed minimal deference to Richard, grabbing his arm and saying: "Brother, be of good comfort and joyful...for you shall have, in the fortnight that is to come, forty thousand more commons than you have at present, and we shall be good companions."²⁷⁰ He followed this with demands exceeding Mile End's, including land reform, the seizure of church estates, the dismissal of all bishops (except one, Balle), and a general demand for an end to lordship.²⁷¹ Three things could explain this sudden shift in tone. The first, as discussed, is that as moderate leaders departed, extremists gained more of a say in the negotiations. The second, floated by Dan Jones, is that the rebels' plans all along had been to continually escalate the demands: "From the early days in the villages to the massacres about the City, everything had been bound together by the fervent belief that still greater successes lay around the corner."²⁷² If the rebels did not believe this, at least Tyler did. Even after Richard conceded Tyler's demands and ordered him home "without delay", Tyler rinsed out his mouth in front of the king, then demanded a jug of ale and sucked it down as well.²⁷³ The rebel leaders showed extreme deference

²⁶⁹ Dunn, *Great Rising*, 97-98.

²⁷⁰ Jones, *Summer of Blood*, 146-7.

²⁷¹ Sumption, *Hundred Years War*, 428.

²⁷² Jones, *Summer of Blood*, 145.

²⁷³ "London...Anonimalle" in *Peasants' Revolt*, 165.

to Richard at Mile End, yet Tyler, at Smithfield, conducted himself as the king's equal at best and superior at worst.²⁷⁴ It proves exceedingly difficult to interpret this eyewitness account as anything less than direct defiance.

A third explanation is that the rebels were not as connected by purpose at Smithfield as they had been a week or two weeks prior. At least a few rebels had been active in London since June 12 (or, if Froissart is to be believed, before the events of May 30).²⁷⁵ Either way, the city had been controlled by sympathizers for at least a full day and possibly two weeks before the chaos of June 14. The rebels' actions at this time followed the same generally restrained attitude that they had prior to entering the city. The rebels had instructions, allegedly from Tyler, not to stray from the cause's symbolic targets. When someone did at the Savoy, he was killed.²⁷⁶ The rebels, until the Mile End meeting, had a set of goals towards which to strive, and once those goals were met, anarchy ensued.

Accounts of the rebels' initial goals vary, but all versions reveal the same general sentiments. Froissart recorded that the pro-revolt Londoners intended to "work on the King that there would be no more serfs in England."²⁷⁷ Thomas Baker and the local officials in Essex only planned to resist tax payments.²⁷⁸ The sworn associations alluded to in 1377 by the House of Commons desired to resist the duties of their lords, i.e. serfdom.²⁷⁹ Balle's letters, while vague,

²⁷⁴ "London...Anonimalle" in *Peasants' Revolt*, 161.

²⁷⁵ Froissart, *Chronicles*, 213.

²⁷⁶ Jones, *Summer of Blood*, 95.

²⁷⁷ Froissart, *Chronicles*, 213. Froissart claims that Balle's goals, as he presented them in his sermons, ended here as well. His ambition to become archbishop emerges later in the narrative.

²⁷⁸ "Eulogium" in *Peasants' Revolt*, 204.

²⁷⁹ Sumption, *Hundred Years' War*, 419.

allude more to justice when discussing specific orders than any kind of grand revolt: “Iohon Schep...biddeth Peres Ploughman go to his werk, and chastise wel Hobbe the Robbere, and taketh with yow Iohan Trewman, and alle hiis fellowes, and no mo, and loke schappe you to on heued, and no mo.”²⁸⁰ Even after the revolt had progressed for a week, the rebels’ intent to do justice to the extortionary advisors had not strayed far from the initial goals of tax resistance.

Tyler’s demands at Smithfield inflated these intentions. An end to serfdom had already been granted by Richard at Mile End.²⁸¹ Wycliffe had called for a disendowment of the Church in previous years, but the rising pursued this goal only insofar as punishing Sudbury for his complicity in the Northampton tax.²⁸² The dismissal of all bishops except Balle, again, had previously applied only to Sudbury’s title.²⁸³ Land redistribution was entirely new to Smithfield.²⁸⁴ Reinforcing the theory of a power shift even more than this was King Richard’s objection to Tyler’s presence at Smithfield. He asked, before beginning negotiations, why Tyler refused to return home.²⁸⁵ The Mile End rebels had departed and been satisfied by Richard’s concessions. Only Tyler remained. Other leaders had negotiated the agreements and departed of their own initiative, but this was never Tyler’s intent.²⁸⁶ No evidence suggests that Tyler supported the meeting or discussion of a charter in the first place. Mile End had been called by Richard, not Tyler, and aside from the *Anonimalle* account that haphazardly places him there (and contrasts

²⁸⁰ “John Ball’s Letter to the Essex Commons” in *The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381*, ed. R. B. Dobson (London: St. Martin’s Press, 1970), 381. The letter was found on a rebel before he was hung.

²⁸¹ Oman, *Great Revolt*, 64-65.

²⁸² Trevelyan, *Wycliffe*, 42.

²⁸³ “Outbreak...Anonimalle” in *Peasants’ Revolt*, 127.

²⁸⁴ Sumption, *Hundred Years War*, 428.

²⁸⁵ “London...Anonimalle” in *Peasants’ Revolt*, 164.

²⁸⁶ Dunn, *Great Rising*, 97.

every other source available to researchers), the lack of a connection beforehand suggests that he may not even have been fully aware of what was happening. Of the three assemblies, Mile End came about almost accidentally; the rebel representatives arrived at the field before the king did. Richard only went when he noticed rustics awaiting his departure from the Tower of London.²⁸⁷

Either way, the intent of the meeting had been to disperse the London rebels, and its success had been as accidental as its organization. By satisfying the moderates at Mile End, Richard ensured their departure from the city. Such a purge in the leadership of what was previously a well-coordinated rebellion with a clear hierarchy of command would have disassembled any leadership structure, and with Tyler's death the following day, the rebels would not have known from whom to receive orders. By evening of June 15, without any alternative, the rebels followed the orders of the monarch to whom Jack Straw had commanded they swear their fealty: Richard II. His orders, repeated from the Mile End meeting, read as follows:

Richard, by the grace of God king of England and France and lord of Ireland, sends greetings to all his bailiffs and loyal subjects to whom this letter comes. We inform you that of our special grace we have manumitted each and every one of our bondsmen and subjects and others of the county of Hertford. We have freed absolutely all of them from all bondage, and we discharge them through this charter. And we also grant pardon to our same bondsmen and subjects for all crimes, treacheries, misdeeds and robberies committed and perpetrated in whatever way by them or any one of them. And we annul any acts of outlawry if any such have been promulgated against them or any one of them as the result of these happenings. We extend to each and every one of them, absolutely all of them our complete peace from this day forward. As testimony to this we have these letters patent of ours written. Witnessed by myself in London, on the fifteenth of June in the fourth year of my reign."²⁸⁸

²⁸⁷ "London...Anonimalle" in *Peasants' Revolt*, 160-161.

²⁸⁸ Walsingham, *Maiora*, 131.

CHAPTER VI: AFTER SMITHFIELD

Monday 17 June may have been the climax of the revolt in west Norfolk, but in the east of the county it was just beginning. Agitators had been riding throughout the county for several days preparing the way for a major gathering at Mousehold Heath on the north-eastern outskirts of Norwich...In their indictments it was claimed that they were working for a dyer from Felmingham, a village fourteen miles north of Norwich, named Geoffrey Lister or Litster...like Wat Tyler and John Wrawe, he apparently emerged from obscurity to become a major leader of the revolt.²⁸⁹

After the death of Wat Tyler, the rebellion lost its first and last absolute leader, ending the rebellion's potential as a formidable resistance to centralized government authority. This was not at first apparent; the situation of England on June 16, with the exception of London, hardly appeared any differently than June 15.²⁹⁰ Without central coordination, the uprising fragmented into localized movements scattered throughout England. Each of these movements developed in their own way, but never again was anything like the seizure of London possible with the network. The risings outside of London, Kent and southern Essex often coincided with and joined with local concerns that gave distinct flavors to the rebels in every part of the country.²⁹¹

One such post-Tyler rising, in St. Albans, had many precedents. The peasants had resisted there before in 1274, 1314 and 1326. After the third disturbance, they had acquired burghal status, but quickly lost it to Edward III in 1331.²⁹² In 1381, the village, already inheriting a violent history, found itself a short journey away from another rising resembling its previous struggles. The details of how they responded to the news, recorded by Walsingham, represents a microcosm of how

²⁸⁹ Barker, *1381*, 332.

²⁹⁰ Dunn, *Great Rising*, 109.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 111.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 112.

events likely unfolded in towns across England. Before the rebel messengers arrived with their usual threats and invitations, the townspeople had already heard of the revolt and decided to support it. The messengers threatened to raze the town if it failed to rise, but all this did was coerce the unwilling monks, such as Abbot Thomas la Mare and Walsingham himself, to march alongside the townsfolk in order to preserve their survival.²⁹³ These individuals came under the command of Jack Straw, an event of which Walsingham was an eyewitness.²⁹⁴

By the time the St. Albans men had reached Straw's command, Walsingham records, the Mile End meeting was underway and the area around the Tower of London had been seized, putting their entry into the fray at a crucial point in the rebellion's progress. It also confirms the minor point that Jack Straw had not been at Mile End to negotiate the terms. Rebel contingents came into the network during and after Mile End, coordinated directly by Tyler and his loyalists.²⁹⁵

When the abbot and his men realized that the party intended to join the uprising, they quietly separated from the townsmen and sent a messenger to warn the monks who had remained behind.²⁹⁶ When some attempted to rejoin the main party, now under Tyler's theoretical command, the townspeople again split off to carry out their own missions. They met at St. Mary at Bow, a London Church. There, Walsingham describes the forces which shaped their intentions in joining the rebels. While the awareness of legal records and tax resistance remains, the primary claims are local concerns which likely portray the real day-to-day fears of most rebels:

That they should enjoy new boundaries around [St Albans] in which they could graze their animals freely, have places assigned to them in which they could fish without blame and similar places assigned for hunting and hawking, and set up their hand-mills wherever they liked at their own wish and whim. They also wanted to

²⁹³ Jones, *Summer of Blood*, 105-106.

²⁹⁴ Walsingham, "London...Walsingham" in *Peasants' Revolt*, 171.

²⁹⁵ Walsingham, *Maiora*, 124.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 131N.

suffer no interference from the bailiff of the liberty inside the town boundaries, and to claim back the bonds which their parents had once made to abbot Richard Wallingford...and, in a word, all records in the abbey which were a support to them or involved loss for the monastery.²⁹⁷

Some of the rebels, despite the confusion about the king's stances, reached out to him for legitimacy. Others appealed to Wat Tyler for help in sacking their monastery if necessary. The leader of this second band, William Grindcobbe, convinced Tyler to back their demands in exchange for their loyalty. One of the abbot's servants who had remained with Grindcobbe initially darted ahead of the townspeople and warned the prior, prompting him and his servants to flee.²⁹⁸

Wat Tyler had ordered the party under Grindcobbe to burn the abbey and its holdings to the ground if it failed to meet their demands, which, by Saturday morning, were backed by royal orders. While Grindcobbe had met with Tyler, another head townsman, Richard of Wallingford, had obtained audience with the king, probably at Mile End. He presented a royal charter to the abbot demanding the townspeople's concerns be fulfilled. When the abbot reminded Richard that the demands exceeded his authority and the authority of any under the law, including the king, the town spokesman dismissed these concerns, as "for the time being the commons had the whip hand."²⁹⁹

The rising in St. Albans, however, would not last forever. As time progressed, the rebels awaited instruction from Tyler. The townsmen successfully attacked the abbey and extorted, using a royal charter, a deed of manumission, but their progress ended there.³⁰⁰ The townsmen, having achieved their personal goals, took little additional action until Sir Walter Atley, representing the king, arrived to subdue them. Grindcobbe encouraged resistance, claiming that neighboring towns

²⁹⁷ Walsingham, *Maiores*, 131-2.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 132-3.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 135.

³⁰⁰ May McKisack, *The Oxford History of England: The Fourteenth Century, 1307-1399* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 417.

would come to their aid.³⁰¹ About three hundred bowmen from the immediate area arrived to help, but nobody else arrived. After waiting for these few men to disperse, Atley arrested the leaders, which prompted the people to riot. Once Grindcobbe, communicating from prison, warned the town of an approaching armed force, they agreed to a peace.³⁰²

This was just one of the local rebellions which fell in isolation without Tyler's command. On June 18, the king authorized local sheriffs to end the rebels' actions in their respective jurisdictions. By June 23, the leading gentry received the same authority. Instead of raising a central levy to fight off an army, Richard treated the movement as a local matter. Most of the men responded similarly to St. Albans, standing down without a fight; very few people were killed during this time, at least in terms of executions.³⁰³ Essex alone offered violent resistance. A small battle took place on June 28, two weeks after the London episode, near Billericay. The rebels lost, and fled to other parts of Essex, hoping for reinforcements, only to find them pacified. The rebels were alone. Soon they were attacked again. Lord FitzWalter, commanding the royal levy moving after them, imprisoned enough rebels that no further battles took place.³⁰⁴

Unlike the other local movements, the Essex rebels displayed broader regional coordination. While other groups had waited for messengers from the king, the Essex rebels contacted the king of their own volition with specific demands for the ratification of the Mile End promises. This demand hints, once again, that the rebel leaders who departed Mile End had constituted part of the rebel leadership and maintained that leadership independently of Tyler upon

³⁰¹ Walsingham, *Maiora*, 156.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 159.

³⁰³ Saul, *Richard II*, 73. The lack of executions, Saul explains, might have resulted from the Statute of Treasons' lack of a solid legal backing for such action.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 74-75.

their departure.³⁰⁵ Alternatively, this could have been the result of Tyler's appointment of John Wrawe as a deputy who imitated the revolt's earlier methods and tactics. The bouts of resistance in Norfolk, it seems, stemmed less from Tyler's influence than from Wrawe's.³⁰⁶ Wrawe was also active in Suffolk, and had the population of multiple counties under his independent sway by the time of Tyler's death, which explained why the Essex rebels were able to muster sufficient force to fight two battles against a royal levy.³⁰⁷ Much of the revolt had begun to fracture in Tyler's absence after June 15, but on June 17, two days after Tyler's death, Wrawe's revolt had yet to reach its full strength.³⁰⁸

The king and his allies had already begun to suppress rebels in other counties besides Essex and Suffolk even as the regional revolt expanded in strength. Wrawe and the Essex men were unable to bring about the same level of coordination as Tyler had, and ultimately the battle at Billercay was more of a massacre than a real fight, the other rebellions having already been put down.³⁰⁹ Some of the fringe locations influenced by Wrawe fell to local authorities before they could fully coalesce. Henry Despenser, the bishop of Norwich, took his own small band of men and met the locals under John Lister in combat. While Lister commanded his forces well, he failed to leave an avenue in his fortifications for retreat. The bishop soundly defeated Lister's force before either party contacted any coordinating group for assistance.³¹⁰

³⁰⁵ Oman, *Great Revolt*, 84.

³⁰⁶ Lindsay, *Peasants' Revolt*, 122.

³⁰⁷ Dunn, *Great Rising*, 123-4.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 136.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 136-7.

³¹⁰ Walsingham, *Maiora*, 146-7.

With the exception of the Essex revolt, the events after Tyler's death fall into the pattern of division and conquest. Before June 7, decentralized rebel actions succeeded in the absence of concentrated government action against the isolated actors. This initial success was also the result of what the evidence suggests was the unfolding of a general premeditated plan of action. After June 7, the rebels' continued success stemmed from their growth into a more fully organized and focused movement under Tyler. After June 15, when Tyler died, the rebels he and his colleagues had organized continued to fight without direction. As their forces either achieved their personal goals (as in St. Albans) or were snuffed out by local enforcers (as in Norwich), the full movement gradually disintegrated until the only remaining forces, centered in Essex, found nowhere left to run.

CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSIONS

While many of the architects behind the 1381 revolt remain unidentified, and we know very little about those who are, Thomas Baker, John Balle, Wat Tyler and the other rebel leaders made use of a highly organized, ideologically cohesive network of resistance to royal authority. The model these leaders subscribed to consisted of a decentralized and yet carefully planned series of instructions to the entire rustic population. The nature of the model precluded resistance against it; the authorities of London, once they realized what was transpiring, still refrained from raising defensive levies, realizing that a decentralized revolt could have infiltrated such forces. The royal government lacked any definite means to strike down the rebels.³¹¹ Only by accident did Richard II isolate Wat Tyler as leader by pacifying and consequently dismissing the moderates at Mile End. The following day, Mayor Walworth killed Tyler, not to intentionally disarm the rebels but in an act of self-defense. Then the rebels lingered without guidance. Disoriented and leaderless, they followed Richard's marching orders. The government finally realized its success and suppressed the large but disconnected cells lingering throughout the rest of the country.

The rebels found moral legitimacy in an appeal to God, or, more accurately, to the egalitarian Gospel of his self-proclaimed spokesman, John Balle. His rhetoric and that of mendicants challenged clerical opulence and the legitimacy of "middlemen" both in the Church and the royal court. Balle also articulated the rebels' strategy: to appeal, aided by encouragement of force, to the king's sense of justice for the reforms Balle desired.³¹² His widespread preaching,

³¹¹ McKisack, *Fourteenth Century*, 409.

³¹² Froissart, *Chronicles*, 212.

and the preaching of the mendicants, spread knowledge of the rebels' complaints. Delivered in English directly to the public instead of in Latin to the ecclesiastical elite, these ideas drew no cogent response which would speak to them. Even if a parish priest took it upon himself to translate counter-arguments to the vernacular, the counter-argument to Balle would never have obtained the same reach or influence as his own.³¹³ Through the eradication of unnecessary agents between the king, Christ and the commons, the rebellion took up Balle's call to unite "with King Richard and the true commons of England."³¹⁴

The themes of corrupted power among civil and religious authority blended well with the actual grievances faced by the common laborer. The Black Plague devastated England's population in the late 1340s, and subsequent plagues kept their numbers down. The survivors, paradoxically, were enriched by the thinning of the labor market and experienced unprecedented wealth. When the nobility responded with laws to suppress these effects, the laborers grew conscious of exactly how much the nobility had to gain by keeping them less wealthy, and therefore less powerful, than they otherwise could be. This developing class consciousness fed perfectly into Balle's religious outrage towards corrupted middlemen. The workers no longer had to theorize malintent from the elites but could now give it a name: The Statute of Laborers.³¹⁵ The more skilled laborers, which formed an emerging middle class, studied the legal system which oppressors used against them and found ways to employ it for their own advancement. Exploring ancient, "just" laws, they brought both legal challenge to the government and greater understanding of law to the peasantry. By the late 1370s, John Balle's warnings about middlemen,

³¹³ Barker, *1381*, 31-32.

³¹⁴ Sumption, *Hundred Years' War*, 423.

³¹⁵ Jones, *Summer of Blood*, 14.

spoke to the reality of many laborers' situations. This awareness manifested in legal action: "It is to be presumed that the 'exemplifications from Domesday' were proofs that in particular manors there were in 1085 free men and socmen, where in 1377 villeins were to be found, so that some lord in the intervening three centuries must have advanced his power to the detriment of the ancient rights of the inhabitants of the place."³¹⁶

By the time of the Northampton Poll tax, the continual failures of the fighting nobility to wage an effective land war in France had spurred on heavier taxes which were seemingly being squandered, leading to the first coordinated networks to evade and resist taxes, evidenced by the new taxes' returns.³¹⁷ The government responded to these failures by cracking down on the evasion, but mistakenly did so only after a confederacy had formed. In doing this, they alienated the local collectors upon whom they had previously relied on for loyalty to enforce taxes. Just as the lawyers of earlier years enabled peasants to comprehend and fight serfdom, the now scorned collectors, exemplified by Thomas of Fobbing or Robert Cave, knew how the taxes operated and now acted as informed investigators. They empowered their communities to resist the tax, this time with force. The resulting conflict sparked the 1381 rising.³¹⁸

For the following week, the rising unfolded as planned. The rebel organizers used correspondence to coordinate local leaders in a horizontal confederacy, a revolutionary yet appropriate decision in an era when vertical hierarchy defined society, sacrament and serfdom. In doing this, none of the rebel actors could be identified as the single leader. While half of England's towns rose against the government, no single targeted military or police action could easily

³¹⁶ Oman, *Great Revolt*, 11.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

³¹⁸ "Eulogium" in *Peasants' Revolt*, 204.

suppress the rebels. By June 7, at a meeting in Maidstone, several such local leaders met in one place, presumably for the first time, having carried out their orders. To decide on their course of action, they freed John Balle, and selected a well-connected Essex man, Wat Tyler, as the rebel leader. At that moment the revolt transitioned from tax resistance to a full-fledged overthrow of late medieval English society.³¹⁹

The new scope of the program also targeted the Church, as demanded by John Balle. In a feat of central coordination, Tyler led his newly formed army first to Canterbury and then on a reverse pilgrimage to London. By the time they reached the Blackheath outside the city, the rebels had become a coordinated movement under Tyler. When the king sent out emissaries to the rebels, they met with Tyler, and when one of those emissaries conspired to coordinate the Londoners with the rebels, he did so with Tyler.³²⁰ When local leaders sought to join the revolt, they did so by consulting with Tyler.³²¹

Tyler did not exclusively lead the revolt, however, until June 14, when, at Mile End, King Richard II unintentionally destabilized the rebellion. By giving in to moderate demands, he removed moderate leaders from the immediate crisis, now dominated by more radical rebels. From then on, sources agreed that the only leader in London was Tyler. By extension, the only rebel leaders remaining around the country were coordinated by and communicated with Tyler. This prompted the extremist rebels to take extreme action. Royal officials of the time saw Mile End as

³¹⁹ Sumption, *Hundred Years' War*, 421.

³²⁰ Oman, *Great Revolt*, 51.

³²¹ Walsingham, *Maiora*, 135.

their greatest mistake, but it positioned them perfectly to deliver a final blow to the rebel cause. Eliminating Tyler cut the head off of the proverbial snake.³²²

The next day's meeting at Smithfield accomplished just that. Mayor Walworth struck the blow that killed Wat Tyler and shattered the last unifying figure of the rebels. Tyler himself was aware of his position, drastically inflating the demands of Mile End to reflect his greater influence. The king and his advisors, however, struck this drastic blow and took control of the rebels less as a planned move and more as a reaction to Tyler's audacious behavior. The king had been negotiating with Tyler extensively and meeting his demands for water and ale as he made them, and had not behaved as though they intended to kill Tyler from the beginning. While Mayor Walworth and Richard II ended the Smithfield meeting on June 15 in the best way possible to meet their own aims, they did so almost entirely by accident.³²³ Mayor Walworth's armed revenues were likely lying in wait for a signal to strike, but this was probably to protect against a rebel charge, not to plan for Tyler's assassination. The murder of Tyler took place in front of his men, and killing him made a martyr of his cause; a better course would have been to take him alive and discredit him. Of the Smithfield events, Barker writes: "everything that happened was therefore simply a response to events as they unfolded."³²⁴

I began my research on the 1381 rising as an investigation into "the ignored peasant mastermind" Wat Tyler, hinging my theories about his authority and the rebellion's origins on the belief that Tyler had been sent from Essex, specifically Colchester, to organize the Kentish rebels after being part of the rising in the north. I still believe this to be true; the Ker expedition across

³²² Dunn, *Great Rising*, 97-98.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 106-107.

³²⁴ Barker, *1381*, 272-3.

the Thames for a hundred reinforcements, when several thousand remained to be recruited around Dartford and Ker already commanded a large enough force to seize an abbey, makes little sense otherwise. Wat Tyler played a crucial role in the rebellion's rise and fall as part of a much larger and more sophisticated network than any of the chroniclers or primary source authors were likely fully aware of. Tyler's involvement turned the sophisticated network into a centralized, ideologically consistent movement that threatened to overturn the existing hierarchy of Richard II's England, but in doing so, he made it vulnerable to the exact sort of suppression against which it had been immune beforehand. Tyler's rising, and the large regional risings which developed from it once devoid of centralized leadership, shook England to its core, but failed precisely because the rebels lacked their central coordinator. Without Tyler at the helm, the rebels congregated regionally, as exemplified by St. Albans, and succumbed one by one to royal intervention.

A full understanding of the 1381 revolt, how it was organized, and why it failed requires a larger understanding of the medieval world in which it took place. Studying this revolt's background means exploring the social, economic and religious background of the wider world of the late fourteenth century. This revolt revealed that behind the picturesque late medieval panorama of popes, kings and knights lived a laboring class striving ever harder to break free of time honored social and economic constraints within a hierarchical, structured world. In this way, the chaos of 1381 offers a glimpse into the minds of the people whose opinions, lives and experiences, did not often draw the interest of chroniclers in more settled times, who often fixated on the more colorful and dramatic concerns of the high and the mighty. Although the stratified, hierarchical order which the chroniclers of late middle ages and their powerful patrons idealized and defended would decline only slowly and endure in various forms for centuries, the

questioning and unraveling of that vision of society was clearly and dramatically evident in the bold and thoughtful actions of English rebels of 1381 and their leaders.

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