THE PEASANTS REVOLT

INTRODUCTION.

We probably all know, or are aware, that Wat Tyler was one of the leaders of the Peasant Revolt of 1381 but are less aware of the connection to which Basildon has to this period of English history. It is important that we try to explain, or document, some of that history, not only associated with him, and his legacy, but also of the period of time which includes Barstable Hundred through to the creation of the Wat Tyler Country Park.

Throughout the late Saxon and Medieval periods, Essex Marshland Sheep were a prized source of dairy produce, in particular, cheeses. However, the decline in dairy farming had begun by the middle of the sixteenth century and appears to be largely due to changing fashions of food with dairy produce and in particular sheep's milk dropping in the social scale in favour of meat consumption. The rich marshland grazing was also used for the fattening of livestock during the summer months before being taken to London for slaughter.

The coastal position and proximity to the huge market in London for agricultural produce, including fresh dairy and meat, expanded the development of many small creeks, ports, hythes and quays, well over a hundred in Essex. The meat trade with London from this part of Essex was established in the fourteenth century followed by cereals and hay to feed both the expanding London population of both people and horses. Of particular note, there was a direct trade from Thameside manors to the continent as in 1367 when John Burgeys of Fobbing obtained a Royal Warrant to ship sixty weys of cheese to Flanders.

It rained almost constantly throughout the summer and autumn of 1314 and then through most of 1315 and 1316. Crops rotted in the ground, harvests failed, and livestock drowned or starved. Food stocks depleted and the price of food soared. The result was the Great Famine, which over the next few years is thought to have claimed over 5% of the British population. It was the same or even worse in mainland Europe.

The shortage of crops pushed up prices of everyday necessities such as vegetables, wheat, barley, and oats. Bread was therefore also expensive and because the grain had to be dried before it could be used, of very poor quality. Salt, the only way at that time to cure and preserve meat, was difficult to obtain because it was much harder to extract through evaporation in wet weather; its price rose dramatically.

The European climate was changing, with cooler and wetter summers and earlier autumn storms. These were far from ideal conditions for agriculture and with a large population to feed, it only took one failed harvest for things to get very bad very quickly. Some historians think that this terrible weather may have been caused by a volcanic eruption, perhaps that of Mount Tarawera in New Zealand which is known to have erupted around 1314. Unfortunately, the Great Famine was only the first of a series of severe crises to hit Europe in the 14th century; the Black Death was just around the corner…

The winter of 1376 into 1377 was also particularly bad, the Abbey of Barking recorded that ' by the flooding of the Thames, they have lost a great part of the profit of their possessions at Barkying and elsewhere in Essex.' By the end of the thirteenth century, supervision of the coastal defences was in the hands of the king's justices and other dignitaries appointed to temporary commissions on walls and ditches. In the fourteenth century, the Essex Commissions were largely concerned with the banks on the upper reaches of Thameside with the power to compel negligent land-owners to fulfil their obligation to repair and maintain their share of the defences.

Vange and Fobbing Marshes

The marshes are unimproved coastal grassland, dykes, and creeks, with a wide variety of maritime herbs and grasses, some of them nationally rare. The site is the main British location for least lettuce. Insects with restricted distributions include the scarce emerald damselfly and Roesel's bush cricket. There are birds at Vange Marsh such as avocets, common terns, and black-tailed godwits. Now also triple SI site. There is access to Fobbing Marsh by footpaths from Corringham, and Vange Marsh is 600 metres from Pitsea railway station.

Pitsea Marsh.

Now a Site of Special Scientific Interest. The southern half is the Wat Tyler Country Park, and the northern half is private land. The site has a variety of habitats, such as grassland, scrub, reedbed, fen, ponds, and saltmarsh.

It was reclaimed in the seventeenth century, when Pitsea Hall Fleet was excavated to construct sea walls.

Looking upstream past the Port of London Authority sign. The tide is out, and the creek is mainly mudflats with the occasional gull and Oystercatcher braving the heavy rain to feed.

The map on the sign could be misleading to the casual visitor as it gives the impression that the land across the creek is Canvey Island. In fact this is taken from Pitsea Wharf and we're looking towards Vange and Fobbing Marshes.

THE BLACK DEATH

In October 1347, twelve Genoese trading ships put into the harbour at Messina in Sicily. The ships had come from the Black Sea where the Genoese had several important trading posts. The ships contained rather strange cargo: dead or dying sailors showed strange black swellings about the size of an egg located in their groins and armpits. These swellings oozed blood and pus. Those who suffered did so with extreme pain and were usually dead within a few days. The victims coughed and sweat heavily. Everything that issued from their body -- sweat, blood, breath, urine, and excrement -- smelled foul.

The disease was bubonic plague, and it came in two forms. In cases of infection of the blood stream, boils and internal bleeding were the result. In this guise the plague spread by physical contact. In the pneumonic phase, the plague was spread by respiration (coughing, sneezing, breathing). The plague was deadly -- a person could go to sleep at night feeling fine and be dead by morning. In other instances, a doctor could catch the illness from one of his patients and die before the patient.

By January 1348, the plague had penetrated France by way of Marseilles and North Africa by way of Tunis. Both Marseilles and Tunis are port towns. The plague then spread west to Spain and North to central France by March. By May, the plague entered Rome and Florence. In June, the plague had moved to Paris, Bordeaux, Lyon, and London. Switzerland and Hungary fell victim in July.

To make matters worse, in January 1348 -- remember, this is the month the plague first appeared on the continent -- a serious earthquake hit an area between Naples and Venice. Houses and churches collapsed, villages were destroyed, and foul odours emanated from the earth. The death rate from the plague was erratic and ranged from twenty percent to one hundred percent. For the area extending from India to Iceland, it can be assumed that between thirty and thirty-five percent of Europe's population disappeared in the three years between 1347 and 1350. This meant about 20 million deaths out of an estimated population of 70 million.

Wheat was left unharvested, and oxen, sheep, cows, goats, pigs, and chickens ran wild, and according to most contemporary accounts, they too fell victim to the plague. English sheep -- the primary provider of wool to Europe -- died in great numbers. One report specified that five thousand lay dead in one field. All this led to a sense of a vanishing future and created what historians have referred to as a "dementia of despair." One German observer wrote that "men and women wandered around as if mad and let their cattle stray because no one had any inclination to concern themselves about the future."

General ignorance about the causes of the plague did nothing to dispel fear and terror. The carriers of the plague -- rats and fleas -- were not suspected for one very simple reason: rats and fleas were common and familiar to the 14th century. Fleas are not mentioned in the records of the plague and rats only incidentally. The actual plague bacillus, Yersinia pestis, was not discovered until the middle of the 19th century, 500 years too late!

In the Wake of the Black Death.

The 14th century in Europe has often been called the Calamitous Century and rightly so. The primary disruption of that century was obviously the appearance of the Black Death. As we've seen, the Black Death was ultimately responsible for the gruesome death of more than 25 million people, a figure which represented at least 30 percent of Europe's total population. Whole villages and towns simply ceased to exist as the plague raged across Europe at mid-century. To make matters worse, Europe suffered a series of crop failures and famines which, while less deadly than the plague, persisted for several years. There were three such famines which occurred just before and after the plague.

These famines were usually result of poor climatic conditions. Regardless of the cause, times were indeed difficult for 14th century men and women. Perhaps Europe was over-populated in at the start of the 14th century -- perhaps there were simply too many mouths to feed given the status of medieval agricultural techniques. And even in years of good harvest, most people had to survive on the slim margin of existence. The 14th century was not an age of plenty. The declining population at the end of the 14th century had a number of important effects. Many people touched by the plague moved away from medieval cities and towns to unaffected areas. This was the negative impact. On the positive side, some landlords began to concentrate on improving the fertility of the soil. And back in the cities, the declining population of workers meant that masters sought out new ways to produce which required less manpower. That is, they began to construct labour saving machinery. In other words, an act of God produced a greater need for technological innovation.

Meanwhile, the prices of agricultural products increased. This inflation of prices stayed high until the end of the century when prices began to fall. But because agricultural labourers were scarce, having been wiped out by famine or by the plague, they began to demand higher wages which were necessary because of the high price of goods. Landlords sought new ways to increase their incomes. One way was to increase rents, which they did. Another way was to find a crop which would yield higher returns, and they found this crop in the raising of sheep. So landlords in England began to convert land which was traditionally held by the peasants in common into enclosed property upon which sheep would be raised. And the raising of sheep, though lucrative, is not a labour-intensive proposition.

One reason why the number of farm labourers decreased was the plague. But another, equally important reason, was that many serfs now chose to commute their labour services by money payments, to abandon the farm altogether, and to pursue more interesting in rewarding jobs in the skilled craft industries in the cities. This new vocational option was made possible by the Black Death. Agricultural prices fell because of lowered demand, and the price of luxury and manufactured goods -- the work of skilled artisans -- rose. The nobility suffered the greatest decline in power from this new state of affairs. They were forced to pay more for finished products and for farm labour, and they received a smaller return on agricultural produce. Everywhere their rents were in steady decline after the plague.

Masters and merchants petitioned their governments to intervene and around 1350, the governments of England, France and Spain began to fix prices and wages which, of course, was favourable to employers and not to workers. For instance, in 1351, Edward III of England instituted the STATUTE OF LABOURERS which forbade employers to pay more than customary wages and require that all labourers accept those wages.

CAUSES OF THE REVOLT

1. The Statute of Labourers 1351.

This was a law passed at the end of the Black Death to stop the peasants taking advantage of the shortage of workers and demanding more money. Peasants were forced to work for the same wages as before, and landowners could insist on labour services being performed, instead of accepting money (commutation). This meant that the landowners could profit from shortages, whilst life was made very much harder for the peasants.

2. Prices.

Prices had risen since the Black Death. Wages had not risen as fast, so the peasants suffered from hunger and shortages.

3. The young King - Richard II

During the course of the Black Death and the years following it, England had a strong and warlike king, Edward III. However, his son, the Black Prince, died before him, leaving his grandson as heir to the throne. In 1377, Edward III died, and this boy of ten became king. The true power lay with the powerful barons, in particular the boy's uncle, John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster. The barons, hated already by the peasants, began to take advantage of the situation.

4. The Poll Tax.

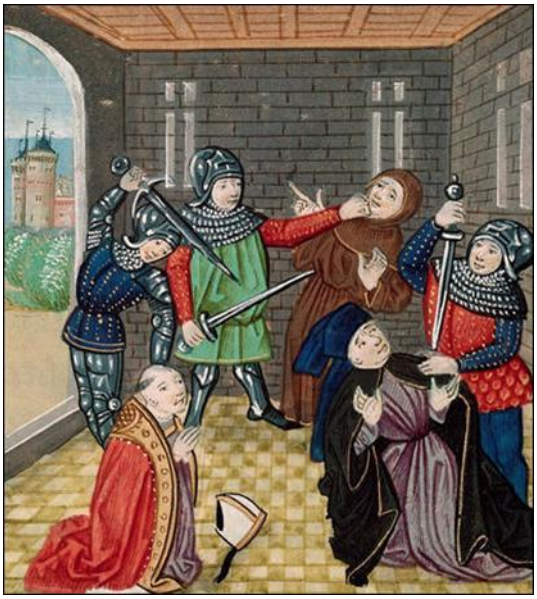
England was involved in the Hundred Years War. This had left the treasury empty, and the barons were tired of paying for the war. In 1377, John of Gaunt imposed a new tax, the Poll (head) Tax, which was to cover the cost of the war. Unlike normal taxes, this was to be paid by the peasants, as well as the landowners. Although this was meant to be a "one-off" event, it was so successful that it was repeated three more times. The first tax was 4d from every adult (adult: 14yrs+), then it was raised to 4d for the peasants and more for the rich, and finally in 1380, it was raised to 12d per adult.

The barons liked the idea of the peasants helping to pay taxes, especially if they were acting as tax collectors, as some of the money was siphoned off into their pockets. It was much harder on the peasants, who could ill afford to pay, especially as the tax was collected in cash and not in farm produce. By 1380, many were hiding from the collectors, and avoiding payment. For this reason, the amount collected dropped away, despite the fact that the tax had been increased.

5. John Ball and the Church.

The Church was badly hit by the Black Death, and many of the clergy were poorly educated, thus reducing popular respect for the Church. The Church was also a major landowner, and the abbots and bishops sided with the barons against the peasants. This made the church hated, as the peasants felt betrayed by an organisation that should help, rather than exploiting them.

This situation was made worse by a number of rebellious priests who preached against the Church and the barons. Foremost amongst these was John Ball, who coined the famous verse; "While Adam delved (dug) and Eve span, who then was the gentleman?" i.e. There had been no group of non-working layabouts in that time, so why should they be tolerated now? So dangerous was this teaching that the Archbishop of Canterbury had arrested John Ball and confined him in Maidstone Castle.



John Ball* was born in St Albans in about 1340. Twenty years later he was working as a priest in York. He eventually became the priest of St James' Church in Colchester. Ball believed it was wrong that some people in England were very rich while others were very poor. Ball's church sermons criticising the feudal system upset his bishop and in 1366 he was removed from his post as the priest of the church. Ball now had no fixed job or home, and he became a travelling priest and gave sermons, whenever he found "a few people ready to listen, by the roadside, on a village green or in a market place, he would pour forth fiery words against the evils of the day and particularly the sins of the rich." Ball was "a preacher, a poet, a maverick thinker and a natural rabble-rouser" and the authorities saw him as "being an incessant, heretical nuisance, preaching in churchyards and in public places across the region, railing against inequality, the corruption of the established Church and the tyrannies of the powerful against the powerless."

John Ball was highly critical of the way the church taxed people and urged them not to pay their tithes. He also believed that the Bible should be published in English. It is claimed that Ball was influenced by the 14th century preacher, John Wycliffe.

While preaching in Norfolk, Henry le Despenser*, the Bishop of Norwich, ordered the imprisonment of John Ball. After he was released he began touring Essex and Kent. During this time he became known as the "mad priest of Kent". He was released but it was not long before he was once again back in prison. Jean Froissart pointed out: "John Ball had several times been confined in the Archbishop of Canterbury's prison for his absurd speeches... It would have been better had he locked him up for the rest of his life, or even had him executed."

Ball preached that "things would not go well with England until everything was held in common". At these meetings he argued: "Are we not all descended from the same parents, Adam and Eve? So what can they show us, what reasons give, why they should be more the master's than ourselves?" It is in Ball's words that we find the early concept of the equality of all men and women, "as opposed to the rigid class divisions, privileges and injustice of feudalism; equality as justified by scripture and expressed as fraternity, which was to continue as a basic ideal of the English radical tradition."

John Ball also complained about laws that were passed telling people what to wear and what to eat. He especially objected to a law that forbad peasants from sending their children to school or to go into the Church to become priests. He also objected to "the law, which also stopped the children of serfs going into the towns to become apprentices... this was done in order to maintain the supply of agricultural labour."

John Ball at Mile End from Jean Froissart, Chronicles (c. 1470)

Ball argued that the feudal system was immoral: "Why are those whom we call lords, masters over us? How have they deserved it? By what right do they keep us enslaved? We are all descended from our first parents, Adam, and Eve; how then can they say that are better than us... At the beginning we were all created equal. If God willed that there should be serfs, he would have said so at the beginning of the world. We are formed in Christ's likeness, and they treat us like animals... They are dressed in velvet and furs, while we wear only cloth. They have wine, and spices and good bread, while we have rye bread and water. They have fine houses and manors, and we have to brave the wind and rain as we toil in the fields. It is by the sweat of our brows that they maintain their high state. We are called serfs, and we are beaten if we do not perform our task."

The king's officials were instructed to look out for John Ball. He was eventually caught in Coventry. He was taken to St Albans to stand trial. "He denied nothing, he freely admitted all the charges without regrets or apologies. He was proud to stand before them and testify to his revolutionary faith." He was sentenced to death, but William Courtenay, the Bishop of London, granted a two-day stay of execution in the hope that he could persuade Ball to repent of his treason and so save his soul. John Ball refused and he was hanged, drawn, and quartered on 15th July 1381.

Jack Straw.

Jack Straw (probably the same person as John Rakestraw or Rackstraw) was one of the three leaders (together with John Ball and Wat Tyler) of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, a major event in the history of England. It has been suggested that Jack Straw may have been a preacher. Some have argued that the name was in fact a pseudonym for Wat Tyler or one of the other peasants' leaders; all of them appear to have used pseudonyms, adding to the confusion.

Several chroniclers, including Henry Knighton, mention Straw, though Knighton erroneously confuses him with Tyler. Thomas Walsingham stated that Straw was a priest and was the second-in-command of the rebels from Bury St Edmunds and Mildenhall.

This story is most likely a result of confusion with a John Wrawe, an unbeneficed priest who was formerly the vicar of Ringsfield near Beccles in Suffolk, and who seems to have led the Suffolk insurgency.

Walsingham also states that Straw and his followers murdered both notable local figures in Bury and, after reaching the capital, several of its Flemish residents, an accusation also made by Froissart. However, according to information in the church of St Mary in Great Baddow, in Essex, England, Jack Straw led an ill-fated crowd from the churchyard there to the risings, and he is elsewhere referred to as the leader of the men from Essex (as opposed to Tyler, who led the rebels from Kent).

Straw is generally supposed to have been executed in 1381 along with the other main figures of the Revolt. Froissart states that after Tyler's death at Smithfield, Straw (along with John Ball) was found "in an old house hidden, thinking to have stolen away", and beheaded. Walsingham gives a lengthy (and most likely invented) 'confession' in which Straw states that the insurgents' plans were to kill the king, "all landowners, bishops, monks, canons, and rectors of churches", set up their own laws, and set fire to London. The later chronicles of Raphael Holinshed and John Stow, in addition to detailing the 'confession', repeat a story, originating in the 15th-century account of Richard Fox, that Jack Straw, alias John Tyler, was provoked into his actions by an assault perpetrated on his daughter by a tax collector.

A Catalyst for Rebellion.

Social unrest afflicted workers in towns and cities as well as the peasants in the countryside. Governments, controlled as they were by the wealthiest nobility, made every attempt to fix prices and wages as well as regulate the movement of workers in their country. The most typical and most significant of these urban revolts was the Ciompi rebellion of 1378.

THE OUTBREAK OF THE REBELLION.

Having examined the Poll Tax returns for 1380, the Royal Council headed by John of Gaunt were upset to discover that less money than ever had been collected. Tax collectors were sent out again, with instructions to collect the full amounts. One of these men was Thomas Bampton, who arrived at Fobbing in Essex, and summoned the villagers of Fobbing, Stanford and Corringham to appear before him. Those law-abiding villagers who turned up were shocked to discover that they would have to pay the hated tax a second time, and that they would also have to pay for the people who had failed to turn up. Not surprisingly, a riot followed, and Bampton and his men were beaten and driven from the village.

Sir Robert Belknap, a Chief Justice was sent to calm the situation, but he suffered a similar fate. Word spread, and peasants all over Essex banded together and turned on the landowners. Manor houses were burnt down, and any records of taxes, labour duties and debts destroyed.

The first point to note is that most of the rebels were not peasants. The rebels included innkeepers, alewives, labourers, craftsmen (such as carpenters), widows carrying on a business, and clerics. Most were landholders, and some held large holdings. Some held positions of responsibility in their locality: one was a hundred juror, another was a bailiff, and another was a reeve. Some of them were from the alderman class in London.

They all had in common a grudge against the status quo. Many rebels held by disadvantageous customary or servile tenures; while they themselves were moving up in the world, they were still restrained by age-old, out-dated laws that attempted to restrict their lives. Others felt that they had been mistreated by the law of the land. The rebels did not want to overthrow the king; in fact, they claimed to have his support and to be acting on his behalf. This seems to have been a significant factor in the king’s decision to pardon the great majority of the rebels. Soon peasants in Kent rebelled also, and risings took place in many other areas of the country. Some unpopular landowners were killed, others fled and others captured and humiliated, having to act as servants and perform menial tasks. Although the revolt spread to many areas of England, the two risings in Essex and Kent became the focus of the revolt.

A timeline of events in 1381.

THOMAS BAKER OF FOBBING
May 30th 1381.
Essex peasants led by Thomas Baker, a landowner, chase Thomas Bampton out of Fobbing and arguably it was he who started the revolt. Robert Belknap, Chief Justice of Common Pleas, was sent to investigate the incident and to punish the offenders uprising.

June 1st 1381.
Essex rebels kill three of Bampton's servants (Tax Collectors) and their heads were put on poles and paraded around the neighbouring villages. After releasing the Chief Justice, some of the villagers looted and set fire to the home of John Sewale, the Sheriff of Essex in 1380. The people responsible sent out messages to the villages of Essex and Kent asking for their support in the fight against the poll tax. Many peasants decided that it was time to support the ideas proposed by John Ball and his followers. It was not long before Wat Tyler, a former soldier in the Hundred Years War, emerged as the leader of the peasants in Kent. Tyler's first decision was to march to Maidstone to free John Ball from prison. "John Ball had been set free and was safe among the commons of Kent, and he was bursting to pour out the passionate words which had been bottled up for three months, words which were exactly what his audience wanted to hear." The revolt spreads through Essex, Hertfordshire, and Suffolk.

June 2nd 1381.
Bampton, commanded Baker to make a full investigation into the tax evasion he suspected in Fobbing. Baker and his associates, however, refused point blank. They saw the investigation as just an excuse for another tax since Bampton had only recently accepted their total. Bampton was furious at this insubordinate lack of cooperation, threatening Baker, and the men of Fobbing by reminding them of the presence of his royal thugs.

With a misguided arrogance only the aristocracy could possess, Bampton ordered his two henchmen to arrest the dissidents, even though they were outnumbered by around 100 Essex villagers. The villagers advanced, flinging rocks and arrows, and the royal collectors fled. The men of Essex fled, too, but only to the woods, and the next day returned to their homes with accounts of what had taken place at Brentwood. That was all it took. Soon riders were traveling far and wide to gather like-minded men to join the protest against the abuse of royal authority and the inquisition into tax receipts. When the messengers returned, they brought news that hundreds of others were willing to rise up against the powers that be. By this time, the violent discontent had spread, and the counties of Essex and Kent were in full revolt. Soon people moved on London in an armed rebellion.

WAT TYLER IN KENT.

June 5th 1381.
On 5th June there was a Peasants' Revolt at Dartford and two days later Rochester Castle was taken. The peasants arrived in Canterbury on 10th June. Here they took over the archbishop's palace, destroyed legal documents and released prisoners from the town's prison. More and more peasants decided to take action. Manor houses were broken into, and documents were destroyed. These records included the villeins' names, the rent they paid and the services they carried out. What had originally started as a protest against the poll tax now became an attempt to destroy the feudal system.

June 7th 1381.
The revolt is now widespread. The Kent rebels besiege Maidstone Castle, which surrenders. John Ball is freed, and Rochester Castle surrenders also. Freeing the prisoners of Rochester and the county's other jails (including John Ball from Maidstone) under the new command of Wat Tyler, the Kentish rebels also took control of the important road linking Canterbury, seat of the most important churchman in the country, and London. They took oaths from anyone passing by. Simultaneously, the pattern of organized mobs targeting the legal profession and the property of unjust gentry was mirrored in Essex. The rebels from the counties met at Cressing Temple, near to where the Sheriff of Essex had just managed to escape with his life, if not his power.

They had caught the authorities underprepared. It seems royal intervention was forced when Tyler captured Canterbury Castle, freed the prisoners, had a bonfire of legal records, and murdered judges and gentry alike. At last, royal messengers came from Windsor with the incredible news that King Richard II had requested an audience with the rebels in London.

June 10th 1381.
The Kent Rebels march on Canterbury, and capture the city, Rich pilgrims are attacked in the town, Finding the Archbishop away, the rebels appoint a humble monk as the new Archbishop, and hold a service in the Cathedral, promising death to all "traitors" they capture. The peasants arrived in Canterbury on 10th June. Here they took over the archbishop's palace, destroyed legal documents and released prisoners from the town's prison. More and more peasants decided to take action.

Manor houses were broken into and documents were destroyed. These records included the villeins' names, the rent they paid and the services they carried out. What had originally started as a protest against the poll tax now became an attempt to destroy the feudal system.

Both the Kent and the Essex rebels now set out to march on London. The simple peasants believed that they were going to explain their grievances to the King, who had been badly advised, and that all would be set right. However, some of the more intelligent figures, such as Wat Tyler and John Ball had a much clearer idea of the situation, and were planning to gain as much as they could. The King and the council were caught completely by surprise, and there were only a few hundred troops in London. The city was virtually defenceless.

June 12th 1381.
Both groups of peasants had reached London. The Essex peasants at Mile End, north of the River Thames. Their numbers are hard to estimate, but both groups could have been made up of up to 50,000 people. A message was sent into the city, demanding a meeting with the king. It was arranged that he would meet them at Rotherhithe, on the Thames, that afternoon. Richard travelled downriver in the royal barge, but at the sight of the huge crowd of peasants, Richard's advisers would not let him land. He returned to the Tower of London, leaving the peasants angry and frustrated.

That night the peasants closed in on London. They were able to enter because the gates of the city, and London Bridge were opened by townspeople sympathetic to their cause, although they later claimed they had been forced to do it. It has been estimated that approximately 30,000 peasants had marched to London. At Blackheath, John Ball gave one of his famous sermons on the need for "freedom and equality".

My good friends, things cannot go on well in England, nor ever will until everything shall be in common; when there shall neither be vassal nor lord, and all distinctions levelled, when the lords shall be no more masters than ourselves. But ill have they used us! And for what reason do they hold us in bondage? Are we not all descended from the same parents, Adam, and Eve? And what can they show, or what reasons give, why they should be more the masters than ourselves? Except, perhaps, in making us labour and work, for them to spend. . . . They had handsome manors, when we must brave the wind and rain in our labours in the field; but it is from our labour they have wherewith to support their pomp. We are called slaves, and if we do not perform our service we are beaten, and we have no sovereign to whom we can complain or who would be willing to hear us. Let us go to the King and speak with him; he is young, and from him we may obtain a favourable answer, and if not we must ourselves seek to amend our condition.

The king had advised Simon of Sudbury, Archbishop of Canterbury, and Chancellor, to seize the opportunity to escape. But as the plan unfolded Sudbury was recognized by the rebels, and the London mob smashed their way into the Tower. One historian has described the event in the following way:

“In the Chapel of St John the shouting rabble came upon the Archbishop, Sir Robert Hales, the Lord Treasurer, John of Gaunt's physician, and John Legge who had devised the poll tax. They were all at prayer before the altar. Dragged away from the chapel, down the steps and out of the gates onto Tower Hill, where traitors were executed, they were beheaded one after the other. Their heads were stuck on pikes and carried in triumph around the city.”

Also on 12 June, the Kent peasants gathered at Blackheath near London under the leaders Wat Tyler, John Ball, and Jack Straw. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Simon Sudbury, who was also Lord Chancellor, and the king's Lord High Treasurer, Robert Hales, were both killed by the rebels, who were demanding the complete abolition of serfdom. The king, sheltered within the Tower of London with his councillors, agreed that the Crown did not have the forces to disperse the rebels and that the only feasible option was to negotiate.

Wat Tyler also spoke to the rebels. He told them: "Remember, we come not as thieves and robbers. We come seeking social justice." Henry Knighton records: "The rebels returned to the New Temple which belonged to the prior of Clerkenwell... and tore up with their axes all the church books, charters and records discovered in the chests and burnt them... One of the criminals chose a fine piece of silver and hid it in his lap; when his fellows saw him carrying it, they threw him, together with his prize, into the fire, saying they were lovers of truth and justice, not robbers and thieves."

Richard II gave orders for the peasants to be locked out of London. However, some Londoners who sympathised with the peasants arranged for the city gates to be left open.

Jean Froissart claims that some 40,000 to 50,000 citizens, about half of the city's inhabitants, were ready to welcome the "True Commons". When the rebels entered the city, the king and his advisers withdrew to the Tower of London. Many poor people living in London decided to join the rebellion. Together they began to destroy the property of the king's senior officials. They also freed the inmates of Marshalsea Prison.

Part of the English Army was at sea bound for Portugal whereas the rest were with John of Gaunt in Scotland. Thomas Walsingham tells us that the king was being protected in the Tower by "six hundred warlike men instructed in arms, brave men, and most experienced, and six hundred archers". Walsingham adds that they "all had so lost heart that you would have thought them more like dead men than living; the memory of their former vigour and glory was extinguished". Walsingham points out that they did not want to fight and suggests they may have been on the side of the peasants.

John Ball sent a message to Richard II stating that the rising was not against his authority as the people only wished only to deliver him and his kingdom from traitors. Ball also asked the king to meet with him at Blackheath. Archbishop Simon Sudbury and Robert Hales, the treasurer, both objects of the people's hatred, warned against meeting the "shoeless ruffians", whereas others, such as William de Montagu, the Earl of Salisbury, urged that the king played for time by pretending that he desired a negotiated agreement.

Thursday June 13th 1381.
On the evening of Thursday 13 June 1381 a large armed band broke into the Hospitallers' priory at Clerkenwell and set it and the many houses around it on fire, beheaded several people, and plundered documents, goods, and money from the house. The leader of this band was one Thomas Farndon or Farringdon of London, one of the leaders of the rebels who had ridden down from Essex on the previous day after plundering and burning Cressing Temple and the house at Coggeshall of Sir John Sewale, Sheriff of Essex.

The King arrives at Rotherhithe on a barge. The rebels demand that the king's leading advisers, John of Gaunt, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Hales, John Legge, should be executed. The king is unwilling to leave his barge and after a few minutes he returns to the Tower of London. Earlier on that Thursday Farndon had led the rebels in an attack on the New Temple, London, which was burned; and on the Savoy Palace, the property of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, and uncle of King Richard II. The Savoy had been plundered and then deliberately blown up with gunpowder. After sacking Clerkenwell priory, Farndon and other rebels spent the night drawing up a 'black list' of those in the government that they wanted dead.

13th June, 1381 (afternoon): The Kent rebels arrive at the Southwark entrance to London. Supporters of the rebels inside the walls lower the drawbridge. The Fleet Prison and Savoy Palace are also set on fire.

On Friday 14 June Jack Straw and other rebels, including some of those who had attacked Clerkenwell, burned down Highbury Manor, the property of the prior of the Hospital in England, and looted it, taking from it and Clerkenwell 'rolls and other muniments and goods and chattels'. King Richard II (then aged fourteen) rode out to negotiate with the rebels at Mile End, where Thomas Farndon seized his bridle and declared: 'Avenge me on that false traitor the prior for my property which he falsely and fraudulently stole from me. Do me justice because otherwise I will get justice done myself.' The king agreed to do him justice.

Farndon and his associates then went to the Tower of London. The Chancellor of the kingdom, Archbishop Simon Sudbury of Canterbury, the treasurer Robert Hales prior of the Hospital in England, John Cavendish the chief justiciar, and other leading royal officials were cowering in the Tower – their attempted escape through the postern gate opening on to the River Thames had been foiled by a woman who was keeping guard on it.

Farndon and his associates seized Sudbury, Hales, and the other leading royal officials, marched them out to Tower Hill and beheaded them. The following day the king met the rebels under Wat Tyler of Kent at West Smithfield. Wat Tyler was killed by the mayor of London, and the king assumed leadership of the rebels. The rebels then went home with the king's promise that their demands would be met.

This was not done, and the legal investigations into the revolt occupied the king's bench for a long time afterwards. A large number of people were given pardons; only ringleaders of the revolt were executed. In March 1383 Thomas Farndon was given a personal royal pardon, which included both his surnames to ensure that there was no doubt over the matter.

WAT TYLER

The rebels were loose in the city. Fleet Prison was broken open, many lawyers were killed in the Temple, and foreign merchants massacred. Despite this, most peasants were peaceful, and little damage was done to the city, on the orders of Wat Tyler. A group of peasants marched west from the city to the magnificent Savoy Palace, home of John of Gaunt. It caught fire as they ransacked it. Fortunately, John of Gaunt was in Scotland at this time, and escaped the rebels. As the flames lit the sky, Richard agreed to meet the rebels at Mile End the following day. He hoped that this would draw the peasants out of the city.

Friday June 14th 1381.

14th June, 1381 (morning): Richard II agrees to meet Wat Tyler and the rebels at 8.00 a.m. outside the town walls at Mile End. At the meeting Wat Tyler explains to the king the demands of the rebels. This includes the end of all feudal services, the freedom to buy and sell all goods, and a free pardon for all offences committed during the rebellion.

Wat Tyler put forward the peasants demands:

- land rents were reduced to reasonable levels.
- the Poll Tax was to be abolished.
- free pardons for all rebels.
- charters would be given to the peasants laying down a number of rights and privileges.
- all "traitors" were to be put to death.

Richard agreed to all these demands, but added that only a royal court could decide if a person was a traitor or not. He thought that this was the best policy, in order to allow the peasants to go home. A group of thirty or so clerks began to copy out charters for the peasants to take home.

However, the King had been outwitted by Wat Tyler. A group of peasants, taking advantage of the King's absence at Mile End, raided the Tower of London. Here, they found three of their most hated people; Simon Sudbury, (Archbishop of Canterbury), Sir Robert Hailes (King's treasurer) and John Legge (the creator of the Poll Tax). They were dragged out onto Tower Hill, and beheaded.

14th June, 1381 (afternoon): About 400 rebels led by John Starling, enter the Tower of London and capture Simon Sudbury, archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Hales, the king's treasurer and John Legge. Sudbury, Hales and Legge are executed at Tower Hill.

Rebellion in East Anglia

Friday 14th June 1381.

Sir John Cavendish (before 1340 – 15 June 1381) was an English judge and politician from Cavendish, Suffolk, England. He and the village gave the name Cavendish to the aristocratic families of the Dukedoms of Devonshire, Newcastle, and Portland. John Cavendish was descended from the Norman Robert de Guernon, who lived during the reign of Henry I and who gave a large amount of property to the Abbey of Gloucester.

Robert's son, Roger de Gernon, of Grimston Hall, in Trimley St Martin, Suffolk, married the heiress of John Potton of Cavendish and obtained a landed estate in the lordship and manor of Cavendish. In consequence, his four sons exchanged their father's name for that of the estate each inherited. Until about 1500 this family are recorded as Gernon alias Cavendish. Sir John Cavendish married Alice de Odingsells, became a lawyer, and was appointed as a Justice of the Common Pleas in 1371 and Chief Justice of the King's Bench in 1372. As Chief Justice he was obliged to suppress the Peasants' Revolt in 1381. Although Wat Tyler, the leader of the revolt was struck down by William Walworth, mayor of London, during negotiations on 15 June, John Cavendish the younger, second son of the Chief Justice, gave the finishing stroke to Wat Tyler, the lord mayor having only wounded him in the neck.

Saturday June 15th 1381.

Following the granting of charters the previous day, many peasants began to leave London and return home, believing that their demands had been met. However, Wat Tyler and a hard core of peasants remained behind, and they demanded another meeting with the King, to deliver even more demands. The King agreed to a meeting at Smithfield, an open space within the city walls. William Walworth, mayor of London, raises an army of about 5,000 men. Richard II sends a message to Wat Tyler asking to meet him at Smithfield that evening. At Smithfield, the king ask Wat Tyler and his rebels to leave London.

Wat Tyler makes further demands such as the end of tithes, the abolition of bishops, the redistribution of wealth, equality before the law, and the freedom to kill the animals in the forest. William Walworth, mayor of London, begins to argue with Wat Tyler. William Walworth stabs and kills Wat Tyler. The rebels obey King Richard's instructions to leave.

When the King's party arrived, Wat Tyler rode up and greeted them in an insolent manner. What happened next is unclear, but was probably a pre-arranged plot. Tyler was rude to the King, refusing to dismount, and spitting in front of him. The Lord Mayor of London, William Walworth, drew his sword and attacked Tyler, wounding him. A squire finished him off as he lay on the ground. Walworth sent news to the wards of London that though the hated Wat Tyler was badly injured, the king was in danger and needed their aid, and they loyally took arms. Walworth then sought out the moribund Tyler, finding him prostrate at St Bartholomew's Church, Smithfield, and beheaded him as a traitor.

This was a crucial moment, before the peasants realised what had happened. The young King rode forward, shouting out that all their demands were to be met, and that they should follow him out of the city, where charters would be forthcoming. Trustingly, the rebels followed him, and most were persuaded to return home.

Rebellion in East Anglia.
Saturday 15th June 1381.
Prior John Cambridge of the Abbey of St. Edmunds beheaded along with the Monk John Lakenheath in Bury. Richard de Leycester leads a revolt in the City of Ely. In Cambridge, burgesses' alliance with county rebels leads to a night of violence. In his testimony Wrawe admits to being present at the murders of Cambridge and Lakenheath and, in the latter case, he says his rebel company gave "help and advice." Unlike the earlier events of the rising, though, he specifically names the individuals who he claims led the acts. The other two murders go unmentioned in his testimony, implying that he claimed not to have been involved in any way at all. In this respect, Wrawe's version differs greatly from the secondary literature, which tends to describe all of the first three murders as being orchestrated by Wrawe himself. The death of the unidentified "worthy person" has only been considered worthy of one mention in a single work of secondary literature.

Most historians assume that Wrawe's testimony is merely the words of a man keen to disassociate himself from the most serious crimes of the rising. Further cause for doubt arises from the verdict of jury from Lackford hundred which found Wrawe and fellow Sudbury vicar Geoffrey Parfay guilty of the murder of the prior. The sudden emergence of murder after two days of looting, however, is a curious change in the character of the rebellion. Another possibility is that this change was the result of a leadership role being assumed by the individuals named by Wrawe.

Wrawe claims that the prior was murdered by a rebel company under the leadership of three Bury townsmen: Thomas Halesworth, Robert Westbrom and Geoffrey Denham. Two of these men, Halesworth and Denham, were servants of the prior. Many other sources, however, indicate some truth in Wrawe's version of events. The three individuals he names had appeared on parliament's exclusion list. It is possible, as Prescott suggests, that they were only included as a result of spurious allegations in the aftermath of the revolt. Yet five years after the rebellion Halesworth was still referred to as a "principal insurgent" in the patent roll entry that granted him a pardon. Furthermore, Gosford, whilst not naming individual rebels, describes the murder as being carried out by the town community rather than an outside leader, writing of a company "encouraged by the people of Bury" (instigata per homines de Bury).

There is no obvious motive for Wrawe targeting the prior but one is readily identifiable for Halesworth and Westbrom. Halesworth was a townsman of high status, having held the post of alderman (the head of the guild) in 1379. In the same year, Halesworth and Westbrom had been key individuals backing Broomfield in the abbatial election dispute, with Halesworth even claiming to be his cousin. There is no definite evidence to confirm this, but Gosford describes one unnamed leading rebel as 'the brother of the papal nominee, a certain rich man of the town' (frater vero provisoris, quidam dives de villa). The abbatial dispute brought Halesworth and Westbrom into direct conflict with the prior, who was a leading figure amongst the Abbey officials on the other side of the dispute. The events in Bury in 1381 indicate the townsmen acting opportunistically to continue their existing dispute with the Abbey and the prior was an obstacle in this dispute.

Sunday 16th June 1381.
Far from demonstrating the scope of Wrawe's leadership, the murder of Cavendish is another example of how the revolt was shaped by local grievances within a community.
The location of his death is significant, as it points to a motive based on a local grievance.

The people of Lakenheath had revolted against royal officials in 1371 over the collection of a parish tax. Four commissioners had been sent to handle this rising, one of whom was Cavendish. When he returned to Lakenheath in 1381 it was for the final time. His death was an example of a community expressing its anger at the enforcement of tax collection and at the interference of royal justice in the community.

Further evidence of the particular importance of the community in Bury is the way in which the town was punished after the revolt. In addition to producing the list of individuals, which included a number of Bury townsmen, parliament named six towns to be excluded from the pardon, one of which was Bury. The list was reiterated later in 1381, but this time Bury was the only town excluded from the pardon. The following year, the government imposed a fine of 2,000 marks upon the residents of the town. Even after Wrawe had been executed, parliament was pursuing a particularly severe punishment for Bury. This suggests they felt that leadership had come from within the town. It is also interesting that they selected a collective punishment rather than relying on trials against individuals. Their approach would have left the guild authorities responsible for organising a commission to levy and collect the fine. The punishment was directed primarily at the town elite, further evidence of the murders being carried out by a community under the leadership of high status townsmen.

Monday 17th June 1381.
The Mayor and rebels of Cambridge assault Barnwell Priory.
In Ely Richard, de Leycester and his band execute Sir Edmund Walsingham a Cambridgeshire Justice.
A brief rebellion in Peterborough against the Abbott.
In Norfolk, a rebel assembly on Mousehold Heath and Lister's entry into Norwich.

Tuesday 18th June 1381.
Sir Roger Bacon and his company enter Great Yarmouth. Riots at Lowestoft led by Richard Resch of Holland.
In Suffolk, John Wrawe leads an assault on Mettingham Castle. At Ramsey, the Abbott and Bishop Despenser disperse a rebel band from Ely.

Wednesday and Thursday 19th – 20th June 1381.
Bishop Despenser crushes rebels and beheads John Hanchach.

Thursday and Friday 20th – 21st June 1381.
Sir Roger Bacon still inciting risings north of Yarmouth.

Saturday 22nd June 1381.
Lister's envoys to Richard II are intercepted at Icklingham in West Suffolk.

The King set off at the head of an army and the next day reached Waltham, from where Richard issued a proclamation that set the tone for what was to come. He had not, he stated, and never did have any sympathy for those who broke the law and acted against Crown and Kingdom with their riotous and treasonable conduct. The pledges made on the 14 and 15th June counted for nothing, as they had been made under duress. They could tear up the promises he'd made: 'Villeins ye are still, and villeins ye shall remain!' he is said to have proclaimed. Generally speaking, there had been few troubles in Chelmsford, though the Sheriff of Essex was threatened and assaulted during the unrest, and 'all writs of green wax' were burnt. Richard II and his court are thought to have stayed at Writtle.

THE AFTERMATH: THE KINGS REVENGE.

July 1381.
As soon as the peasants had left London, messengers were dispatched throughout the country, summoning troops. The last members of the huge gathering of peasants were encamped at Billericay in Essex. They found themselves cut down by royal troops, vainly flourishing the pardons and charters that they had been given.

Royal forces toured the affected areas, hunting the rebels. Possession of a charter became a virtual death sentence.

In Hertfordshire and Essex, some 500 died, very few with any form of trial, as the Earl of Buckingham carried out the King's demand for vengeance.

In Kent, the toll of executions was even greater, with 1500 peasants sent to the gallows. The King and the army reached Chelmsford on 2nd July, revoking all charters, pledges and promises made during the uprising. There would be no amnesty either. A judicial inquiry would be set up, with powers to look into all actions of the rebels from the first day of the insurgency. With the King and his court officiating, and despatching orders, deeds, and declarations to all parts of the kingdom, for a short time Chelmsford was to all intents and purposes, the capital of England.

Essex men, in a body of about 500 addressed themselves barefoot to the King for mercy, and had it granted upon condition that they should deliver up to justice, the chief instruments of stirring up the rebellion; which being accordingly done, they were immediately tried and hanged, ten or twelve on a beam at Chelmsford, because they were too many to be executed after the usual manner which was by beheading. The judgement of Robert Tresilian* seems to permeate that account.

Ten Fobbing men were condemned at Chelmsford in the July and at least five were hanged. For his role in the uprising, Thomas Baker was hanged, drawn, and quartered on 4 July 1381 at Chelmsford along with William Gildebourne. Men from South Benfleet, Leigh, Hadleigh, Bowers Gifford, Rayleigh, Rawreth and Fobbing had joined in the attack of the Manor of Barnhall at Downham on 12 June. They, too, were tried before Judge Tresilian at Chelmsford.

A document from the time names the jurors, who: ... say upon their oaths that William ate Stable, late servant of Geoffrey Dersham, Thomas Sprag (Spraggle) of South Benfleet, Richard Bertram, herdsman in South Benfleet Marsh, Robert Maryn of South Benfleet. Nichola Cartere who was lately taken as wife by William Dekne of South Benfleet, Thomas de la Leye, William Bocher of Hadley, Richard Belle of Hadley, John Symond of Hadley, Peter Pekok of Bures Giffard, John ate Merssh of Hadley and Henry Flecher of Ralegh, on the Wednesday next after the Feast of Trinity, in the fourth year of Richard II led and supported the commons to the manor of Geoffrey Dersham of Bernhalle (Barnhall) and feloniously and traitorously stole and carried off five cows priced at 5 marks, three calves priced at 20 shillings, one hundred and forty sheep priced at sixteen pounds and pots and pans and other goods and chattels of the same Geoffrey worth sixty shillings; and furthermore broke and levelled the house of the same Geoffrey and feloniously took and carried away one hundred and twenty chickens priced at forty shillings.

And furthermore, they all rode armed through the peaceful countryside raising the aforesaid commons against the King and his laws to the Temple of the Priory of St. John in England at Cressy (Cressing Temple) and to the house of John Sewale of Coggeshalle, and levelled the houses of the aforesaid Prior and John feloniously came and took away their goods and chattels. Moreover, they say that on Friday next after the Feast of the Holy Trinity in the fourth year of the reign of the aforesaid King Richard II, John Wiltshire of Lesser Burstede, freely and without compulsion, lopped off the head of a certain esquire of the Duke of Lancaster called Grenfield in the City of London.

Nineteen men were hanged, while another twelve were hanged, drawn and quarter. There is one woman listed among the accused, but we don't know what happened to her. Perhaps Nichola Carter, new wife of William Dekne of South Benfleet, was able to claim pregnancy and so escape her fate? One source says of Tresilian and his 'Bloody Assize': 'He pressured jurors into giving up names of suspects, and to maximise sentences, contrived to have charges presented as Felony rather than Trespass.' By 14th July Tresilian had moved on to St. Albans, where he tried and sentenced the Priest John Ball, among others. In all, it is reckoned he sentenced to death some five hundred rebels.

Bread and Cheese Hill Thundersley.

During the troubled times of the Peasants Revolt in 1381, which began in south-east Essex, rebels patrolled the top of the hill at Thundersley, about one-and-a-half miles west of Victoria House Corner, Hadleigh, stopping any stranger that clambered up the narrow track, requesting him to repeat the phrase "bread and cheese". If it was not pronounced with a recognisable English accent the unfortunate person was put to death on the spot. The explanation is as follows: Flemish weavers had been invited here by Edward III because their cloth was improved by the use of English wool.

As a result exports increased between the two countries but although the weavers grew rich the ordinary English labourer found that he had to work harder than ever for his pittance.

It is said the hill got its present name from the treatment meted out to the unfortunate Flemish. The Rev. W. E. Heygate in An Old Parson's Anecdotes and Tales (1893) makes a direct reference to it saying "A curious name this and supposed by some people to have been obtained from Wat Tyler's rebellion". Says Mr. Heygate, the rebels came to be known as Bread and Cheese men from "the steep hill down which the road near Jarvis Hall descends." The story of the revolt is well known, particularly in this part of the county. Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable refers to the term bread and cheese as being "the barest necessities of life" so it seems possible that the term can be applied to people of impoverished means. These words are also acknowledged as being the most difficult for a foreigner to speak.

The Anchor.
Apart from churches and castles, this is the oldest building in Castle Point and probably South East Essex. It was built in 1381 A.D., following the burning down of the original Manor House (near the site of the Methodist Church) during the Peasant's Revolt. The present "Moorings" buildings on the left were the stables – four horses being required to take a carriage up Vicarage Hill. Tom Bloom, Ned Clobbe, Walter Game, and other bondsmen of an Essex village are caught up in the movements of John Ball's Great Company.

4th July 1381.
Another minor rebellion broke out in St. Albans, where the abbot was a hated figure amongst the townspeople. This was ruthlessly crushed, and on 15th July, John Ball, whose preaching had done so much to cause the rebellion, was hung, drawn, and quartered in the marketplace, as an example to any other potential rebels. As far away as the city of York, over 200 miles north of London, aggrieved townsfolk were tearing down the city walls and destroying religious houses. Indeed, when John Ball fled from Smithfield, he was aiming for York, where he knew he could be sure of a sympathetic crowd. He was captured in Coventry, and hanged, drawn, and quartered in St Albans.

Across East Anglia and Cambridgeshire, the most feared rebel was John Wrawe. A former chaplain from Essex, instead of heading to London he moved north to stir up support for the revolt. Guilty of arson, blackmail, theft, and murder, Wrawe and his followers were especially brutal in their methods, and did not seem as ideologically driven as Ball and Tyler. They plundered the Priory of St Edmunds at Bury, stealing priceless treasures then quaffing wine with the proceeds, and murdering the prior, John of Cambridge. They also murdered Sir John Cavendish, Chief Justice of the King's Bench, for good measure. Wrawe's rebellion was decimated by another churchman, Henry Despenser, Bishop of Norwich. Despenser had been an accomplished knight before taking orders. He had fled Norwich after learning of the Norfolk rebels' intention to murder him, but when his safe-place at Burleigh was threatened by Wrawe, he acted decisively. With only eight lances and a few archers, Despenser found some of Wrawe's men at Peterborough, sacking the abbey, and personally slaughtered many of the sorry group, even those pleading sanctuary at the altar. He cut and stabbed his way back to Norwich, liberating Cambridge, Ely, and Huntingdon in the process.

8th July 1381.
As noted above, Thomas Walsingham reported that the appointment of Robert Hales as treasurer was not popular in the country. Walsingham's description of him as a great-hearted and active knight recalls his military career in the East but gives no indication that he was a pious man. In the country his military reputation seems to have increased the distrust felt towards him: on 8 July 1381, the jurors at Hadleigh Castle in the Hundred of Rochford, Essex, presented that one John Buck had told the people of Great and Little Wakering and North Horbury that Robert Hales was coming with a hundred lances (i.e. a hundred men-at-arms) to kill all the people of the Hundred. The fact that some of Hales' own servants (including one of his grooms) were among those who pillaged and burnt Highbury house and Clerkenwell priory and participated in the murder of Hales does not suggest that he was a well-loved master. His behaviour during the revolt did not improve his popularity: he was blamed for preventing King Richard from going out to talk to the rebels when they first arrived in London, describing them as people without reason who did not know how to act sensibly. He may also have been disliked as a parvenu. Thomas Farndon was a member of a prominent and ancient London alderman family. The Farringdon's or Farndons were goldsmiths. In 1313, 1320, and 1323 Nicholas Farringdon was mayor of London. A Thomas de Farndon was Member of Parliament for Middlesex in 1377; this may not be the Thomas Farndon involved in Hales' murder, but it may have been. For Farndon, Hales was a 'new man' of no particular family who had, as Farndon told a gathering of rebels in Essex.

13th July, 1381.
John Ball is captured in Coventry and taken to be tried at St Albans.
15th July, 1381.
John Ball, is hung, drawn, and quartered at St Albans.
29th September, 1381.
Peasants under the leadership of Thomas Harding make plans to capture Maidstone.
30th September, 1381.
Leaders of planned rebellion arrested at Boughton Heath. Later, ten of these men are found guilty of treason and executed.

The Result of the Peasants Revolt.

1. On the surface, the peasants were crushed, their demands denied, and many executed. However, the land owners had been scared, and in the longer term several things were achieved.
2. Parliament gave up trying to control the wages the landowners paid their peasants.
3. The hated poll tax was never raised again. (Until the proposal by Margaret Thatcher in 1990).
4. The Lords treated the peasants with much more respect. They made more of them free men ie. they were not owned as part of the land. This benefited in the end, as free men always work much harder.
5. This marked the breakdown of the feudal system, which had worked well during the early Middle Ages, but was now becoming outdated as attitudes were beginning to change.

WAT TYLER – A RETROSPECT
Walter "Wat" Tyler (c.1320/January 4, 1341 - 15 June 1381) was a leader of the 1381 Peasants' Revolt in England. Not much is known of Wat Tyler's early life, although one source claims that he was born on January 4, 1341 , although another source claims he was born around 1320, although most historians agree that he was born c.1341. He was probably born in Kent. Born with the first name Walter, his original surname was unknown. It is thought that the name "Tyler" comes from his occupation as a roof tiler. Prior to the Peasants' Revolt it is probable that he lived in Kent; he has variously been represented as coming from Dartford, Deptford, and Maidstone, all in Kent, and from Colchester in Essex.

The Peasants' Revolt began in May 1381, triggered by a recently imposed poll tax of 4 pence from every adult, whether peasant or wealthy. The revolt was not only about money, as the peasants also sought increased liberty and other social reforms. They demanded that each labourer be allowed to work for the employer of his choice and sought an end to serfdom and other rigid social demarcation. There were uprisings across England, with much of the unrest focused on Essex and Kent. The uprising was opposed by a significant part of English society in those regions, including nobility and wealthy religious establishments. Many peasants and labourers were inspired by the teachings of John Ball, a radical priest who preached that all humans should be treated equally, as descendants of Adam and Eve, and who asked "When Adam delved and Eve span/Who was then the gentleman?"

How Wat Tyler became involved with the revolt is unknown, although a much later sixteenth-century source indicates that a man of similar name, John Tyler, was its initiator. This account suggests that a poll-tax collector had indecently assaulted John Tyler's daughter. It is suggested the poll tax collector "pulled up his daughter's cloaths to see if she was arrived at the age of puberty" In revenge he killed the miscreant and triggered the insurgency. Regardless of the basis of that story, by June 1381, when groups of rebels from across the country began a coordinated assault on London, Wat Tyler had emerged as a leader of the Kentish forces.

On 13 June, the rebels reached the capital and crossed London Bridge. Once in the city, they attacked civil targets, including the Fleet Prison and John of Gaunt's Savoy Palace, destroying legal records, opening prisons, sacking homes, and killing individuals they thought were associated with the royal government. In response, the king, Richard II (then 14 years old), met with the rebels on 14 June 1381 and agreed to make many concessions and to give full pardons to all those involved in the rebellion. While some of the rebels were satisfied by the king's promises and dispersed, Tyler and his followers were not.

On 15 June 1381, Tyler and his Kentish forces met with King Richard at Smithfield, outside London. There, Tyler spoke personally with the king and put forward his demands. At first, the meeting seems to have gone well, with Tyler treating the king in a friendly, if overly-familiar, manner, and Richard agreeing the rebels "should have all that he could fairly grant".

However, tensions quickly rose. According to a contemporary chronicler, Tyler acted contemptuously, calling for a flagon of water to rinse his mouth "because of the great heat that he was in" and when he received the water "he rinsed his mouth in a very rude and disgusting fashion before the King's face". Sir John Newton (a servant of the king) insulted Tyler by calling him "the greatest thief and robber in all Kent". Tyler attacked Newton, but was restrained and arrested by the Lord Mayor of London, William Walworth. Tyler then attempted to stab the mayor, who was saved by his armour. Walworth slashed Tyler across the neck and head with his sword, and another of the king's servants, possibly Ralph de Standish, stabbed Tyler again, severely wounding him. Tyler managed to ride thirty yards before he fell from his horse. In the disorder that followed, he was taken to a hospital for the poor, but was tracked down by the mayor, brought back to Smithfield and publicly decapitated. Tyler's head was placed atop a pole and carried through the city, then displayed on London Bridge. In the wake of their leader's death, his followers were driven from London and the movement was shattered. Subsequently Richard II revoked all the concessions he had made to the rebels and many were hunted down and executed. That effectively ended the Revolt.

The peasants were not just protesting against the government. Since the Black Death, poor people had become increasingly angry that they were still serfs, usually farming the land and serving their king. Whipped up by the preaching of radical priest John Ball, they were demanding that all men should be free and equal; for less harsh laws; and a fairer distribution of wealth.

The Peasants' Revolt was a popular uprising. In its demands for rights and equality, it was similar to the Chartists of the 19th century and the Suffragettes of the 20th century - both of whom campaigned for greater political rights - except that, remarkably, the Peasants' Revolt happened six centuries earlier!

With the exception of his fame as the leader of the English Peasant's Revolt of 1381. According to popular accounts, the commons of Kent after taking Rochester Castle, chose Wat Tyler of Maidstone as their captain. Under him they moved to Canterbury, Blackheath, and London.

Then the King caused a proclamation to be made that all the commons of the country who were still in London should come to Smithfield, to meet in there, and so they did.

And when the King and his train had arrived there they turned into the Eastern meadow in front of St. Bartholomew's, which is a house of canons: and the commons arrayed themselves on the west side in great battles. At this moment, the Mayor of London, William Walworth, came up, and the King bade him go to the commons, and make their chieftain come to him. And when he was summoned by the Mayor, by the name of Wat Tyler of Maidstone, he came to the King with great confidence, mounted on a little horse, that the commons might see him. And he dismounted, holding in his hand a dagger which he had taken from another man, and when he had dismounted he half bent his knee, and then took the King by the hand, and shook his arm forcibly and roughly, saying to him, "Brother, be of good comfort and joyful, for you shall have, in the fortnight that is to, praise from the commons even more than you have yet had, and we shall be good companions." And the King said to Walter, "Why will you not go back to your own country?" But the other answered, with a great oath, that neither he nor his fellows would depart until they had cut their charter such as they wished to have it, and had certain points rehearsed and added to their charter which they wished to demand. And he said in a threatening fashion that the lords of the realm would rue it bitterly if these points were not settled to their pleasure. Then the King asked him what were the points which he wished to have revised, and he should have them freely, without contradiction, written out and sealed. Thereupon the said Walter rehearsed the points which were to be demanded; and he asked that there should be no law within the realm save the law of Winchester, and that from henceforth there should be no outlawry in any process of law, and that no lord should have lordship save civilly, and that there should be equality among all people save only the King, and that the goods of Holy Church should not remain in the hands of the religious, nor of parsons and vicars, and other churchmen; but that clergy already in possession should have a sufficient sustenance from the endowments, and the rest of the goods should be divided among the people of the parish. And he demanded that there should be only one bishop in England and only one prelate, and all the lands and tenements now held by them should be confiscated, and divided among the commons, only reserving for them a reasonable sustenance. And he demanded that there should be no more villeins in England, and no serfdom or villeinage, but that all men should be free and of one condition. To this the King gave an easy answer, and said that he should have all that he could fairly grant, reserving only for himself the regality of his crown. And then he bade him go back to his home, without making further delay.

During all this time that the King was speaking, no lord or counsellor dared or wished to give answer to the commons in any place save the King himself. Presently Wat Tyler, in the presence of the King, sent for a flagon of water to rinse his mouth, because of the great heat that he was in, and when it was brought the rinse his mouth in a very rude and disgusting fashion before the King's face. And then he made them bring him a jug of beer, and drank a great draught, and then, in the presence of the King, climbed on his horse again. At this time, a certain valet from Kent, who was among the Kings retinue, asked that the said Walter, the chief of the commons, might be pointed out to him. And when he saw him, he said allowed that he knew him for the greatest thief and robber in all Kent. . . . And for these words Wat tried to strike him with his dagger, and would have slain him in the King's presence, but because he strove so to do, the Mayor of London, William Walworth, reasoned with the said Wat for his violent behaviour and despite, done in the King's presence, and arrested him. In because he arrested him, he said Wat stabbed the Mayor with his dagger in the stomach in great wrath. But, as it pleased God, the Mayor was wearing armour and took no harm, like a hardy in vigorous man drew his cutlass, and struck back at the said Watt, in gave him a deep cut on the neck, and then a great cut on the head. And during this scuffle one of the King's household drew his sword, and ran Wat two or three times through the body, mortally wounding him.

And he spurred his horse, crying to the commons to avenge him, and the horse carried him some four score paces, and then he fell to the ground half dead. And when the commons saw him fall, and knew not how for certain it was, they began to bend their bows and to shoot, wherefore the King himself spurred his horse, and rode out to them, commanding them that they should all come to him to Clerkenwell Fields.

Meanwhile the Mayor of London rode as hastily as he could back to the City, and commanded those who were in charge of the twenty-four wards to make proclamation round their wards, that every man should arm himself as quickly as he could, and come to the King in St. John's Fields, where were the commons, to a the King, for he was in great trouble and necessity. . . . And presently the aldermen came to him in a body, bringing with them their wardens, and the wards arrayed in bands, a fine company of well-armed folks in great strength. And they enveloped the commons like sheep within a pen, and after that the Mayor had set the wardens of the city on their way to the King, he returned with a company of lances to Smithfield, to make an end of the captain of the commons. And when he came to Smithfield he found not there the said captain Wat Tyler, that which he marvelled much, and asked what was become of the traitor. And it was told him that he had been carried by some of the commons to the hospital for poor folks by St. Bartholomew's, and was put to bed in the chamber of the master of hospital. In the Mayor went thither and found him, and had him carried out to the middle of Smithfield, in presence of his fellows, and there beheaded. And thus ended his wretched life. But the Mayor had his head set on a pole and borne before him to the King, who still abode in the Fields. And when the King saw the head he had it brought near him to abash the commons, and thanked the Mayor greatly for what he a done. In when the commons saw that their chieftain, Wat Tyler, was dead in such a manner, they fell to the ground there among the wheat, like beaten men, employing the King for mercy for their misdeeds. And the King benevolently granted them mercy, and most of them took to flight. But the King ordained two knights to conduct the rest of them, namely the Kentishmen, through London, and over London Bridge, without doing them harm, so that each of them could go to his own home.

Afterwards the King sent out his messengers into divers parts, to capture the malefactors and put them to death. And many were taken and hanged at London, and they set up many gallows around the City of London, and other cities and boroughs of the south country. At last, as it pleased God, the King seeing that too many of his liege subjects would be undone, and too much blood spilt, took pity in his heart, and granted them all pardon, on condition that they should never rise again, under pain of losing life or members, and that each of them should get his charter of pardon, and pay the King as fee for his seal twenty shillings, to make him rich. And so finished this wicked war.

IN MEMORIUM

- In an episode of the comedy series Blackadder II, Lord Blackadder compares his servant Baldrick to Wat Tyler when he asks for the afternoon off.

- In the season five premiere of Downton Abbey, Mr. Carson accuses James the footman of being a Wat Tyler for stating that he is only a footman and therefore cannot mind his surroundings.

- A cultural history survey of Wat Tyler's portrayals in post-medieval literature down to the modern period has been written by Stephen Basdeo who argues that most of Tyler's appropriations in popular culture appear at times of political excitement.

- The English novelty punk band Wat Tyler was named after him.

- The Czech folk band Asonance have a song called "Povstání Watta Tylera" (Watt Tyler's rebellion).

Permanent tributes:

- A section of the A249 road passing through Maidstone is named "Wat Tyler Way" in his honour.

- “Tyler’s Causeway” running from Newgate street Village towards A1000 in Hertfordshire named for the route taken by some of his followers fleeing the capital following his death.

- A road on the western edge of Blackheath is called Wat Tyler Road.

- Swindon Borough Council's Offices are in Wat Tyler House.

- A memorial commemorating Wat Tyler and The Great Rising of 1381 was unveiled on 15 July 2015 in Smithfield, London.

- The Wat Tyler Pub in Dartford where he is reputed to have stopped on his way to London Bridge. An ancient tavern stood on this site.

CONCLUSION

Based upon the documented commentaries, it is a probability that Wat Tyler got no closer to Essex than the area of Mile End in which he met with King Richard II. The River Lee forming the boundary between Middlesex and Essex close to that point and Mile End being in Middlesex. There is mention of a meeting, crossing the Thames at Barking, but which way and who went or met?

PITSEA HALL FARM NOW CROMWELL MANOR.

Two arms of the River Thames, form a peninsula, of which the western branch is called Pitsey Creek and from this the parish extends north-eastwards. Before the Norman conquest, Ulueva, the wife of Phin, had this estate and appears to have retained possession till the general survey in 1086; but soon afterwards, belonged to Eudo Dapifer, who gave part of it to St. Johns Abbey in Colchester which in part afterwards believed to what was Pitsea Hall Manor.

The Mansion of Pitsea Hall is at the bottom of the hill, near the creek. In 1539, the manor with the advowson of the church, was granted to Thomas Lord Cromwell; whose attainder in 1540, reverting to the crown, it was appointed for the maintenance of the Princess Mary; and afterwards, in 1562, was granted by Queen Elizabeth To Thomas Howard, duke of Norfolk; upon whose execution in 1572, this estate descended to Philip Howard, Earl of Arundel, his eldest son by his first lady, Mary, daughter and heiress of Henry Fitz-Alan, Earl of Arundel; from whom it was conveyed in 1581 to Roger Townshend esq. and Edward Cook, gent. and Bridget his wife, who held it of the heirs of the Duke of Norfolk.

In 1618, Sir Edward Cooke, Knight, held this manor and in 1630 presented to the living; in 1664 it belonged to Nr. Samuel Moyer and to his son Samuel, created a Baronet in 1701, who died in 1716. His nephew, Benjamin Moyer esq. was his successor in this estate; which now belongs to Mrs. Moyer.

In 1852 the London Tilbury and Southend Extension Railway Act was passed which allowed for a new rail route to Southend via Tilbury. During construction, a small portion of the grounds was acquired to enable the route to pass through Pitsea where a new station was then built which opened in 1855 and it was probably at this time that excavations unearthed a Cromwellian helmet from the English Civil War (1642-1651). The hall, which now stands in around 23 acres, has been a listed building since 24th March, 1950 (now Grade II) and is now a licenced venue for weddings and hospitality functions.

Norman Bambridge
Basildon Borough Heritage Society
September 2025.