

Peasants, Poll Tax and Pillage



It came to a head in Essex in May, 1381. The Poll Tax funding war with France had been hiked to three groats a head, (beggars and under-fifteens excluded) and despite some loading on the wealthy, was biting hard on the peasantry. It added grief to a feudal system still giving the land-holding aristocracy almost absolute power over peasant life, from compulsory agricultural service down to marriage sanction.

And then there was the Black Death, killing half of England's five million inhabitants to bring labour's shortage and land abandonment. It handed surviving peasants more wage leverage and some moved away to avoid manorial service, taking up untended land to become small farmers. But those new 'yeomen' resented even more the manorial oppression.

The church meanwhile, allied as ever to the gentry, continued to take the parish tithe while starving priests and parishioners.

The nation's peasants, unsurprisingly, were revolting and when 5,000 Essex men confronted poll tax commissioners and attendant law enforcers at Brentwood, things got a little out of hand; six tax officials were murdered.

But by then, the peasants had momentum, particularly in Kent where Wat Tyler would soon march on London.

In Norfolk, the rebel leader was Geoffrey Litster, a dyer of Felmingham with a dislike for landlords, foreigners, artisans and big business. For just a week, he enjoyed undisputed authority, but in that short time, things got even more out of hand.

With Sir Roger Bacon of Baconsthorpe, Litster had roped in four more knights who were captured when his men tried to enlist the Earl of Suffolk's legitimacy to the rebel cause. The Earl had escaped disguised as a servant but the knights were taken to Mousehold Heath outside Norwich, along with Sir Robert Salle, then in charge of Norwich's defences. Salle also decided to opt out but slipped trying to mount his horse and the crowd turned on him. As Thomas Walsingham's later account puts it, 'Being unable to dissemble like the rest, he openly condemned their atrocities, for which reason he was knocked on the head by a countryman - and thus expired a knight who in the open field of battle would have terrified a thousand such'.



Litster then extracted money from Norwich on a promise not to pillage, slaughter and burn, and accordingly, killing only a few notables, just to make clear who was in charge, he set up in the castle where knights were forced to wait upon him at table on their knees. His followers called him the King of the Commons.

Next day, his men set about the county, burning the deeds and court rolls of Carrow Priory and the town charters at Yarmouth where they broke into the gaol and killed three of the four inmates because they were Flemings, releasing the fourth.

But then, on the 15th June, Tyler was killed in London, chopped down by the mayor while picking a fight with a barracker during a summit with King Richard II at Smithfield.

It took the wind out of Litster sails. He sent three men with the Norwich money and two knightly hostages to London, hoping to negotiate a settlement. Near Newmarket, they ran into Henry Despenser, soldier Bishop of Norwich. In Rutland when the uprising began, Despenser had set out with troops for Norwich only to find Peterborough abbey under attack. Killing those rebels, he did the same to others attacking Ramsey monastery. So he was really in the swing when he met Litster's men; removing their heads, he posted them at the Newmarket pillory. Loyalists then began emerging from the woodwork and by the time Despenser reached Norwich, he had quite a force. .



Litster had retreated to North Walsham, digging in south of the town behind barricades of tables, windows and doors. These were clearly not structures to deter a rampaging cleric, for as Walsingham then puts it, 'Immediately, this warlike Bishop being enraged at the audacity of these scoundrels, caused the trumpets to be sounded and seizing a lance in his right hand, set spurs to his horse and rushed forward with such a bravery that he reached the summit of the embankment before the arrows of his followers', presumably wearing his shield over his posterior.

With Litster captured, some followers fled to the church then under construction. But Despenser, being Bishop, knew it wasn't yet consecrated, and entering, cut them to pieces. Then remembering his ecclesiastical duty, he received Litster's confession and granted him absolution, before having him dragged off to be hanged, sportingly holding his head to stop it banging on the ground.

But public sympathy rests with the principle if not the practice of the rebel cause. The whole episode and the general notion of people helping each other upwards is now commemorated in the oak sculpture completed by Mark Goldsworthy in Memorial Park, North Walsham last year.

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