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The English Rising of 1381

Rebellions are not always radical, and a rising is not necessarily a riot. The Peasant Rebellion of 1381 was such an event. The peasants who rebelled in the fourteenth century would not have seen themselves as radicals and most were not a gang of rampaging looters on a random crime spree. Most rebels were men invested in the success of society with prominent positions in their communities and were not merely groups of would-be thieves with nothing left to lose taking advantage of a deteriorating political situation. The risings in 1381 took place in both rural and urban settings, and while the characteristics of each share some key differences, both sets of rebels were frustrated with the restrictions placed upon them by a specific group of social superiors. However, the motives behind the rebellion go beyond mere class warfare and actually indicate a desire on the part of the rebels to return to an older, more traditional method of English community government. The new class of peasants felt they deserved a voice in England, and the risings of 1381 are about those people finding that voice.

The Rural Rebellion

The risings in 1381 took place among both rural and urban populations all over England, but it has come to be known as the "Peasant Rebellion" for a reason. The events that took place in the countryside are in many ways easier for historians to explain and have been studied in greater detail than the urban revolt. The records of the rural revolt are more intact, and we know more about the people who staged that part of the rebellion. The most interesting part is the difference between what we know now and the ideas and prejudices we have about what a "peasant" might have been. Even the name "peasant" tends to give us the impression of poor, simple-minded farmers (or serfs) trying to wring a life for themselves out of an unforgiving countryside. However, these "peasants" were not so simple, and in fact, many of them can hardly be called peasants at all. When we study the history behind the events of 1381, we can learn significantly more about why these rebels felt they were repressed, who was doing the repressing, and the nature of the rebels themselves.

The rebellion in 1381 was the spark and a culmination of discontent, but the level of instability in English society had been trending upward for some time before the first outbreaks of revolt were ever reported. The social landscape of the fourteenth century was evolving rapidly in a world where the medieval economy and legal system simply could not (or would not) keep up. In 1348 when the Black Death came to England and decimated such a significant portion of the population, the very nature of society changed. Though death tolls vary from source to source and place to place, rough estimates suggest that the amount of deaths in the countryside was roughly one-third of the population. Death tolls like these, though not as great as those in urban areas, would have created enormous vacuums in society. The new vacancies in positions offered an unprecedented demand for labor, and the moneyed, landowning class found themselves in a situation in which they were uncomfortable. Since the population had been so reduced, a demand for workers meant that

those workers could afford to demand higher wages. This, in turn, could create economic opportunities for peasants where there had been none before. A worker could grow rich and rise above his station, thereby gradually making his way toward becoming gentry. Social mobility took on a whole new meaning.

The Landlords

The fear of the landlord class is reflected in the 1351 Statute of Laborers. This statute is an attempt by the landholding class to fix wages to a pre-plague rate:

> Because a great part of the people and especially of the workmen and servants has now died in that pestilence, some, seeing the straights of the masters and the scarcity of the servants, are not willing to serve unless they receive excessive wages, and others, rather than through labour to gain their living, prefer to beg in idleness: We, considering the grave inconveniences which might come from the lack especially of ploughmen and such labourers, have held deliberation and treaty concerning this with the prelates and nobles and other learned men sitting by us...we have seen fit to ordain: that every man and woman of our kingdom of England... whether bond or free...shall be bound to serve him who has seen fit so to seek after him; and he shall take only the wages liveries, meed or salary which, in the places where he sought to serve, were accustomed to be paid in the twentieth year of our reign in England, or the five or six common years next preceding.[1]

The Parliament-men (or, more specifically, those putting forth this statute) were part of the landholding class as holding property was a requirement in order to sit in Parliament. As a member of the House of Commons, he would have been required to front his own travel expenses and was required to live off a certain amount of generated income since the position offered no pay. The House of Commons was not exactly "common" in the present-day sense. It is important to recognize that these Parliament-men were not the same men as the future rebels; they were their enemies. The men in Parliament represented an increasing attempt at a more centralized and less localized government - a government many of the rebels saw as an interference. The Statute of Laborers was an economic attempt to control the new class of workers that had risen up after the "pestilence." The landholding class saw these workers as men attempting to upset the natural order of things with their demand for higher wages. The old medieval economy was shifting, and landlords were naturally trying to do what they could to hold to an older, more traditional (and more profitable for them) economy.

The Sumptuary Laws of 1363 were similar in intention.[2] These laws sought to prescribe certain types of dress and prohibit others depending on social class. We can glean from the existence of these laws as well that significant instances of upward social mobility were taking place. Those who previously could not afford expensive clothes were now able to because they could afford to carve out a new place for themselves in a society with a low population and a new demand for labor. The landlords and magnates felt threatened enough by these new social developments to make legal and aesthetic distinctions between what constituted a nobleman and what constituted a peasant. The class-based tensions would continue to get worse in the years leading up to the Rebellion.

The Serfs

1 The Avalon Project, "The Statute of Laborers; 1351: Statutes of the Realm, vol. i., 307," Accessed April 2nd, 2012, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/medieval/statlab.asp

2 PROME, 1363 October, nos 25-32; Ruffhead (ed.), Statues, I, 315-16 in Ian Mortimer, *The Time Traveller's Guide to Medieval England* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2008), 217.

The lower classes in the second half of the fourteenth century were getting richer. Peasants had more ready cash available to them and were able to purchase land, flocks, and cattle. As this new class of workers gradually gained more independence through financial gain and the need for labor, the landholding classes and magnates attempted to slow their progress and did what they could to hold on to their serfs. Throughout the fourteenth century, tensions between serf and landlord continued to grow as the economy unrelentingly moved forward.[3] As the price of food decreased dramatically after the Black Death due to the stark loss in population, the landlords found themselves desperately wanting their serfs back. Serfdom would have been preferable to the rising cost of wage labor. Landlords began to attempt to impose a sort of "second serfdom" by allowing their serfs to leave the manor, but ordering them to return each year to serve the lord in order to help with the harvest.[4] Serfs would soon discover that they would have even less avenues for economic improvement open to them in this period as their landlords attempted to extract every bit of revenue that they could manage. The landholding class and the magnates attempted to impose marriage fines on their serfs, attempted to control their acquisition of free land, and forced them to pay extra rents and hold the land on customary tenure.[5] Throughout the period leading up to the rebellion, there are many examples illustrating serfs' attempts to assert their freedom. In 1360 in Suffolk, John Clench and John Soule claimed to be free. The manor court found them to be serfs, they were placed in the stocks, and a tenant who had supported the two men lost his lands until he paid a fine to the local lord.[6] In 1378 in Essex, Joan Lyon, a daughter of a serf, married without permission. According to the records, two servile tenants "conspired among themselves at Chelmsford to swear and give verdict at the next court at Great Leighs" that Joan was free. The two tenants were fined 13s. 4d. and 20s. 0d.[7] If an income of £1 was considered moving up through peasant society at this point, these would have been enormous fines.[8] We can see from the rather disturbingly large sum that the tenants were fined in this case that the debacle was at least in part an attempt to extract some financial gain out of what the landlords were increasingly viewing as a desperate situation. Cases like these were on the rise all over England during this period, with serfs attempting to assert their freedom in a variety of ways. The manorial courts looking into cases that pitted serfs against their landlords were caught in a bind. On the one hand, they were expected to present cases and reveal crimes in order to provide revenue for the local landlords and magnates that these powerful men saw as necessary income. On the other hand, they were also expected to provide justice to the local population. Injustice in court would become a major issue for the rebels in 1381, and the fact that King's Bench (an English court of common law) continued to enforce the 1351 Statute of Laborers (which

> The Rebellion was a violent, targeted declaration that the government had gone too far . . . .

3 It is worth noting that there were differences in each county and the way the laws worked. For example, tenants had more privileges in Essex, were treated harshly in Norfolk, and in Kent, there were no serfs and manorial courts did not have as much power as other counties.

4 Christopher Dyer, "Social and Economic Background to the Revolt of 1381," in *The English Rising of 1381*, eds. R. H. Hilton and T. H. Aston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 25.

5 Ibid, 24.

6 S.R.O.I., HA12/C2/14., in Dyer, "Social and Economic Background to the Revolt of 1381," 31

7 P.R.O., L.R.3/18/3., in Ibid., 31.

8 Prior to 1971, there were 12 pence in a shilling and twenty shillings in a pound. Income estimates found in Dyer, "Social and Economic Background to the Revolt of 1381," 21,35.

prevented many workers from rising further in society and making an income that was adjusted appropriately to the demand for their labor and the changing economy) did not do anything to improve an already tense situation.

The Great Rumour of 1377

The servile population continued to try to assert its independence, and in 1377, the "Great Rumour" swept across England. This rumor refers primarily to the Petition Against Rebellious Villeins presented to Parliament by the House of Commons in 1377. The petition was primarily centered on certain peasants seeking exemplifications from Domesday Book concerning "those manors and vills where these villeins and tenants live."[9] Domesday Book was completed in 1086 and provided a detailed account of English landownership for the new Norman monarchs that arrived in 1066. It was, in effect, the first official census. The peasants appealing to Domesday were hoping to establish certain privileges they would not have had otherwise. The writers of the petition in the House of Commons were the landholding class and primarily concerned with a potential peasant revolt. Thus, the petition notes that "These men have refused to allow the officials of the lords to distrain them for the said customs and services; and have made confederation and alliance together to resist the lords and their officials by force, so that each will aid the other whenever they are distrained for any reason." The petition goes on to clarify that "To sustain their errors and rebellions they have collected large sums of money among themselves to meet their costs and expenses; and many of them have now come to court to secure assistance in their designs."[10] Considering the future events of 1381, it would be unfair to call the House entirely paranoid, but even if it were, the important thing to note about the "Great Rumour" of 1377 is that the servile population was organized, intelligent, and wealthy enough to garner the attention and panic of Parliament. Those seeking the exemplifications were bright enough and literate enough to understand what Domesday Book was, how to procure the exemplifications, and what they thought the exemplifications could do to better their lives. Furthermore, it is clear from the petition that those seeking the exemplifications were able to collect the appropriate funds in order to provide for their court costs and legal fees, which were by no means inexpensive. Traditionally, servile tenants are thought of as poor men who can barely scrape by, but that is not the case with these men. Also of note is the fact that those appealing to Domesday would have needed to understand the finer legal reasoning involved. They were aware of the potential privileges they felt could be gained by establishing that their land was held by the ancient demesne of the Crown. Appealing for the exemplifications under Domesday meant that the appellants would not technically be free, but they would not be obliged to attend the hundred and county courts, to pay geld or toll, or contribute to the murdrum fine.[11] Those appealing to Domesday Book for these exemplifications would not be able to bring action against his lord in public court, but would have rights in manorial court or before royal justices on eyre.[12] Furthermore, considering that appealing to Domesday had the potential to allow servile tenants rights before royal justices, they would have all the more ability to voice whatever grievances they had against their local lords. Given the common mistreatment of lords toward their tenants, injustice in manorial courts, excessive fines, and the "second serfdom," by 1381 those grievances were many. It is easy to see why

9 Commons' Petition Against Rebellious Villeins, 1377, Rot. Parl., III 21-2, in *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, ed. R. B. Dobson (London: The MacMillan Press, LTD, 1970), 76.
10 Ibid., 76-7.

11 The murdrum fine was an Anglo-Norman law that stated that if a Norman were killed and the killer was not apprehended within 5 days, the hundred in which the crime was committed was liable for a collective penalty.
12 Rosamond Faith, "The 'Great Rumour' of 1377 and Peasant Ideology," in *The English Rising of 1381*, eds. Hilton and Aston, 48.

the landholding class would not have been eager to grant these exemplifications, and it is worth noting that after the Commons' Petition in 1377, no further exemplifications on royal patent rolls are recorded between 1377 and 1381.[13] The goal of the petition in denying these exemplifications was accomplished, but the resistance to it may have helped to contribute to furthering frustrations on the part of those who were appealing to Domesday.

The Free Englishman

Serfs were a factor in the Rising of 1381. Like the rest of the peasant class, many were chafing at the bit of their social limitations. However, most of the rebels that participated in the rural part of the Rebellion in 1381 were not serfs. In fact, in Kent, perhaps the most famous staging area of the rising, there were no serfs.[14] While local mistreatment and injustice in part explain servile grievances that were crucial elements in the events of 1381, what were the specific criticisms of the free Englishman?

Looking again at constrictive legislation like the 1351 Statute of Laborers, one can see the economic position of the rural peasantry (free and unfree) was improving significantly before 1381. Some of these men were actually on the fringe of the gentry. Many of the southern rebels had an income between £1 and £5, were professionals like brewers, drapers, and other artisans, and even some tenants in the south were known to own flocks numbering greater than twenty-five sheep.[15] In Suffolk, John Philip of Brandon acquired at least five separate holdings of land in the 1370s and rose from warrener to bailiff in the local lord's service.[16] In the 1370s, Robert Wryghte of Foxearth increased the number of animals he owned and his wife became the chief brewer in the village. This same Wryghte was later charged extraordinarily large sums through the manor court for offenses like trespassing on the demesne and his wife was forced to pay substantial brewing fines. Together, the couple paid 7s. 8d. in 1378 and 13s. 0d. in 1379, including a brewing fine of 10s. 0d.[17] The local lords felt the peasants could afford them, and the peasants likewise felt the fines to be unjust. This also gave free peasants who worded a reason to be disgusted with the justice system - a system they increasingly felt was treating them with unfairness. That same Robert Wryghte took this mistreatment so to heart that during the rebellion, he plundered the property of the Chief Justice of King's Bench.[18]

This new class of peasants that was poised to take its place in the rural risings was not composed of men on the fringes of society. It is clear from later proceedings that most of the participants were comfortably wealthy peasants and not the very poor. Furthermore, those who did take part in the rebellion often had held position in local government or prominent positions in their social hierarchy. John Philip of Suffolk from the earlier example managed to do so and he is merely one case of many. The men who would be rebels were not desperate hopefuls with nothing left to lose. They possessed a significant amount of income, position, and influence. When 1381 arrived, this meant that the rebels would choose their targets very carefully and specifically. Robert Wryghte was intelligent enough to understand that he needed to take his fight all the way to King's Bench, and he knew to specifically target Chief Justice Sir John Cavendish during the rebellion. Other rebels like Wryghte burned court rolls and magnates' manors, but it was because they were expressing specific grievances against King's Bench or the magnates for what they perceived as injustices done to them by the courts and

13 *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, ed. R. B. Dobson (London: The MacMillan Press, LTD, 1970), 76.
14 See Dyer, "Social and Economic Background to the Revolt of 1381."
15 Ibid., 21, 35.
16 S.R.O.B., J529/1-2; P.R.O., S.C.6/1304/31-36., in Dyer, "Social and Economic Background to the Revolt of 1381," 35.
17 Ibid., 36.
18 Ibid., 38.

local lords. They did not merely engage in a riotous crime spree. The grievances declared by the rural rebels were expressed by prominent, literate, intelligent men and were very specific in nature.

The Poll Tax of 1381

In September of 1380, rebellion broke out in Salisbury. By 1381, the rising had spread throughout England. As we can see, the tension between peasants and landlords had been building for some time. The Poll Tax of 1381 is commonly cited as the primary grievance of the rebels during the Rising, but the poll tax was only a catalyst for underlying social issues. The real problem with the poll tax was that it was a flat tax; everyone had to pay it, and poorer people were disproportionately affected. Furthermore, taxes in England had to be levied. Taxation was not an accepted part of the common, shared experience the way it is in the present day. Taxes were meant to be levied for the defense of the realm, and the biggest problem with the poll tax in the eyes of the peasantry was not necessarily that it was expensive, but that the realm was not being properly defended. Throughout most of the fourteenth century and well into the fifteenth, England was engaged in the Hundred Years' War with France. Wars were, to say the least, expensive. If taxes were for defense, the peasantry was uncomfortable at best and extremely agitated at worst at the idea of paying for the Black Prince to wage war in France while the coast of England itself was not secure from French pirates. The fact that many peasants were unwilling to pay the poll tax aggravated the already tense situation with the landlords and the House of Commons. Given the fact that the peasants were using their newfound wealth to hire lawyers to argue for their rights in court and buy enough expensive new clothes that new legislation was deemed necessary, these same landlords felt the peasantry could afford to pay a poll tax. It is a valid argument on the part of the Commons, and it is worth noting that the fight against the poll tax was not really about the money. For the first time in English history, the peasants and serfs had money. Those who were the most vocal against the government during the rebellion were drawn from the wealthier peasants, not the poorest. These men wanted their say. It was about what the government was doing, or rather not doing, with the money. The Rebellion was a violent, targeted declaration that the government had gone too far in their pecuniary extraction without living up to contemporary definitions of responsible government.

Wat Tyler and the Rebels' Demands

On June 14th, 1381, Wat Tyler presented the demands of the rebels to King Richard II. He required "There should henceforth be no law except the law of Winchester."[19] The desire for the return to this law is significant, because among other things, it stated:

> that every man have in his house arms for keeping the peace in accordance with the ancient assize;... that every man between fifteen years and sixty be assessed and sworn to arms according the amount of his lands and chattels...and in each hundred and liberty let two constables be chosen to make the view of arms: and the aforesaid constables shall, when the justices assigned to this come to the district, present before them the defaults they have found in arms, in watch-keeping, and in highways... And the justices assigned shall present again to the king in each parliament and the king will provide a remedy therefor.[20]

19 Wat Tyler, "Wat Tyler's Demands," 1381, in "Readings for January 19th: Peasant's Revolt of 1381," HY 654, University of Alabama at Birmingham, Spring 2012, Dr. Conley.

20 Statutes of the Realm (1101-1713), ed. A. Luders et al., 11 vols. (Record Commission, London, 1810-28), 96. in Alan Harding, "The Revolt against the Justices," in *The English Rising of 1381*, eds. Hilton and Aston, 166.

When Wat Tyler, as the leader of the rebels, demanded a return to this Winchester law, he was suggesting was that what was laid out in the statute should be all the interaction any community should have with the royal government. The rebels would have found the idea of a return to a community-based system extremely appealing after years of what they saw as unnecessary government interference through excessive fines by local lords, injustices in the court system, and the poll tax. The statute would have meant that the community only called upon the national government when the justices toured the districts and to supply the local communities with what they lacked in weapons, men, and highways. Most tellingly, these touring justices would be beholden specifically to the king. Wat Tyler goes on to demand: "no lord shall have lordship but that there should be proportion between all people, saving only the lordship of the king."[21] The rebels were done with what they saw as landlord and magnate corruption, both on the manor and in the justice system.

The fourteenth century has been called the era of fur-collared crime by historian Barbara Hanawalt, implying a time when common people were often strong-armed by local nobility and landlords.[22] Justice could not properly be carried out, since members of juries were often intimidated, and people were particularly unwilling to testify against local powerful players in society for fear of the consequences. The peasants expressed hatred against this injustice when they burned court rolls and targeted members of King's Bench and local landlords during the Rebellion. Through the demand for proportion among all save the monarch, Tyler's rebels sought to bypass the lords completely and move straight for the king. The King in England should be the fount of all justice; the demand for the return to the law of Winchester is part and parcel of a demand for a return to justice. According to Thomas Walsingham, Wat Tyler wanted a commission from the king to behead all lawyers, writing, "Now, above all things, Tyler desired to obtain a commission for himself and his men to execute all lawyers, escheators and others who had been trained in the law or dealt in the law because of their office. He believed that once all those learned in the law had been killed, all things would henceforward be regulated by the decrees of the common people."[23] Watching the uprising from London, Thomas Walsingham was certainly against the rebels. However, considering Tyler's other demands, we can see that there may be some truth to these words, and that a request for a commission like this might not have been out of the realm of possibility; the rebels were demanding English justice, and that meant a just king. Tyler also demanded that "Holy Church ought not to be in the hands of men of religion, or parsons, or vicars, or others of Holy church but these should have their sustenance easily and the rest of the goods be divided between the parishioners; and that there should be no bishop in England but one."[24] While referring to Canterbury as the singular bishopric, this demand also implies that there were similar injustices in the ecclesiastical courts. Church courts were said to be more oppressive than lay courts, which was an issue that went back farther than the Constitutions of Clarendon and the reign of Henry II.[25] The demand for equality is part of a greater demand for justice.

Wat Tyler demanded for "all to be free and of one condition."[26] While serfs participated in the rural rebellion

21 Wat Tyler, "Wat Tyler's Demands," 1381, in "Readings for January 19th: Peasant's Revolt of 1381," HY 654, University of Alabama at Birmingham, Spring 2012, Dr. Conley.

22 Barbara A. Hanawalt, "Fur-Collar Crime: The Pattern of Crime among the Fourteenth-Century English Nobility," *Journal of Social History* Vol. 8, No. 4 (Summer, 1975), 1-17.

23 Thomas Walsingham, Historia Anglicana, in *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, ed. Dobson, 177.

24 Wat Tyler, "Wat Tyler's Demands," 1381, in "Readings for January 19th: Peasant's Revolt of 1381," HY 654, University of Alabama at Birmingham, Spring 2012, Dr. Conley.

25 The Avalon Project, "Constitutions of Clarendon; 1164: Stubbs' "Charters," 135.," Accessed April 2nd, 2012, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/medieval/constcla.asp

26 Ibid.

and certainly desired their freedom from local landlords, being free also had an alternate meaning. The rebels wanted their own independence and the ability to pursue their own livelihood without undue interference from a distant royal government. This was freedom in the most traditional English sense. Rural English rebels wanted the national government to intervene in local affairs only if the locality was suffering from an economic deficit or if its justice system needed to be rectified. They were not interested in being constricted by the Statute of Laborers or the Sumptuary Laws, and they were certainly not interested in the poll tax. The demands made by Wat Tyler on behalf of the rebels, though radical at first glance, actually show that the Rising was conservative and traditional in nature. The rebels wanted a return to the old, community-based system upon which the Statute of Winchester was based. The demands specified a return to the old ways, which were perceived as better. The idea of returning to an older golden age would become the blueprint for nearly all future English "revolutions." The rural rebels resented the government's intrusion into their lives and what they perceived as an abuse of power, and their specific choice of targets represent this hostile sentiment. The urban rebellion is different in some ways; the lower classes in the cities did not share precisely the same economic issues regarding landlords, the price of food, wage labor, and land-based serfdom. However, we will see that the mentality of the rebels in the city and the countryside share some common characteristics. Both sets of rebels were moderately wealthy, moving up in society, and knowledgeable. Neither set of rebels was composed of a random mob. Both came to resent a very specific oligarchy that they felt were intruding on their lives.

> These "peasants" were not so simple, and in fact, many of them can hardly be called peasants at all.

The Urban Rebellion

The introduction of Dobson's edited volume suggests that the rebels in urban society only took advantage of the rural rising to further their own particular aims, but that is not the case. Like in rural England, there had been significant demographic change in the urban centers during the post-plague years. The mortality rate was significantly higher in the cities (estimates put the death toll closer to 50% in urban areas an even higher in some cases) and so the towns had to deal with replacements for positions, changes in rent, services, and a new demand for labor just as the countryside did.[27] The Black Death had created the same vacuum in the cities as it did in the countryside and just as many new opportunities for the lower classes to rise through the ranks, thereby creating a new class of wealthier commoners who were gradually becoming frustrated with their overlords. The main difference in the cities was the existence of a wealthy merchant oligarchy as opposed to rich landlords or magnates, but in some ways the social struggle was similar. Furthermore, there was not as much of a disconnect between urban centers and the rural countryside as many historians have often assumed.

Those who initially study medieval English history often assume that individual communities were extremely isolated. While laws, customs, and treatment often varied, and while it is true that a person at this time tended to identify with their own community rather than the concept of "England," there was actually a great deal of interaction between townspeople and rural citizens. People would come into the towns to trade, visit fairs, and to stay in inns. Rural artisans would also apprentice their children to urban craftsmen. Townspeople often invested in rural

27 A. F. Butcher, "English Urban Society and the Revolt of 1381," in *The English Rising of 1381*, eds. Hilton and Aston, 86.

holdings.[28] All of these ventures required interaction and conversation between different groups of people, and it makes sense that they would have talked politics. If we remember that most of the men who fought in the rebellion were moderately well-off and at least somewhat educated for the period, we can comfortably assume that the state of affairs of the realm would have at least occasionally entered common discussion. After all, war affects trade, and trade and money were what motivated many of these men to travel to the towns from the countryside and vice versa in the first place. Furthermore, the unpopular taxes levied by the Crown in this period were the great equalizer among the urban and rural population. The servants of the Crown were often considered a common enemy. The Great Rumour of 1377 is a good example of the potential interaction between rural and urban; rural tenants would have needed to acquire royal writs and patents under the Great Seal and hire lawyers, and they would have needed to travel to do so. We must remember that this Rumour was so widespread that there was petition regarding the trouble in the House of Commons. The news would have easily travelled the kingdom.

We know that the rebels living in the urban centers would have learned of and understood the complaints of the rural rebels, but what about their own grievances? The evidence that is left to historians for understanding the causes of the urban rising is much more difficult to decipher. Much of it is left by chroniclers like Thomas Walsingham, and as we have seen, his testimony must be treated as somewhat suspect because of his contemptuous view of the rebels. Most of the remaining documents that have survived come from indictments from local jurors copied by royal clerks after the rebellion took place, and are thus also suspicious due to the allegiance of the clerks. In order to attempt to discover some of the motives behind the urban rebels' actions, this section will look at two centers of urban activity during the Rising of 1381.

28 Ibid., 91.

York

King Richard II considered the northern boroughs dangerous, and perhaps rightfully so. After Wat Tyler's death, the king sent letters patent instructing the boroughs to prohibit illegal assembly of any sort.[29] In an appeal for restraint to burgesses in Beverley in 1382, Richard wrote, "From the uncertainty of good government, many insolences are committed among the inhabitants and commons of cities and towns, evils arise as well as scandals; and peaceful rule is badly hindered by the excitement of divers kind of dangers."[30] York was an enormous urban center with a large population during this period, and in many ways the London of the north. Historians have written before that if there were ever any possibility of transferring the political capital, it would have been to York.[31] After the Revolt, York became the third borough in the kingdom to receive county status. According to R. B. Dobson, editor of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, the city became increasingly autonomous throughout the fourteenth century and maintained a legal authority to manage the affairs of the city. In the period leading up to the Revolt, urban populations everywhere were gradually becoming frustrated by a controlling oligarchy that was increasingly tampering with their livelihood, and York was no exception.

When we look at one of the major documents from the Rebellion in York, it can almost read as merely a band of armed men looting the local Guildhall. However, this outbreak of violent resistance was, just like the rural rebellion, targeted one very specific individual. According to a Parliamentary Petition in November-December of 1380,

29 Cal. Pat. Rolls, 1381-5, p. 69., in R. B. Dobson, "The Risings in York, Beverley, and Scarborough, 1380-1381," in *The English Rising of 1381*, eds. Hilton and Aston, 116.

30 Beverley corporation Archives, Town Cartulary, fo.17, in Dobson,112.

31 J.H. Harvey, "Richard II and York," in F. R. H. Du Boulay and C. Barron (eds.), *The Reign of Richard II* (London, 1971), 203; Ibid., 118.

men chased the elected mayor, John de Gysburn, from the city and "forcibly broke down by means of their axes and other arms the doors and windows of their Guildhall, entered it and made a certain Simon de Quixlay swear to be their mayor - against his will and that of the good men of the city."[32] The petition writes that these events took place against Quixlay's will and that of the "good men of the city," but given who is presenting the petition and the position we know the House of Commons has traditionally taken against the rebels, this statement is suspect. It is worth noting that the rebels who forced their way into the Guildhall on the 26th of November did not engage in a riotous, looting rampage of the city, but very specifically targeted the former mayor, de Gysburn. We also must consider the state of affairs in urban centers during the risings in 1381. Many people in York were frustrated with the wealthy merchant oligarchy, and the deposed mayor would have been part of that group. His forcible deposition speaks to the mentality of the rising as a whole.

Of further interest is the fact that part of the petition includes a request for a writ demanding that the bailiffs of York respect the previous, original mayor, John de Gysburn, under a penalty:

> Item, another writ should be sent to the bailiffs, good men and all the commonalty of the said city, commanding them to respect the said John, their mayor, as the person who represents the state of our lord king in the said city, under penalty of forfeiting their goods, chattels, and everything else. And the king wills that a proclamation to this effect should be made within the city so that no one can excuse himself by ignorance, etc.[33]

This section of the petition informs us of two things. Primarily, it could easily indicate that the bailiffs of York were, in fact, supporting Quixlay, and had to be ordered to support the original, elected mayor. Again, this speaks to the nature of the Rising as a whole. The people participating were not the common rabble, but rather prominent, often elected officials taking part in an overthrow of social superiors that they saw as corrupt. Furthermore, the petition requests that a writ be sent to "all the commonalty of the said city," implying that more were interested in replacing de Gysburn than the petition had initially implied when it suggested that Quixlay was put in place against the will of the "good men of the city." The wording of the request for a writ indicates that the attack on the Guildhall may have had widespread support, and this is supported by the fact that even though he was ordered to step down, Quixlay was elected mayor of York the following year.[34]

Scarborough

While significantly smaller than York, the northern port town of Scarborough still had a role to play in the Rising of 1381. According to King's Bench records, the news of the rebellion in the south inspired the rising in Scarborough. Robert Galoun was designated the leader of the local rebels, which numbered at least 500. Like the other prominent rebels all over England, Galoun was wealthy - he had enough money to found a perpetual chantry in the local parish church the year before.[35] The rebel leader's

32 According to a Parliamentary Petition, November-December 1380, Rot. Parl., III, 96-97, in *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, ed. Dobson, 285.

33 Ibid., 287.

34 R. B. Dobson, "The Riots at York: Elsewhere in England," in *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, ed. Dobson, 284. Quixlay had support from the lesser craftsmen of the city, and was elected mayor in February of 1381. The nature of his support further reinforces the argument that the previous mayor, de Gysburn, had not attracted the support of the up-and-coming lower classes. In 1381, de Gysburn and his followers attacked Bootham Bar and attempted to reassert political power. De Gysburn's men were accused of murder and in November of 1382, the city was required to pay a fine of 1,000 marks for a general pardon.

35 Fasti Parochiales III (Yorkshire Archaeological Society, Record Series, 1967), 110-11, in R. B. Dobson, "The Riots at Scarborough:

donation shows that he was a man of standing and some notoriety in the local community before the revolt, and not a person with nothing to lose. Again, this is a typical profile of a rebel in 1381.

Henry Percy, the Earl of Northumberland, was charged with the duty of trying the rebels after the Rising along with 12 jurors of Scarborough. They were to try the rebels for what they had done on June 23rd, 1381, when according to the Coram Rege Roll of King's Bench, they "besieged many liegemen of the King...later they led the said liegemen to prison and kept them there until they swore they would be faithful to the said accused and the commons of all England."[36] The rebels in Scarborough targeted the king's men specifically for injustices they felt were done to them. The rebels felt that the king's servants were not doing their jobs, and they were increasingly agitated by rumors from the south. It is important to recognize that they did not kill the king's liegemen, but instead imprisoned them and required an oath of loyalty to the commons of England. The rebels in Scarborough felt they shared a common bond with the rest of the realm. Despite whatever differences existed among all of the communities and between urban centers and the countryside, the rebels were all loosely committed to the idea that the king's men were not doing their sworn duty to protect the realm and administer justice. The Rolls go on to declare that the Scarborough rebels "feloniously took and carried off various possessions of the said liegemen, namely £10 belonging to John Stokwyth and a hauberk worth forty shillings from John de Aclom."[37] This was not random looting or a crime spree, but a specifically targeted attack against the king's liegemen. The rebels were taking back what they felt they were owed by the king's own servants. They were not common criminals, and they would not have seen themselves as robbers. They attacked and imprisoned those officials they felt had done them specific injustices.

> Social mobility took on a whole new meaning.

York and Scarborough are only two urban centers in a sea of townships scattered throughout England, but they are similar in the sense that both sets of rebels were very organized, both had enormous amounts of support that came from the better-off, and both went after very specific targets. Though York was certainly larger than Scarborough, the rising took place on smaller scales as well. The York revolt also had elements of local political disputes in a way that the Scarborough rising did not, but the social tensions that continued to split York after the rebellion proved that there was more to the rebellion there than a mere mayoral power grab. The nervous tone of the Parliamentary Petition of 1380 indicates how afraid the members of the House of Commons were of the rebels and that they were unsure of local support in York. The Scarborough rising shows us that the rebels there felt solidarity with other rebels throughout England and proves that even in the medieval period there was some expression of a bond between the "commons." What is clear in both cases presented here is that the rebels in York and Scarborough were expressing their displeasure with government officials that they felt were not performing their duties properly.

How the Rebellion Shaped English Political Philosophy

The Peasant Rebellion of 1381 tells us some important things about the mind of the politically active medieval Englishman. Almost all that participated in the rebel-

Elsewhere in England," in *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, ed. Dobson, 290.

36 Coram Rege Roll, Easter 9 Richard II [KB, 27/500], Rex, membs. 12, 12v; partly printed in Reville, 253-6, in *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, ed. Dobson, 291.

37 Ibid., 291.

lion were a new class of moderately wealthy, intelligent, politically active peasants that did not live on the fringe of society with nothing to lose. We see here that even if a rebel was a rural serf, he was gradually gaining the opportunity to be wealthy after the Black Death. Rebels from both urban centers and the countryside often felt they shared a common bond. Rural peasants had to contend with a somewhat different situation with local landlords and magnates regarding food prices and a land-based economy, but both free and unfree were frustrated with the constraints placed upon them by their social superiors in the rural and urban settings. As peasants all over England found themselves capable of gaining wealth in ways that had not been open to them before the plague decimated the population, landlords and the urban wealthy were in a panic to cling to their traditional roles. The entire structure of society threatened to shift in the mid-fourteenth century, and legislation like the Statute of Laborers and the Sumptuary Laws proved that the men who made the laws were trying their hardest to make sure nothing changed.

The backlash against government imposition is the real essence of the risings in 1381. The government attempted to legislate peasants' livelihoods in parliament, and the courts were attempting to take away the incomes of workers and serfs through what most viewed as unjust and unnecessary fines. The hated Poll Tax of 1831 was merely the last straw levied by a government that most felt could not properly fight the war in France, let alone defend its own coast. Whether or not the peasants could afford the tax was not the primary issue in the mind of the rebels (though it may have been in the minds of the Parliamentmen) but rather that the government was not performing its duties. When Wat Tyler demanded a return to community law in his demands to Richard II, the rebels were critiquing everything that had gone wrong with big government in the fourteenth century. During the Rising, those who were not a part of Parliament, the courts, or the government announced that they had a say in dictating what the country did with its money. The new class of peasants had the very English notion that because they were a part of the new economy, they had the right to a political voice, and that philosophy did not die when the Rebellion ended. The theme of "no taxation without representation" and a strong desire for a government that does not interfere with the local community has underwritten an enormous part of English history and should be familiar to American students in particular. Present-day Anglo-American notions of political liberty are not so far removed from the demands of English peasants in the fourteenth century.