




A HOTBED FOR DISSIDENCE:  
Southeast England in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381

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On the basis of this thesis  
defended by the candidate on  
May 4, 2011 we, the  
undersigned, recommend that the  
candidate be awarded  
Highest Honors  
in History:

To Mr. Gareth Kinsey,  
Who made the Southeast come alive  
one castle at a time.

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## INTRODUCTION

In June of 1381, thousands of distraught Kentish peasants banded together and assailed the purportedly unjust nobility of the realm. For the first time in English history, Canterbury was sacked and London was occupied by a hostile force.<sup>1</sup> This intense and relatively bloodless episode, now known as the English Peasants' Revolt, transpired over the course of only two weeks, until its abrupt end upon the death of its rhetorical leader, Wat Tyler. After the termination of the Kentish rebels' campaign, which the peasants of Essex and the commoners of London supported, small and comparatively inconsequential rebellions continued to occur throughout England for weeks. Because contemporary and modern historians have downplayed the significance of these subsequent revolts, none of them are nearly as memorable as the Southeast's initial push.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, centuries of attention paid by historians to the Southeast have resulted in the synonymy of the English Peasants' Revolt with "Wat Tyler's Rebellion." This is likely due to the successes that the peasants of the Southeast achieved. They captured London, Canterbury, and King Richard II, and they forced the king to grant manumissions to all serfs. If we concede that the impact of the Southeastern revolt led to its historical fame, an important question is raised: What were the causes and circumstances that led not only to the ebullient revolt in Southeast England, but also to its relative success? Upon closer examination of the Peasants' Revolt, it is puzzling that the Southeast would have been the forerunner in iconoclasm, but this thesis explains why that geographic area was such a hotbed for dissidence.

Because the causes of the Southeastern revolt are so complex, it is important to have a clear and simple understanding of the events being discussed. In November of 1380, Chancellor

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<sup>1</sup> All translations are mine unless otherwise noted. Where I have translated, the original language is found in the note. I especially thank Dr. Daniel Solomon, Vanderbilt University, for assisting me with a few of these translations.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Oman, *The Great Revolt of 1381* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969). 1. Also see the extant chronicles (note 3), in which considerable attention is given to the revolt in the Southeast, while most modern understanding of the subsequent revolts comes from court documents, Parliamentary decrees, royal pardons, and epistles.

Archbishop Simon Sudbury of Canterbury convened Parliament at Northampton to discuss the rising cost of the Hundred Years' War, and after intense deliberation between the two chambers, an agreement was made to levy a poll tax.<sup>3</sup> In the succeeding months, tax collectors attempted to collect this tax, but they were ultimately outwitted by wide-scale fraud in the form of peasants lying about the size of their households. John Legge, a sergeant-at-arms of King Richard II, responded by organizing a commission under the authority of the King's uncle, John of Gaunt, to attempt to collect the tax again, and he secured the legal capacity from Parliament to arrest and detain anyone who evaded his initiative. On May 30, 1381, one of the new commissioners, Thomas Bampton, entered the town of Fobbing, Essex, where he arrested a man for refusing to pay more than he was able. The townspeople came to their comrade's aid, and they stoned Bampton and his small military escort out of the town. Hearing about this, Parliament sent the Chief Justice of Common Pleas, Robert Belknap, to investigate the behavior of Fobbing's residents, but he was met by the peasants half way to London, and he was detained and forced to swear on a Bible that he would never investigate the crimes committed. Belknap returned to London on May 31 with the dire news that England may have fallen into a state of civil war.

Over the next two weeks, the Crown effectively lost control of the entirety of Southeast England. The peasants of Essex managed to take Colchester without resistance, but the actions of the Kentish peasants soon overshadowed this accomplishment. Responding to the call-to-arms initiated by the men of Fobbing, a man called Abel Ker overtook the small monastery of Lesness in northern Kent on June 2, and then, after raising a small army across the estuary in Essex, he proceeded to sack the city of Dartford. From there, Robert Cave took command of the ever-increasing peasant force and led an assault on Rochester. On June 6, the keep at Rochester fell

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<sup>3</sup> The following events are recorded in several extant chronicles, including the *Anonimale Chronicle*, *Knighton's Continuator*, Walsingham's *Chronica Maiora*, and Froissart's *Chronicles*. Chapters 2 and 3 of Oman also have a very extensive summary of the events.

into rebel hands, and on June 7, the brigade moved south to Maidstone, the county seat of Kent. Here, Wat Tyler took control of the force and marched to Canterbury. For his part, Tyler organized the army and even set up a disciplinary system similar to the court-marshal; he personally sought to punish any man who stole, harmed, or killed. Tyler's strict nature contributed to the Kentish peasants' success by facilitating the creation and completion of defined objectives, and it also may have saved many lives during the criminal trials that followed the decline of the movement. Although most of the rebels were disciplined in this way, many residents of Canterbury, after Tyler had captured the city, pilfered the property of the local nobility, and therefore that city was not granted the general pardon issued by Richard II after the revolt. After taking Canterbury, the seat of Archbishop Sudbury, the peasants moved to London. By coordinating with leaders in Essex, Tyler was able to combine the two forces. On the night of June 12, 1381, exactly two weeks after Thomas Bampton was stoned out of Fobbing, London was surrounded by an angry peasant mob.

A lot is known about the events that followed. On June 13, after an episode involving King Richard II outside of the city, the peasants of both factions stormed into London. They were still operating under Tyler's strict disciplinary policy, however, so there were very few murders or thefts committed on this day. The worst of the crimes was the destruction of the Savoy, the palace of John of Gaunt. In the afternoon, Richard decided to negotiate with the peasants at Mile End, and there he accepted almost all of Wat Tyler's demands, which are discussed later in this thesis. During these negotiations, several peasants stormed the Tower of London and captured and beheaded Archbishop Sudbury, John Legge, the Treasurer Hales, and the personal physician of John of Gaunt (Gaunt himself was absent on business in Edinburgh). Content with the King's promises and the executions, many of the peasants returned home, a

staunch group of extremists, led by the now power-hungry Tyler, remained. The next day, London fell into chaos as the extremists murdered hundreds of foreigners, lawyers, and creditors. On June 15, Richard attempted to renegotiate with the obviously unhappy peasants at Smithfield. Tyler proposed several outrageous revisions to the charter granted on June 13, and though the King was willing to converse, one of his men-at-arms stabbed Tyler in the belly for his arrogance. He later died, was beheaded, and his head was put on a pole outside of London, watching post mortem as even his faithful extremists lumbered back east to their humble homes. Thus ended the Southeast's involvement in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.

The revolt in the Southeast had dire consequences for the history of England and even Europe, so the question of the motivations of the peasants is particularly worthwhile. One of the consequences of the revolt in the Southeast was that the lower classes of East Anglia and Hertfordshire followed the example of Kent and Essex by revolting. But there were also more lasting effects. For example, Oman notes that after the death of Wat Tyler at Smithfield, "[King] Richard ... was no longer the mere boy that he had been down to this moment, and was for the future a factor of importance in the government of the realm."<sup>4</sup> Until he appeased the rowdy peasants at Smithfield, the fourteen-year-old king's uncle, John of Gaunt, and certain political officers, especially the Lord Chancellor of the Realm, held the greatest influence in England. Additionally, the revolt's destruction caused more lasting effects. Countless documents were burned, including tax records and the entire library of Cambridge University.<sup>5</sup> Also, the property

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<sup>4</sup> Oman. 80.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 127. Although Cambridge University was not attacked by the peasants of the Southeast, but rather by the lower classes of Cambridgeshire, I have included this example here as an extreme consequence of the larger revolt. Moreover, because it is unlikely that the peasants of Cambridgeshire would have revolted without the influence of Wat Tyler, the burning of the documents of Cambridge University is an indirect consequence of the Southeastern rising.

of murdered aristocrats needed to be redistributed.<sup>6</sup> Finally, on a more thematic level, the English Peasants' Revolt added to the trend of peasants' uprisings throughout Europe in the mid-fourteenth century; well-known revolts occurred in Flanders, France, and Florence in the decades preceding the uprising in Southeast England.<sup>7</sup> Because of these consequences, the discussion in this thesis is useful to the study and understanding of life in the Late Middle Ages.

Moreover, this thesis is necessary because, upon examining some of the conditions unique to Kent and Essex, it is quite puzzling that these peasants would have been the harbingers of such infidelity to the Crown. The southern and eastern coasts of England were most subject to the raids of the French military during the Hundred Years' War, and therefore the peasants in these regions had more to gain from the poll tax than did the lower classes of, for example, Cambridgeshire. Additionally, several of the coastal towns of Kent belonged to the coalition of the Cinque Ports, which had historically protected the island from invasion. Of the original five ports, four were in Kent, and by the time of the revolt, several smaller ports in Kent and even one in Essex were assumed into the coalition.<sup>8</sup> It is noteworthy that the member cities of the Cinque Ports were exempt from all regal taxes, including the infamous Poll Tax of 1380. Because Kent had so much to gain from the prospect of a greater defense, and because so many of their cities were exempt from the poll tax, it is especially puzzling that they were the forerunners and most violent in the Peasants' Revolt. These paradoxes make the question of the causes of the revolt in the Southeast even more salient.

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<sup>6</sup> William Caferro, *John Hawkwood: An English Mercenary in Fourteenth-Century Italy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2006). 227. For example, John Hawkwood profited from the Peasants' Revolt by purchasing Richard Lyons' land in Essex, after the wealthy Londoner was murdered by Wat Tyler.

<sup>7</sup> These, and several lesser known revolts, are discussed in Samuel K. Cohn, Jr., *A Lust for Liberty* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> The coalition of Cinque Ports included several key cities in the Southeast. In Sussex, Hastings was the original port, and it was supported by Seaford, Northey, Winchelsea, Petit Ilham, Rye, and Orwardstone. In Kent, New Romney, Hythe, Dover, and Sandwhich were the original ports. They were supported by Lydd, West Hythe, Folkestone, Kingdown, Ringwould, Walmer, Deal, Ramsgate, St. Peters, St. Johns, Birchington, Sarre, Fordwhich, Reculver, Faversham, and Grange. Finally, in Essex, the port of Brightlingsea supported Sandwhich.



As a general rule, historians have paid little attention to the regional variations in the causes of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, instead attributing the events of the Peasants' Revolt almost entirely to the Southeast, which is reflected in the metonym, "Wat Tyler's Rebellion." Thus, when historians discuss the causes of the revolt, they ignore the origins of dissidence in the other counties, and they assume that several of the events leading to the Southeast's revolt are true throughout the realm. This, however, is problematic for two reasons. First, not all of the causes of the revolt in the Southeast contributed to the revolts elsewhere, and second, this assumption detracts from the significance of the Southeast's revolt by generalizing the unique causes. There are a few exceptions to this rule, such as Powell's *The Rising in East Anglia*, but even these works only summarize the events in those other areas.<sup>9</sup> There have been a few scholarly studies of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 in the Southeast that can contribute to this discussion, however. For example, André Réville documented the criminal trials and judicial records relating to the Peasants' Revolt by distinct regions, and other scholars have argued whether the peasants of Kent were organized.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, the discussions concerning the causes of the Peasants' Revolt as a whole, if read with the understanding that the majority of these authors are referring only to Southeast England, are useful for my thesis.

The discussion about the regional organization of the peasants is particularly applicable to my research question. Organization usually suggests premeditation, a factor that may contribute a new level to the understanding of the causes of the revolt in the Southeast. Nicholas Brooks, in his essay, "The Organization and Achievements of the Peasants of Kent and Essex in

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<sup>9</sup> Edgar Powell *The Rising in East Anglia* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1896).

<sup>10</sup> André Réville, *Le soulèvement des travailleurs d'Angleterre en 1381*, (Paris: A. Picard et fils, 1898). For organization, see Nicholas Brooks, "The Organization and Achievements of the Peasants of Kent and Essex in 1381," *Studies in Medieval History Presented to R.C. Davis*, (London: The Hambledon Press, 1985), 247-70.

1381,” argues that the peasants of the Southeast were extremely well organized.<sup>11</sup> He asserts that the majority of peasants traveled with one to two horses, despite their poverty, which suggests that someone in their ranks was extremely wealthy and skilled in the science of logistics. Furthermore, he argues that the events in Kent and Essex happened simultaneously. The county seats of Maidstone and Chelmsford fell on the same day. The homes of the sheriffs in their respective counties were sacked on the same day. Finally, the peasant conglomerates of Kent and Essex joined each other outside of London on the same day. Brooks argues that this implies intent and collusion. On the other hand, Charles Oman is of the steadfast opinion that there is no evidence to suppose that the peasants were organized beyond the suggestion of the chroniclers.<sup>12</sup> He argues, “We have no proof that there was any central committee of malcontents who chose their time and then issued orders for the rising. The leaders who emerged in each region seem to have been the creatures of the moment, selected almost at hazard.”<sup>13</sup> I do not agree with either historian completely; extant records do not offer an explanation for the selection of leaders in the Southeast, but the quality of the leadership did contribute to rebels’ fervor and success.

Another debate regards the origins of the Peasants’ Revolt. Remember that several of these causes are actually the causes of the revolt particularly in the Southeast. E.B. Fryde believes he describes the most fundamental origin when he says, “The earliest uprising, which started in Essex at the end of May 1381, was precipitated by attempts to collect the arrears of a particularly unpopular poll-tax.”<sup>14</sup> Stephen Rigby and Sylvia Federico argue a similar case, but they maintain, “The trouble in 1381 began not only because of the levying [and collection] of the

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<sup>11</sup> Brooks, 247-70.

<sup>12</sup> The chroniclers generally agree that the peasants were disorganized mobs that wrought havoc wherever they went. Froissart is most telling of this opinion when he says, “[The mob] passed by like a tornado, leveling and gutting ... and showing ... no mercy.” Jean Froissart, *Chronicles*, trans. Geoffrey Brereton (London: Penguin Group, 1978), 224.

<sup>13</sup> Oman, 12.

<sup>14</sup> E.B. Fryde in the “Introduction to the New Edition” of Oman’s *The Great Revolt*, cited above. xii.

tax but because of the manner in which it was collected.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the tax collectors in Kent and Essex were not exactly gentlemanly in their arbitrations and practices. One tax collector personally examined young women’s intact hymens as a means by which he could know if they were married.<sup>16</sup> In this way, and others, Rigby proclaims that the revolt occurred as a general protest against a “growing intrusion in the life of the local community.”<sup>17</sup> Rigby and Federico are correct in their assessment that the revolt occurred for reasons other than the poll-tax levy, but they should not have limited their argument to the manner of collection. I acknowledge that the Poll Tax of 1380 was important, but other factors such as timing, proximity, and leadership style were even more significant.

In this thesis, I explore the causes of the Southeastern revolt and its relative successes through the use of extant primary documents. I have found chronicles, legal documents, and literary sources to be invaluable to this project. In the first instance, there are many chronicles published and unpublished, in a variety of languages, which give detailed accounts of the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381.<sup>18</sup> Secondly, legal documents, such as laws, public records, and judicial proceedings, provide the most universal and detailed records from the year 1381. Finally, I have found value in medieval literature, especially William Langland’s *The Vision of Piers Plowman* and Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. Though literature has limitations as an historical source, I have collected some key evidence through my examinations of it. All these primary documents form the backbone of my research.

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<sup>15</sup> Sylvia Federico, “The Imaginary Society: Women in 1381,” *The Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (Chicago: Apr., 2001), 178.

<sup>16</sup> The Poll Tax of 1380 was levied on the entire adult population of England. John Legge, the particular offender in this case, seems to have judged that a woman old enough to marry (i.e. have sexual relations), must be an adult, and therefore must pay the tax.

<sup>17</sup> Stephen Rigby, *English Society in the Later Middle Ages*, (New York: 1995), 121.

<sup>18</sup> For example, the *Anonimale Chronicle*, Knighton’s *Continuator*, Walsingham’s *Chronica Maiora*, Froissart’s *Chronicles*, *The Chronicle of Lanercost*, and Capgrave’s *Chronicle of England*.

I begin this thesis with a discussion of the macro and micro abuses that led to the uprising in the Southeast. “Macro abuses” refers to those cruelties committed by the government against the entire realm, while “micro abuses” defines the injustices committed solely against the Southeast. I distinguish between these offenses where modern historians have not in order to differentiate between the causes of the Peasants’ Revolt as a whole and the incidents that engendered the rebellion specifically in Kent, Essex, and Middlesex. In my second chapter, I discuss the circumstances in the Southeast that facilitated revolt, such as the importance of the Southeast’s proximity to London and Canterbury, with respect to the causes and the successes of the uprising. Finally, in my third chapter, I describe several of the subsequent revolts, such as those in Norfolk and Suffolk, and through this lens I define and analyze more factors that contributed to the causes of the Southeast’s fervor and achievements. In doing all this, I hope to unpack and address the regional causes and relative successes of what has become known as “Wat Tyler’s Rebellion.”

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**CHAPTER ONE:**  
**Governmental Abuses**

The most important reason for the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 in Southeast England was the abuses that the people of that region suffered. Not all of the atrocities committed by the Crown were aimed at the Southeast, however. The exploitation of the peasantry, which included laws and taxes passed by Parliament, targeted the regal dominion as a whole. Still, together with these macro abuses, there were also micro abuses that affected solely the lower classes of Kent and Essex. Many chronicles discuss the offenses of such infamous characters as John Legge and Thomas Bampton. This chapter explores the reactions of the rebels to the abuses that they suffered or believed they suffered at the hands of Parliament, the Crown, and even individuals. Through this discussion, it is evident that the peasants of the Southeast suffered greater abuse than did their neighbors.

First, the macro abuses facilitated several of the personal inflictions that came later. Although these offenses were committed against the entire people of England, they are nonetheless significant for understanding the motives of the Southeastern rebels. The roots of the revolt can be traced to the Black Death in 1348. This plague, which varying reports estimate killed a third of Europe's population, in addition to raising the price of food, spurred the passage of certain laws that restricted the rights of the increasingly important lower classes.<sup>19</sup> Besides the social problems arising from the Black Death, England had found itself entangled in the dangerous and expensive Hundred Years' War, which had been waging since 1337. By 1381, peasants in both the north and south of England were suffering constant raids by the Scots and the French respectively, and the cost of maintaining the war was rising significantly. This

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<sup>19</sup> Judith M. Bennett and C. Warren Hollister, *Medieval Europe: A Short History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006). 322.

expense explains the three poll taxes between 1377 and 1381, in addition to the annual tenths-and-fifteenths tax. All of these macro abuses contributed greatly to the revolt in the Southeast, in addition to the revolts of other geographic areas.

The source of many of the troubles in fourteenth-century England was the Black Death. It was a plague that seems to have originated in Asia and traveled to Europe via a Genoese merchant ship. The plague struck Britain exceptionally hard. Perhaps because it is an island with little room for escape, or perhaps due to poor health conditions, population studies now reveal that the number of English residents fell from about 4.75 million in 1300 to 2.25 million after the Black Death reached Britain in 1349.<sup>20</sup> With about half of the population gone, the vast majority of which consisted of the lower classes, England's economy was thrown into turmoil. There was no longer an abundant workforce, which consequently led to a smaller demand for food, a smaller demand for land, and yet a greater demand for unskilled labor. Thus, in 1350, the English peasants suddenly found themselves in a very powerful position, although Parliament ensured that this situation would be short lived.

The Black Death had certainly ravaged the feudal system, which was deeply entrenched in Medieval English society, but Parliament was not so keen to dissolve the English social structure. Therefore, in 1349, in the wake of the Black Death, King Edward III urged Parliament to pass the Ordinance of Labourers, which mandated, "That every Man and Woman of our Realm ... be bounden to serve [his or her lord] which so shall him require ; [*sic*] and take only the Wages, Livery, Meed, or Salary, which were accustomed to be given in the places where he oweth to serve, the xx. year of our Reign."<sup>21</sup> The twentieth year of Edward's reign was 1346,

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<sup>20</sup> Stuart J. Borsch, *The Black Death in Egypt and England: A Comparative Study* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005). Online.

<sup>21</sup> Great Britain. *Statutes of the Realm*. Vol. 1, Anno 23. London, 1349. 307. Note: John Raithby published and translated these statutes in 1828, and page numbers refer to this publication.

which means that the peasants, by law, were not permitted to receive higher wages for days working on manorial fields after the Black Death, even though demand for labor was so much higher.<sup>22</sup> The peasants of England did not approve of this unjust ordinance, so they silently protested the government by abandoning their sworn lords. This became such a grave problem for the nobility of England that Parliament was forced to pass the stricter Statute of Labourers two years later, which reads in part:

Whereas late against the Malice of Servants, which were idle, and not willing to serve after the Pestilence, without taking excessive Wages, It was ordained by our Lord and King ... That such manner of Servants ... should be bound to serve, receiving Salary and Wages accustomed in Places where they ought to serve in the Twentieth Year of the Reign of the King ... and that the same Servants refusing to serve in such Manner should be punished by Imprisonment of the Bodies ... And now forasmuch as it is given the King to understand ... the said Servants having no regard to the said Ordinance, but to their ease and singular Covetise, do withdraw themselves to serve great Men and other, unless they have Livery and Wages to the double or treble of that they were wont to take the said Twentieth Year.<sup>23</sup>

The Statute continues by defining the wages that a peasant could earn for a given task. For example, a reaper of corn in the first week of August was only permitted to receive two pence per day, and the lord was forbidden from offering additional meat or drink. This statute marks an early abuse by Parliament and the Crown that eventually contributed to the Peasants' Revolt in 1381. From the discussion in the law itself, one surmises that the peasants of England were not averse to rebelling against their feudal lords. Furthermore, the law demonstrates the harsh approach that Parliament and the Crown took to enforcing their unjust laws; they threatened imprisonment if the lower classes sought the market value of their services. Finally, the Statute of Labourers shows the extent of the government's abuse. According to Charles Oman, the prices of labor set forth in the statute in 1351, after the Black Death had destroyed

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<sup>22</sup> With some exceptions that developed in the years immediately preceding the Black Death, all peasants were required to spend a certain number of days working on a lord's manorial lands as rent for their land. Serfs always worked on manorial lands. The lord had to pay peasants in coin for any days in excess of the rental payment that they worked.

<sup>23</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*. Vol. 1, Anno 25, Stat. 2, c. 1, 2. 311.

half of the unskilled working class, were at even lower rates than in 1346, “2*d.*-3*d.* a day instead of at 3*d.*-4*d.*,” the latter being the more common prices.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, 30 years before the peasants revolted, Parliament and King Edward III were already exploiting them.

These same laws were equally unjust to the journeymen class. Journeymen were skilled workers who had served their apprenticeships but whom the guilds did not endow the rank of master. The Ordinance of Labourers in 1349 specifically states, “That Sadlers, Skinners ... and all other Artificers and Workmen, shall not take for their Labour and Workmanship above the same that was wont to be paid to such Persons the said twentieth year.” The penalty for asking for the market value of labor was imprisonment.<sup>25</sup> The Statute of Labourers reveals quite a bit about how the journeymen tried to protest silently in the two years following the original decree. The new law, for example, mandates specifically that shoemakers must sell boots and shoes in the same manner that they did in the twentieth year.<sup>26</sup> This suggests that they had begun to sell either single shoes, or even parts of shoes, in order to avoid selling a pair at the pre-plague value. Journeymen also protested by means of forming early trade unions. Oman cites an unnamed source who commented, “If there is any dispute between a master ... and his man, such a man is wont to go to all the men within the city of the same trade, and then by covin and conspiracy ... they will order that no one among them shall work or serve his own master.”<sup>27</sup> Such civil disobedience following the passage of the labor laws provides evidence of the lower classes’ discontentment with the abuses of Parliament.

<sup>24</sup> Oman. 7. Note: *d.* stands for denarii, which were Roman currency, though in England *d.* is the understood abbreviation for “penny.” Charlemagne standardized the money of account in Western Europe based on the weight of silver. See John F. Chown, *A History of Money: From AD 800* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 18. In Medieval English currency, £1 (pound sterling) = 20*s.* (schillings), and 1*s.* = 12*d.* Furthermore, the English had a common coin called a groat, which was valued at 4*d.* Also note that the Statute of Labourers further incensed the peasants because of restrictions it placed on movement. This aspect of the Statute is discussed in much greater detail in the second chapter of this thesis.

<sup>25</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*. Vol. 1, Anno 23. 308.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* Anno 25. 312.

<sup>27</sup> Oman. 16.



There is little doubt that the peasants and journeymen of England were silently protesting the king, but I argue further that the Statute of Labourers actually created stirrings of rebellion. William Langland's *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, an epic poem about an anonymous dreamer seeking absolution, discusses the peasants' unhappiness. Though the poem is fictional, it still has great thematic and historical value because of its description of the preoccupations of English society at the time. In the second revision of the poem, published in the 1370's, Langland writes:

Laborers that have no land to live on but work with their hands  
Deigned not to dine one day on leftover vegetables;  
May they have no penny-ale nor piece of bacon  
But rather fresh meat or fish, fried or baked  
And those hot and piping hot for the chilling of his maw  
And unless he be hired for a high wage, he will chide  
And complain that he was a workman that time ...  
And then he curses the king and all the king's justices,  
For such laws to promulgate, the laborers to grieve.<sup>28</sup>

These few lines of *Piers Plowman* reveal much about the culture of the peasantry in England during the second half of the fourteenth century. For example, the Statute of Labourers, written a quarter century earlier, specifically forbade a lord from giving meat and drink to his workers, but the poem divulges that even manorial lords were bending the law by giving penny-ale and bacon. Furthermore, the peasants depicted in these verses seem to feel that they are worth more than their small wages and cheap food, and they strive to earn the market value and perhaps even more for their years of misfortune. Finally, the poem is one of the earliest accounts of the peasantry blaming the king and his council for their hardship. They curse the court specifically for the Statute of Labourers. Indeed, these emotions were so relevant to the contemporary peasants' attitude that when the revolt did commence in Kent in June 1381, John Ball wrote,

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<sup>28</sup> William Langland, *Piers Plowman*, ed. Derek Pearsall, Passus VIII, v. 329-338 (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2008). 169. Original: "Laborers that han no lond to lyue on but here handes / Deynede noght to dyne a-day of nyhte-olde wortes; / May no peny-ale hem pay ne no pece of bacoun / But hit be fresh flesch or fisch, yfried or ybaked, And that *chaut* and *pluchaut* for chillyng of his mawe. / And but yf he be heyliche yhuyred elles wol he chyde / And that he was werkeman ywrouhte warien the tyme. / ... And thenne a corseth the kyng and alle the kynges justices, / Suche lawes to lerne, laborers to greue."

“John the Shepherd ... bids Piers Plowman to go to his work.”<sup>29</sup> After the revolt, Langland quickly rewrote certain sections of *Piers Plowman*. As Derek Pearsall, a modern Langland scholar explains: “This latest revision seems to have been prompted perhaps partly as a result of the trend of contemporary events ... in particular the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381.”<sup>30</sup> Hence, this epic poem suggests that the abuses of the Statute of Labourers were still rife in the English peasantry in the 1370’s, immediately preceding the Peasants’ Revolt.

Parliament also took note of the rising hostility of the peasantry. Edward III died in June 1377, and he was succeeded by his grandson, Richard II, who was only ten years old.<sup>31</sup> In the first year of Richard’s reign, Parliament passed a series of ordinances that were particularly abusive to the peasantry. First of all, the rolls mandate, “It is ordained, That all Statutes and Ordinances made before this Time ... be holden and firmly kept in all Points.”<sup>32</sup> This blanket acceptance of all former laws may have been expected, but it nonetheless ensured that the Statute of Labourers would continue to grieve the lower classes of England. This, however, was not the greatest offense in the 1377 Rolls of Parliament. “In many Signories and Parts of the Realm of England,” they continue, “the Villaines and Landtenants in Villenage ... do daily withdraw their Services ... and, which more is, gather themselves together in great Routs, and agree by such Confederacy, that every one shall aid other to resist their Lords.” This demonstrates that the intensity of protest had increased from civil disobedience to small, organized riots. The Rolls persist, “It is Ordained and stablished, [*sic*] that the Lords ... shall have special Commissions ... to enquire of all such Rebels ... and to imprison all those that thereof shall be endited [*sic*] before

<sup>29</sup> John Ball, “The Letter of John Ball (Royal MS),” contained in *Medieval English Political Writings*, ed. James M. Dean (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996). Original: “Johon Schep ... biddeth Peres Ploughman go to his werk.”

<sup>30</sup> Derek Pearsall in the Introduction to *Piers Plowman*: Langland. 2.

<sup>31</sup> Richard II was son of the Edward, Black Prince of Wales, who died in 1376. The Court opted to give the full power of the Crown to Richard in order to avoid the regency of his uncle, John of Gaunt.

<sup>32</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*. Vol. 2, Anno 1, c. 5. 2.

them, as well for the Time past.”<sup>33</sup> In other words, Parliament gave manorial lords both unlimited power to imprison farmhands on charges of conspiracy and the authority to imprison retroactively, even without due process. This macro abuse undoubtedly did not sit well with the English peasantry.

Parliament imposed all of these restrictions on the commons of England as a result of the Black Death, but there were also several inflictions caused by the continuing Hundred Years’ War. The Hundred Years’ War began in 1337 when Phillip VI of France invaded Gascony, a fief north of the Pyrenees that actually boasted England’s King Edward III as the rightful lord.<sup>34</sup> The war continued with brief breaks until 1453, but by 1380, 43 years of near constant warfare had begun to take its toll on the lives of the common Englishman. France had invaded England’s southern coast on numerous occasions, while Scotland, allied with the French, fought against the English Crown in the north in hopes of achieving Scottish independence. Moreover, the war became expensive, and Parliament had to expand the annual tenths-and-fifteenths tax to a series of poll taxes. Altogether, there were three poll taxes levied between 1377 and 1381, which represented an unprecedented financial burden on the commons. These taxes, in addition to the Crown’s inability to protect its subjects from constant border skirmishes, served as more macro abuses that contributed to the Peasants’ Revolt.

The vast majority of the war was fought on French soil, and in the fourteenth century, the English claimed victory at nearly every major battle. Still, the English peasants found that they were quite vulnerable to smaller invasions. For example, in October 1346, King David II of Scotland invaded Durham in northern England while Edward III was otherwise occupied with the French in Calais. *The Chronicle of Lanercost* accounts the cruelty of the invasion: “David

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid. c. 6.

<sup>34</sup> For a more detailed description of the outbreak of the Hundred Years’ War, see Jonathan Sumption, *The Hundred Years War*, Vol. 1 (London: Faber and Faber, 1990).

abode in the manor of Beaurepair [now Beupark], sending forth his satellites in all directions, bidding them drive off cattle, burn houses, kill men and harry the country.” Of the grief of the peasants, the anonymous author says, “Every husband uttered lamentation ... young and old, virgins and widows, wailed aloud.”<sup>35</sup> Although David was eventually captured during this campaign, the chronicler makes it clear that the peasantry were distraught due to the cruelties of war. Nonetheless, the war continued, and on June 29, 1377, the French invaded Winchelsea in East Sussex. Jonathan Sumption, a modern war scholar, provides a summary of the ensuing violence: “In the early evening of 30 June the French systematically set fire to Rye, reducing the town to ashes ... [And] while the battle was being fought outside Winchelsea ... The French and Castilians were able to burn [Hastings] without resistance.”<sup>36</sup> This last example is representative of a French military’s tendency to raid and flee the southern coast of England, burning towns occupied especially by the working classes. As long as these raids continued, the peasants’ dissatisfaction with the war grew.

Although these skirmishes were indeed onerous to the lower classes, the events that followed the levying of the Poll Tax of 1380 suggest that the cost of the war played a greater role in precipitating the revolt. Merchants were already burdened with a tenths-and-fifteenths tax nearly annually, but because this excise had become ordinary, it should not necessarily be viewed as a deciding cause of the revolt.<sup>37</sup> Over time, this method of taxation proved insufficient for England’s war effort, so Parliament was forced to explore new means. In 1377, they issued a

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<sup>35</sup> *The Chronicle of Lanercost*, trans. Sir Herbert Maxwell (Glasgow: University of Glasgow Press, 1913). 334-335.

<sup>36</sup> Jonathan Sumption, *The Hundred Years War*, Vol. 3 (London: Faber and Faber, 2009). 282. Note: Hastings, Winchelsea, and Rye are all considered Cinque Ports, and therefore these towns were actually exempt from the subsequent poll taxes.

<sup>37</sup> “Tenths-and-fifteenths” refers to an excise on all new moveable goods (not real estate). The tax varied between 6.67% and 10% based on the kind of object and the person being taxed.

poll tax of 4*d.* per head, and it was so successful that another one was issued in 1379.<sup>38</sup> In November 1380, Chancellor Archbishop Sudbury convened Parliament at Northampton in hopes of raising £160,000 for that year's expensive and fruitless war effort. Although this amount was very large, it was a fair request. As Oman's research shows, "There was three-months' pay owing to the garrisons of Calais, Cherbourg, and Brest, and Buckingham's army [which had led that year's campaign] was in even larger arrears." After intense debate, Parliament voted to levy another poll tax, this time of 1*s.* per head, with consideration that the rich should help the poor, but that no man paid less than 4*d.* or more than £1.<sup>39</sup> This, then, was the bottom line: Parliament had levied three poll taxes in four years, and the final one was three times higher than the former two. Perhaps exhibiting keen foresight of the peasants' impending anger, the Royal Treasurer, Bishop Brantingham of Exeter, resigned his post almost immediately after Parliament recessed.<sup>40</sup>

The peasants' were quite upset with Poll Tax of 1380, and they demonstrated this discontent by means of silent protest. That is, they simply did not pay the tax. Two-thirds of the receipts of the levy were due in January, and after this collection, a clear trend of tax evasion was apparent. After all receipts were received in June, the adult population of England, calculated by the returns of each poll tax, had reportedly decreased by over a third from 1,355,201 in 1377 to

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<sup>38</sup> Oman. 25. In the Poll Tax of 1379, the tax was graded by wealth. The Duke of Lancaster and the Duke of Brittany paid £6 13*s.* 4*d.*; the Chief Justices and the Chief Baron of the Exchequer paid £5; earls, countesses and the Mayor of London paid £4; barons, aldermen, mayors, lawyers and notaries paid £2; knights, jurors and merchants paid between 3*s.* 4*d.* and £1; all others paid 4*d.*

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 22-31. The clergy were exempt from the poll tax, but together, they were asked to pay £60,000 so that the poll tax need only raise £100,000. They were compliant. Oman also notes that this poll tax was doomed to fail because there were several farming communities in which no rich man could aid the poor, so that the poor were forced to pay a schilling a head without reprieve. It should also be noted that Parliament never considered putting an end to the aggressive war effort.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Walsingham, *Chronica maiora 1376-1422*, trans. David Preest, ed. James G. Clark (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2005), 117.

896,481 in 1381.<sup>41</sup> Charles Oman compiled the exact returns of each county and showed that rampant tax evasion had occurred throughout the realm. Essex's number of paying inhabitants had decreased by 36%, while Cornwall, the worst of all counties, had returned a decrease in population of 65%. Through this protest of the Poll Tax, the peasants made their discontentment known to Parliament. Poor Englishmen were simply not going to tolerate the abuses of their government any longer.

However, nor was Parliament going to tolerate the abuses of its subjects. After the January receipts of the poll tax demonstrated widespread evasion and negligence on the part of tax collectors, John of Gaunt set out to correct the situation. John of Gaunt was the uncle of King Richard II and his closest advisor. His popular image was that of prodigal, and his dealings regarding the Poll Tax of 1380 did not help. On this matter, the *Anominalle Chronicle* states, "The Council of the King [John of Gaunt] ordained certain commissions to make inquiry in every township how the tax had been levied."<sup>42</sup> John had ordered that a new commission investigate not only the tax collectors and their actions, but also the crimes of the peasantry, and this commission had regal authority to attain information in any manner they pleased. Noncompliance would result in imprisonment. The commons felt they had done nothing wrong by evading the unjust tax, and they thought John of Gaunt, if not the Crown itself, was being excessively greedy. After all, what is one poor woman's goat to a man whose bed sheets were worth over 1,000 marks?<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, the Duke's order prevailed throughout England, and this new investigative commission precipitated many of the micro abuses that greatly upset the peasants of Southeast England.

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<sup>41</sup> Oman, Appendix II. 162-166. The numbers represent a summary of the Lord Treasurer's Remembrancer's (L.T.R.) Enrolled Accounts in the Record Office, E. 359/8 C, mm. 11-16. This appendix is reproduced in part in my first appendix.

<sup>42</sup> *Anominalle Chronicle*, trans. Charles Oman. Ibid. 187.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 195.

I refer to the aforesaid abuses as macro abuses because they explain the violent atmosphere that existed throughout England as a result of the abuses of the Crown and Parliament. However, they do not explain why specifically the peasants of Kent, Essex, and Middlesex rose to revolt in May and June of 1381. For that, the micro abuses, inflicted upon individuals by individuals, must be examined. Therefore, I turn now to the personal actions of several characters whose names became infamous to the rising peasants of the Southeast: John Legge, Simon Burley, Thomas Bampton, and Robert Belknap. Each of these men reportedly had unpleasant face-to-face interactions with the peasants of Kent or Essex, and these meetings precipitated the outbreak of the Peasants' Revolt. Indeed, on June 13, the day the peasants first stormed through London's streets, the commoners' hatred for these men led them to demand these men's lives. As the *Anominalle Chronicle* describes: "The commons of Kent ... sent [to the King] a petition, requiring that he should grant them the head of the Duke of Lancaster [John of Gaunt], and the heads of fifteen other lords."<sup>44</sup> Among these fifteen "traitorous" lords were all the aforementioned men except Simon Burley. These particular men were hunted for their personal affronts against the peasants of Kent and Essex.

Of all the perpetrators, the peasants of Kent took particular offense to the actions of John Legge. Legge was a sergeant-at-arms of the King who was assigned to one of the new investigative commissions mandated by John of Gaunt. He traveled to Kent sometime after the commission was established on May 3, 1381.<sup>45</sup> To have been part of a commission that investigated the crimes of the peasants – the crimes which the peasants felt were justified – was bad enough, but John Legge crossed the line. Because the Poll Tax of 1380 was levied on the

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 192. The list includes Archbishop Sudbury, Sir Robert Hales, Sir John Fordham, Sir Robert Belknap, Sir Ralph Ferrers, Sir Robert Plessington, John Legge, and Thomas Bampton. These eight names are given, while the remaining seven are either alluded to by political office or omitted.

<sup>45</sup> Nicholas Brooks, "The Organization and Achievements of the Peasants of Kent and Essex in 1381," in *Studies in Medieval History Presented to R. H. C. Davis*, Ed. Henry Mayr-Harting and R. I. Moore (London: 1985), 254.

*adult* population of England, Legge believed it necessary to investigate young women's virginity as an indicator of age. He reasoned that if a young lady were not a virgin, she must be old enough to pay the tax. Thus, *Knighton's Continuator* accounts, "[John Legge] shamelessly raised young girls' skirts so that he might test whether they were corrupted by intercourse with men, and thus he forced their friends and parents to pay the tax for them. And many chose to pay for their daughters' sake rather than to see them so shamelessly violated."<sup>46</sup> It seems that John Legge not only threatened to manually verify that the hymen was intact, but he actually carried out the threat of this gruesome invasion of privacy. Naturally, he irreversibly offended fathers, brothers, and especially the women themselves.

Another micro abuse was performed by Sir Simon Burley in the town of Gravesend in northern Kent. Of his offenses, the *Anonimalle Chronicle* asserts, "Sir Simon Burley, having in his company two sergeants-at-arms, came to Gravesend, and challenged a man there of being his born serf : the good folks of the town came to him to make a bargain for the man ... but Sir Simon would take nothing less than £300."<sup>47</sup> Burley then bound the man, who was called John Belling, and imprisoned him in Rochester Castle. In doing so, Sir Simon appears to have offended the peasants in three distinct ways. First, he accused Belling, who was evidently well known and liked in Gravesend, of being his serf; he could have made this claim against any peasant. Second, he would not release Belling for less than £300, a ridiculous price especially in light of the wage limits proscribed by the Statute of Labourers. If a peasant worked manorial lands every single day of the year for 81 years and did not spend a single penny, he could have

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<sup>46</sup> Henry Knighton, *Knighton's Chronicle*, ed. G. H. Martin (Oxford: 1995), 208. Original: "[John Legge] esursum impudice eleuauit, ut sic experiretur utrum corrupte essent et cognite a uiris, ut sic more artaret amicos et parentes pro eis soluere taxam. Et plures pocius elegerunt soluere pro suis filiabus quam uidere eas tam turpiter attractari."

<sup>47</sup> *Anonimalle Chronicle*. 188-9. Also the short narrative that follows.



finally paid this price.<sup>48</sup> Finally, Sir Simon arrested the peasant, taking him from his family and friends. The author of the *Anonimalle Chronicle* later states, “Because of the man of Gravesend, [the revolting peasants] laid siege to Rochester Castle.”<sup>49</sup>

The peasants of Essex likewise banded together to fight off maltreatment from government officials. After the new commission was appointed in Essex on May 16, Thomas Bampton was allotted the task of investigating the tax records in the Brentwood area. On May 30, he entered the town of Fobbing, and the chronicles reveal, “One [peasant] went to the said Thomas Bampton, and roundly gave him the answer that they would have no traffic with him, nor give him one penny. On which the said Thomas commanded his sergeants-at-arms to arrest these folks, and put them in prison.”<sup>50</sup> Bampton riled the peasants by exercising the commission’s unlimited power. The commons had deliberated prior to Bampton’s arrival, and when their fellow was arrested, the peasants of no less than 15 towns surrounding Fobbing, armed with stones and longbows, freed their neighbor and chased Bampton and his soldiers back to London.<sup>51</sup> Though it is apparent that these peasants were seeking a fight, it was the personal actions of Thomas Bampton that actually precipitated the revolt. Thus, on June 13, when the peasants first made their petitions known to the King, they demanded Bampton’s head. This fact indicates that, at least according to public opinion, the individual actions of Thomas Bampton were indeed influential in engendering the revolt in the Southeast.

The story of Robert Belknap, the Chief Justice of the Common Pleas, is intimately related to that of Thomas Bampton. According to the *Anominalle Chronicle*, because of the events that took place on May 30 in Fobbing, Belknap was sent to the Brentwood area to arrest and try those

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<sup>48</sup> This figure is based on the median wage permitted by the Statute of Labourers, that is *2d.-3d.* per day.

<sup>49</sup> *Anonimalle Chronicle*. 189.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* 187.

<sup>51</sup> Brooks. 251. Citing Public Record Office [P.R.O.], King’s Bench 9/166/2 m. 4.

responsible for sedition. The chronicle says, "The commons rose against [Belknap] ... They took him, and made him swear on the Bible that never again would he hold such a session, nor act as a justice in such inquests."<sup>52</sup> As long as he kept his promise, Belknap was free to go unharmed. Yet despite their clemency on May 31, two weeks later, the peasants of the Southeast demanded Belknap's head in the black list presented to the King. The reason is that the justice broke his oath. Judicial records show that on June 3, a certain Robert Bealknapp, identified as the Chief Justice of Common Pleas, was holding sessions against the peasants at Dartford in Kent.<sup>53</sup> Two days later, Abel Ker started the Peasants' Revolt in Kent when he captured the city of Dartford.<sup>54</sup> Of course, the juxtaposition of these two events might have been a coincidence, but it is more likely that Belknap's actions led to the city's capture, especially because the peasants so drastically changed their minds regarding the justice's fate.

Finally, the influence of personal vendettas on the Peasants' Revolt must be considered. Although one grudge could not have started the Peasants' Revolt, the event as a whole created a prime opportunity for the peasants to act on their animosities, and therefore the commons could see personal value in joining the uprising. There are many extant illustrations of these personal vendettas being consummated. For example, Wat Tyler, the single most prominent leader of the revolt in the Southeast, is seen avenging himself in Froissart's *Chronicles*. Froissart accounts:

In [London] they killed a wealthy man called Richard Lyon, whose servant Wat Tyler had once been during the wars in France. On one occasion Richard Lyon had beaten his servant and Wat Tyler remembered it. He led his men to him, had his head cut off in front of him, and then had it stuck on a lance and carried through the streets.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>52</sup> *Anominalle Chronicle*. 188.

<sup>53</sup> A. J. Prescott, *Judicial Records of the Rising of 1381*, unpublished dissertation (London: Bedford College at University of London, 1984). 129. Citing P.R.O. JUST 1/1491 m. 11.

<sup>54</sup> *Anominalle Chronicle*. 189. "The Friday after Whit Sunday [they] came to Dartford."

<sup>55</sup> Jean Froissart, *Chronicles*, trans. Geoffrey Brereton (London: Penguin Group, 1978). 218.

This example is exceptional because the peasants of Kent were generally discouraged from killing or looting by their own discretion. Indeed, Knighton, writing about the sacking of the Savoy, says, "But one of those wicked men took a beautiful piece of silver ... and because someone saw him and reported it to his associates, they threw that very man, with his treasure, into a fire, saying that they were zealots of truth and justice, not thieves or robbers."<sup>56</sup> In Essex, however, this was not the case. Andrew Prescott, a professor at the University of Glasgow, has uncovered many such instances of personal vengeance there, and he lists, for example, the instances of the citizens of Maldon extorting money from their Lord, John Snape, and a certain butcher, John Symond, who beheaded the rector of Gestingthorpe but did not steal a penny.<sup>57</sup> These individual feuds led to violence, and this violence complemented the main objectives of the peasants of the Southeast. With such collateral damage, the revolt became even more fearful and historically significant.

Of course, several of these aforementioned micro abuses may not have actually occurred. In his examination of the judicial records during the Peasants' Revolt, Prescott has found inconsistencies between the accounts of the chronicles and the court documents. For example, Robert Belknap, the Chief Justice of the Common Pleas, definitely held court at Stratford Longthorn in Essex on May 30 and at Barnet in Middlesex on May 31.<sup>58</sup> Still, these facts do not necessarily disprove the assertion made by the author of the *Anominalle Chronicle* that Belknap attempted to hold session in Brentwood on May 31. After all, the chronicle only states that Belknap was traveling toward Fobbing when he was intercepted and turned back. The entire journey from Stratford to Brentwood is 15 miles, while Barnet is 25 miles from Brentwood.

<sup>56</sup> Knighton. 214. Original: "Vnus autem illorum nephandorum sumpsit unam pulcram peciam argenteam ... quod uidens alius et sociis referens, ipsum cum pecia in ignem proiecerunt, dicentes se zelatores ueritatis et iusticie, non fures aut latrones."

<sup>57</sup> Prescott. 138-9.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 129. Citing P.R.O. JUST 1/1491 m. 43d, 44, 49, 50d.

Similarly, Prescott believes it unlikely that Sir Simon Burley could have abducted John Belling and attempted to extort two lifetimes' wages from the peasants of Gravesend because, as a personal friend of the King, he had been sent to the continent to negotiate Richard's marriage to Anne of Bohemia.<sup>59</sup> Finally, Charles Oman shows that, where most chronicles disagree on every aspect of Wat Tyler's background, including even his hometown, Froissart's story of Tyler's vendetta against Richard Lyons seems suspiciously authoritative.<sup>60</sup>

Despite these apparent inconsistencies, however, my thesis holds, for the peasants had no way of knowing whether these micro abuses were true. The commons captured Rochester Castle, changed their minds about Robert Belknap's fate, and demanded the heads of the other micro abusers. Whether they were motivated by actual events is inconsequential; the point is that these events, real or inspired, contributed to the peasants' decision to revolt in Kent, Essex, and London in 1381.

Thus, both the macro and micro abuses committed by the Lords of England, the Crown, and Parliament caused the Peasants' Revolt in the Southeast. Whereas much evidence has already been given for the relevance of these abuses, one particularly valuable consideration remains that may confirm my assertions and quell any doubt concerning the reasons that the peasants revolted. On June 13, 1381, the peasants of Kent and Essex did not only present the King with a list of men whom they wished beheaded, but they also presented him with a verbal list of petitions. These lists have not been preserved, but in an effort to stop the increasingly violent civil disruption, King Richard II acquiesced to all the demands of the commons and

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid. Citing T. Tout, *Chapters in the Administrative History of Medieval England*, iii (Manchester, 1928), 366-67.

<sup>60</sup> Oman. 36. In the indictments of Parliament, Tyler is called, "Wauter Tyler del countée de Kent," while jury documents call him, "Waletrum Teghler de Essex," and documents found in Maidstone refer to him as, "Walter Tyler of Colchester." This last is the only attempt at placing his hometown rather than his home county, despite the fact that most people at the time were known by their hometowns. Without even this knowledge, to assume that Froissart knows Tyler's prior occupation and even the identity of his lord (Richard Lyons) is quite bold.

granted several regal charters. On the abusive nature of the feudal system, Richard mandated: “We have freed absolutely all [bondsmen and subjects] from all bondage, and we discharge them through this charter.”<sup>61</sup> On the ill-received allegations of tax evasion, he ordered: “We also grant pardon to our same bondsmen and subjects for all crimes.” Oman cites another charter, which says, “All restrictions on free buying and selling were to be swept away.”<sup>62</sup> Thus, through these charters, many of the complaints of the peasants of Southeast England are revealed. They were offended by the unjust nature of feudalism and the Statute of Labourers, and they were angry for having been charged and investigated for tax evasion. These charters, in addition to the black list, prove that the abuses of the government contributed to the rising in the Southeast.

The grievances of the peasants in the Southeast were numerous. On the macro level, the entire realm was afflicted by the injustice of the new labor laws, especially after the Black Death. The kingdom was participating in an endless war against France and Scotland, and the peasants living in both the North and the South lived in constant worry of invasion. More than being attacked, however, they feared starvation and poverty at home, so when Parliament levied three poll taxes in four years, the peasants resorted to tax evasion, which was a crime. However, while all the above abuses applied to peasants throughout the lands, none suffered micro abuses as seriously as did the inhabitants of Southeast England. Certainly other regions endured some level of local governmental abuse, but the actions of characters like John Legge and Sir Simon Burley in the Southeast were understandably more offensive. Their deeds infringed on the personal liberties of the peasants of the Southeast in a dramatic way. All of these abuses are factors that caused the peasants of Kent and Essex to rise in revolt in 1381.

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<sup>61</sup> Walsingham, 131. The following quote, as well.

<sup>62</sup> Oman, 64.

**CHAPTER TWO:**  
**Southeast England, the Environment of Revolt**

The counties of Kent, Essex, and Middlesex certainly had cause enough to revolt with just the abuses, but these abuses alone may not explain why this particular area of England was more susceptible to sedition than other areas. There are several spatial characteristics of the region that make it a hotbed for unrest. For one, the Southeast had unparalleled religious and political importance for Britain and Europe, especially due to the prominence of the Archbishopric of Canterbury and the city of London. Moreover, the social atmosphere of the Southeast was more diverse than in other counties, allowing eclectic ideas to be exchanged more freely. Although there is other evidence of this culture of gregariousness, the most well known is undoubtedly Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Finally, economic circumstances in the Southeast itself – caused by the failing wool market, the Statute of Labourers, and the influx of foreign labor – engendered a much higher level of financial angst, which also led to the Peasants' Revolt. All of these spatial circumstances, which derived from the political geography of the region, made these southeastern counties more likely to rebel so suddenly, violently, and successfully as compared with their neighbors.

In the first place, Southeast England had unmatched political and religious importance for both Britain and Europe. London was one of the largest cities in Europe at the time, and it was also home to the British monarchy and Parliament. What is often overlooked, however, is that London was also the headquarters of the English bar, several lesser political offices, and the Knights of St. John, an ecclesiastical military order better known as the Knights Hospitallers. In addition to the vast significance of London, the Southeast also contained Canterbury, the religious capital of England. Canterbury was not only the holy destination of the pilgrims traveling to St. Thomas Becket's resting place, but it was the seat of the Archbishop of

Canterbury, Sir Simon Sudbury, who also served as the Lord Chancellor of the Realm during both the levy of the Poll Tax of 1380 and the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. Furthermore, Canterbury was considered the senior of the two archdioceses in England at the time (the other being York), and consequently religious observers and dissidents often found their way to Kent. Finally, Kent and Essex consisted of many smaller towns and cities with great military, economic, and social worth. All of these political and religious circumstances helped foment the rebellious tendencies of the peasants and journeymen of the Southeast either because of proximity or through direct causation.

Though I can explain many political factors in the Southeast that contributed to the turbulence of the Peasants' Revolt, these factors are meaningless without the bridge that explains their relevance to the peasants themselves. That bridge, where none otherwise exists, is best explained by proximity. In the Middle Ages, villeins and serfs, who together made up approximately two-thirds of the peasant class, were tied indefinitely to their land. Landless peasants, who worked under contractual agreement with their lord, were also legally forbidden from moving after the Statute of Labourers was instituted in 1351. It mandated, "Such manner of Servants, as well Men as Women, should be bound to serve ... in Places where they ought to serve in the Twentieth Year of the Reign of the King ... and that none of them go out of the Town, where he dwelleth in the Winter, to serve the Summer."<sup>63</sup> By restricting movement in this manner, the nobility of England was presumably limiting the fluctuation of market prices and the possibility of class upheaval. With respect to the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, this restriction also initially prevented the dissemination of ideas and strategy, which in fact limited the scope of the revolt to localized areas. Additionally, whatever travel did occur in the fourteenth century was

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<sup>63</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*. Vol. 1, Anno 25, Stat. 2, c. 1, 2. 311-12. Again, the twentieth year of the reign of King Edward III was 1346, preceding the Black Death in England.

often very slow. Nicholas Brooks, in his essay on the organization of the peasants of Kent and Essex, reminds his readers, “A speed of 30 miles a day was in the Middle Ages only attained by individual well-mounted travelers.”<sup>64</sup> Therefore it makes sense that the dissenters closest to the source of their ire would be more able and likely to act on their dispositions. Likewise, because of restrictions of movement and the glacial rate of travel, the peasants of the Southeast were more able and likely to revolt against the powers-that-be in nearby London and Canterbury.

Several of these offensive bureaucrats found a home in London. Though it is quite well known that both the Crown and Parliament were headquartered in England’s capital city, many lesser offices were also stationed there. For example, the Lord Treasurer of the Realm, Sir Robert Hales, was one of the primary targets of the peasants during the revolt; he was beheaded during the storming of the Tower of London on June 13.<sup>65</sup> The treasurer managed the finances of the kingdom, including the returns of the Poll Tax of 1380, and he also guarded the royal treasures, which were stored at Jewel Tower at the royal palace of Westminster.<sup>66</sup> Treasurer Hales was not the only Londoner that played a financial role in the poll tax, however. Sir Robert Plessington, Chief Baron of the Exchequer, was also sought out for his role in the levy and collection of the infamous tax, as were Londoners John of Gaunt, John Legge, and Robert Belknap.<sup>67</sup> In addition to financial offices, the Lord Chancellor served as the primary advisor to the King and the King’s representative to Parliament. This office, based in London, was occupied in 1381 by Archbishop Simon Sudbury of Canterbury. Though his cathedral chair was, of course, in Canterbury, he lived primarily in his palace at Lambeth, two miles south of the Tower of London. The peasants were well aware of Sudbury’s secular role, and, as André Réville accounts, “On [June 12], they

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<sup>64</sup> Brooks, 269.

<sup>65</sup> Knighton, 213.

<sup>66</sup> *The Jewel Tower*, (London: English Heritage, 1996). 1. The Tower was used as the royal treasury from 1365 until 1621, when it was converted to the Parliamentary Record Office.

<sup>67</sup> *Anominalle Chronicle*, 192.



arrived at Lambeth ... The Archbishop Chancellor left Lambeth hurriedly, so they could only vandalize his manor.”<sup>68</sup> Other prominent offices in London that received special attention during the Peasants’ Revolt include the Clerk of the Privy Seal, the Mayor of London, the aldermen of London, and the Sheriff of Middlesex and his deputies.<sup>69</sup> Many of the officials that held these posts did indeed act in a manner that the peasants’ believed necessitated the Peasants’ Revolt, and the proximity of the offices to the Southeast facilitated an uprising.

In addition to the public offices headquartered in London, the bar was likewise located there. Lawyers could be found debating, organizing, and holding trial in the New Temple on Fleet Street in the City of London. These professionals had played a significant role in instigating the peasants’ unrest for years preceding the actual revolt, and these roles were not as unilateral as one might suspect. In the 1377 Roles of Parliament, the law reads, “By Colour of certain Exemplifications made out of the Book of Domesday of the Manors and Towns where they have been dwelling, and by virtue of the same Exemplifications, and their evil interpretations of the same, [the peasants] affirm [themselves] to be quite and utterly discharged of all Manner Servage.”<sup>70</sup> This statement is quite significant because peasants were not educated in history, literacy, or law, and therefore to cite the Domesday Book certainly implies that a lawyer somewhere was aiding, if not conspiring with, the peasants. Additionally, according to an indictment that followed the revolt, the commons of Great Coggeshall in Essex stormed the

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<sup>68</sup>Réville. LXXX. Original: *Le lendemain ils arrivèrent à Lambeth ... L’archevêque chancelier quitta Lambeth précipitamment; on ne put que saccager son manoir.*

<sup>69</sup> The clerk of the Privy Seal was John Fordham, whose wine cellar was raided (*Anominalle*, 194). The Mayor of London was William Walworth; he personally killed Wat Tyler and was subsequently knighted (Froissart, 227). The aldermen of London seem to have been inconsistent in their loyalties to the Crown, especially a certain John Horne, who supposedly lowered the drawbridge at London Bridge to allow entry to the peasants on June 13 (Oman, 51). Finally, the peasants burned three houses belonging to the under-sheriff of Middlesex, John Butterwyk (Prescott, 208 and Réville, 210). For more information on the public offices of London and their relation to the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381, see:

W.M. Ormrod, “The Peasants’ Revolt and the Government of England,” *The Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 1, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Jan. 1990). 1-30.

<sup>70</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*. Vol. 2, Anno 1, c. 6. 2.

house of Sir John Sewale and destroyed “all writs and sums of the lord king of the green wax.”<sup>71</sup> Because they were illiterate, they could only determine documents of the escheator by a seal of green wax, but someone educated in the laws or finances of the kingdom must have told them about this trait. Of course, lawyers were not always on the commons’ side; after all, lawmakers created the laws that enchained the lower classes, and lawyers enforced those laws. Thus, lawyers became a primary target for the peasants of Kent, and the New Temple, which was in close proximity to revolting peasants, was one of the few buildings sacked on the first day of London’s occupation.<sup>72</sup>

Another organization that was based in London was the Knights of St. John, or the Knights Hospitallers. In fourteenth-century England, the famed military order operated as the realm’s undertakers in the years following the Black Death, especially in London. Land for burials within the city was scarce, but the Hospitallers used their connections with both the church and state to acquire burial lands.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, the Knights, having established a certain monopoly on funerals, would not perform this act for free. They claimed that the Pope himself stated that they should only bury “those who have given alms to the fraternity.”<sup>74</sup> In addition to this advantageous greed, at the Council of Vienna in 1311, Pope Clement V dissolved the Knights Templar and mandated: “The property [of the Templars] should become forever that of the order of the Hospital of saint [*sic*] John.”<sup>75</sup> While the peasants of England were suffering under the Statute of Labourers and the numerous poll taxes, the Knights Hospitallers were

<sup>71</sup> Brooks. 260. Citing P.R.O., KB 145/3/6/1.

<sup>72</sup> *Anominalle Chronicle*. 194. “And then they went to the Temple, to destroy the tenants of the said Temple, and they cast the houses to the ground, and threw off all the tiles, and left the roofing in a bad way. They went into the Temple church and took all the books and rolls and remembrances . . . which belonged to the lawyers, and they carried them into the highway and burnt them there.” Also see Knighton. 217.

<sup>73</sup> Ralph B. Pugh, “The Knights Hospitallers as Undertakers,” *Speculum*, Vol. 56, No. 3, (Cambridge: Medieval Academy of America, Jul. 1981), 568.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* 566-7. Citing *Calendar of Patent Roles* 1272-81, 174-5.

<sup>75</sup> Clement V, “Ad providam,” from “Council of Vienne (1311-1312),” *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1, trans. Norman P. Tanner, (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown UP, 1990), 344.

growing ever more wealthy. This group was based in nearby London, and so it is no surprise that the angry peasants of the Southeast targeted it in their revolt. The *Anominalle Chronicle* accounts how the peasants murdered the Hospitaller Prior of Clerkenwell, Sir Robert Hales, and afterwards destroyed his manor and set fire to many houses in the priory.<sup>76</sup> Additionally, Jack Straw's confession reads, "Our prime and principal objective [was] the killing of the Knights Hospitallers."<sup>77</sup> Once again, it seems that the proximity of London helped foster feelings of ill will that resulted in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.

London was not the only political presence in Southeast England; Canterbury was also important. In order to grasp just how important this city was, let us turn to its history. Canterbury was the chief borough in the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Kent in the sixth century.<sup>78</sup> St. Augustine traveled to Canterbury in 596 on a mission to reconvert Roman Britannia and reestablish the primary sees of London and York. He converted the Kentish king, Æthelbert, in 596, and King Æthelbert granted him land and wealth in that coastal town. Though both Pope Gregory I and St. Augustine sought to move Britain's primary see to London, that city was outside of Æthelbert's kingdom, and therefore such a project would have been too dangerous. Before he died in 610, St. Augustine consecrated three bishops and appointed a successor in Canterbury, and since then Canterbury has asserted its role as the origin of Christianity in England and the realm's primary cathedral.

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<sup>76</sup> *Anominalle Chronicle*. 191, 193, 195-6. Sir Robert Hales was also the Lord Treasurer of the Realm. However, it should not be assumed that Hales was killed for only one occupation. The chronicle introduces him as "Sir Robert Hales, Prior of the Hospital of St. John's, Treasurer of England," which implies both were offensive.

<sup>77</sup> Walsingham. 148. The account of "The Confession of Jack Straw" has long been considered invented by Walsingham, but it nonetheless demonstrates how the upper classes interpreted the causes of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. I believe that this statement, in conjunction with the crimes against the Hospitallers committed by the peasants, is evidence of genuine disapproval of the order.

<sup>78</sup> Nicholas Brooks, *The Early History of the Church of Canterbury*, (Leicester: Leicester UP, 1984). 1-11. Canterbury or *Cantwaraburh*, "the borough of the men of Kent." The subsequent history shares this source. St. Augustine of Canterbury should not be confused with Augustine of Hippo, who lived two centuries earlier.

This situation had not changed by the year of the Peasants' Revolt in 1381, but rather the city's political and religious importance had multiplied due to the events that transpired there in 1170. Because of its rich historical and religious tradition, the Archbishopric of Canterbury had accumulated certain powers throughout the centuries. One such power was the privilege to oversee the coronation of British monarchs.<sup>79</sup> After a disagreement with King Henry II in 1164, Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury, exiled himself to France. When Henry the Younger (who died before his father) was crowned in June 1170 by the Bishop of York, Becket exercised his primacy and excommunicated the bishop, signaling that the coronation was invalid. These actions undermined the will of Henry II, who consequently ordered Becket's execution.<sup>80</sup> After he was murdered, the Church hailed Thomas Becket as a martyr and saint. King Henry II made a pilgrimage to Canterbury in 1174 in order to avoid public unrest, and thereafter thousands of his subjects began emulating his journey. Canterbury's Pilgrims' Way has since become one of the Christian world's most popularly studied pilgrimages, especially because of the publishing of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Because of these virtues – the history, the power to coronate and excommunicate, and the pilgrimage – Canterbury was a very significant city in medieval England. Due to its distinction, and due to the fact that Archbishop Sudbury was the Lord Chancellor of the Realm in 1381, it is easy to see why the Southeastern city of Canterbury played a significant role in the Peasants' Revolt.

Not only did Canterbury have great political importance, but it was also the prime representative of the Church in England, and was thus home to the religious justice system of the realm. Christian malcontents and heretics from all over the island were arrested and sent to the

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<sup>79</sup> Frank Barlow, *Thomas Becket*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990). 208.

<sup>80</sup> In his frustration, Henry ostensibly said, "Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?" Four knights overheard him, interpreted the comment as a royal mandate, traveled to Canterbury, and murdered Becket below the High Altar at Canterbury Cathedral.

Southeast for inquisitional investigations and castigation. One such prisoner was John Ball, the famed preacher of the commons. As Knighton accounts:

Thus [the peasants] first directed their attack upon a certain town of the archbishop of Canterbury's, called Maidstone, in which the archbishop had a prison, and the prison contained a certain chaplain, named John Ball, who was highly renowned amongst the laity as a preacher. He had for a long time unprofitably spread the word of the Lord, mixing tares with the wheat in a manner greatly pleasing to the lay mind, bitterly denouncing the law and the free estate of the church, execrably dividing the clergy and laity by his errors, and casting a cloud of darkness over the province for many years, for which reasons he had been tried by the church and convicted, and adjudged and committed to that prison in perpetuity. And the said commons broke open the prison, and carried him off with them, for they intended to make him their archbishop.<sup>81</sup>

This passage reveals much about the religious justice system of the time. First and foremost, however, the passage deals with the character of John Ball. John Ball was the second most notable character in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, following only Wat Tyler in fame. He was a religious dissident who had been ordained in York, and there he held his first post as friar.<sup>82</sup> He was soon reassigned to Colchester in Essex, whence he proceeded as an itinerant preacher for twenty years before he was imprisoned for heresy and disobedience at Maidstone. After the peasants freed John Ball from his cell, the *Anominalle Chronicle* accounts, "Sir [*sic*] John advised them to get rid of all the lords, and of the archbishops and bishops, and abbots, and priors, and most of the monks and canons, saying that there should be no bishop in England save one archbishop only, and that he himself would be that prelate."<sup>83</sup> In addition to his ambition, Ball played an important role in gathering and encouraging the angry peasants by writing letters and giving heated sermons, including the speech of Blackheath, which proclaimed, "When Adam delve, and Eve span, / Who then was the gentleman?"<sup>84</sup> This important figure in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 would not have been in Kent had he not been imprisoned there because of the

<sup>81</sup> Knighton. 211. Mixing tares in the wheat is an allusion to Mat. 13:25, "While everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat."

<sup>82</sup> Oman. 42.

<sup>83</sup> *Anominalle Chronicle*. 190.

<sup>84</sup> Walsingham. 162. For Ball's letters, see Note 18 of Chapter 1.

location of the Archbishopric of Canterbury. Hence, the political geography of the Southeast certainly helped to empower that region to rebel.

London and Canterbury were not the only two political presences in the Southeast that contributed to fomentation of the peasants' ire. There were also unique and significant political entities spread throughout the Southeast. As in the case of the religious prison at Maidstone, there were a few high-profile prisons in Kent, Middlesex, and Essex, in addition to the local jails that also permeated every county in England. Unjust imprisonment was always a concern for peasants that lived under the feudal system because they did not have the power to make, enforce, study, or fight the laws. Thus, when Sir Simon Burley accused John Belling of being an escaped serf, none of Belling's friends in the town of Gravesend could stop the knight from arresting the poor man and taking him to Rochester Castle.<sup>85</sup> Although Rochester Castle had only a small jail, for the primary purpose of the castle was the defense of the city and realm, there were large prisons elsewhere in the Southeast. One of these, the archbishop's prison at Maidstone, has already been discussed, but an even larger, secular prison known as the Marshalsea was located in Southwark in Middlesex. The chronicles account that on either June 12 or 13, "[The peasants] came to Southwark, to the king's prison of the Marshalsea, and at once broke open the prison, and compelled the prisoners to go with them and help them," and, "they leveled to the ground a fine house belonging to John Imworth, then Marshal of the Marshalsea."<sup>86</sup> Almost every extant chronicle of the Peasants' Revolt mentions the sacking of the Marshalsea, and many mention the murder of John Imworth on June 14, which suggests the importance that the chroniclers, if not also the peasants, placed on the significance of prisons in the revolt. And even if the peasants were not acting in self-defense when they assaulted prisons

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<sup>85</sup> *Anonimale Chronicle*. 188-9.

<sup>86</sup> First, Knighton, 211. Then *Anonimale Chronicle*, 193.

like the Marshalsea and later Fleet Prison, as Knighton says, they could count on the disgruntled prisoners to increase their numbers.<sup>87</sup> Thus, the presence of high-profile prisons in the Southeast undoubtedly added to environment of sedition.

Another dominant political entity in the Southeast that angered the peasants was the Confederation of the Cinque Ports, which was based largely in Kent. This ancient group of coastal cities and towns was assigned to defend the realm, from dangers like foreign invaders to pirates and even to abusive foreign trade practices. Four out of the five original Cinque Ports are located in Kent along with 16 of the 22 supporting towns, which received the same benefits from the Crown. One supporting town, Brightlingsea, is in Essex, while the remaining 6 towns are in Sussex.<sup>88</sup> Edward I (r. 1272-1307) deemed these coastal cities so important that he mandated:

Know ye, that for the faithful Service which Our Barons of the *Cinque-Ports* have hitherto paid to our Predecessors the Kings of *England*; ... and for the good Service to be continued for the future ... We have granted and confirmed by this Our Charter ... to the fame of Our Barons, and their Heirs, all their Liberties and Acquittances, so that they may be free from all Toll, and from all Custom, viz. from all Lastage, Tallage, Passage, Carriage, Riverage, Bridg-toll [*sic*], and all Wreck, and from all Sale.<sup>89</sup>

Thus, the barons of the Cinque Ports were granted exemption from all regal taxes, including the Poll Tax of 1380. This exemption seems to have included all subjects of these barons as well. Therefore, in theory, it would stand to reason that, because such a large portion of the population of Kent was exempt from the Poll Tax of 1380, that region would be less upset than others about the tax and its collection. This, however, did not prove to be the case. Despite the fact that most peasants involved in the revolt were immediately pardoned, Froissart claims that the commons of

<sup>87</sup> Fleet Prison was another prominent prison in London that was destroyed by a group led by Wat Tyler. See Henry B. Wheatley, "London Episodes," *The Antiquary*, Vol. XI (London: Elliot Stock, May 1885), p. 203.

<sup>88</sup> For a complete list and the locations of the Cinque Ports and supporting towns, see Note 2 of the Introduction and Figure 2 of Appendix I.

<sup>89</sup> Charles II, "The great and ancient charter of the Cinque-Ports of our lord the King, and manners of the same," *Reproduction in the British Library*, (London: 1682). 6-7.

Sandwich, one of the original five Cinque Ports, were so unruly that their pardon was revoked.<sup>90</sup> Additionally, documents from the King's Bench report that a certain Theobald Ellis of Kent "was arrested by the sheriff of London following an allegation by Elias Thorp that he had sought to kill Elizabeth, the widow of Sir Ralph Spigurnall, the former warden of the Cinque Ports."<sup>91</sup> Ellis was charged three separate times in the case, once in a lawsuit, once by a Middlesex jury, and once by the King, but his case never went to trial. Nevertheless, Ellis and the riotous peasants of Sandwich demonstrate that the peasants of Kent were quite upset with the Cinque Ports, probably because of either their close association with the politics of London, their relationship to the unpopular war in France, or jealousies regarding tax exemption. At any rate, the political presence of the Confederation of the Cinque Ports riled the commons of the Southeast.

Finally, although there were great political and religious forces that influenced the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 in the Southeast, the minor entities characteristic of every English county should not be overlooked. These offending parties, especially sheriffs and escheators, were no less at fault for fomenting dissidence than their superiors were in London. These two offices were quite detested throughout England because, as Brooks explains, "In January 1381 when there was already governmental concern at low returns, the escheator and sheriff were established as a two-man commission in every shire to enquire into *and record* the name, abode and class of every person over 15."<sup>92</sup> Thus, these two persons in each county acted as Parliament's first investigative team into the widespread tax evasion that had occurred throughout the preceding month. Therefore it should serve as no surprise that Sir John Sewale,

<sup>90</sup> Froissart. 230.

<sup>91</sup> Prescott. 209. Citing P.R.O. KB 27/483 rex m. 23d., 24d., and KB 145/3/5/1, KB 27/485 rex m. 18. Also in Réville, pp. 210-211, 215.

<sup>92</sup> Brooks, "The Organization of the Peasants in 1381." 262. Citing *Calendar of Fine Rolls 1377-83*, (London: 1926), pp. 224-34, 248-50.



Sheriff of Essex, was assaulted on June 10. The peasants of Essex attacked him, tore his clothes, robbed his house, and stole all of his tax related documents, which were sealed by the green wax of the escheator.<sup>93</sup> On the same day, the peasants of Kent kidnapped William Septvans, the sheriff of Kent. The *Archaeologia cantiana*, a chronicle describing the revolt in Kent, elaborates: “[They] dragged the said Sheriff to prison ... and made the said Sheriff take an oath to them and compelled the said sheriff, under fear of death, to deliver up his books ... and they burnt fifty rolls and the said writs on the same day at Canterbury.”<sup>94</sup> Similarly, on June 9, the home of Elias Reyner, escheator of Kent, was invaded at Rochester and his documents were likewise destroyed in a “ceremonial burning.”<sup>95</sup> Finally, the escheator of Essex, John Ewell, was attacked and killed on June 10, and after the murder, a mob of peasants stormed his house and likewise burned all of his tax-related documents.<sup>96</sup> This violence towards the offices of the sheriff and the escheator demonstrates that the peasants were upset not only by the great political entities in their vicinity, but also by the minor political forces operating in their midst.

All of the aforementioned circumstances – the existence of minor offices in London and throughout the Southeast, the New Temple and its guild of lawyers, the station of the Knights Hospitallers, Canterbury as the religious capital of England and the consequences of that role, prisons, and the Cinque Ports – are political factors that influenced the Southeast’s rebellion. There were several other factors that contributed to this unrest, however. For example, the social atmosphere of the Southeast in 1381 was quite conducive to a revolt. Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* demonstrates this through its premise, that a group of economically, religiously, politically, and socially diverse peoples was able to communicate and exchange ideas

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.* 260. Citing P.R.O. KB 145/3/6/1.

<sup>94</sup> *Archaeologia cantiana*, Vol. 3. 92-3, trans. John E. Taylor, (Kent Archaeological Society: 1860).

<sup>95</sup> Brooks, “The Organization of the Peasants in 1381.” 256. Citing P.R.O. KB 9/43 m. 7.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.* 262. Citing P.R.O. KB 145/3/6/1.

freely because of the equalizing nature of Pilgrims' Way, the pilgrimage from London to Thomas Becket's resting site at Canterbury Cathedral. Additionally, these stories, along with historical evidence, show that women were increasingly becoming uneasy with their medieval gender role, and it may not have been unheard of for their sex to rise above that role and rebel. Finally, there were great struggles occurring within the Church in 1381 that affected the social atmosphere in the Southeast, most notably the heresies of John Ball and John Wycliffe. These religious struggles shook the faith of the peasants in Kent, Essex, and Middlesex, and they encouraged free thought. All these social changes were exacerbated in the Southeast because of the Canterbury Pilgrimage, a conglomerate of prominent cities, a high level of international trade, and proximity to the continent. The exaggerated social evolution in this region facilitated the uprising there.

Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* gives many clues to the social atmosphere of the Southeast in 1381, which are corroborated by historical records. In this literary work, the narrator, who speaks in the first person, imagines 29 other men and women of varying social ranks traveling along Pilgrims' Way in Kent. These people – knights, cooks, lawyers and journeymen included – take turns competing in a story-telling competition. What is interesting about this premise is that each person had a right to tell and be told stories, an equalizing measure that is reflected in the fact that the *Canterbury Tales* was written in Middle English, the common tongue, not in the politically prominent languages of 14<sup>th</sup> century England, which were Norman French and Latin. It is extremely likely that the Canterbury Pilgrimage did indeed have such an effect on the Southeast's social structure for two reasons. First, as literary scholar Derek Pearsall indicates: "The *Canterbury Tales* continued throughout the fifteenth century as a 'best-seller', [*sic*] and there are more manuscripts of the poem surviving, in whole or in part ... than of any other work

written in English.”<sup>97</sup> The work would not have been so popular if its premise had not presented at least some level of truth, through which each class might feel some connection to the literature. Secondly, extant historical records show that classes mixed in Southeast England at this time. I have already discussed the strong possibility of lawyers assisting peasants in arguing their grievances before Parliament, and I have also demonstrated that clergymen, such as John Ball, supported the peasants. Certain other documents also suggest that political leaders, especially aldermen, often fraternized with the lower classes in Southeast England prior to the Peasants’ Revolt.<sup>98</sup> The *Canterbury Tales* and historical records show that classes were mixing in Kent in 1381, and the peasants experienced a greater sense of equality with the nobility. During the revolt, the commoners demanded the equality of all men, which suggests that the lower classes’ experiences with the evolving social structure in the Southeast may have led to their demands during the uprising.

Geoffrey Chaucer’s work also points to a certain level of gender equality. Just as he included several different social classes among his storytellers, Chaucer also lists a prioress, a nun, and the Wife of Bath in his cast. Though one can argue that Chaucer included these women to be satirical or prescriptive, because of the historical accounts of the Peasants’ Revolt, I believe that he was describing social change in the Southeast. In fact, Sylvia Federico, a scholar and proponent for the study of women’s involvement in the revolt, argues that Chaucer directly addressed the female presence in the events of June 1381. In “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale,” a fox invades a henhouse and steals away the rooster, Chanticleer. Federico describes the events to follow, as she says, “[The hens] raise the hue and cry and are heeded immediately by neighbors,

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<sup>97</sup> Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1985). 296-7.

<sup>98</sup> For instance, see the Royal Letters (1<sup>st</sup>) published in Reville’s Appendice II, p. 190.

male and female, who band together with rustic weapons to chase a common enemy.”<sup>99</sup> Chaucer writes further about the hens: “God bless us all, so hideous was the din, / Not even Jack Straw and his mob of men / Ever let out a clamour half as shrill ... As they let out the day they chased the fox.”<sup>100</sup> Whether this explicit reference to the Peasants’ Revolt signifies Chaucer’s acknowledgement that women played a significant role in those events is not as important as the fact that Chaucer here acknowledges that women *can* incite revolt. Once again, historical documents from the Peasants’ Revolt back up this notion. Women helped to instigate the revolt by being victims of micro abuses, as in the instance of John Legge’s manner of tax collection, and documents also suggest they helped lead the movement. For instance, a certain Johanna Ferrour apparently led the group that arrested and beheaded Archbishop Simon Sudbury at the Tower of London.<sup>101</sup> Thus, literature and historical documents seem to indicate that the evolving social structure of the Southeast facilitated a female presence in the revolt.

Finally, the role of clergymen in the social structure of Southeast England was also changing in the years preceding the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381. Once again, Chaucer includes several clergymen among his main characters (with the same effect of equalization), and he is furthermore quite critical of the clergy throughout his work.<sup>102</sup> The chronicles, however, are far more defining of the religious aspect of the Southeast’s social structure than the *Canterbury Tales*. Remember that in Knighton’s *Continuator*, the chronicler maintained that John Ball was preaching heresy and poisoning the minds of the lay people. Ball was not the only priest that attracted peasants with less-than-approved doctrines, though. John Wycliffe, a preacher and scholar at Oxford University was well known during this time for his Lollard ideology, which

<sup>99</sup> Sylvia Federico, “The Imaginary Society: Women in 1381,” *The Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, April 2001). 176.

<sup>100</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, trans. David Wright (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985). 216.

<sup>101</sup> Federico, 168. Citing KB 27/482 rex m. 39d.

<sup>102</sup> Pearsall suggests that even the most reverent of the tales may be ironic and cynic. See p. 246.

questioned the presence of Christ's body and blood in the Eucharist. Charles Oman dismisses Lollardy as a prime cause of the revolt, but even if the heretics did not preach revolt, the simple fact that priests were rebelling against the Church presented a model by which the peasants could revolt against their superiors.<sup>103</sup> In fact, it seems that the peasants took to heart the rogue priests' condemnations of the Church during their uprising, as they targeted clergymen and monasteries that played no part in the abuses of the government. For example, court records in Kent claim that on June 2, "[Abel Ker and his men] entered into the abbey at Lesness in a company of soldiers, and they gathered the abbot of that same place with an escort and made him swear to their legitimacy."<sup>104</sup> Thus, literature and historical records suggest that there was intense public disapproval of the Church in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century. The dismissal of Church doctrine and the outright aggression of the peasants towards the religious body characterize the social atmosphere that facilitated the Peasants' Revolt in Southeast England.

In addition to the political and social circumstances that contributed to the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, economic factors played a key role. I have already discussed at length the impact of the Black Death and the Statute of Labourers on the economy of England, especially for peasants and journeymen. Here I turn to the economic hardships that had a particular impact on the Southeast, such as Edward III's decision in 1337 to sponsor the mass immigration of merchant class Flemings into England. Additionally, the Company of the Staple and the Wool Tax, two controllers of England's massive wool market, brought great business to the Southeast, but when the market began to fail for a variety of reasons, these areas became economically

<sup>103</sup> For Oman's opinions, see pgs. 19-21.

<sup>104</sup> For clergymen, consider William Appleton, a Franciscan friar, who was murdered in London (Knighton, 213). For Ker's invasion of Lesness, see Réville, 183. Self-translated, original: *et abbathiam de Lesnes in comitatu predicto intraverunt, et abbatem ejusdem loci essendi de euroum comitiva jurare co[e]gerunt.*

depressed. Considering these factors, I argue that the economic circumstances in Southeast England in 1381 also played an important role in engendering the Peasants' Revolt.

Immigrants (especially Flemish weavers) and lawyers were the two groups of victims that received the brunt of rebel violence in the Peasants' Revolt. The former faction suffered in this way because it represented a cause of economic hardship, a theme repeated in the murders of poll-tax collectors and leviers. However, immigration posed a problem to the peasants long before the Poll Tax of November 1380. Dr. E. Lipson, an historian who studies Medieval British Economics, describes Edward III's immigration policy in the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century: "The art of weaving woolen cloth was well established in [England] as far back as the twelfth century, and Edward's work was ... to revive an old [industry] which was fast decaying. This was accomplished by bringing over Flemish weavers to England."<sup>105</sup> Lipson further describes the history of Flemish immigration, noting that in 1331, Edward III specifically wrote to a certain John Kempe of Flanders to ask him to work the "misteries" of his weaving practices in England by immigrating and bringing with him any apprentices and servants who might assist him. In 1337, Edward and Parliament expanded this personal invitation to a general and legally motivated invitation. Three mandates of the Statutes of the Realm for that year are particularly notable. The first two read thus:

ITEM, It is accorded, That no Man nor Woman great nor small of England, Ireland, nor Wales, nor of our Sovereign Lord the King's Power in Scotland, of what Estate or Condition he be, the King, Queen, and their Children only except, shall wear no Cloth, which shall be bought after the feast of Saint Michael next coming, other than is made in England, Ireland, Wales, or Scotland, within the King's Power, upon Pain of Forfeiture of the same Cloth, and further to be punished at the King's Will ; and that in the said Lands ... a Man may make the Cloths as long and as short as a Man will.

ITEM, It is accorded and established, That no Merchant, foreign or denizen, nor none other, after the Feast of Saint Michael, shall bring or cause to be brought privily nor apertly, by

<sup>105</sup> E. Lipson, *The History of the Woollen and Worsted Industries* (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1965). 12.

himself nor by other, into the said Lands ... any Cloths made in any other Places than in the same, upon the Forfeiture of the said Cloths, and further to be punished at the King's Will.<sup>106</sup>

These two mandates encouraged immigration not by giving benefits to or favoring foreign weavers, as had been the case for John Kempe, but rather by creating a market for English woven wool. England was known throughout Christendom for its vast wool exports, but that wool was largely woven and manufactured into clothes in foreign kingdoms, especially Flanders and Florence.<sup>107</sup> In order to promote English self-sufficiency, the King banned the donning of any clothes made outside of his controlled territories. This naturally promoted the extant weaving guilds of large cities like London and Canterbury, but it also gave immigrants, especially Flemish weavers, incentive to move their businesses to England, where their livelihoods were being made even before 1337. To give the Flemings, who were renowned for their skills throughout Europe, even more incentive to immigrate, the King and Parliament issued the following mandate as well:

ITEM, It is accorded, That all the Cloth-workers of strange Lands, of whatsoever Country they be, which will come to England, Ireland, Wales, and Scotland, with the King's Power, shall come safely and surely, and shall be in the King's Protection and safe Conduct, to swell in the same Lands, [choosing] where they will ; and to the Intent the said Cloth-workers shall have the greater Will to come and dwell here, our Sovereign Lord the King will grant them Franchises, as many and such as may suffice them.<sup>108</sup>

The records do not describe any of these further franchises which may have been granted by the King, but guaranteed royal protection for immigrant weavers certainly was an attractive motivation for Flemings to move their business to England. Thus, through drastic changes in domestic policy, figures for the immigration of foreign merchant-class workers into England increased significantly in the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>106</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, Anno 11, Edward III, c. 2-3 (1337). 280.

<sup>107</sup> Eileen Power, "The Wool Trade in Medieval English History," *The Ford Lectures* (London: University of London, 1941). 10.

<sup>108</sup> *Statutes of the Realm*, Anno 11, Edward III, c. 5 (1337). 281.

This presented a series of problems for the journeymen of England, especially in the Southeast, as this was the area most accessible to European immigrants. Moreover, it had several thriving cities in which a new weaving merchant might succeed. The Black Death, which struck the island in 1349, sharply decreased the human population of England, and, understandably, the cloth industry shrunk in response. Nonetheless, incentives remained (i.e. the isolationist policies and the protection of foreign merchants) for foreign weavers to establish their businesses in England. This led to an increase in supply of woven goods and a decrease in demand, which created ample competition between domestic and foreign weavers. However, the government had favored the foreign workers more than their domestic counterparts by providing them with armed protection and franchises, “as many and such as may suffice.” Considering these tough economic circumstances, and considering the English journeymen’s jealousies, it is not difficult to understand why such resentment for foreigners existed throughout the Peasants’ Revolt.

Though violence against Flemings is seen throughout England in 1381, documents suggest that Southeast England acted most violently toward this group. Froissart says that when the peasants were in London, “they went from street to street, killing all the Flemings they found in churches, chapels, and houses. None was spared.”<sup>109</sup> Similarly, the *Anominalle Chronicle* maintains, “The commons made proclamation that whoever could catch any Fleming or other alien of any nation, might cut off his head.”<sup>110</sup> This violence directed toward Flemings was uncharacteristic of the movement’s general goals, for even the richest gentry in Kent were only robbed and forced to swear fidelity to the commoners. Thus, by the peasants’ reaction to foreigners during their revolt, we understand that the Southeast was incited to revolt, even to murder, by the economic circumstances.

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<sup>109</sup> Froissart. 217.

<sup>110</sup> *Anominalle Chroncile*. 199.



In addition to the struggles of English journeymen in the Southeast's wool market with respect to immigration, the wool market in general faced economic hardships in 1381. Although Englishmen could no longer wear foreign clothing, Flanders still had a reputation for making fine clothe, which allowed it to trade quite successfully with the rest of Europe. Moreover, England's most profitable export in the 14<sup>th</sup> century was wool, and Flanders was its most loyal customer.<sup>111</sup> Unfortunately, in 1381, two factors were taking tolls on the rich wool exports of the English kingdom. In the first place, Gwilym Dodd, an English historian, writes, "A big drop in average winter temperatures in the second half of the fourteenth century appears to have significantly increased the proportion of inferior wool being sold on the market."<sup>112</sup> Though this circumstance undoubtedly hurt the economies of other areas of England by reducing the price that sellers could obtain for their products, it had a different effect in the Southeast. There, coarser, cheaper grades of wool were the staple, and the level of competition for coarse, raw wool was at an all time high by 1380, which greatly impacted the already cheap (but vast) market in the Southeast.<sup>113</sup> Secondly, in 1380, Flanders did not import nearly as much wool as either it was accustomed to or England expected. That year, Flanders had fallen into a state of civil war, and in 1381 the opportunistic French King, Charles VI, had invaded Ghent.<sup>114</sup> This meant that English wool traders saw less profits in those years. In the Southeast, this was especially hurtful because, even though not all wool was produced in that region, all exported wool was required by law to travel through Calais, a recently captured city in northern France located 21 miles from

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<sup>111</sup> Power. 13.

<sup>112</sup> Gwilym Dodd, "The Calais Staple and the Parliament of May 1382," *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 117 (Oxford: Oxford UP, Feb., 2002). 94.

<sup>113</sup> For grades of wool by region, see Power, 17. For the time frame regarding the effects fo colder winters, see Dodd, 94.

<sup>114</sup> Froissart. 231-42.

Kent's Dover.<sup>115</sup> Therefore, fewer traders were traveling through the Southeast in 1381, which brought less business in general. Finally, Charles Oman points out that the failure of the wool market, which, through taxation, made up approximately half of the Crown's wealth, directly contributed to the necessity for the levying of the Poll Tax of 1380.<sup>116</sup>

There were a variety of circumstances unique to the Southeast that contributed to the engendering, ebullience, and success of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. In the first place, there were the political places and factors, whose significance is explained largely by proximity, that contributed to the uprising. Among these political factors were the prominence of London and Canterbury, political and religious prisons, the Confederation of the Cinque Ports, the legal headquarters at the New Temple and the Knights Hospitallers, and even the local political figures characteristic of every county in England. Secondly, social circumstances contributed to the causes of the revolt in the Southeast. These include the equalization of social classes and sexes, and the heretical movements of the time. Finally, the economic circumstances in the Southeast, magnified by the abuses of the Statute of Labourers of 1351, also contributed to the revolt. The most prominent market in England was the wool market, and journeymen found this market being invaded by foreigners who had obtained royal protections. Moreover, the market for wool exports was failing in the late fourteenth century, which directly contributed not only to the angst of producers and journeymen alike, but also to the lack of funds that necessitated Parliament's actions at the November 1380 meeting in Northampton: the infamous poll tax. All of these factors played key roles in the uprising of the peasants in the Southeast England.

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<sup>115</sup> Dodd, 96.

<sup>116</sup> Oman, 23.

### **CHAPTER THREE:** **Differentiating Factors**

The causes and facilitating factors of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 in Southeast England were numerous. The government committed several abuses that affected especially that region, and a combination of political, economic, and social dynamics also contributed to the ebullient nature of the revolt. In this chapter, my thesis shifts its focus from the events in Kent, Essex, and London particularly towards the counties of East Anglia. The revolts in this area of England serve as a frame through which, by differentiating the revolts from the Southeastern rising, we may broaden our understanding of the factors contributing to the fervor of the Southeast. Moreover, when several of the less successful peasants' movements exhibit the same discrepancies, such as the lack of movement and failure to discipline the masses, we can understand these distinctions as certain strengths of the revolt in the Southeast. Timing and proximity to the religious and political capitals are two of the most fundamental of these strengths, and the revolts in Bury St Edmunds, Cambridge, and Norwich exhibit many more. Therefore, this chapter aims to explain the rebellious fervor of the Southeastern rebels by means of exploring the lesser-known subsequent revolts.

First, timing is one of the two most significant factors that differentiated the revolts in the Southeast from those in East Anglia. The later onset of the revolts in the more northern regions had a complicated effect on the outcomes of those revolts. First of all, there is no doubt that the events in the Southeast helped to instigate the riots in East Anglia. Chronicler Thomas Walsingham writes, "On the same Saturday [June 15] ... Under the leadership of a wicked priest [John Wrawe], who had ... received instructions from that villain, Wat Tyler, they ... brought together a crowd of common people ... These followed the example of those who had rioted in

London.”<sup>117</sup> Hence, unlike the rebellion in the Southeast, the revolts in East Anglia can be attributed in large part to the success of the earlier uprising. Moreover, the quick failure of these later revolts can also be attributed to the failure of the Southeastern rebels. That is, the death of Wat Tyler on June 15 sent two messages throughout England. The first of these was a prohibitive message to peasants who may have been considering joining a local peasants’ revolt. The swelling numbers under the command of certain leaders, such as John Litster in Norwich, were curbed by the fall of Tyler in London. Oman remarks: “No doubt [Litster] had already heard the news that Tyler was dead ... About June 20 or 21 he resolved to send an embassy to the capital, to request the grant of a charter ... as also of a general pardon to himself and his followers.”<sup>118</sup> Finally, after Tyler was disposed of in London, King Richard began to raise the alarm across his realm so that cities might prepare themselves to defend against the rebel mobs.<sup>119</sup> Therefore, although the early success of the Southeast inspired revolt across England, the late timing of the subsequent revolts hindered their successes. As such, timing did not hamper the fervor of the Southeast, as it did in East Anglia.

In addition to timing, the distance of the other counties to the religious and political capitals of England may have weakened the impact of the later movements. As I described in Chapter Two, peasants from all areas of England were restricted in their movement not only by serfdom, but also by the Statute of Labourers. Furthermore, a peasant on horseback might only hope to travel 30 miles in one day. Hence, it would have been difficult for John Litster in Norwich, which is located 116 miles from London, to mobilize a force to march on the capital of the realm. Even John Wrawe in Bury St Edmunds, located 80 miles from London, would have

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<sup>117</sup> Walsingham, 142.

<sup>118</sup> Oman, 119.

<sup>119</sup> Two slightly humorous examples of this are given in *Knighton's Chronicle*: those of the city of Leicester and the castle of Pontefract. See Knighton, 226-32.

found it difficult to travel that distance. Still, distance alone does not explain why the Home Counties, those immediately surrounding Middlesex, could not have raised a significant force against London. Indeed, one of the more prominent peasant rebellions occurred at St Albans in Hertfordshire, which is located a mere 26 miles from the heart of the capital, and Herts lies tangent to Middlesex's northern border. The St Albans rising, however, lasted four days, from June 15 to June 19, before being quelled by the king's ministers.<sup>120</sup> This fact demonstrates two points. First, the peasants of the Home Counties did not have enough time to muster a force strong enough to approach London; even the leaders of Kent, who were aided by rebels in Essex, required two full weeks to assemble such a force. Second, due to their proximity to London, the rebellions in the Home Counties were suppressed quickly after the death of Tyler. Thus, distance not only prevented faraway counties from entering London, but it also contributed to the speedy containment of rebellion in nearby areas. Like timing, therefore, distance did not hamper the Southeastern peasants' ability to revolt as it did in other counties.

Proximity and timing were two advantages that contributed to the fervor of the revolt in the Southeast, but more such boons are recognized through the examination of the specific events associated with the revolts in East Anglia. For example, the happenings in Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk between June 12 and June 23 demonstrate some key differences between the revolt there and the uprisings in Kent, Essex, and Middlesex.<sup>121</sup> John Wrawe, a poor priest from Suffolk, appeared at the town of Liston on June 12, ostensibly after detaching himself from leadership in the Kentish mob. At Liston, Wrawe gathered a small force, which he used to sack the home of Richard Lyons in order to demonstrate his strength and thereby bolster his

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<sup>120</sup> See Walsingham, 151-153, for an account of the St Albans rebellion. It is the most detailed account of the rising there, but Walsingham was also a monk at St Albans, so it should be read at least with some criticism.

<sup>121</sup> The events in Bury St Edmunds are summarized in Oman, pp. 103-9 and 135, and also in Walsingham, 142-5.

numbers.<sup>122</sup> On the next day he attempted to rob the home of John Cavendish, the Chief Justice of the King's Bench, but his victim had hid his valuables in a local church. The mob stormed the church, but they did no damage to the religious' property. On June 14, Wrawe's mob found and murdered John Cavendish. Wrawe then received a plea from the commoners of Bury St Edmunds to use his uprising to intercede on their behalf. For centuries, the peasants, merchants, and townspeople of Bury had been under the legal jurisdiction of the Abbey of Bury St Edmunds, and despite four previous attempts to overthrow their lords, the abbey maintained an iron-clad hold on its peasants' lives. The commoners of Bury convinced the rebels to murder the incumbent abbot, Prior John Cambridge, in hopes of installing a leader more sympathetic to their plight. Wrawe stayed in Bury from June 15 until June 23, sending out small expeditions to blackmail local nobility and murder foreigners. The Earl of Suffolk led an army on Wrawe's forces on June 23, and Wrawe surrendered without a fight.

The story of the uprising in Suffolk differs from the story of the revolt in Kent and Essex in many ways. One of these differences is the level and nature of involvement of the peasants in the acts of revolt. Walsingham accounts that after the murder of Prior Cambridge, Wrawe's mob stormed the city's monastery and demanded the head of a certain monk, John Lakenheath. He says, "Then, when [Lakenheath] stood among them, amazingly none of them recognised him. But they did all this ... at the instigation of the townspeople, who had secretly employed the commons to do this, while removing themselves from the mob, so that by this they might seem to have had no part in such heinous crimes."<sup>123</sup> Parliament seems to have affirmed Walsingham's claim that the townspeople purposefully employed the mob to kill their oppressor because, as the Cottonian manuscripts attest, "That village [Bury St Edmunds], because of its transgressions,

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<sup>122</sup> This is the same Richard Lyons whom Wat Tyler killed in London, according to Froissart.

<sup>123</sup> Walsingham, 143.

was placed outside the royal pardon according to the counsel of the entire Parliament, and it was condemned to pay two thousand marks, of which the King would have a thousand pounds for their offenses against His Royal Majesty, and the Church would have five hundred marks.”<sup>124</sup> This situation indicates two key differences. First, the East Anglian townspeople were reluctant to join the movement, unlike the citizens of Maidstone, Canterbury, and London. Instead, they consciously attempted to revolt while placing blame on more extreme members of society; there was no unity in the movement in Suffolk. Second, the mob itself was not fighting for what it believed in, but rather it was doing almost mercenary work. In Kent, as I have shown, there were significant motives behind the actions of the peasants, and they were not afraid to join the movement. The willingness of the Kentish men to put their lives on the line for their cause demonstrates a level of personal involvement that may partially explain the fervor of the Southeastern revolt.

Additionally, there was a much greater focus on local matters in the revolt at Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk than in the Southeast’s revolt, and this is evident both in the mission and the manners of John Wrawe. As for the mission, Wrawe started the Suffolk revolt with intentions similar to those of the Southeast. He fought against the poll tax and its collectors, and he sought to right the injustices in England by ransacking the home of the Chief Justice of the King’s Bench, John Cavendish.<sup>125</sup> Nonetheless, after three days the revolt in Suffolk shifted its focus to the local matters at Bury St Edmunds. Once there, Wrawe became interested in the city’s political scene. At the time, there was an intense debate concerning who should be the next abbot of Bury, and therefore also the lord of the peasants in the surrounding lands. The peasants

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<sup>124</sup> “Extracts from the Cottonian Mss. in British Museum,” Claudius A. XII. fol. 131 b. Published in Powell, 143. Original: *Predicta villa, propter suas transgressiones, posita fuit de consilio totius parliamenti extra proteccionem regiam, et condemnata in duobus millibus marcisquarum mille libras rex haberet pro offensa eorum contra regiam majestatem, et quingentas marcas ecclesia haberet.*

<sup>125</sup> Powell, 13-14.

avored a certain Edmund Broomfield, who solicited the commons' support by preaching his vision: "[I want] to unite earth and heaven, flesh and spirit, cloister and marketplace, in fact to bring together monks and laity and make them one."<sup>126</sup> Prior Cambridge, on the other hand, supported Broomfield's opponent, John Tymworth. Wrawe decided to intervene in the matter by murdering Prior Cambridge and forcing the monks to give the title to Broomfield, who was in Nottingham at the time. Then Wrawe drew up a charter that significantly increased the burghers' power, and he ordered, "[Broomfield] should forty days after his arrival guarantee with his seal the charter."<sup>127</sup> Rather than seeking such a charter that would have encompassed the entirety of England, as Tyler had done, Wrawe was content with securing freedom for a few men. The Southeast's larger goal, naturally, facilitated more excitement.

The manner in which Wrawe wielded his power also succumbed to local influence. Wrawe and his band of demagogues found themselves most comfortable while acting as judges over local matters. Government records from 1381 explain that upon the capture of Prior Cambridge, Wrawe proceeded toward Mildenheth in Suffolk with a contingent of jurors from the town of Bury. There they tried the prior, found him guilty, and executed him. Wrawe later confessed to managing the trial. The record of that confession accounts: "The same John Wrawe says abruptly that if the aforementioned Thomas, Geoffrey, and Robert [the jurors] had not been there, and the death of that prior had not been decided by trial, then the same prior would not have been killed nor destroyed."<sup>128</sup> In a similar instance, Wrawe descended from Bury toward the town of Beccles on June 19 in order to oversee the trial and execution of a certain Geoffrey Southgate. In the company of three local jurors – Robert of Beccles, Roger Bradewell, and

<sup>126</sup> Walsingham, 95.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid. 144.

<sup>128</sup> "Déclarations de John Wrawe," *Placita coram rege*, Easter 5 Ric. II, m. 26. Published in Réville, 177. Original: *Dicit precise idem Johannes Wraw quod si predicti Thomas, Galfredus et Robertus non fuissent ibi, et mortem ipsius prioris [non] procurassent, idem prior tunc non fuisset mortuus neque interfectus.*



Edmund Barbour – Wrawe heard the charges against Southgate, who was indicted for publicly denouncing Wrawe and his mob. The Assize Rolls describe the outcome: “At that place, the aforementioned Edmund decapitated the said Geoffery for his crime.”<sup>129</sup> In these two instances, Wrawe seems to have established himself as a local official whose primary objective was maintaining order through established legal process. This, of course, contrasts with the mission of Wat Tyler, who aimed to right the wrongs of the Statute of Labourers and the Poll Tax of 1380, among other abuses. Tyler’s revolt, therefore, would have appealed to many heterogeneous peoples, rather than those of a defined local region.

Another difference between the strategy of John Wrawe and that of Wat Tyler was the movement of the mob. Once Wrawe entered Bury St Edmunds on June 15, he used the city as his makeshift headquarters until the Earl of Suffolk finally ousted him on June 23. From Bury he sent out blackmailing missions led by his personal friends and renegade knights, the latter which added to his credibility as the local leader.<sup>130</sup> In fact, there only seems to have been three instances in which John Wrawe left Bury St Edmunds in the entire eight days of its occupation.

Two of these have already been discussed – the trials of Prior Cambridge in Mildenheth and Geoffrey Southgate in Beccles. The remaining instance occurred on June 18. According to the Assize Rolls: “John Wrawe ... with a certain army ... advanced against the castle of Mettingham, and they entered there, and they plundered, pillaged and took away gold and silver to the sum of £40, and other goods and chattels, such as jewels and armaments, to the value of £20.”<sup>131</sup> Besides presiding over two local trials and the pilferage at one minor castle, John

<sup>129</sup> *Assize Rolls*, N. 2, 29, 6, m. 9, part 1, and m. 19-21. Published in Réville, 75. Original: *Ibidem predictus Edmundus dictum Galfredum felonice decollavit.*

<sup>130</sup> A summary of these minor missions can be found in Oman, 108.

<sup>131</sup> *Assize Rolls*, N. 2, 29, 6, m. 9, part 1, and m. 19. Published in Réville, 75. Original: *Johannes Wrawe ... in eodem exercitu ... processerunt ad castrum de Metyngham, et illuc intraverunt ... aurum et argentums, ad summan*

Wrawe was content to reside in the safety of Bury. This situation contrasts sharply with that of Wat Tyler and his Kentish followers. In just six days (June 6-12), the Southeastern forces traveled from Dartford to Rochester, Maidstone, Canterbury, and then to Blackheath outside of London. This journey was 117 miles long, which is special in its own right, but the peasants did not just travel. They ransacked homes and burned documents and threw open prisons along the way. These actions increased the fervor and swelled the ranks of the Southeastern mob.

The discipline of forces should also be taken into consideration when comparing these two rebellions. In Suffolk there was little discipline of which to speak. John Wrawe himself led an expedition to the castle at Mettingham and oversaw the theft of £60 worth of money and goods. His subordinates were no better. Government records summarize the actions of one such lieutenant, Geoffrey Parfeye, in the town of Thetford. They claim, “[Geoffrey] made a proclamation and discussed the mitigation of the peoples’ burdens, and for fear of his proclamations ... Simon Barbour, then mayor of that city, for the sake of saving his town from the passion of the households, offered 28 marks, and [Geoffrey] took the bribe.”<sup>132</sup> At least for Parfeye, therefore, it appears that personal enrichment was more important than spreading news of the revolt to the far reaches of Suffolk. Similarly, John Wrawe was keen to blackmail the local nobility in an effort to enrich himself and his officers. Several stories of the extortion committed by Wrawe’s henchmen have survived. Oman summarizes one instance, saying: “Sir Thomas Cornerd, one of the renegade knights who joined the rising, got ten marks out of John Rookwood of Stanfield ... but cheated [Wrawe] of part of his gains, by pretending that he had only obtained

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*XL librarum, et alia bona et catalla, ut in jocalibus et armatures, ad valenciam XX librarum, expoliaverunt, depredaverunt et abstulerunt.*

<sup>132</sup> “Déclarations de John Wrawe,” Assize Rolls, N. 2. 29, 6, m. 1, part 2 d, and m. 27. Published in Réville, 76. Original: *Fecit quondam proclamacionem et levacionem populi, et pro timore cujus proclamacionis ... Simon Barbour, tunc major ejusdem ville, pro predicta villa de incendio domorum salvanda, finem de XXVIII marcis in pecunia fecit, quas ... cepit et asportavit.*

eight.”<sup>133</sup> This example demonstrates the utter lack of discipline present in the Suffolk mob; not only was Wrawe stealing from the local nobility, but his subordinates were also stealing from him. This greed and lack of discipline was characteristic of the Suffolk revolt.

Conversely, the Kentish rebels were so well disciplined that they once killed a fellow dissident who they caught stealing silver from the home of the hated John of Gaunt.<sup>134</sup> The man stole the silver piece, attempted to hide it in his bosom, and then tried to flee. Afterwards, the Kentish rebels cried, “We are zealots for truth and justice, not thieves or robbers!” This situation highlights not only the value of discipline in a rebellion, but also the different motivations for rebellion in the two regions, as determined by the peasants themselves. Additionally, the man who tried to steal the silver in London was trying to flee with his newfound wealth. Thus the discipline in the Southeast appears to have helped focus the peasants on their cause, and consequently it helped to keep those peasants in the ranks of the mob.

Finally, the integrity of the leaders of each regional faction may also partially explain the fervor of the Southeastern rebels. From the examples just given, it is evident that John Wrawe and his lieutenants were not much more than brigands and blackmailers; indeed, they may have been little more than cowards. When the Earl of Suffolk, William Ufford, stormed Bury St Edmunds on June 23, Oman reports, “[Wrawe,] instead of offering battle to the forces of order ... fled and hid himself away.”<sup>135</sup> This contrasts greatly with the actions of Wat Tyler, who was so bold as to demand King Richard’s own sword at the final meeting at Smithfield. Wrawe’s cowardice did not end there, however. Upon being captured, he entered himself into King’s evidence, which is a state of legal protection under which one has the opportunity to earn favor by assisting the justice system in an investigation. To save his own neck, Wrawe provided the

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<sup>133</sup> Oman, 108.

<sup>134</sup> Knighton, 214.

<sup>135</sup> Oman, 135.

Earl with 34 of his coconspirators' names, of whom 15 were eventually executed.<sup>136</sup> Among the names in Wrawe's confession are Geoffrey Parfeye, the priest who extorted 28 marks from the mayor of Thetford, and Robert of Beccles, Roger Bradewell, and Edmund Barbour, the jurors whom Wrawe employed in the case of his denouncer, Geoffrey Southgate. Despite these desperate attempts to save his own life, John Wrawe was executed by hanging the same day of his capture, June 23, 1381. It should be noted that Jack Straw, one of Tyler's officers, also gave a confession after the Kentish revolt, but he did not indict anyone, and he only confessed after Mayor Walworth of London offered to have Mass said for Straw's soul for thirty years.<sup>137</sup> The difference in the integrity of the leaders, especially in the face of defeat, demonstrates the extreme discrepancy in the loyalty that the regional leaders had for their cause.

The occurrences in the other counties of East Anglia further demonstrate the practices of the Southeastern rebels that contributed to the fervor of their revolt. In particular, the township of Cambridge in Cambridgeshire offers insight into the importance of central leadership.<sup>138</sup> There, at least twelve unique revolts broke out on June 14 following the arrival of both Tyler's and Wrawe's messengers the previous day. After a day of revolt in the countryside, a certain John Hanchach led a group of rebels to Cambridge town, where he instigated revolt among the citizens. The residents of Cambridge then elected two leaders – James and Thomas Grantcheaster – and together with Hanchach, the leaders stormed Cambridge University. The motivation for this attack was the constant battle between “town and gown,” prompted by the fact that the university received special privileges over the town from the King, and a sixth of all houses in

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<sup>136</sup> Wrawe's accusations can be found in *Placita coram rege*, Easter 5 Ric. II, m. 26. Published in Réville's *Appendice I*, pp. 175-82. A summary of the Suffolk indictments and executions is found in Réville, 157.

<sup>137</sup> Walsingham, 147-8.

<sup>138</sup> The events of the revolt in Cambridgeshire are summarized in Oman, 125-8 and 130-2, and in Powell, 41-56. The main primary source for these events is Assize Rolls N. 103.

Cambridge town were owned by the university.<sup>139</sup> The rebels, expressing their resentment, murdered William Wigmore, the beadle of the university, and then they stormed Corpus Christi College and pillaged £80 of treasures. The next morning, they ravaged St. Mary's Church during Holy Mass, stole all the documents there, and proceeded to do the same at the House of the Carmelites (now Queens' College). Together these documents made up the university library. All the documents were burned in Market Square that afternoon, and whatever Masters of Arts remained at the university were subsequently made to sign a charter expanding the burghers' rights and exempting them from legal penalty for their actions in obtaining those rights. Later on June 16, the mayor of Cambridge, Edmund Redmeadow, led his town in razing the land surrounding the Priory at Barnwell. The revolt in Cambridgeshire was eventually ended when Bishop Henry Despenser of Norwich led a small army against the town on June 19.

Several aspects of the revolt in the township of Cambridge bear resemblance to the events in Suffolk. Because these aspects are repeated, we can consider these differences to be strengths of the Southeastern revolt with even more confidence. One of these dissimilarities is that in Cambridge there was a greater focus on local matters than on matters pertaining to the governance of the realm. The lower class's primary goal was to obtain a local charter of rights from the university. After achieving this objective, the mayor himself then led 1000 farmers and burghers against the Prior of Barnwell, not because of any particularly offensive abuse, but rather to secure the rights for the peasants to hunt and fish and use the priory's lands for grazing.<sup>140</sup> Certain prominent men did suffer in Cambridgeshire, but these men fell to small and isolated

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<sup>139</sup> Oman notes, "This came from many deceased townfolk having left houses in 'candle rents' to the College, i.e. for the sustentation of lights and the saying of masses for their souls." Note 2, 126.

<sup>140</sup> *Pat. 5 Ric. II, part 1, m. 30 d.* Published in Réville, 244, doc. 128.

rural mobs rather than to the large movement that had sprung up in Cambridge.<sup>141</sup> Conversely, the unified peasant force of the Southeast actively sought to punish their government and secure personal liberties for themselves, their fellow Englishmen, and their posterity. In addition, the Cambridge revolt resembles the Suffolk uprising in that neither of the factions actively moved. Had the twelve unique Cambridgeshire revolts traveled more, it is likely that they would have joined forces and been more of a threat to Bishop Despenser on June 18. The Kent and Essex revolts were always unified, and they entered London with 60,000 men; had they been split into twelve independent forces, it is unlikely that the King would have taken so much notice.<sup>142</sup> Finally, there was a distinct lack of discipline in the mob at Cambridge. They stormed into a Mass at St. Mary's Church and stole £20 worth of treasures, in addition to the £80 pillaged at Corpus Christi College the previous night. As I have shown, the Southeastern peasants were much more disciplined, which led to greater overall fervor in the uprising.

In addition to these differences, the division of the men of Cambridgeshire and the lack of central leadership also emphasizes the practices that led to greater zeal in the Southeast's movement. According to the indictment records of the King's Bench, several men, including John Greyston, John Stanford, Robert Tavell, John Michel, John Hanchach, and Geoffrey Cobbe, among others, were responsible for sedition in unique villages throughout the shire. Some of these leaders, like John Stanford, rode from London after seeing Tyler's men at Blackheath on June 13, while Robert Tavell was actually a minor leader in the events in Suffolk on June 12

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<sup>141</sup> Such as the sheriff, Henry English, and Poll-tax collectors Thomas Torell and John Blanchpayne. Edmund Walsingham, a Justice of the Peace for Cambridgeshire, fell to the hands of an organized mob from Ely, but that mob was expelled less than two days after its inception, rendering Walsingham's murder the most significant of its actions. See Powell, 47-8.

<sup>142</sup> For the number of men, see Froissart, 213. The number is repeated in the *Anominale Chronicle* on p. 190, and it is estimated at 200,000 in Walsingham on p. 162. All these numbers are undoubtedly inflated, but the smaller the actual number was, the stronger my argument is. If only 10,000 peasants stood outside of London, then a group divided like that of Cambridgeshire would have approached London with less than 850 men – a number which is much easier to ignore than 10,000.

before riding west to his home in Cambridge.<sup>143</sup> In addition to these solitary revolts, the uprisings that did persist in Cambridgeshire were not able to secure leaders. Remember John Hanchach first came to the township of Cambridge on June 15, and he began to incite the revolt there. Then, the peasants of Cambridge elected two leaders, James and Thomas Grantcheaster, and still the next day, the mob began to follow the Mayor of Cambridge, Edmund Redmeadow. Thus, in about 24 hours, the Cambridge revolt had had four different leaders. With such a lack of coordination, it is not surprising that very little was actually accomplished in this revolt. Conversely, the movement in Kent always had one defined leader. Abel Ker led the mob from Lesness to Dartford from June 2 to 4; Robert Cave led it from Dartford to Rochester and Maidstone from June 4 to 7; Wat Tyler led the revolt from June 7 until it was defeated on June 15. The fact that the revolt in the Southeast was always coordinated under one man's vision may very well explain, at least in part, its quick progress, the intense unification, and the overall ebullience of the Southeast's rising.

Finally, in order to ascertain another key factor that led to the fervor of the Southeastern peasants, let us turn our focus to the revolt in the last remaining East Anglian county, Norfolk.<sup>144</sup> Random groups of peasants began to overtake western Norfolk on June 16, and the revolts in that area never managed to claim a central leader or accomplish anything of particular historical significance. On June 17, however, peasants from the eastern half of the county officially mustered at Mousehold Heath, the traditional mustering site in Norfolk since pre-Norman times. There, the peasants appointed a local dyer, Geoffrey Litster, as their leader. Litster created and

<sup>143</sup> See docs. 121-47, Réville. 241-50.

<sup>144</sup> The events in Norfolk are best summarized by Oman, 114-20 and 132-5. As for primary sources, in addition to the indictments of the King's Bench, most contemporary chronicles also include a version of the narrative, including Walsingham, 144-7, *Knighton*, 224-6, *Anominalle*, 204-5, and Froissart, 222-4. Also, for the conquests and actions of Bishop Despenser in Norfolk, see John Capgrave, *Johannis Capgrave Liber de illustribus Henricis*, Vol. 7 (Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans & Roberts, 1858). 170-172.

carried out two primary objectives. First, he wanted to enlist local nobility in order to lend credence to his cause, and he succeeded; one knight openly offered his support, four knights agreed to support Litster, one knight refused and was consequently murdered, and lastly, Lord William Ufford, Earl of Suffolk, fled upon the peasants' approach.<sup>145</sup> Next, Litster captured the county capital of Norfolk, Norwich and proclaimed himself 'King of the Commons.' Thence he sent out missions to burn town charters and tax documents, and he acted as a judge in several ordinary criminal cases. In addition, the peasants of Norfolk had a special hatred for foreigners, and while they were searching for such documents, the mob killed all Flemings and Dutchmen they found. Whereas the murder of foreigners ran rampant, the murder of domestics and theft of any property seems to have been strictly discouraged. On June 20, Litster, having heard of the fate of Wat Tyler, sent a diplomatic emissary to the King with a large sum of money in order to persuade him to grant clemency. Bishop Despenser intercepted the messengers, killed them, pursued Litster, and defeated the 'King of the Commons' in open battle on June 22.

The rebellion in Norfolk was much more similar to the Southeastern revolt than the uprisings in the other two East Anglian counties, but certain similarities among the revolts in East Anglia underscore the practices that led to such ebullience in the Southeast. For example, the leaders in the Norfolk revolt were much more concerned with local affairs than Ker, Cave, or Tyler ever were. Citing the Parliamentary Rolls, Oman claims: "'The King of the Commons' himself ... presided at several trials both of 'traitors' and of persons accused of ordinary felonies. One or two of these unfortunates were put to death."<sup>146</sup> Similarly, Sir Roger Bacon specifically targeted the town charter of Yarmouth because that town held a monopoly on all trade within a

<sup>145</sup> Sir Roger Bacon openly offered his support. The four knights who supported Litster upon request were Lord Roger Scales, Sir William Morley, Sir John Brewes, and Sir Stephen Hales. Sir Robert Salle was killed. Before his murder, the peasants actually hailed him as a champion for their cause, because he was born a peasant, the son of a mason, but was knighted by Edward III for heroic exploits in France. See Walsingham, 145, and Froissart, 223.

<sup>146</sup> Oman, 118.



seven-mile radius of its center; no one could buy or sell within that radius except in Yarmouth's marketplace.<sup>147</sup> These actions persist with the motif that the leaders of each East Anglian revolt were quite concerned with establishing a new *modus vivendi* without the consent of Parliament or the King. It is true that Litster sought to legitimize his movement by recruiting members of the nobility to his cause, but he was only partially successful, and he did not attract any prominent nobility – a bishop, an M.P., an earl, or the King himself. Kent and Essex, however, went straight to the King, realizing that if they managed to win his approval, then no one, not even John of Gaunt, could stand against them. Furthermore, the lack of movement of the Norfolk mob once again speaks to the great importance of the movement of the Southeastern rebels, which has already been discussed. These two differences, shared with Norfolk's East Anglian neighbors, continue to demonstrate factors that contributed to the fervor of the Southeast.

There is one more factor that can be gathered from an examination of the revolt in Norfolk. That is the relevance of titles to the ebullience of a peasants' movement. Geoffrey Litster called himself 'King of the Commons,' a title which expresses a position of supreme power even over those peasants who refused to favor him with their support. Conversely, the leaders of the revolt in the Southeast never gave themselves titles; they were only ever referred to as *ductores*, or leaders.<sup>148</sup> The personal ambition of the leaders in the Southeast is debatable, though. For example, regarding the beliefs of John Ball, the *Anominalle Chronicle* reports, "There should be no bishop in England save one archbishop only, and that he himself would be that prelate."<sup>149</sup> Conversely, Walsingham reports that Ball said, "[The commons] would secure peace for themselves ... if, having done away with the important people, there was equal

<sup>147</sup> *Rolls of Parliament*, III, 94-5, n. 8.

<sup>148</sup> See *Knighton*, 220.

<sup>149</sup> *Anominalle*. 190.

freedom and the same nobility for all men.”<sup>150</sup> It is unlikely that we will ever know whether the Southeastern rebel leaders were consumed with personal ambition, but regardless, the fact remains that the leaders were unified in the belief that personal ambitions were second to securing the favor of King Richard II.<sup>151</sup> This contributes to the ebullience of the Southeastern revolt in two ways. First, ambition drives a man. If Wat Tyler and John Ball did have personal ambitions that necessitated the King’s approval, then why would they stop before achieving their goal? Litster, on the other hand, had already secured his title of ‘King of the Commons,’ so he was content to sit in Norwich Castle. Second, ambition kills a cause. If Tyler’s primary concern were his own personal advancement, then his primary concern could not have been revolution, and if anything drives a revolt, it is revolution. In these ways, the lack of supreme titles in the Southeast contributed directly to the ebullience of the uprising in that region.

This chapter has demonstrated that several factors that contributed to the fervor of the Southeastern peasants can only be ascertained by looking outside of the extant documents pertaining to the revolt there. By comparing the Southeastern rising to the revolts of East Anglia, we are given a lens through which we may view these other possible factors. For example, by examining closely the revolt in Bury St Edmunds, we detect several boons to the fervor and success of Kent and Essex, such as the importance of direct involvement of peasants as opposed to the mercenary work of the Suffolk mob. In Kent, each man put his life and property on the line in an effort to secure liberty; in Suffolk, the peasants did no such thing. Additionally, through the cowardice of John Wrawe, the bravery and integrity of John Ball and Wat Tyler shines forth. These qualities demonstrate that the Southeastern leaders were more concerned with

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<sup>150</sup> Walsingham, 162.

<sup>151</sup> This statement includes even Wat Tyler. Tyler never actually expressed a desire to be made King, but in Jack Straw’s Confession (Walsingham, 147-8), the lieutenant does include that situation as Tyler’s ultimate goal. Hence, Tyler’s personal ambition is only accounted in an account of an account of the man.

their revolution rather than their personal well-being; they were concerned with saving their fellow Englishman from tyranny, not ratting him out to that very same despot. By examining the revolts in Cambridge and Norfolk, the significance of movement, central leadership, the leaders' involvement in local affairs, and the ambition for titles (or lack thereof) all emerge as reasons for the fervor that permeated the Southeast in those first two weeks of June, 1381. Moreover, the fact that several of these dissimilarities are repeated in all three East Anglian revolts emphasizes the significance of these traits for the revolt in the Southeast. Finally, timing and proximity undoubtedly played key roles in the relative success of the Wat Tyler's uprising. All of these, in addition to the governmental abuses and unique political, social, and religious conditions previously discussed, are paramount factors that contributed to such ebullience in the revolt of Kent, Essex, and Middlesex.

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## CONCLUSION

The English Peasants' Revolt of 1381 has become known in popular histories as "Wat Tyler's Rebellion," which is at first a curious metonym for the larger movement. After all, John Wrawe and Geoffrey Litster led similar revolts almost contemporaneously with the Southeast's uprising. Still, because of the Kentish rebels' relative success – they captured London and Canterbury, as opposed to Cambridge University and an abbey in Suffolk – chroniclers and historians have been captivated by their story for centuries. This thesis, recognizing that the impact of the Southeastern revolt led to its historical fame, asked the question: What were the causes and circumstances that led not only to the ebullient revolt in Southeast England, but also to its relative success? I have answered this question by describing the macro and micro abuses suffered by the peasants and journeymen of the Southeast. I have also analyzed the circumstances in the Southeast that contributed to the uprising, and I have dissected further motivations and clues to the reasons for such success by comparing the revolt in the Southeast to the uprisings farther north. All of these factors played some role in engendering, motivating, or aiding the peasants of Kent and Essex.

The conclusions we can draw regarding this question are, in part, the contents of the thesis. The abuses inflicted by the government against the commons contributed to the revolts throughout the kingdom. I define macro abuses as those that affected the entirety of England, and although they did indeed motivate the Southeast to revolt, more causes must be considered because counties such as Cornwall did not make an appearance on the revolutionary stage. Some of these macro abuses include the Ordinance and Statute of Labourers, the Poll Tax of November 1380, and the proliferation of the Hundred Years' War. Micro abuses, on the other hand, are those that affected solely the peasants of the Southeast. These inflictions are more pertinent to

this thesis because they help to destroy the metonym of “Wat Tyler’s Rebellion,” and by understanding them we can analyze precisely what makes the Southeastern revolt so peculiar. Some of these abuses include the atrocities committed by John Legge against women, the seizure of peasants as personal property, personal vendettas, and the practical enforcement of tax collecting measures approved by Parliament. Though there are certainly other important factors that contributed to the Southeast’s fervor and success, these abuses are especially important because they represent the brink, the line across which the government crossed to ultimately spawn the revolt.

Additionally, I conclude that the circumstances in the Southeast in 1381 contributed to the causes, ebullience, and success of the Kentish peasants. The Southeast as a geographic region contained both the political and religious capitals of the realm, which placed several offending groups in close proximity to the rebels. These groups include authorities such as the King, Parliament, and several lesser offices like the justices of the King’s Bench and the Treasurer. Furthermore, groups such as lawyers and the Knights Hospitallers were stationed in these prominent urban centers. Because of the nearby political hubs, there were also high-profile prisons and local defense coalitions, especially the Confederation of the Cinque Ports, in the Southeast. I have proven that the peasants of this region held grievances against several of these offices and groups. The Southeast was also a center of drastic social change during this time, as evidenced by historical documents and the publication and reception of the *Canterbury Tales*. Finally, the economy of the Southeast particularly contributed to the Peasants’ Revolt. That is, King Edward II appealed to foreigners to immigrate and steal domestic journeymens’ jobs, despite the struggling economy after the Black Death. Furthermore, the market for wool, England’s largest and most famed export, was failing due to long winters and the civil conflicts

in Flanders. This led not only to decreased business and increased competition in the Southeast, but Charles Oman suggests (and I agree) that it directly led to the Poll Tax of November 1380, which I have already discussed as a macro abuse that led to the revolt.

Finally, we can draw several conclusions from the examination of the subsequent revolts throughout England. By looking to Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk, for example, we note that the form and actions of John Wrawe's rebellion contrast sharply with Wat Tyler's uprising. The commoners in this region were more reluctant to get involved, instead opting to hide behind the few, more rambunctious members of society. This highlights the importance of the excitement and unity of the peasants of the Southeast, who gathered in a group of close to 60,000 men according to two medieval chroniclers. Furthermore, the leader in Suffolk, Wrawe, shifted his attention to local goals, such as trying individuals in pseudo courts of law. This led to a lack of movement, which prevented him from reinforcing his numbers and accomplishing concrete goals, as had his counterpart, Tyler. Finally, the motivations of the rebels in each region were different: In Suffolk, the leaders were content with enriching themselves and gaining power, never fighting for serfs' manumission or an end to an ostensibly unjust tax. Revolts outside of Suffolk highlight even more differences that contributed to the success of the revolt in Kent, Essex, and Middlesex. For example, in Cambridge, in less than one full day, the revolt there boasted four unique leaders. Leadership certainly changed throughout the weeks in which the revolt in the Southeast took place, but there were fewer leaders, and leadership only changed during major milestones of the revolt – the capture of Rochester Castle and Maidstone. Finally, the fact that Wat Tyler never sought a title like 'The King of the Commons,' as did Geoffrey Litster in Norfolk, demonstrates that fame, fortune, and power at least were not the predominant

goals of the leaders of the revolt in the Southeast. For all these reasons, the Southeastern revolt was relatively successful.

All of these conclusions are significant because they fill a notably empty hole in the historiography of the English Peasants' Revolt of 1381. That is, scholars have discussed the causes of the Peasants' Revolt, but, as I have noted, none has made a serious effort to distinguish the Peasants' Revolt from "Wat Tyler's Rebellion." The revolt in the Southeast has come to characterize the entire history of the events of that June. This thesis treats the Southeastern rebellion as a distinct uprising, much like Powell's work that examines solely the events in East Anglia. Moreover, this thesis analyzes the causes for the ebullience and successes of the Southeastern peasants, rather than simply presenting a detailed account of the events in that region, as many chapters in previous works have done. Considering all this, "A Hotbed for Dissidence" makes a significant impact on the historiography of the Peasants' Revolt.

It also raises some interesting questions. For example, Samuel Cohn, Jr., a history professor at the University of Glasgow, acknowledges in the introduction to his book, *A Lust for Liberty*: "Historians have attempted to construct hierarchies of popular rebellion, drawing distinctions between 'rebellion,' 'revolt,' and 'riot.'" <sup>152</sup> Considering the differences in the causes and success of the Southeast's revolt as compared to the uprisings in East Anglia and the Home Counties, this distinction of labels may lead to a greater understanding of the reasons behind these differences. Cohn attempts to define these terms, though he admits that it is difficult. 'Rebellion,' for instance, could be "the complete overthrow of a society's foundations," or it could be a word describing "aristocratic challenges to the dominant power." <sup>153</sup> Neither of these definitions would apply to the uprisings in East Anglia, where commoners started the revolt

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<sup>152</sup> Cohn, 3.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid. 3-4.

(even though Wrawe and Litster were supported by a handful of knights) and little progress was made against the dominant powers of English society, namely the King and Parliament. On the other hand, the events in the Southeast might be a rebellion, because they did subjugate these two powers, at least for a time, and they did have the intent to permanently overthrow that society. Nonetheless, because the movement failed, the overthrow of society was not “complete,” and therefore the Southeast’s rising may not have been a rebellion by these standards. Finally, by examining the diction of fourteenth century chronicles, Cohn finds it even more difficult to distinguish between the two lesser terms, revolt and riot, which chroniclers seem to use interchangeably along with terms like: movements, noise, commotions, rumors, conspiracies, plots, plans, illicit assemblies, and disturbances.<sup>154</sup> Because all of these terms are so ill-defined and subjective, I postulate that, if there will be scholarly value in labeling the uprisings in different areas of England during the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381, the author must first work to create stable definitions for his terms.

Another question that can now be raised is whether the lower classes of Southeast England achieved any lasting, significant impacts by means of their revolt. They certainly sent waves throughout the kingdom, and I have shown that the actions of Wat Tyler and John Ball directly influenced the uprisings in East Anglia and the Home Counties. But was there more? History shows that Bishop William Courtenay of London immediately succeeded Archbishop Sudbury as Lord Chancellor of the Realm, but that he resigned this position when he was translated to the post of Archbishop of Canterbury on July 31, 1381, which was only one month later. Could the Southeastern peasants, by means of their actions against both the Church and state, have implied a public mandate separating these powers? Such impacts can only be

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid. 4.



determined by mere speculation, but I imagine that a study of the lasting impacts of the Southeast's revolt would be fruitful and insightful.

Finally, this thesis raises an interesting question regarding the actions of Wat Tyler on June 14 and 15. In Chapter Three, I analyzed several of the characteristics of the Southeastern revolt that made Tyler's efforts successful. Among these were continuous movement, personal humility, discipline, and the consideration of larger goals. On his final day in London, after achieving all his objectives, Tyler abandoned these principles. His immediate failure upon adopting this new *modus operandi* supports my argument regarding the impact of these differential factors on the Southeastern revolt, but I am curious to know why he changed so drastically and suddenly. Is it possible that Tyler tasted power and was not ready to let it go? Or perhaps Tyler, a previously unknown peasant, had been supported by an organizing force, as Brooks suggests, but after achieving its ends at Mile End on June 13, Tyler decided to take matters into his own hands. Once again, all this is mere speculation, but I hope that my findings in this thesis may shed light on future discussions of this matter.

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The English Peasants' Revolt of 1381 occurred over the course of two weeks, but 630 years later there is still so much to discover and analyze regarding those events. As historians dig deeper, it will become evermore necessary to be specific in our observations. Thus, metonyms such as "Wat Tyler's Rebellion" must become obsolete. For this reason, this thesis has discussed the specific causes for the launching of the Peasants' Revolt in the Southeast, and for the ebullience and success of the peasants of Kent, Essex, and Middlesex. After examining the governmental abuses, the political, social, and economic conditions, and the differentiating factors that made this area of England unique, we can now answer that question: What were the causes and circumstances that led not only to the ebullient revolt in Southeast England, but also

to its relative success? Whatever questions may be asked next, I hope the conclusions of this thesis will lead to a more developed and informed answer.

## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX I Poll Tax Returns

The following data is a selected reproduction of Charles Oman's second appendix regarding the population of England based on the returns of both the Poll Tax of 1377 and that of 1380. The data is based off of records from the Lord Treasurer's Remembrancer's Enrolled Accounts in the Public Record Office (E. 359/8 B and C, mm. 3-6, 11-16).

*The population change of various counties, cities, and villages in England from 1377 to 1381:*

	<u>1377</u>	<u>Aug. 1381*</u>
Bedfordshire	20,339	14,895
Berkshire	22,723	15,709
Buckinghamshire	24,627	17,997
Cornwall	34,274	12,109
Derbyshire	23,243	15,657
Essex	47,962	30,748
Colchester	2,955	1,609
Hampshire	33,241	22,018
Kent	56,557	43,855
Middlesex	11,243	9,937
London	23,314	20,397
Norfolk	88,797	66,719
Northamptonshire	40,255	27,997
Northampton	1,477	1,518**
Somerset	54,604	30,384
Bath	570	297
Wells	901	487
Suffolk	58,610	44,635
Surrey	18,039	12,684
Sussex	35,326	26,616
Southamptonshire	33,241	22,018
Southampton	1,152	1,051
Wiltshire	42,599	30,627

\* This data comes from the final returns of the Poll Tax of 1380, not the initial January returns, which only would have comprised two-thirds of the mandated returns even if there had been no tax evasion. Therefore, though separate data does exist for the January returns, the sum of persons is less than both the 1377 returns and the August 1381 returns in all cases.

\*\* The village of Northampton was the only village of significant size to report an increase in population.

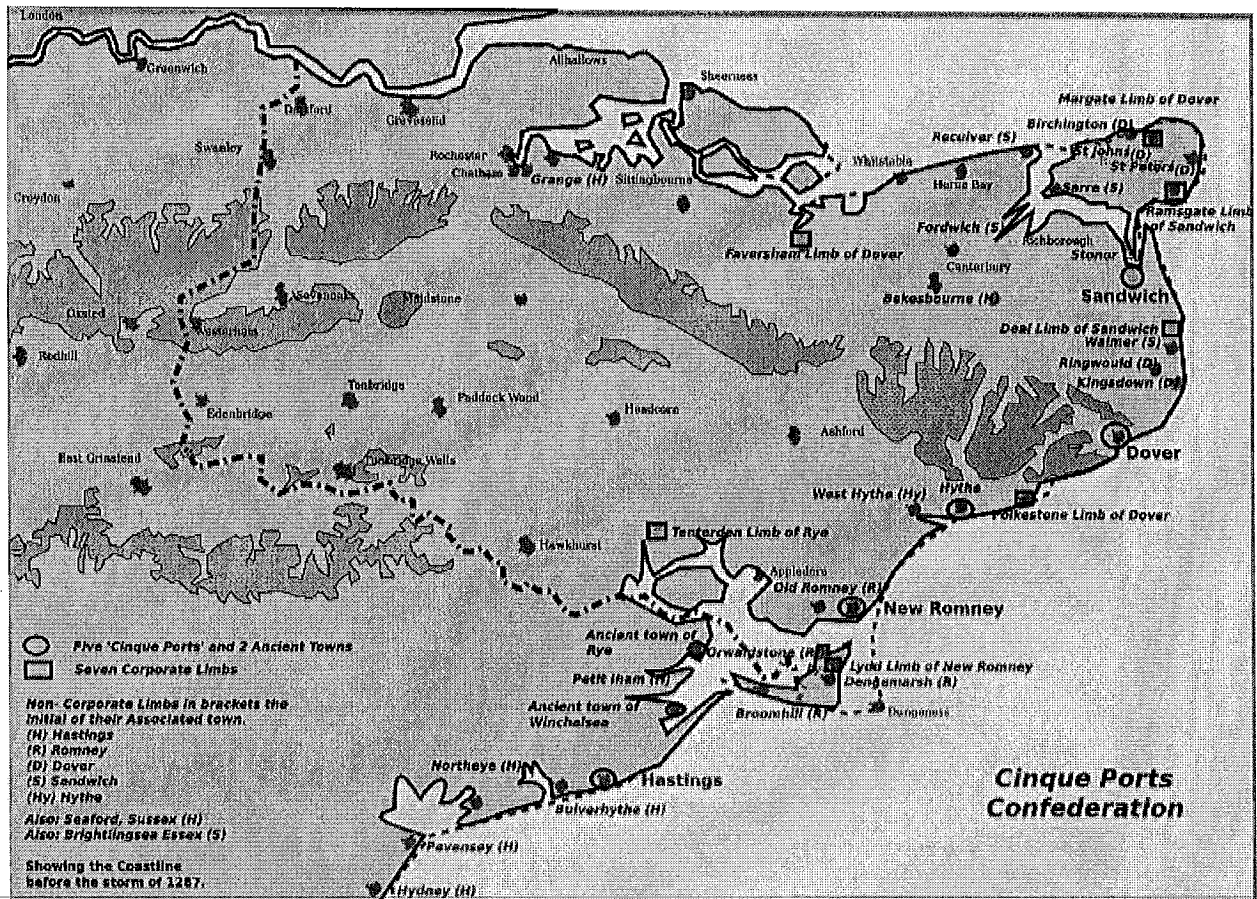
**APPENDIX II**  
Maps and Figures

**Figure 1. Historic Counties of England.** Kent, Essex, and Middlesex are indicated. Notice the East Anglian Counties of Cambridgeshire, Norfolk, and Suffolk, immediately north of Essex.



**Figure 2. The Confederation of Cinque Ports.** Supporting towns are indicated as parentheticals.

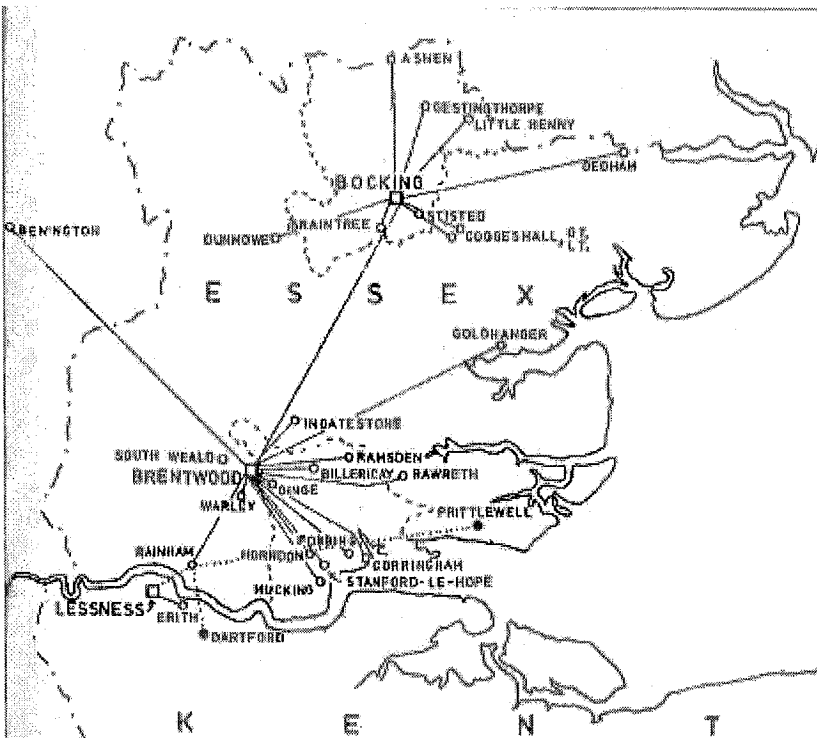
Source: Clem Rutter (Rochester: June 2007). Online.



**Figure 3. The Revolt in Essex.**

The effort led by Abel Ker from Erith to Lessness to Dartford is also shown.

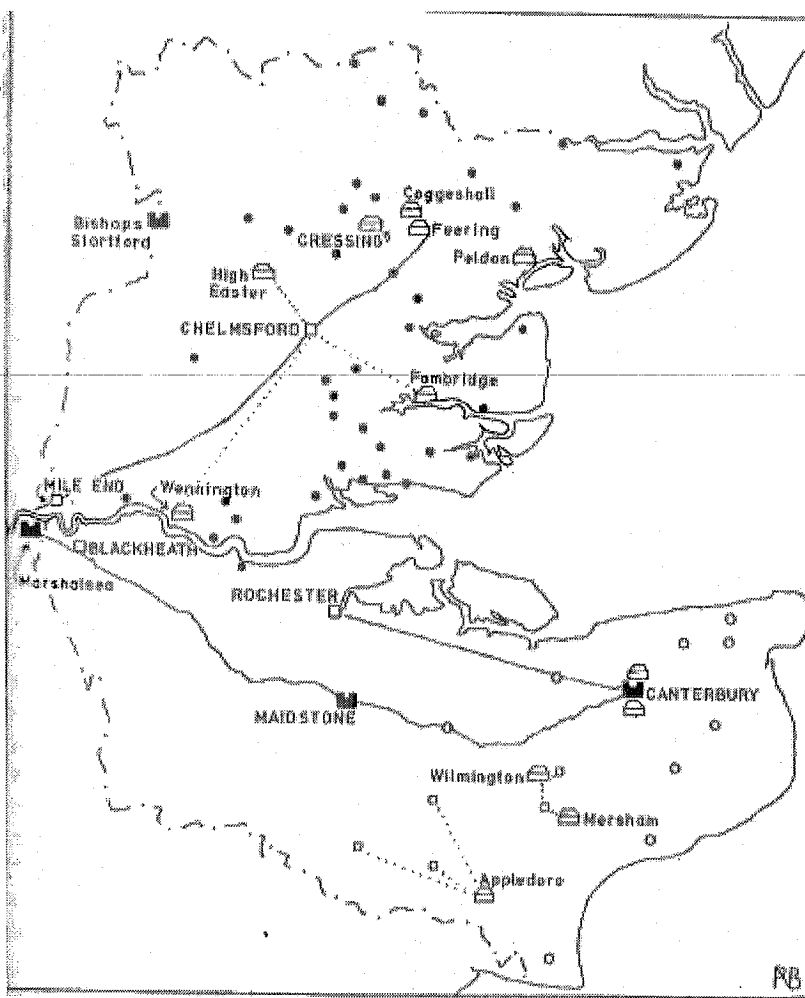
Source: Brooks, 253.



**Figure 4. The Initial Outbreak in Kent.** This would have occurred between June 6 and June 9. The peasants in Essex had meanwhile taken Great Coggeshall in the North. See Figure 5. Source: Brooks. 257.



**Figure 5. The March to London.** June 10-12, 1381. The prison of Marshalsea is in Southwark in Middlesex, while Mile End is in London. Source: Brooks. 261.



**Figure 6. East Anglia.**

Cambridge, Bury St Edmunds, and Norwich in relation to London.

Source: Google Maps

