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En Langue Anglaise

**Popular Unrest and the Rise of a  
Labour Class-Consciousness in Late  
Medieval England (1300's-1500's)**

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## **DEDICATION**

*To Naima,  
Houssam Eddine,  
and Salsabil*

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## ABSTRACT

Most historians attribute the founding of modern England and the rise of labour class-consciousness to the period after the Industrial Revolution when workers started to call for the improvement of their conditions and for appropriate wages in an organized way under the leadership of their respective trade unions. This work aims to demonstrate that the roots of modern England as it is known today are even deeper in the history of this country. Following the Great Famine and the Black Death (1348), a severe labour shortage occurred, and the labourers in towns and villages saw it as their legitimate right to ask for higher wages and lower rents of land. The lords responded with an Ordinance and Statute of Labourers (1351) to keep wages to their pre-plague level. In the fourteenth century, the Hundred Years War (1337-1453) had taken a different course; around 1360, English victories and plunder of the French lands turned into defeats and humiliation. Most of the blame was put on the government of the period. To finance such an unrewarding war, Parliament decided that the commons had to contribute to this enterprise; hence three successive poll taxes were imposed on all the English population whatever their status or wealth. The combination of all such elements as increasing demand for labour and low wages after the Black Death, excessive war taxation, and the government's corruption that led to defeats in the Hundred Years' War against France, led to a common feeling of oppression and discontent among the common people. This explains the calls for revolt in 1381 and 1450, to mention but a few, and the full-scale response to them. The important number of facts about social unrest in fourteenth and fifteenth century England provided in this work, and the sources used to support these facts make it possible to assume that the late medieval class was fully aware of its strength and the importance of its role in society as a homogenous class having the same sufferings and goals. Hence, the idea of labour class-consciousness in this period is fully justified.

## List of Acronyms

- J.P. : Justice of the Peace
- L.M.A.: Late Middle Ages
- E.M.A. : Early Middle Ages
- P.R. Peasants' Revolt



**Table:** Number of taxable population registered in 1377 and 1381

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## **General Introduction**

A fourteenth-century English King, Richard II, and a host of fifteenth-century French observers described medieval Englishmen as treacherous, rebellious people who killed their kings. This opinion, though biased, was not without factual basis. In the period from 1215 to 1415, five out of eight Kings fought wars with their subjects; four out of eight were either captured or deposed, and two were killed. Two others escaped open warfare but encountered vigorous resistance or conspiracy. These dramatic episodes have captured the imagination of professional historians and political theorists for centuries.

Yet the forms that resistance to authority took in medieval England have not been directly observed despite the widespread interest in medieval popular rebellion in the 1970s, and the revival of the study of violence in medieval society. Several studies have focused on violence among the nobility or between kingdoms, with little attention to the use of violence by and against the people. Such violence, however, was a repeated feature of political relations between the medieval labouring force and the upper strata of the English society. This reveals the existence mature political ideas, as well as changes that reflect developments in government, society, and political culture. Therefore, understanding medieval English revolt is essential to comprehend later English politics.

To focus on violence between peasants and nobles is not to deny that cooperation was the common pattern of medieval life, nor does it suggest that resistance had an organic continuity throughout the later medieval period. Parliament was not yet a central player in its own right, and periods of conflict varied widely in their motivation, quality, and results. Different revolts were nurtured by quite specific problems under quite particular conditions. Moreover, serious conflict did not arise during the reign of politically skilful Kings such as Edward III (1327-1377) <sup>1</sup>. Nonetheless, one cannot ignore the fact that during the two hundred years between 1300 and 1500, there were several occurrences of social conflicts. The latter can definitely not be overlooked in the study of medieval English life.

This work attempts to answer such questions as what happened then, and why, and with what result. Since individual revolts had long roots, this work is a study not just of revolts themselves, but also of political crises and a general view of the overall scene that characterised the period. It attempts to demonstrate how members of the working class proposed, implemented, and defended their version of good governance against what they regarded as bad rulership.

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<sup>1</sup> King Edward III (1312–77) of England from 1327 to 1377, and son of Edward II. He had continuous problems with the Scots, but he had some success in his attempts to become the king of France, for example at the battles of Crécy (1346) and Poitiers (1355). After his death, his grandson became the king of England as Richard II, because his son Edward, the Black Prince, had died the year before. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 8th Edition, Oxford University Press, 2010.

Twentieth-century historians tended to study peasants with the assumption that using force against the King was both illegitimate and disruptive. This viewpoint may be a result of the tendency to study history from the King's perspective. Nevertheless, one of the great achievements of history in the last century has been the involvement of scholars in the study of archives, which are generally royal ones. In any event, the royal view of the illegitimacy of using force against the king was rarely questioned; this is evident even in the vocabulary employed to designate that use of force, 'rebellion' and 'revolt.' The modern dislike for violence, in opposition to the medieval love of war and the depiction of nobles as those who fight, has also resulted in a somehow obsolete disapproval of revolt.

Such an attitude towards social unrest is made clear in the attempt to make broad distinctions between reform and revolt and the explicit belittling of rebels for acting in a chaotic or vengeful rather than political way. Even the most exhaustive studies of the acts taken in the course of a revolt, concerned themselves not with the causes of the revolt or how it propagated in the whole country, but how members of the gentry used it to spread their power on the local level through feud and robbery. Recent works that have addressed the political possibilities of violence are rather exceptional.

As a result, contrary to royal standpoints, viewpoints and accounts, that often conflicted with royal ones, have received little attention or have been dismissed as self-serving. Most recent historians

do not distinguish between levels of force, identifying any display of arms as ‘near civil war’ and any use of arms against royal followers as ‘revolt’ or ‘civil war.’ Medieval English nobles, however, drawing legal discourses and political antecedents at home and abroad, legitimated the use of force for particular purposes, distinguishing between varying targets and the intensity of violence. Even kings often referred to their troubles with their nobles as wars rather than revolts.

This work attempts to differentiate between sophisticated concepts of class conflict and endeavours to treat violence as part of medieval English politics rather than a sign of its failure. The medieval understanding of violence as a political implement, combined with the presupposition that supports the supremacy of the law, helps explain the prevalence of revolt, and to a certain extent, legitimizes it.

A major goal of this work, then, is to try to rebuild the viewpoint of the medieval English working class as it regarded the king and his nobles, rather than the other way round, to consider their notions of law and government along with their more personal agendas. Magnates had substantial levels of administrative and judicial skill. This had effect both in their lordships and in royal government. Given the scarcity of sources produced explicitly by subjects, reconstructing both baronial ideas and popular ones is remains problematic. Yet, there is enough evidence in surviving literature, documents, and chronicles, as well as in analysis of popular action to justify the attempt.

Indeed, there were many occurrences of revolt in diverse regions of the Kingdom. However, despite dissimilarities in circumstances and the culture of each area, revolt in medieval England was a last resort carried out according to inherent rules, and its recurrence had an important effect on English kingship and government and resulted changes in the idea of violence itself from simple outlawry to indubitable defence of rights.

This work attempts to investigate the phenomenon of revolt that prevailed in the entire Kingdom during the late medieval period. Among the scarce works dealing with the subject, three sources provide essential backgrounds for the study of political violence. In *King, Parliament, and Public Finance in Medieval England to 1369*, G.L. Harris traces the main shifts in royal government, with the formation of new financial institutions to provide funding for war, the growth of Parliament as a means for the king to gain consent to taxation, and the resultant development of political community.

In *War, Justice, and Public Order*, Richard Kaeuper explains how the development of the legal state and royal claims to provide justice in the thirteenth century combined with the demands of war in the fourteenth century that led to over taxation when the royal purse could not afford to finance war any longer. Recent work pervasively focus on personality and patronage, which is related to the prevalence of studying only one reign or even one individual at a time. The most common form of medieval English political history writing since about 1970 has been dedicated to biography. As a result, one can notice a more or less sophisticated picture of the political

weakness of particular kings and of the importance of patronage links and individual grievances in the events of kingdom-wide politics in particular reigns, which constitutes an important corrective to previous constitutional and institutional histories that ignored social and cultural trends. In *The Law of Treason* J.G. Bellamy sets forth the changing legal status of opposition to the king from the late thirteenth century through the fifteenth century, indicating how treason became more defined and its punishment more severe beginning in the early fourteenth century onwards.

The existence of good comprehensive studies has provided researchers in the field with some data that enable them to compare different periods. It is now possible to investigate the long-term atmosphere of kingdom-wide politics, with special focus on social unrest as evidence of the existence of class-consciousness among the working class.

This study claims authenticity in its interpretations of political failure by not focusing on the role of individuals. Although the occurrence of resistance was clearly rested on royal failure, kings did not all fail in the same way, nor were barons equally self-seeking; the definition of failure and reaction to it definitely need to be approached differently.

The personalities and personal incentives of both kings and leading rebels are important. It is important to understand the extent to which personalities and personal agendas dominated in certain political crises, what ideas and structures of government, and what societal organization contributed in shaping them, and why some rebels earned significant levels of support among the country while others did not. Comparison and the attempt to cover such a vast area of land makes



the duty of research quite difficult and might involve a certain degree of generalization for the sake of seeing the general picture, a method only possible with the existence of exhaustive studies of the events.

Gaillard Thomas Lapsley argues that constitutional historians have traditionally focused on resistance: “from Magna Carta <sup>2</sup> to the end of the middle Ages, and indeed long after that, the central problem of constitutional history is how to restrain a King who broke the law”. This work rather focuses primarily on conflict, on the repeated use of violence, rather than in documenting a more peaceful and continuous strife to gain control over institutions.

Christine Carpenter supports a reintegration of ‘constitutional’ history, the history of political and governmental structures and the beliefs of those who participate in them about how those structures should operate, with the history of politics and institutions. She points out the quasi-dogmatism of older models of constitutional and institutional history, their tendency to impose the views and judgments of the present on the past and their tendency to disregard the impact of personalities and societal structures. She also exposes the limitations of research since World War II, in providing a useful synthesis.

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<sup>2</sup> Magna Carta is a document officially stating the political and legal rights of the English people, that King John was forced to sign in 1215 (often referred to as the basis for modern English law) Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 8th edition, Oxford University Press, 2010.

This study relies both on new sources as well as old ones that have been re-examined. The most significant new sources are the extensive legal records of the trials of rebels. Scholars have used these judicial records for at least half a century and isolated cases have become fairly well known, but no systematic investigation other than for individual periods of revolt has been carried out. This work attempts to analyse occurrences of revolts, in order to understand what sort of activities took place during them and develop some knowledge of what individuals knew about Kingdom-wide politics and why they had chosen to participate in resistance. Legal records, combined with records involving forfeitures and pardons, have enabled the analysis of participation in revolt with regard to geography, status, and personal influence of rebels. In addition to these archival records, this study uses some chronicles of medieval England with an attempt to avoid the influence their pro-baronial biased character. This last group of sources are especially important for understanding the theoretical background of revolt and its connection with baronial statements and actions.

During the late Middle Ages, a substantial portion of the English nobility and community expressed dissatisfaction with the rule of their Kings and took forcible action to express such discontent, struggling, often successfully, to change the course of English politics and government. This work reflects upon the context of resistance, what developments in Kingship, culture, and society set the stage for the particular expression of opposition. Then, it provides an

overall description of resistance, with the aim of demonstrating when and how opposition formed, what actions royal opponents took to express their discontent, what successes they had and for how long, and how swiftly and abruptly force was brought to bear against the government. This is followed by a discussion of the character and level of reform: how governments implemented changes in their policies, and what new structures they proposed. There is also an analysis of participation in revolt, or who joined the leading opponents in revolt, from what parts of the country, from what social ranks, and for what reasons.

This work is divided into four chapters. The first is rather theoretical; it attempts to explain how different theorists and historians approached the phenomenon of social unrest during the late medieval period, and it describes the conflictual relationship between the different social classes in both villages and urban areas.

The second chapter elucidates the earliest occurrences of dispute between peasants and lords. Documents used to illustrate such conflictual relationship between members of the different social classes include a petition, judicial complaints presented by oppressed members of the labouring class, and an analysis of a poem narrating how tyrannized workmen failed to voice their grievances in front of the law, and returned to their villages empty-handed.

The third chapter further illustrates the main causes behind such tumultuous period, such as labour shortage caused by the Great Famine and the ensuing Black Death and the landowners' refusal to pay higher<sup>9</sup>

wages, which was the natural outcome of the increase in demand for labour. It also describes in detail the strategies adopted by the villeins<sup>3</sup> and free labourers to counter the lords' attempts to keep the pre-plague wages. The strained relationship between the lords and the peasants culminated in the revolt of 1381 whose colossal character supports the idea of a class-conscious movement against the tyranny of the upper class.

The last chapter lays focus on the tense relationship between the social classes with more occurrences of revolt in different regions of the Kingdom. It also attempts to approach the issue of class struggle and class-consciousness from a more or less different perspective, with focus on the literature produced during this period that demonstrates the existence of a class-conscious section of the English society ready to fight for its rights.

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<sup>3</sup> A villein is an unfree peasant standing as the slave of a feudal lord but free in legal relations with respect to all others. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 8th edition, Oxford University Press, 2010.

# **Chapter One**

## **Popular Politics and Social Conflict**

### **in Late Medieval England**

This chapter attempts to answer questions about how historians, with their different biases and tendencies, interpreted the conflictual relationship between the social classes in late medieval England. This chapter also analyses such a tense relationship both in rural and urban areas.

One of the basic assumptions of this work is that late medieval England witnessed a long process of working-class formation. Local and regional working-class figures were central to that period and continued to be so until early modern popular politics. They remained an important part of working class-consciousness.

This might be in contradiction with the idea that the Industrial Revolution was the gateway to modernity, and the basis of an interpretation that made class-consciousness implausible in pre-industrial society. However, modern historians suggest that class influenced popular politics for centuries before the Industrial Revolution. Far from emerging out of nothing following the Industrial Revolution, class took new forms through the history of England.

Some even claim that ‘Studies of class formation have long been hampered by modern social historians’ strange obsession with the nation state’.<sup>4</sup>

Since the late nineteenth century, European socialist historians linked their political agendas to the transformed *national* identities of the late medieval period. Social historians, however, focused on the single definition of class-identity. In fact, medieval rebellions played a decisive part in the making of early modern England. This argument extends to a redefinition of early modern England, based on which class-consciousness and class struggle are pertinent features of medieval English society.

Peasants were the major component of the late medieval English society, and were of three sorts. First, there were serfs who were owned by the lords and had no right to leave the land in which they dwelt. Second, there were free labourers who owned nothing but the power to work the land, and hence depended on the lords to employ them in return for wages fixed by the law. A third category consisted of free peasants who owned parcels of land sold to them by the lord, especially after the inevitable rise in wages that followed the Black Death, but who owed services to the local lord during fixed periods of the year, mainly during harvest seasons.

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<sup>4</sup> Andy Wood, *Riot, Rebellion and Popular Politics in Early Modern England*, Palgrave, New York, 2002, p. 102

## I. Approaches to Popular Politics

How did ordinary people in later medieval England express their interests and values? Did they exercise political power? Because the bulk of the population lacked formal political rights, popular politics did not involve them in the national government. Yet, this does not mean that ordinary people were powerless. By virtue of their crucial role in the economy, and their sheer numbers, they made their interests known to their rulers through legal and illegal means.

Marxist writers<sup>5</sup> have described these activities as class conflict or class struggle. However, popular politics is a more inclusive description of disputes, conflicts, and expressions of interest that were sometimes class against class, for instance peasants against manorial lords. Conflicts also involved factions within particular social groups, or alliances between them. These disputes were sometimes about economic matters, such as the rent and fines paid for peasant holdings, sometimes about legal and personal rights and sometimes about privileges.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, all these issues can be understood as political in the broadest

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<sup>5</sup> Marxism is the political and economic theories of Karl Marx (1818-83) which explain the changes and developments in society as the result of opposition between the social classes. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 8th Edition, , Oxford University Press, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Cliff Slaughter, *Marxism, Ideology, and Literature*, Macmillan Press, London, 1980 p.109

meaning of the word. The outcome of these disputes determined the balance of power within society. Their outcome determined who accumulated wealth, and who did not; who was protected by the law and who was not; and who elected a town council, and who did not. The study of popular politics in medieval England has been strongly influenced by Marxist ideas. Yet, what are the strengths and weaknesses of the Marxist approach in this regard?

Marx's ideology is based on the idea that all societies are divided into two main conflicting classes. In modern industrial society, these classes are workers and capitalist employers who are in conflict over the level of wages. In medieval society, however, the classes were peasants and lords who strove over wages and the amount of money paid for land rent.

Karl Marx saw that class society rose out of the organisation of economy, which made conflict between classes prevalent. However, class divisions of modern societies are clearer to depict than in medieval ones, especially if evaluated with the criteria of today's society. Nowadays, capitalist employers have the monopoly of the means of production, and therefore workers, who own little beyond their skills and ability to labour, have to accept employment for wages. Workers can only gain some influence over their employers by organising collectively, and threatening their employers with mass



withdrawal of their labour.<sup>7</sup>

In medieval society, however, some peasants possessed land they could buy after the inevitable rises in wages that followed the Black Death, and the stock and equipment needed to farm it. Why then did they pay rent to lords? Marx argued that peasants did so because they were forced to; they were subject to ‘extra-economic coercion’. The majority of peasants were subject to serfdom, and in the legal theory of medieval England, serfdom denied peasants many basic rights. This category could not marry or leave the place where they were born without their lord’s consent; they could not own property as all their wealth and the products of their labour belonged to their lord; nor could they complain about the lords’ abuses in a royal court. Serfdom and land tenure took many different forms: extra-economic coercion existed because peasants lacked power, they paid rent not because they had freely entered into a contract to do so, but because they could not resist, lords’ pressure.<sup>8</sup>

To what extent, then, did medieval English peasants constitute a class made up of people who recognised their common position in society, and consciously organised to improve or protect it? Within this

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<sup>7</sup> Rosemary Horrox and W. Mark Ormrod, ed., *A Social History of England, 1200–1500*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006, p. 2

<sup>8</sup> Joel Mokyr, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Economic History, Volume 2*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003, p.465

context, Marx described peasants as ‘potatoes in a sack’, sharing a common position but lacking the incentive and means to organise politically.<sup>9</sup> He argued for the revolutionary potential of the peasantry to end the feudal system by actively resisting the demands of their lords.<sup>10</sup>

For medieval England, it has been argued that peasants unintentionally brought about historical change, excluding the idea that they ever consciously organised with revolutionary change in mind. Marxist historians, by contrast, have discussed the nature and degree of class conflict within medieval society; their concern was also focused on how this conflict helped bring about the end of the feudal economy in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and its replacement by the capitalist economy and society.<sup>11</sup>

A more or less persuasive application of Marx’s ideas is presented in a series of articles by Robert Brenner,<sup>12</sup> in which he argues that class structure and class conflict are the key to explain the

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<sup>9</sup> Karl Marx, ‘*The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*’, in Shanin, ed., *Peasants and Peasant Societies*, translated and published by Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1937, p. 332.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> S. H. Rigby, *op. cit.*, p. 66

<sup>12</sup> T. H. Aston and C. H. E. Philpin, eds., *The Brenner Debate Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987, pp. 10-12.

long-term pattern of development in England starting from the medieval period. For Brenner, the social effect of demographic change, such as the fall in population levels resulting from the Black Death, and of commercial developments, such as the increased marketing of grain, were determinant factors for the balance of class forces between lords and peasants. The power of each class was the result of their internal unity and ability to organise.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, the path of development towards capitalism that was followed in England was the unintended outcome of late medieval struggles between lords and peasants, struggles that left the peasantry free but without full ownership rights to their land.

Relying on the research of other historians to draw conclusions about the conditions of life in medieval England is less consistent than combining modern theories and ideas about class, serfdom and historical development with detailed study of primary sources. For instance, some historians, like Brenner, assert that class division between lord and peasant was the most fundamental criterion in late Medieval England, while others like R. H. Hilton explored the complexities of rural social structure in the late medieval period. These include the differences of wealth amongst peasant tenants and the presence of large numbers of servants, labourers and artisans in village

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 253

society. Data of this kind can only be found in primary sources.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, rather than simply stating that peasants were coerced into serfdom, Hilton studied how serfdom was enforced in practice, and the multiple forms it took. In addition, rather than simply asserting that class conflict was important, the conflict Hilton described was documented in detail. Such studies of popular conflicts in the period between 1200 and 1450, including rural disputes over serfdom, urban disputes over political and economic rights remain extremely influential.<sup>15</sup>

In addition, in order to explain their view of social tensions and long-term patterns of change, Marxist approaches offer two general contributions to describe popular political conflicts in the medieval period. First, they claim that structures, such as property and law are social constructs invented and managed by people. They are therefore subject to change over time and are effected by political power rather than being neutral administrative systems. This is a particularly important point to make with regard to the medieval period, when the right to hold courts and enforce law belonged to private individuals as well as to the royal government; and rights to land were extremely complex and negotiable. Second, the work of ~~Marxist historian such as~~

<sup>14</sup> William H. Sewell Jr., *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005, p. 30

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

Hilton have drawn attention to the power and agency of ordinary people, an approach that has been described as '*history from below*'.<sup>16</sup>

By contrast, the traditional political history of medieval England focused on formal politics, and thus largely ignored the contribution and experiences of ordinary people, apart from their occasional participation in large-scale open revolt.<sup>17</sup>

Yet, are Marxists the only thinkers to have dealt with medieval popular politics? In fact, historians such as Christopher Dyer and Rosamond Faith, for instance, have stressed the inequalities and power relationships between lord and peasant without using an overtly Marxist framework. Edmund Fryde's survey of peasant rebellion and peasant discontents in the 150 years after the Black Death is written without any explicit reference to Marx's ideas or the concept of class. Others have challenged the approach taken by Marxist historians more directly.

Four main strands of criticism illustrate alternative ways of viewing popular politics: The first trend argues that class, and therefore class conflict, is an inappropriate categorization of social groups in the medieval period. The second puts forward that urban society and the conflicts within it sit uneasily with a scheme that stresses rural

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<sup>16</sup> Jeremy Black, Donald M. MacRaid, *Studying History*, Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire, 2007 p.114

<sup>17</sup> William H. Sewell Jr., *op. cit.*, p. 33

economic relations. The third view is that even within rural society, the degree of exploitation and conflict between lords and peasants has been greatly overestimated. The fourth sees that many conflicts were between ordinary people and the state, over issues such as taxation, and not between different classes or strata within society.<sup>18</sup>

Certainly, in medieval thought, society was not perceived as made up of conflicting classes, but instead, as mentioned earlier, as a society of orders divided into three groups: the priesthood who pray, the knighthood who fight, and the labourers who work. Each order was interdependent, relying on the others and performing a vital function for society as a whole. Society was both harmonious and unchanging, with each group keeping to its proper place.

No historian accepts this self-portrayal of medieval society as such: clearly, there was conflict between social groups and changes in social structure over time. However, many would argue that medieval society was not structured into classes defined by their economic position.<sup>19</sup>

Patricia Crone claims that ‘preindustrial societies were not class

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<sup>18</sup> Edmund B. Fryde, *Peasants and Landlords in Later Medieval England*, Sutton, Stroud, 1999, p. 156.

<sup>19</sup> Rosemary Horrox and W. Mark Ormrod, ed., *op. cit.* p 1

societies by any definition’ and that ‘since there were no modern-style classes in the past, there was no modern-style class struggle either’. Instead, she argues that pre-industrial societies were structured by political rather than economic relationships. Power and prestige determined people’s status and thus influenced their level of wealth, and not vice versa. As status was often hereditary and defined by law, social mobility was restricted. It is this recognition of the different origins of social difference that prevented many historians from using the term ‘class’ with regard to medieval society, preferring instead to talk about status groups.<sup>20</sup>

While this is to some extent merely a dispute about terminology, there are also real differences of understanding. Ultimately, Marxists believe that class interests are an expression of economic interests; while historians who prefer to talk about status groups see social difference deriving from other sources: privilege, prestige and political power itself.

Both the ‘functional’ model of relatively static and harmonious social orders and the Marxist model of two conflicting classes give a cursory explanation of the difference between rural and urban society in the medieval period. Yet, by definition, towns differ from the countryside in their economic and political structures. This leads to

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<sup>20</sup> Patricia Crone, *Pre-industrial Societies, Anatomy of the Pre-modern World*, Oneworld Publications, London, 2003, pp. 101-103.

some confusion, with urban historians varying in how they classify the main social groups within towns, and in the degree to which they consider the presence of conflict in that period. Some historians have seen urban political arrangements marked by the political dominance of mercantile oligarchs, and the position of the journeymen and the marginalised poor within the urban economy as naturally dysfunctional and as necessarily generating conflict.<sup>21</sup> For R. B. Dobson, the attempt by the *communitas* to challenge the power of the ruling merchant oligarchy constitutes ‘one of the major themes in the constitutional history of the late medieval town’.<sup>22</sup>

On the other hand, many historians argue that medieval English town life lacked movements that sought radical social or political change. For them, although urban society was profoundly unequal, urban social and political structures were strengthened by a ‘central psychological prop’, that of ‘the individual’s inescapable respect for authority’ and the belief that to disobey a parent, a lord, a master or magistrate was ‘to commit a sin’. Urban political conflict is also seen in terms of protest about the *personal* corruption of individual town rulers rather than being generated by a clash of fundamental political principles or by a desire for structural change in town government. Some believe that it was in the countryside rather than in the towns that

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<sup>21</sup> R. B. Dobson, *Peasants’ Revolt of 1381*, op. cit., p. 235

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 284



radical ideas challenging the prevailing hierarchy of wealth and power were to be found.<sup>23</sup>

The nature of social conflict in the countryside remains subject to debate. For instance, the extent and severity of serfdom have been questioned, and the impact of manorial lords on the lives of tenants has been judged negative, irrelevant, or even positive. In legal theory, serfdom was undoubtedly a harsh institution. However, many peasants in medieval England cannot be described as unfree. The latest estimate suggests that in 1300 more tenants held land by free than by unfree tenure. Even for the unfree, much of the potential harshness of serfdom was mitigated by the power of custom.<sup>24</sup>

Constant conflict would have drained the resources to both lords and tenants; ‘custom’ or usual practice was the compromise that was reached, and despite their superior political power, it seems to have been remarkably difficult for lords to break local custom. Therefore, although in theory servile tenants could not own property, in practice lands were inherited, and money lent and borrowed between tenants. Fines had to be paid for permission to marry or leave the manor, but these were set according to the ability to pay and were sometimes not charged at all. Moreover, although fines varied in size, rents were fixed

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<sup>23</sup> Sylvia Thrupp, *Merchant Class of Medieval London*, op. cit., pp. 14–127

<sup>24</sup> Mark Bailey, *Medieval Suffolk: An Economic and Social History, 1200-1500*, The Boydell Press, Woodridge, 2010, p. 31.

at customary levels. John Hatcher has shown that, as a result, by the early fourteenth century many unfree tenants paid lower rents than people who held land by free tenures.<sup>25</sup>

Lords can be seen as protecting their unfree tenants: they discouraged them from splitting their landholdings into uneconomically small farms, and provided manorial courts in which disputes could be arbitrated, transactions registered, and village agriculture controlled. Ambrose Raftis, founder of the Toronto School of historians, argues that lordly influence was positive, enabling unfree peasants to become increasingly market oriented and prosperous.<sup>26</sup>

Some historians largely dismiss the importance of lord-peasant relations in medieval society and instead stress relationships within the family and the village as central to people's lives. They also lay emphasis on the divisions and conflict within village society between ordinary villagers rather than between lord and tenants.

While on the one hand the class-based approach can be criticised for neglecting divisions within households, communities and social groups, on the other, it could be argued that it underestimates forces for unity. Some complaints, particularly about taxation, united the ordinary

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<sup>25</sup> J. Hatcher, 'English serfdom and villeinage towards a reassessment', *Past and Present*, Vol. 90, February 1981, pp. 3-39

<sup>26</sup> J. Raftis, *Peasant Economic Development within the English Manorial System*, McGill Queen's University Press, Quebec, 1997, p. 96.

population as a whole against the central government.<sup>27</sup>

Resistance to taxation was an element of large-scale popular rebellions in England in 1381 and 1489, when Parliament granted King Henry VII a subsidy of £100,000 to help defend Brittany, an ally of England in its war against France. King Henry sent Percy, Earl of Northumberland, to collect taxes to help raise more money for this campaign. However, many people in Northumberland and Yorkshire claimed to have already paid their part through local taxes. Rebellion broke out in April 1489. The Earl met with the rebels, but a scuffle broke out and he was killed. The rebels then asked for pardon but the King denied it, and instead, sent a large army to the north, led by the Earl of Surrey. The Rebel leader, John Chambre was hanged for treason, and the rebels found a new leader in Sir John Egremont. Unfortunately for the rebels, Egremont proved unreliable and fled to the Court of Margaret,<sup>28</sup> Duchess of Burgundy who opposed King

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<sup>27</sup> S. H. Rigby, *op. cit.*, p. 69

<sup>28</sup> Margaret of York (3 May 1446 – 23 November 1503) – also by marriage known as Margaret of Burgundy – was Duchess of Burgundy as the third wife of Charles the Bold and acted as a protector of the Duchy after his death. She was a daughter of Richard Plantagenet, third Duke of York, and Cecily Neville, and the sister of two Kings of England, Edward IV and Richard III. Her brother, the Duke of Clarence, had been executed by Edward IV in 1478 and her younger brother Richard, who took the throne as Richard III was killed in 1485 at the Battle of Bosworth by Henry Tudor, Earl

Henry's rule.

It is difficult to argue that the government was attacked simply because it represented the ruling class. The interests of the government and manorial lords were not identical; in fact, they could be in direct opposition: paying tax impoverished the peasantry, reducing their ability to pay rent to landlords. Furthermore, it was not only taxation that led ordinary people to criticise the state: the royal legal system was subject to attack during the 1381 Revolt, as well as the private courts of manorial lords, with the rebels directing their actions against royal laws, courts, and lawyers. Rebels complained about misgovernment, favouritism, and corruption in 1381 and during Cade's Rebellion of 1450, while in the thirteenth century, peasants became involved in the baronial movement that challenged the royal government between 1258 and 1267, sometimes out of loyalty to their lords, sometimes out of self-interest, and sometimes perhaps out of principle.<sup>29</sup>

Being aware of these problems, historians of popular politics and conflict have increasingly turned away from Marxist interpretations, preferring instead to take useful concepts from a range of approaches, and placing greater emphasis on popular culture, including ordinary

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of Richmond who became Henry VII. With the death of Richard, the House of York ceased to rule in England. Margaret was a supporter of anyone willing to challenge Henry Tudor.

<sup>29</sup> G. O. Sayles, *The Functions of the Medieval Parliament of England*, The Hambledon Press, London, 1988, p. 148.

people's understanding of religious ideas and national politics, as well as their economic position. Previously, writers from both ends of the political spectrum had rejected the idea that peasants showed independence of thought or adopted a radical outlook.<sup>30</sup> Despite arguing for the radical impact of peasant rebellion and resistance, Hilton has seen peasant ideology as essentially conservative, writing that 'the ruling ideas of medieval peasants seem to have been the ideas of the rulers of society as transmitted to them in innumerable sermons about the duties and the characteristic sins of the various orders of society'.<sup>31</sup> Some authors are even more dismissive, suggesting that 'peasants did not easily develop common aims above the local level, let alone political organisation'.<sup>32</sup>

Paul Freedman in *Images of the Medieval Peasant* illustrates how serfdom was criticised by medieval intellectuals across Europe, and explores how peasants used ideas of reciprocity taken from the society of the orders, and of equality before God taken from Christianity, to justify their own popular movements. Rather than assuming that a lack of overt social conflict indicates contentment with

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<sup>30</sup> T. H. Aston, *Landlords, Peasants and Politics in Medieval England*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006, p. 269.

<sup>31</sup> R. H. Hilton, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>32</sup> Patricia Crone, *Pre-industrial Societies*, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

the existing order, or the lack of a political consciousness,<sup>33</sup> James Scott in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* uses cross-cultural comparisons to illuminate and reveal the ideological world of subordinate social groups. Similar approaches have begun to influence the study of the English revolts, both rural and urban, with a thorough analysis of the remnants of rebel literature, and legal records that contain important traces of the rebel agenda.<sup>34</sup>

## II. Analysing Conflict in Village Society

Most popular political activity in rural society revolved around local disputes between lord and tenants. To understand these, it is essential to understand the nature of the late medieval manor. The manor was both a unit of landownership and a unit of jurisdiction with its own court, held by a manorial lord. Each manor had its own customs or laws that determined many aspects of village life, for instance tenants' rights of inheritance to land; the level of rent, fines and labour services owed to the lord; and how different types of land and other resources such as common pasture and woodland could be used by the tenants. Hence, manorial customs were not records of rural practices; they were rules and restrictions that determined the

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<sup>33</sup> Paul H. Freedman, *Images of the Medieval Peasant*, Stanford University Press, California, 1999, pp. 22-24

<sup>34</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, Yale University Press, Yale, 2008 - p. 2

population's quality of life: the distribution of wealth and rights to freedom of action.<sup>35</sup>

Customs were depicted as unchanging and 'ancient', but in fact, they were often altered, sometimes officially by the manorial lord with the consent of the jurors of the manorial court, who represented the tenants. Sometimes they were altered by the manorial lord in the face of tenant protests; sometimes by the tenants when the lord was indifferent or when the manor was poorly administered.

Disputes between lords and tenants over customs including the nature of serfdom, were fragmented in the same way that manorial jurisdiction was. They occurred separately in most manors, making it difficult to offer a general history. English manors are well documented from the late thirteenth century onwards because of the large number of manorial court rolls that survive, and these rolls reveal much evidence of disputes between lords and tenants, as well as between tenants. Tensions arose within the structure of the manor because on the one hand, it was in lords' interests to maximise income drawn from land and tenants. On the other hand, it was in tenants' interests to increase their income by paying as little as possible to their lord in money, goods or labour, and by using the land and resources within the manor

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<sup>35</sup> John Malcolm, *William Bean, From Lord to Patron: Lordship in Late Medieval England*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1989, p.182

to the greatest possible extent.<sup>36</sup>

Nevertheless, disputes were not purely economic. Ordinary people appear to have hated serfdom because of the social stigma it represented, as well as the economic restrictions it entailed. Nor can lords' actions always be explained by a search for profits. For instance, in 1390, when six unfree tenants from Wingham, Kent, delivered hay and straw to their lord Archbishop Courtney in Canterbury, they did so secretly and on foot to avoid revealing their servile status in public. The Archbishop punished them by making them parade round Wingham Church carrying sacks of hay and straw, presumably with the aim of humiliating them and publicly affirming their low personal status, even though they had carried out the work required of them.<sup>37</sup>

Some of the earliest records of lord–peasant tensions, dating from the early decades of the thirteenth century are cases from the royal courts over whether particular tenants were servile or not. Serfdom was not new in this period, but it was becoming more and more precisely defined in law owing to the growth of the royal legal system to which access was denied to the unfree serf in matters concerning property.

Some cases reveal the extent of lordly power over servile

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 766.



tenants. Tenants complained about their land being seized, physical attacks and theft of goods, arson and imprisonment; all carried out by their lord or his agents. For instance, in 1205 an Essex man was assaulted and robbed of £10 in cash, clothing, and jewellery on his way to market before being thrown into the Abbot of Waltham's jail. His attackers were the Abbot's servants who denied robbery because, according to them, the man was the Abbot's villein or serf, and thus technically there was no robbery. If a victim in a case like this was judged a free man, he could have legal remedy in the royal courts, but if proved unfree, the case would be dismissed because legally no crime had been committed since the man and his property belonged to his lord.<sup>38</sup>

Disputes over status could involve whole manors rather than just individuals. One strategy was to claim the manor was part of the 'ancient demesne', land that had belonged to the King at some time in the past. Rents, fines and services owned by tenants on these manors could not be altered, even if the manor had subsequently passed into the hands of another lord. The usual way of attempting to prove ancient demesne status was to appeal to the Domesday Book, which recorded manor owners just before and after the Norman Conquest.<sup>39</sup> An appeal

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<sup>38</sup> R. H. Hilton, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

<sup>39</sup> The Norman Conquest refers to the events of 1066, the most famous date in English history, when the Normans defeated the English and took control of England. William, Duke of Normandy, landed with his army at Pevensey in south-east England and

of ancient demesne required significant organisation by villagers including some initial understanding of the laws in these matters and the collection of funds to hire lawyers and travel to London. There are scattered appeals from the mid-thirteenth century onwards, for instance in 1260 by the tenants of Mickleover, Derbyshire, by the tenants of the Priory of Harmondsworth in 1278, and by the tenants of Ogbourne, Wiltshire, in 1309.<sup>40</sup>

In 1377, there was a rush of cases involving at least forty manors from Wiltshire, Hampshire, Surrey, Sussex and Devon in what seemingly constituted an organised movement. Alarmed manorial lords petitioned Parliament to repeal it before peasant aspirations ran out of control.

Most of these cases brought before the royal court were unsuccessful. Yet appeals did occasionally succeed: the tenants of Crondall, Hampshire, who had been disputing their status since at least 1280, had their ancient demesne status recognised in 1364, thus fixing the payments their lord demanded. This manor had not been in royal

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defeated the English under King Harold II at the Battle of Hastings. King Harold was killed, and William became King William I of England. By 1070, the Normans had firm control of the whole country. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 8th Edition, Oxford University Press, 2010.

<sup>40</sup> S. H. Rigby, *English Society in the Later Middle Ages: Class, Status, and Gender*, Macmillan Publishers Limited, London, 1995 p. 105.

hands at the time of Domesday Book,<sup>41</sup> but it had belonged to the King sometime in the ninth or early tenth century, which helped them defeat the lords.<sup>42</sup>

Historians have long suspected that labour services were performed with a deliberate negligence. David Stone has recently proved this was so on the manor of Wisbech Barton. Comparing the labour productivity of workers hired for wages and tenants performing labour services between 1341 and 1389, he found that wage workers were consistently more productive, suggesting that the poor performance of labour services was endemic.<sup>43</sup> Poor work was one strategy; clear refusal to perform services also appears to have been surprisingly common. In twenty-one surviving court sessions from Ramsey Abbey between 1279 and 1311, R. H. Hilton found 146 ‘separate convictions for the deliberate non-performance of labour services, apart from cases of deliberate cases of bad work’.<sup>44</sup> In the St

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<sup>41</sup> The Domesday Book is a written record of the ownership and value of land in England in 1086. It was made for William the Conqueror in order to calculate the size and value of the king’s property and the tax value of other land in the country. Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 8th edition, Oxford University Press, 2010.

<sup>42</sup> R. H. Hilton, T. H., Alton, *The English Rising of 1381*. UK: Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987, p. 56.

<sup>43</sup> David Stone, ‘Productivity of hired and customary labour’, *The Economic History Review*, Vol. 50, January 2003, pp. 640-656

<sup>44</sup> R. H. Hilton, ‘Peasant movements in England before 1381’, *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1949, pp. 57-8.

Albans' manor of Park, groups of tenants failed to perform labour services in 1245, 1265, the 1270s, 1309 and every year between 1318 and 1327.<sup>45</sup>

Rather than being individual actions, historian Rosamond Faith argues that these were coordinated labour strikes. Poor performance and tenant resistance were perhaps a reason why labour rents were increasingly commuted into money payments in the first half of the fourteenth century.

On some manors, such as Park, tenants fought their lords on a number of fronts. Tenants not only withheld labour services from the abbot of St Albans, but also poached partridges, hares, rabbits and fish in his forests, took timber from his woodland, and used hand mills in opposition to his monopoly of milling. The dispute over the use of hand mills stretched back as far as the Abbey surviving manorial records, which began in 1237. The townspeople of St Albans were also in conflict with the abbey over these issues. They united in action, symbolically invading woodland and returning with greenery and a live rabbit, and entering the Abbey to break up and distribute the confiscated hand mills that had been cemented into the floor of the

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

abbot's parlour as a sign of his lordly rights.<sup>46</sup>

In Darnell, Cheshire, in the 1320s and 1330s, tenants of the Abbey of Vale Royal also disputed their lord's monopoly of milling, as well as denying their servile status and opposing restrictions placed on the leasing of land. They presented their case to King Edward III on different instances, and even 'went as far afield as Rutlandshire, in arms, to seek out and attack the abbot and his entourage'.<sup>47</sup>

The drastic fall in population levels from 1348 onwards following the plague increased the availability of land for those who survived, strengthening tenants' bargaining power against their lords. There was, however, no immediate weakening of serfdom. In fact, many lords exploited their remaining tenants more heavily in their attempt to retain previous levels of manorial revenue from a smaller number of surviving serfs.<sup>48</sup>

Yet, between 1381 and the mid-fifteenth century, serfdom virtually disappeared from England. It was never abolished, and a few people retained hereditary servile status into the sixteenth century, but

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<sup>46</sup> Rosamond Faith, *The English Peasantry and the Growth of Lordship*, Leicester University Press, London, 1997, pp. 63–8.

<sup>47</sup> R. H. Hilton, 'Peasant Movements in England before 1381', *op. cit.*, p. 59

<sup>48</sup> R. H. Britnell, *The Commercialisation of English Society, 1000-1500*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1996, p. 232.

it was no longer widespread. How then did serfdom disappear?

There were three possible routes to freedom, all of which required deliberate action on the part of servile tenants. One was to purchase manumission, official recognition of freedom from the lord. Manumission fines were relatively expensive, usually £10 or £20 in the fifteenth century. This route was never a common one, perhaps used most often by wealthy individuals who wanted to be sure their bond to a lord was broken.

The second route was the renegotiation of land tenure, either by individuals or by groups of tenants. By the early fifteenth century, many landholdings lay vacant and lords were increasingly desperate to retain their remaining tenants. Labour services were permanently commuted and servile descriptions removed from tenurial obligations, so that villagers became personally free tenants holding land by customary tenures such as copyhold, as happened for instance on the abbey of Westminster's manors. This occurred quietly on many manors, with little or no comment in the records. Lords did not want to protest about the concessions they were offering to tenants, probably in the hope they could revive old practices when the economic situation improved.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> B. F. Harvey, *Westminster Abbey and its Estates*, Clarendon Press, London, 1977, pp. 268–77.

The third and most common route was flight: simply to leave, illegally, the manor of servitude and take up land elsewhere on different terms as a free tenant. Court rolls from the 1380s to the 1440s show an unusually active land market and high turnover of tenants.

Certainly, the fall in population levels opened up new opportunities for the survivors, but this intensity of mobility can only be fully explained if we take into account many ordinary people's desire to obtain freedom as well as a good landholding. Freedom also brought the right to make flexible economic choices and, as the fifteenth century progressed, only those manors that offered benefits such as low rents, good quality arable land, large areas of common grazing, opportunities to work in rural industry and minimal lordly interference remained fully exploited.<sup>50</sup>

The shortage of tenants placed ordinary people in a strong bargaining position. There were 'rent strikes' against particular manorial dues that tenants felt were unfair or unnecessary, such as the fine to recognise a new lord that tenants of the bishop of Worcester withheld in 1433; or money payments for commuted labour services that tenants of the nuns of Syon at Cheltenham refused to pay between 1445 and 1452. Similarly, the power of manorial courts was diminished by tenant refusals to pay fines, perform offices or even turn

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<sup>50</sup> Christopher Dyer, 'A Redistribution of Incomes in Fifteenth-century England?', *Past and Present*, Vol. 39, 1968 p. 200.

up at court at all.<sup>51</sup>

Courts remained important for functions that benefited tenants, registering land transfers and regulating village agriculture. Lords who refused to lighten payments or restrictions on tenants were sometimes left with no tenants at all. Others whose manors were situated on poor land or in remote locations suffered the same fate. Some lords even emptied villages deliberately to create large-scale sheep or cattle farms.

Certainly, instances from the 1490s of lords forcefully removing tenants were reported to the inquiry into rural depopulation led by Cardinal Wolsey in 1517.<sup>52</sup> However, the majority of villages that were deserted in the fifteenth century were vacated voluntarily by tenants or their heirs who hoped to find better opportunities elsewhere.

As the power of manorial lords within the village waned in the fifteenth century, many villages and small towns took an increasing responsibility for managing their own affairs through the creation and enforcement of by-laws that regulated not only agricultural practices but also social behaviour. An increased incidence of fines for breaking by-laws in manorial courts might indicate increased disorder, but can also be seen as a sign of changing patterns of regulation, as ordinary

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Nathalie M. Fryde, 'Peasant Rebellion and Peasant Discontents', *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, January 1991, p. 810.



people took on functions of law-keeping that had previously been the function of manorial lords. By the end of the fifteenth century, the common people of England had not only largely managed to abolish serfdom, but had significantly reduced lordly power, redistributed wealth among themselves and taken control of important elements of the legal system.<sup>53</sup>

### III. Urban Social Conflict

If social conflict was inherent in the rural social relations of medieval England and played a crucial role in medieval social change, a question that comes to mind is the following: How significant was social and political conflict within the English medieval town? What were the causes of popular unrest if any? How successful was it in achieving its aims?

Urban social and political conflicts can be divided into two main types: those that took place in towns that had yet to win self-government from their lords, and those where the burgesses had won such freedom and where unrest was targeted against the town rulers. In the seigniorial boroughs, the townsmen were far less likely to achieve the administrative independence enjoyed by the burgesses of the royal towns. In particular, it was amongst boroughs with monastic overlords

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<sup>53</sup> L.R. Poos, *Rural Society after the Black Death: Essex 1350-1525*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, p. 134.

that the lords' manorial powers seem to have been most resented and became a source of friction and conflict.<sup>54</sup>

Monastic lords tended to retain control of town courts and of the urban economy, by means of the appointment of stewards<sup>55</sup> and bailiffs<sup>56</sup> and wanted to maintain an immediate financial interest in the town through the direct collection of rents and tolls rather than receiving the revenues via the townsmen's elected officials. Such rights were not so extreme as to restrict urban growth within monastic boroughs, but they remained an irritating symbol of the townsmen's lack of independence compared with the burgesses of towns that were often less impressive in terms of their population and wealth.

Bury St Edmunds is a classic instance of a town where the lack of civic freedom resulted in recurrent outbreaks of conflict with its monastic overlord. From the late twelfth century onwards, the townsmen clashed with the abbey over the election of town officials and the collection of taxes. Tensions periodically erupted into violence, with assaults on the abbey and its servants. In 1327, for instance, Bury

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<sup>54</sup> Bertie Wilkinson, *The Later Middle Ages in England 1216 -1485*, Routledge, New York, 2014, p. 188

<sup>55</sup> In late medieval England, a steward was a person employed to manage another person's property, especially a large house or land. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 8th edition, Oxford University Press, 2010.

<sup>56</sup> A bailiff refers to a law officer whose job is to take the possessions and property of people who cannot pay their debts. Ibid.

was one of a number of monastic boroughs including St Albans, Abingdon and Dunstable where the townsmen used the weakening of central government resulting from the deposition of Edward II <sup>57</sup> as an opportunity to press their claims. At Bury, the townsmen allied to the abbey's rural tenants, plundered the abbey and elected their own alderman <sup>58</sup> who was not presented to the abbot for confirmation. These events were to be repeated during the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 when the townsmen of Bury again attacked the abbey and demanded that the monks restore to them the liberties supposedly granted to them by King Canute (1016-1035), a Danish King of medieval England and the founder of the monastery.<sup>59</sup>

There were similar risings against religious houses in other towns, such as Bridgwater, Dunstable and Peterborough, although not all such risings were necessarily in alliance with local rural rebellions as they were at Bury and St Albans. However, the suppression of the Peasants' Revolt usually meant the end of the towns' ambitions to self-

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<sup>57</sup> Edward II (1284–1327) the king of England from 1307 to 1327, the son of Edward I and the first Prince of Wales. He took his armies to Scotland, but was defeated at the Battle of Bannockburn (1314) by Robert the Bruce. He was a weak king who is said to have upset the English barons, and in 1327 his son Edward III replaced him. Later that year he was murdered. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 8th edition, Oxford University Press, 2010.

<sup>58</sup> An alderman was a senior member of a town, borough or county council, below the rank of a mayor, chosen by other members of the council. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 8th edition, Oxford University Press, 2010.

<sup>59</sup> S. H. Rigby, *op. cit.*, p. 97

government.

Municipal institutions were usually obtained without recourse to force, as in the reigns of Kings Richard I,<sup>60</sup> and John when royal boroughs such as Grimsby took advantage of the crown's financial need to buy charters of self-government. Yet, such liberties could always be suspended if the town was seen as a challenge to royal authority.

Moreover, in many seigniorial boroughs, particularly those with lay lords, such as Boston and Leicester, cooperation was the norm between lord and townsmen. There was no persistent conflict within the monastic boroughs as well.<sup>61</sup>

At Durham, the relationship between the townsmen and their ecclesiastical overlords seems to have been one of peaceful coexistence, while at Westminster the townsmen seem to have been left to order their own affairs so long as the ultimate authority of the

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<sup>60</sup> Richard I (1157–99) the king of England from 1189 to 1199, following his father King Henry II. He is often called Richard the Lionheart or Richard, Coeur de Lion, because of his courage in battle. He spent the first part of his rule abroad fighting in the Third Crusade, at the end of which he reached a peace agreement with Saladin in 1191. On his journey home he was captured and held as a prisoner by the Austrian emperor Henry VI, until a large amount of money was paid for releasing him. He spent his later years fighting against the French, and after his death in battle in 1199 he was replaced as king by his brother John. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 8th edition, Oxford University Press, 2010.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 86

abbot was recognised.<sup>62</sup>

If townsmen on occasion, came into conflict with their lords, the achievement of urban self-government by no means meant an end to urban social conflict. Such conflict sometimes resulted from a clash of economic interests between merchants and master-craftsmen, as in London in 1327 where opposition between saddlers and their dependent lorimers,<sup>63</sup> led to fighting in the streets with the threat of a general strike.

In turn, masters came into conflict with their journeymen, as in Colchester in 1418 where the master-fullers attempted to ensure that their workers did not work up materials in their own right but only as hired labour. Inevitably, wages were a key issue, as at York in the 1420s, where relations between masters and journeymen became so strained that the city council was forced to intervene to raise wages, despite the masters' opposition. Such disputes often involved the formation of separate journeymen's guilds, as in 1303 when the London journeymen-cordwainers rebelled against a wage cut.<sup>64</sup>

However, while economic strife was found within towns, the

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> A maker of bits and metal mountings for horses' bridles; also, a spurrier, and (generally) a maker of small iron-ware and a worker in wrought-iron.

<sup>64</sup> John Kennedy Melling, *London's Guilds and Liveries*, Shire Publications, Buckinghamshire, 2003, p. 101

potential for conflict between masters and employees was reduced by the fact that many of those in waged work were not permanent proletarians but rather took paid work at a particular stage of their life cycle, in their teens and early twenties. Many such servants were related to their employers or came from the same social class.<sup>65</sup>

The fact that the household was the basic unit of production encouraged close personal ties between masters and servants, as can be seen from legacies made to servants in wills. Furthermore, unlike peasant opposition to manorial impositions, that were aimed against some particular landlord, urban economic struggles often lacked a clear target. As a result, when conflict arose in the towns, it often focused on *political* issues, such as the election of borough officials or the claim that town rulers were manipulating the taxation system for their own benefit. Urban political theories and ideals thus play a central role in any assessment of popular movements within medieval English towns.<sup>66</sup>

As emphasised by some historians, the dominant political theory within towns, as within society as a whole, was based on a *descending* concept of political power, in which town rulers owed their legitimacy to some superior political power, ultimately to God. Town mayors thus

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<sup>65</sup> Paul Vinogradoff, *Villainage in England: Essays in English Medieval History*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2010, p. 54

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

made much of the dignity arising from their position as royal officers and the duty of the townsmen to accept their authority.<sup>67</sup>

In social terms, this descending concept of government meant that those appointed as mayor or sheriff<sup>68</sup> of the city should be drawn from the ‘more worthy, more powerful, more good and true, more discreet and more sufficient, and more befitting to occupy’ such office, rather than from middling persons or *mediocre*, let alone the *inferiores* to whom such office would be a burden.<sup>69</sup> Yet, in practice, despite the claims of this explicit theory, daily political practice implicitly embodied an alternative concept of power, an *ascending* concept in which the basis of political authority lay in some form of popular consent.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Samuel Kline Cohn, *op. cit.*, p.216.

<sup>68</sup> Sheriff, a chief officer in a shire, i.e. the ‘shire \*reeve’, representing the crown as its executive before the Norman Conquest. William I separated secular and ecclesiastical courts, thus leaving the sheriff as the king’s power in the county. He summoned and led his shire’s array of soldiery; he also executed all writs, and, for the first century after 1066, judged both criminal and civil cases. But from the time of Henry II, and the emergence of the *curia regis*, his powers were considerably restricted, jurisdiction over civil cases disappearing. His responsibilities thereafter were to investigate allegations of crime from within his shire, to try minor offences, and to hold those accused of serious crimes for the arrival of the justices. Source: Christopher Corèdon, and Ann Williams, *A Dictionary of Medieval Terms and Phrases*, D. S. Brewer, Cambridge, 2004.

<sup>69</sup> Francis Hill, *Medieval Lincoln*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p. 279.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

Thus, mayors were not only royal agents but also municipal *representatives*, while the requirement that town government should be carried out according to custom assumed consent by the commonalty. The need for popular consent could be given explicit description through the requirement that town by-laws and ordinances be made ‘with the assent of the commonalty’.<sup>71</sup> In other words, the choice facing townsmen was not between egalitarian democracy and unquestioning acceptance of the rule of the rich. Rather, it was how to reconcile the existence of the principle of rule by the ‘better sort’ with that of the community’s right to consultation and representation.<sup>72</sup>

These two principles could come into opposition as can be seen at Leicester in 1489 when, in accordance with an act of Parliament, the mayor and twenty-four, along with forty-eight of the ‘wiser’ inhabitants nominated by the mayor and twenty-four, elected Roger Tryng as mayor ‘in the name of the whole community’.<sup>73</sup> The commonalty of the town, who had been described in the act as men of ‘little substance and no discretion’, met in accordance with past custom at an assembly of burgesses and elected Thomas Toutheby as mayor.

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<sup>71</sup> Hudson and Tingey, *The Records of the City of Norwich*, vol. 1, 2000, pp. 30, 64–70.

<sup>72</sup> <sup>72</sup> Christian Drummond Liddy, *War, Politics and Finance in Late Medieval English Towns: Bristol, York, and the Crown*, Boydell Press, Suffolk, 2005, p. 93

<sup>73</sup> *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, vol. 6, p. 432; Bateson, *Records of the Borough of Leicester*, vol. 2, pp. 319, 324–7.



The result of such conflict was, on occasion, a change in the structure of municipal government to provide a greater accountability of town rulers to the commonalty.

At Lynn, conflict in the early fifteenth century between the town's *potentiores* and its *mediocres* and *inferiores* led to concessions by the town rulers, who agreed to consult the lesser inhabitants about the financial charges made on them and to allow them an involvement in the election of officers. The townsmen of Lynn did not reject the rule of the 'better sort': they accepted that mayors should be chosen from the ruling twenty-four and simply sought the right to select two of the twenty-four as candidates for the mayoralty so as to prevent the town rulers from becoming a self-perpetuating elite who tallaged without consultation.<sup>74</sup>

The desire to establish at least some popular influence on town rulers often led to the creation of new town councils, as at Norwich, where conflict between the commonalty and the ruling twenty-four over the mayoral election led, in 1415, to the creation of an additional council of sixty. In London, in 1376, constitutional change took the form of restrictions on the power of the aldermen who ran the city, and the creation of a common council based on guild representation rather than one elected on a district basis. At Exeter such pressure from below led not to the creation of a new council but to the enlargement of the

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<sup>74</sup> S. H. Rigby, *op.cit.*, p. 81.

existing one, with the addition of a further twelve councillors ‘for the commonalty’ to the existing council of twelve.<sup>75</sup>

At York, popular pressure, ranging from petitions to riots, led to changes in the procedure for electing the mayor in 1464, 1473, 1489, 1504 and 1517 and to a formal recognition of the role of the craft guilds as the representatives of the commonalty and their involvement in the elections. The issues underlying political strife are particularly apparent in London disputes in the early 1440s in the conflicts around the candidature of Ralph Holland as the popular candidate for the mayoralty. Here, conflict centred on the basic principles underlying the city’s government, such as the extent of the civic franchise, popular participation in government, the social value of the artisan and equality before the law. Such conflict reveals to historians a rather different conception of town rulers from that presented in the official sources on which they usually depended.<sup>76</sup>

Movements to make town rulers more accountable had some short-term successes in late medieval England, and the ‘descending’ rather than the ‘ascending’ concept of town government that was increasingly triumphant. Thus, in London, the reforms of John of Northampton and the craft guilds that sought to restrict the powers of the city’s aldermen were reversed from 1384 until, in 1394, it was

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

ordained that aldermen should hold office for life.<sup>77</sup>

Nor was the emergence of town councils always associated with the extension of popular involvement in town government. On the contrary, councils could also be used to restrict popular involvement, as at Grimsby, where a council of twelve took on some of the duties once carried out by juries in the borough court. Elsewhere, at Leicester, such councils could replace popular electoral assemblies. They tended to be associated with the introduction of aldermen appointed for life and the restriction of candidature for the mayoralty to aldermen, as at Nottingham (1448), Stamford (1462) and Grantham (1463), or at least to those nominated by the aldermen, as at Hull (1443).

All of these trends culminated in those towns that adopted ‘close corporations’, as at Bristol (1499), Exeter (1504) and Lynn (1524), where the popular element in town government was swept away, councillors and aldermen were co-opted and served in office for life. It is not clear why this shift from an informal plutocracy to a more formal oligarchy<sup>78</sup> should have occurred precisely when the inhabitants of the English countryside were succeeding in throwing off the legal restrictions of manorialism. Less democratic forms of government may

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<sup>77</sup> Paul Strohm, in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Volume 41*. Oxford University Press. Oxford, 2004. p. 41.

<sup>78</sup> Plutocracy refers to a government by the richest people of a country and oligarchy is a form of government in which only a small group of people hold all the power.

have been a response from above to a fear of popular disorder, particularly at election times, as at Colchester in 1430. The reliance of popular movements on the short-term forms of action that were typical of the pre-industrial population often made it difficult for them to defend any gains that were achieved.<sup>79</sup>

Such protests could easily be dismissed as ‘unlawful’ by town rulers, who tended to be backed by the crown, whose main concern was the defence of ‘order’ rather than resolving the issues that gave rise to disorder. Town officials had their own sanctions against those who did not accept their rule: a day in the borough gaol was enough to end the protests of John Astyn of Grimsby, who in 1389 refused to pay his assessment for borough taxation and claimed that he would not be ruled by the mayor but only by his fellows and equals. The borough charters issued by the crown in the Later Middle Ages, that reveal an increasing interest in the internal organization of town government, were also a force for more exclusive forms of government.<sup>80</sup>

Town rulers may also have followed each other in the expansion of the appointment of aldermen for life, in the increasing emphasis of the dignity of office. Finally, while economic trends, particularly the shortage of tenants and labourers, tended to favour the success of the peasants’ struggles in the post-plague period, they might have worked

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<sup>79</sup> Samuel Kline Cohn, Jr., *op. cit.*, p. 46.

<sup>80</sup> H. Rigby, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

*against* the success of urban popular movements. On the one hand, in those towns that were in decline in this period, a shortage of wealthier citizens may have led to a conscious attempt to attract richer townsmen to municipal office by the introduction of more exclusive forms of government. On the other, urban prosperity could also lead to the growth of oligarchy, as in the case of late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Exeter, where the polarisation of wealth associated with the expansion of the cloth trade saw town government becoming increasingly closed and subject to the control of the wealthy.<sup>81</sup>

Accordingly, neither the urban struggles for independence from monastic overlords nor those aimed at making town government more ‘democratic’ were to achieve much long-term success in late medieval England.

Studies of medieval society have moved away from approaches that see popular politics simply as class struggles between lords and peasants; or ones that minimise the impact of such struggles altogether. Instead, ordinary people can be seen as political actors in their own right, actors who usually lacked formal political power, but none the less found many ways of making their interests and ideas known. Social conflicts can be seen not just as an expression of discontent and a force for bringing about change, but also as a window into popular culture and ideas. The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 was an extraordinary

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

event, but to use the words of James Scott, it was a ‘public declaration of the hidden transcript’: a moment when the ideas and feelings of subordinate groups that had previously gone largely undocumented suddenly burst into the public world, and were put into action, and thus into the formal historical record.<sup>82</sup>

Views of serfdom have shifted too: few would argue with the conclusion that many villeins paid less rent per acre than some free tenants. Therefore, the weight of exactions was not the primary factor that made serfdom such a hated institution. Yet, it is irrefutable that serfdom was resisted strongly by many of those who suffered its stigma. It seems likely that serfdom was hated because it restricted action, was unpredictable even within the bounds of custom, and denied the unfree legal redress against lords. This reminds the reader that people did not simply fight against poverty, but for dignity and control in their lives.

Now that village and town social life has been fully described, with focus on the often tense relationship between the different classes, the following chapter aims at presenting the earliest occurrences of disputes, complaints, and eventual coercion of the labouring class over the lower. Such incidents had been recorded in petitions, complaints, and vernacular poetry.

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<sup>82</sup> James C. Scott, *op. cit.*, p.200.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Lord-Peasant Disputes in the**

#### **Early 1300s**

Compared to the fully documented modern history, evidence about what historical events in such a remote period as the late Middle Ages are scarce, and the documents that have survived need to be analysed in order to fully understand these events, without being biased by their authors.

Among these documents are petitions and complaints written by plaintive peasants and other forms of expression such as vernacular poetry, in which the poet voices the grievances of the people, especially when legal means are vain.

Another way of protest against the oppression of the upper classes was open revolt. The most outstanding incident that broke the English political and religious history was the Peasants' Rising of 1381 whose relation to the train of events and the growth and decay of institutions has been traced by many medievalists. It must be admitted that effect on administrative and Parliamentary affairs was almost nothing; its effect on religion was only the casual reaction of events irrelevant to the quarrels of Bishop and Reformer.

However, though the Peasants' Rising was hardly significant to the rest of English affairs, it constitutes an organic part of the history of labour, and throws more light on the hopes and values proper to the working class than any other record of mediaeval times. The work of scholars recently opened new fields of inquiry into the past, and has shown from Manor Rolls and bailiffs' accounts the actual conditions under which the emancipation of the feudal serf took place, a story of profound importance and interest.

Nevertheless, these documents are not specially enlivening or attractive without a thorough and critical reading. The story of this great process in English civilisation that had started at least a hundred years before the 1381 is completed by the events of this Rising, which, in effect, give a human and spiritual interest to the economic facts of the period, showing the peasant as a man rather than a mere item in the bailiffs' records. Once one has read the story of this horrifying summer, a manorial roll of the fourteenth century becomes a record of real life, in which hope and despair, defiance to servile submission, surged up during that century of labour war. It is mostly for this reason that historians do recognise the interest of the Rising even for the understanding of the previous occurrences of revolt, and the English society of the late medieval period as a whole.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> R.B. Dobson, *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, op. cit., p. 23



When the fourteenth century opened, the ‘Manorial’ system i.e. the agricultural system that preceded William the Conqueror’s<sup>84</sup> great census was still alive, though its decay had already begun. This system was based on serfdom; the lord of the manor kept part of the tillage land to be worked by his bailiff for the supply of his own granaries, while the other part was cultivated in small patches by the peasants of the village. These men held their fields on a tenure that was, by custom, out of the landlord’s reach.<sup>85</sup> Nevertheless, their tenure was heavily burdened. They were not freemen of the land, but *villeins* or serfs owing feudal dues of various kinds to the lord, and were obliged to do service many days in the year on the ‘demesne’ i.e. the land under the supervision of the lord’s bailiff. The lord relied on these fixed services for the cultivation of this demesne. On those days that were not claimed by the bailiff, the serf could work on his own parcel of land to support his family and pay the rent due to the lord.

Such were, in brief, the bases on which feudal society stood, and such were the means by which the land was tilled. The relation of

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<sup>84</sup> William I or William the Conqueror (c. 1027–87) the king of England from 1066 to 1087. He was the Duke of Normandy, in northern France, when the English king Edward the Confessor died. William claimed that Edward had promised him the right to be the next king of England. He invaded England and defeated King Harold II at the Battle of Hastings in 1066. Later that year he became king. He gave power and land in England to other Normans, and built many castles to control the English people. Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 8th edition, Oxford University Press, 2010.

<sup>85</sup> William Ashley, *An Introduction to English Economic History and Theory, Part I: The Middle Ages*; 4<sup>th</sup> ed., McMaster University, Ontario, 1909, p. 89.

personal dependence and obligation of personal service in return for land tenure on the part of the *villeins* corresponded in idea to the feudal relation of the Knight to the Baron who leased land to his knights in return of military services in case of war or feud. Such an organised system was meant to prevent anarchy and perpetual social confrontation. It gave rights to both lord and *villein*, for the latter owed only certain fixed services, and was, in principle, not a slave under the lord's eternal command.<sup>86</sup>

Nevertheless, occurrences of lord-peasant conflict make the above assumptions subject to persistent questioning. Despite their occasional aspect, perhaps due to the lack of written traces of other instances of conflict, the instances of social clash below could be taken as evidence of the disturbed social relations between the different strata of Late Medieval English society, and possibly support the thesis of the existence of class-consciousness among the labouring faction of Late Medieval England.

### **I. The Bocking Petition 1300**

In spite of the enormous volume of manorial surviving records, there is but little documentary evidence as to the attitude of the masses of the English peasantry towards their masters and the

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<sup>86</sup> George Macaulay Trevelyan, *England in the Age of Wycliffe*, Longmans, London, 1920, p.185

institutions that determined the nature of their daily life. Both their grievances and whatever causes of satisfaction they may have had remained matters of conjecture until they first became partially articulate in the age of Wycliffe<sup>87</sup> and Langland.<sup>88</sup>

The document appended to this work shows the inhabitants of a manor, in Bocking, Essex. The plaintive seem clearly conscious of their rights and of their common interests, and with a very real grasp of the legal details involved, banding themselves together to formally protest to their lord, the Prior of Christ Church, Canterbury, against the petty tyrannies of an obsessive steward. From this document, one may clearly notice the various ways in which a masterful official was able to use his position to oppress manorial tenants, and ‘rob’ the manorial court of its earlier democratic basis. In this case, the tenants appealed, over the heads of their immediate superiors, to a lord, whom they perhaps had never seen, but whose influence could be clearly perceived. In making their protest, they pleaded the Statute and the Common

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<sup>87</sup> John Wycliffe (c.1330–84) an English writer on religion who criticized various bad practices that were common in the Church at that time. He said that the Bible, not the Church, was the most important religious authority, and was involved in translating the Bible into English. The group who supported his beliefs were called Lollards. Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 8th edition, Oxford University Press, 2010.

<sup>88</sup> William Langland (c. 1330– c. 1386) an English poet whose only known work is *Piers Plowman*, a poem describing a man’s spiritual journey in search of the truth.

Law, as well as the Customs of the Manor.<sup>89</sup>

The petition throws some light on the obscure question of peasant status and has a special significance in that it affords a unique example of an appeal by the customary tenants of a manor to the protection of Magna Carta in their resistance to the steward's abuse of his authority.

The petition written in Anglo-French may date to the first quarter of the fourteenth century, but it certainly does not date to later than 1331. The manor of Bocking Hall in Essex was held by the Prior and Convent of Christ Church, Canterbury, from 1006 until 1540. With other estates in Essex, Suffolk and Norfolk, it formed the 'Custody of Essex,' one of the four groups of manors or "custodies" into which the monastic estates were divided. There was a resident farm-bailiff, and John le Doo, against whom the complaints were laid, who acted as Seneschal or Steward. The 1309 extent of the Manor gives the names of some eighty-six males, so that the population was probably not much less than 500.<sup>90</sup> Anglo-French was the language of the unlearned. Among the tenants there were several who would answer to this description; there were

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<sup>89</sup> Peter Des Roches, *An Alien in English Politics, 1205-1238*, Cambridge University Press, New York, p.161

<sup>90</sup> Judith A. Green, *The Aristocracy of Norman England*, 1997, Cambridge University Press, New York p.107

also a vicar and a chaplain and two other inhabitants described as clerks. A cleric writing to an ecclesiastical dignitary, might, however, be expected to use Latin; but French as the language of the law courts was the natural language of petition. When consideration is given to the legal knowledge shown in the wording of the appeal, it becomes clear that the tenants must have had the advice and help of some person with legal training.<sup>91</sup>

The reply of the Prior is inherent in terms evocative of a royal answer. The Prior had his council for legal and economic affairs, before which he might well have considered both the petition and the reply to be made. No known record is available about how far the grievances of the complainants were redressed. However, it seems that tenants did not receive harsh treatment, and the fact that petition and reply were both carefully copied into the new rental, some years later, might indicate obedience to the instructions given that such abuses of power were not to be repeated.<sup>92</sup>

Six of the eight articles of complaint deal with abuses in connection with the holding of the manorial court. The first of these complaints says that the steward had overridden a custom of the

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<sup>91</sup> Albert C. Baugh and Thomas Cable, *A History of the English Language*, Routledge, London, 2002, p. 105.

<sup>92</sup> Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1994, p. 149.

manor by which certain cases other than indictments, or matters touching the Crown were adjourned at the Court Leet for further consideration by the Capital Pledges at the next three-weekly meeting of the court. It also claims that he has disposed of such cases himself without paying heed to the presentments of the jurors.

The second article of the petition is concerned with the sale and purchase of holdings. The burden of the complaint seems to be that, while free men should be able to sell their holdings to any person, the Steward refused to recognise such sale until payment of a fine had been made.

In Article three, the tenants claim that ameracements<sup>93</sup> should be ‘affeered’ (or assessed by their peers according to the gravity of the offence. They also complain that the steward has refused such assessment and has increased the penalties so heavily as to bring them to ruin and distress, against all reason and contrary to the Great Charter that the Church ought to apply. In the Charter, four classes of peasants (other than clerics are dealt with:

The freeman is amerced for serious offences only, and his punishment should be according to the gravity of the offence. The merchant is not to be amerced so that he loses his merchandise. The

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<sup>93</sup> An amercement is the infliction of a penalty left to the ‘mercy’ of the inflicter; hence the imposition of an arbitrary mulct or fine (originally lighter in amount than fines fixed for specific offences).

villein amerced for an offence against the King's peace should not lose his 'wainage.'<sup>94</sup> In each of the three foregoing cases, the amercements were to be assessed by the oath of honest and lawful men of the neighbourhood. Earls and barons only may not be amerced except by their peers.

The tenants are not likely to be claiming as villeins, a condition they are by no means ready to accept; neither are they concerned solely with amercements of the leet<sup>95</sup> jurisdiction. Therefore, they were as free men, for whom the principle of amercements by peers is not explicitly granted by the Charter. Possibly, they were depending on the chapter of the Great Charter covering the obligations of tenants in chief towards their tenants, and interpreting this as extending the principle of amercement by peers to the manorial courts. It seems more likely that they were expressing what was generally believed to be the tenor of the Great Charter in this respect. They would have been on firmer legal ground, perhaps, if they had pleaded the First Statute of Westminster.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Wainge refers to the horses, oxen, plows, wains or wagons and implements for carrying on tillage.

<sup>95</sup> A leet is a special kind of court of record that the lords of certain manors were empowered by charter or prescription to hold annually or semi-annually.

<sup>96</sup> The Statute of Westminster of 1275 was one of two English statutes largely drafted by Robert Burnell and passed during the reign of Edward I at Westminster, its main work being the consideration of the Statute of Westminster I. This was drawn up, not in Latin, but in Norman French, and was passed "by the assent of Archbishops, Bishops,

The petition affords some evidence about the popular knowledge of this check to arbitrary rule and as to the belief in the efficacy of the Great Charter to afford the protection of the law against injustice, even for relatively humble folk. The Charter seems to be known enough throughout the country as a result of the elaborate provision made for its publication at various times during the thirteenth century with reference to the duty of the Church to maintain it.<sup>97</sup>

As late as 1300, Winchelsea Bishops pronounced a sentence of excommunication against any who should violate its provisions. Later Archbishop Boniface had sent a similar sentence with papal confirmation, to be proclaimed by the clergy throughout England; with the text of the proclamation were sent copies of the Charter from which other copies were made.

Article Four of the petition is a complaint that the steward had demanded a separate service of suit of court from each parcel of land in cases where a holding rendering one such service subdivided, and that he had ignored royal writs issued to him on this account.

In Article Five, the tenants complain that the steward has dealt, at the ordinary three-weekly meetings of the manorial court, with cases

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Abbots, Priors, Earls, Barons, and the Commonalty of the Realm, being thither summoned."

<sup>97</sup> William Sharp Mckechnie, *Magna Carta A Commentary on the Great Charter of King John*, James Maclehose and Sons, University of Glasgow, 1914, p. 196



to be dealt with only at the annual meeting.

In Article Eight, they complain that the steward had summoned them to render suit of court during the three weeks of mowing the lord's meadow, a period during which attendance was impossible by reason of the service being performed.

In Article Seven, the only concerned with the demands for labour services, complaint is made that the steward demanded services over and above those that they were bound to render by the custom of the manor, and mercilessly oppressed them in cases of refusal to execute such services.<sup>98</sup>

The documents consulted barely mention the results of the conflict between the peasants of Bocking and their steward. However, the importance of this appeal and its relevance to the present work lie in the fact that it mirrors both the grievances of an oppressed class, which has been conscious enough and apparently accustomed to legal procedures to the extent of petitioning their master.

The main concern here is not who won, or who was defeated, but rather that there was conflict indeed, and the plaintive peasants, members of the labouring class, organised themselves and reacted to

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<sup>98</sup> John F. Nichols, 'An Early Fourteenth Century Petition from the Tenants of Bocking to Their Manorial Lord', *The Economic History Review*, Vol. 2, No. 2 Wiley, Jan., 1930, pp. 300-307.

the tyranny of a defender of the interests of the upper class.

Petitioning, however, was not the only means of reaction to the lord's oppression. People resorted to complaints to the King or the court as well. Below is an instance of such a means by which the working class, especially peasants, being the majority of the population, expressed their rejection to injustice.

## II. Peasant Complaint and Judicial Reform

The grievances of peasants are frequently recorded in the court records that result from royal invitations for complaint. One of the most frequent grievances concerns the administration of purveyance and its impact on villagers and peasants. Purveyance was a means by which the royal household and armies were provisioned.<sup>99</sup> The impact of purveyance fell unevenly socially as well as geographically. It affected the peasantry much more severely than the upper classes and clergy. More advantaged social groups could engineer protection or even exemption, by purchasing royal letters of protection, or by bribing officials.<sup>100</sup> Purveyance was used to provide food and shelter for the household and subsidiary households on their itineraries around the

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<sup>99</sup> Chris Given-Wilson, 'Purveyance for the Royal Household, 1362–1413', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, Vol. 56, 1983, pp. 145–63

<sup>100</sup> J. R. Maddicott, *The Origins of the English Parliament, 924-1327*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2010, pp. 19-21.

Kingdom. *Precursores* rode ahead of the household to get provisions ready. They worked with local royal officials and ‘valuers’, arranging to have foodstuffs and other necessities ready for the household’s arrival.

The provisioning of armies took place on a national scale. In each county, the sheriff, an officer representing the King in counties, and some towns, who performs some legal duties and attends ceremonies, was responsible for meeting royal requirements. Purveyance was particularly intensive in 1294-7, for campaigns in Scotland and Gascony, and in 1314-16 for the battle of Bannockburn, and from 1333 onwards, for campaigns in Scotland and France.<sup>101</sup> Provisions could be obtained in a number of ways, ranging from house-to-house collections, to bulk procurement at markets and ports.

Theoretically, all goods, services, and labour provided must be paid for. However, purveyance implied taking rather than buying, and deficit and losses could occur in various ways.<sup>102</sup> Payment might never be made, or it might not reflect the true value of the goods supplied. Purveyors might insist on buying at a discount.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, where payment was made by credit instrument, it could be hard for the

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., pp. 16-17

<sup>102</sup> Walter Sinclair Thomson, ‘A Lincolnshire Assize Roll for 1298’, *The Lincolnshire Record Society*, Vol. 36, 1944, p. 116.

<sup>103</sup> C. J. Given-Wilson, op. cit., p. 161.

creditor to get what he was owed.<sup>104</sup> In 1298, King Edward I<sup>105</sup> instigated an inquiry in Lincolnshire in which purveyance is the commonest topic of complaint.<sup>106</sup> Some forty years later, King Edward III instigated the *Inquisition of the Ninth*, a parish-by-parish investigation of the shortfall in tax revenue from the ninth levied in 1340. This instigation was another occasion on which villagers expressed complaints about purveyances.<sup>107</sup> Further royal inquiries in Lincolnshire in 1340-42 heard complaints from many villages about royal officials.<sup>108</sup>

These records offer particularly good examples of peasant plaint in the judicial record. Edward III levied the ninth, so called because every ninth sheaf was set aside for the King, to fund his military campaigns in France and Scotland. The levy took place amid tension

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., pp. 155-61

<sup>105</sup> Edward I (1239–1307) the king of England from 1272 to 1307, the eldest son of Henry III. He spent a lot of time trying to control Wales and Scotland, fighting, among others, William Wallace and Robert the Bruce. As a result, he was called the ‘Hammer of the Scots’. In 1296, he brought the Stone of Scone to England. Although he was the first Norman king of England called Edward, there were two King Edwards before the Conquest. Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 8th edition, Oxford University Press, 2010.

<sup>106</sup> Walter Sinclair Thomson, *Lincoln Assize Roll*, op. cit., p. 60.

<sup>107</sup> Natalie M. Fryde, ‘Edward III’s Removal of his Ministers and Judges, 1340–1’, *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, Vol. 48, 1975, pp. 149–61.

<sup>108</sup> Mary-Rose McLaren, ‘The English Peasantry and the Demands of the Crown, 1294–1341’, *Past and Present, Supplement Vol.1*, 1975, p. 62.

between the crown and lay and ecclesiastical lords, and the eventual yield was too low to meet the debts run up, meaning that the crown had to levy a loan in wool in 1340. The *Inquisition of the Ninth* called on villages to explain why their payments of the ninth were lower than expected. The royal inquiries were answered with a storm of peasant complaint. Frequently, natural disasters were blamed for reduced productivity. The villagers of Lymcum Halghestok, Dorset, claimed that a sea flood had ruined a great part of their land holdings.<sup>109</sup> The parish of Remesbury, Wiltshire, explained that the lambs were small and the majority of the sheep died because of the hard winter, and the price of wool was low because of lack of money. Another Wiltshire parish listed a string of climatic disasters as well as animal diseases as the reason for their low tax yield:

... on account of a long-lasting heavy freeze ... a third of the land of the parish lay uncultivated, and the land that was sown produced a fortieth part on account of fierce sun and drought in summer. And similarly there was great mortality among the sheep...<sup>110</sup>

The inquiries also elicited complaints against royal officials. In some counties, many villages took the opportunity to explain that their productivity and prosperity had been ruinously afflicted by the abuses

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<sup>109</sup> *Nonarum Inquisitiones in Curia Scaccarii temp. regis Edwardi III*, London, Record Commission, 1807, p. 44

<sup>110</sup> William Chester Jordan, *The Great Famine: Northern Europe in the Early Fourteenth Century*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1996, pp. 182-188

and depredations of royal purveyors, in some cases, on top of climatic and other natural disasters. For example, the villagers of Gamelyngeye, Cambridgeshire, testified to the poverty and oppression of tenants: "... 490 acres of land lay fallow on account of the destitution and poverty of the tenants ... and on account of the various taxes and tallages imposed year after year ..."<sup>111</sup>

The villagers of Long Stowe, Cambridgeshire, testified similarly to the lamentable condition of tenants and their holdings because of taxation:

... a great part of the land of the vill <sup>112</sup>lies fallow and uncultivated and many holdings are empty, reducing the value of the ninth from twenty years ago, and even the land of the village is nearly uncultivated on account of the impotence of the tenants who are afflicted and destroyed, through frequent royal taxes and tallages..<sup>113</sup>

The villagers of the manors of Alansmore and Clehonger in Herefordshire complained that ten virgates of land lay fallow because the tenants were poor on account of diverse taxes and levies imposed

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<sup>111</sup> *Nonarum Inquisitiones*, op. cit., p. 208

<sup>112</sup> Vill is the smallest unit of administration; equivalent to today's parish. There are some 13,000 vills named in Domesday Book.

<sup>113</sup> *Nonarum Inquisitiones*, op. cit., p. 208

upon them.<sup>114</sup>

The royal inquiries of 1340-1 provide other examples of peasant plaint in the judicial record. These inquiries were instituted by Edward III because of his shortfall in tax revenue when he returned from campaigning in France. The Lincolnshire inquiry of 1341 heard that John de Kele seized wool and silver from the village of Skegness to help the war effort, but none of it went to the King.<sup>115</sup> Two other officials, Ralph Swallow and Stephen Radcliffe, did not pass on the profits from the sale of the livestock they had seized.<sup>116</sup> The Lincolnshire inquiry of 1341 also heard that William of Wallingford, formerly a King's purveyor, seized twenty cattle and oxen from the village of Claypole and sold them.<sup>117</sup> Another complaint was that Roger le Draper had seized corn and oats, spending the money on himself. Yet another grievance was that Hugo de Wygthorpe had attached various men of Waynfleet and extracted thirteen shillings and four pence from them illegally. An inquiry in Hertfordshire in the same year heard that a certain Philip, bailiff, and Roger Hurt, his deputy, came to the house of Stephen Wallis and broke down the door of his

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<sup>114</sup> An early English land-measure, varying greatly in extent, but in many cases averaging thirty acres.

<sup>115</sup> The National Archives (Public Record Office), JUST, 1/521/9.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 1/521/4.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 1/121/3.

granary, seizing six quarters of oats. William King, formerly a bailiff, is reported to have seized a cart and two horses against the will of Robert de Syward, without being commissioned by the King to do so. An inquiry in Suffolk in 1314 heard that Robert Halliday unjustly seized a horse worth fifteen shillings from Thomas de Cressingham and kept the money for fifteen days.<sup>118</sup>

Parish-by-parish, records of testimony from named peasant jurors who testified to the *Inquisition of the Ninth*, and the testimony of those who complained to the inquiries illustrate the peasants' own strategic exploitation of the old tradition of 'peasant lament'. Invited to explain themselves, the villagers took the opportunity to have peasant complaint heard in court. Such materials have indeed been read as evidence for the voice of peasant complaint.<sup>119</sup>

It is indeed tempting to treat such documents, as evidence for the legitimizing of peasant complaint by the new complaint procedure, but it is also interesting to consider the diplomatic evidence and the judicial context in which these complaints were expressed. Why did the inquisitors choose to write their concise accounts of the peasants' depositions? Why did they occur so commonly even in those of villages as geographically dispersed as Herefordshire and

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<sup>118</sup> Wendy Scase, *Literature and Complaint in England 1272-1553*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007, p. 14

<sup>119</sup> Mary-Rose McLaren, *op. cit.*, p. 12



Cambridgeshire?

Peasant complaint is so prevalent in the records because such traditional grievances were what the clerks were ready and wanted to hear and record. Evidence is provided by the commissions and mandates. For example, returning from campaign in France, Edward III immediately issued a proclamation acknowledging that he had made heavy demands on the people. He announced an inquiry into corruption and abuses among royal officials who had been too quick to levy from ‘our poor people’, becoming rich and powerful with respect to ‘their poor neighbours’ to the detriment also of the crown’s revenues. The King invited the submission of written bills of complaint.<sup>120</sup>

The mandate commissioning the Hertfordshire inquiry explicitly says that it was set up to hear about ‘various oppressions, extortions, injuries, grievances, and outrages by tax officials and their clerks’. The crown framed invitations to complain in the terms of peasant complaint, and the complaints echoed peasant complaint back to the King.<sup>121</sup>

The key point is that these complaints were designed to achieve redress for the crown. It was only incidentally that the villagers would benefit from these hearings. Complaints were taken into consideration

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<sup>120</sup> Natalie M. Fryde, *Peasant Rebellion and Peasant Discontents*, op. cit., p. 149.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

because the King had been robbed or defrauded of tax, and therefore, these traditional peasant grievances against taxation were given the status of legal plaint. Hence, the repeated allegations, in the examples quoted above, that the King's purveyors have kept what they have seized for themselves, or have sold their pickings and not passed on the profit to the crown. These complaints work especially in the interests of royal government's control over administration in the regions. The old tradition of peasant plaint takes on new legal validity for the reason that the interests of the crown are involved.<sup>122</sup> Nevertheless, the repetition of such plaints and their number may suggest a common agreement among the people who suffered from these frauds, and a possible general accord about the necessity for reform.

Another kind of plaint where grievances about taxation and purveyance are expressed is the commons' petition to Parliament. Like Continental Parliaments, the English Parliament's function was to dispense justice.<sup>123</sup> Complaints were made to Parliament, particularly in cases where a remedy was not available in the common law courts.<sup>124</sup> Commons' petitions to Parliament related private grievances

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<sup>122</sup> Miriam Müller, 'The Aims and Organisation of a Peasant Revolt in Early Fourteenth century Wiltshire', *Rural History*, Vol. 14, 2003, p. 1–20.

<sup>123</sup> G. O. Sayles, *op. cit.*, pp. 40–41.

<sup>124</sup> H. G. Richardson and G. O. Sayles, eds., *Rotuli Parliamentorum Anglie Hactenus Inediti MCCLXXIX-MCCCLXXIII*, Camden Society, 3rd ser., Vol. 51, for the Royal Historical Society, London, 1935, p. xiii.

to the royal interest.<sup>125</sup> Emerging between 1316 and 1327, commons' petitions were those guaranteed or sponsored by the Parliamentary commons.<sup>126</sup> The commons' petition invoked the concept of the public interest, as distinct from the interests of the crown, or of the individual. Peasant plaint is deployed in many petitions that originate from the 'commons' or from a community. Some petitions are presented in the names of the people of a region. For example, in 1320 the 'men of Holderness' brought a complaint about the purveyors John Goldeneye and Robert Romeyn, complaining that various people had never been paid for the goods seized from them. The basis for the petition is that this abuse affected both the King, and the people of Holderness. The 'commonalty of Lincolnshire' presented a petition concerning grievous sufferings in their region in the same period:

To our Lord the King and his Council, the commonalty of the county of Lincoln complain, praying that he pay heed to the troubles and losses that they have had, and still have, that is to say, disease of livestock, lowlands flooded with water, failed corn, and people taken and held to ransom by enemies and rebels of our lord King, and many have left their lands and houses for malice and fear of these

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<sup>125</sup> Alan Harding, 'Plaints and Bills in the History of English Law, mainly in the period 1250–1350', in Dafydd Jenkins ed., *Legal History Studies 1972: Papers presented to the Legal History Conference, Aberystwyth, 18–21 July 1972*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1975, pp. 65–86.

<sup>126</sup> A. R. Myers, 'Parliamentary Petitions in the Fifteenth Century', *The English Historical Review*, 52 (1937), pp. 396–8.

enemies. For this reason a great part of the land of the said county lies fallow... Your bailiffs and agents have come, and have taken a large number of quarters of corn and malt, to your service, to the great affliction of the said county<sup>127</sup>

Other petitions are presented simply in the name of ‘the commune’. One example comes from a Parliament held at York in 1334:

And because the people are greatly aggrieved by various purveyances of others than the people of our lord King, the commune prays that all purveyances be forbidden except purveyances of the King, and that those purveyances be taken in the manner ordained by statute.<sup>128</sup>

The petitions from Lincolnshire and the men of Holderness clearly serve interests in the shires. Differences between the form of these petitions and that of instruments drafted by Parliamentary clerks suggest that these complaints were drafted beyond Parliament; it seems likely that provincial lawyers were involved, and that the county courts may have provided a structure within which provincial political society could formulate petitions. In these examples, therefore, it is likely that the county communities exploited peasant complaint in the complex negotiations with the crown enabled by the new petitionary structure.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> The National Archives (Public Record Office), JUST, 8/6/259.

<sup>128</sup> H. G. Richardson and G. O. Sayles, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

<sup>129</sup> G. L. Harris, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

The commons' petition provided another way in which the lament of the peasant could be appropriated and mobilized for new political ends in the new judicial context. Yet again, the writing and presentation of the petition itself, regardless of how they were exploited and to what end, can be considered as a common assent about the need to redress the situation, and a common feeling that a class was being oppressed by another.

As mentioned earlier, only thorough analysis of the documents available can enlighten one's path in search of how the lord-peasant relationship was like during the Late Middle Ages. In the following section, the hardship endured by the lower classes is implicitly mentioned in complaints written, not by members of the working class, but by the lords, who assimilated grievances they had to the oppression their subjects underwent.

### **III. Villeins' Hardships within Lords' Complaints**

Indeed, some complaints as the ones mentioned earlier had legal standing and force; others were vain attempts to claim for peasants' rights. Other texts, however, were not meant to expose or claim for the redress of peasants' grievances. They are rather marked with marginalisation of the latter, but a thorough reading of these texts might give an idea about how the peasant situation was conceived by their oppressors, and even used as examples of how persecuted this class was. Below are not the utterances of villeins, or of advocates for

villeins, against their lords. They are texts linked with the legal and constitutional relations of the King with the barons, and with the Church. No identification with villeinage is mentioned in these texts; however, these writings claim that peasant plaint is a major means through which these people could voice their complaints.

One example comes from a petition issued in 1297, in which the Earl of Hereford petitioned the exchequer on behalf of himself and others against the language used to allow the levy of an eighth. The writs held that earls, counts, barons, and the community of the realm had granted the eighth. The Earl of Hereford's objection was that the levy had never been 'granted' but taken against the will of the plaintive, a situation which compared them with serfs that could be "tallaged at will". The Earl was making the point that the taxation of free men was subject to consent, whereas the crown was taking at will and thereby attributing the status of villeins to those he taxed this way.<sup>130</sup>

In the same year, a petition was presented to the King by the higher clergy as well as by earls, and barons. The petition sets out grievances concerning royal monetary and military requests. The petitioners complained that they could not perform military service, or provide financial assistance to the King, because they are oppressed by

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<sup>130</sup> J. G. Edwards, 'Confirmatio Cartarum and Baronial Grievances in 1297', *English Historical Review*, 58 (1943), p. 156.

‘various tallages and purveyances’ and consequently could hardly sustain themselves. The petitioners complained that they no longer enjoyed the liberties that they used to have because the laws of Magna Carta were no longer respected.<sup>131</sup>

Contrary to taxation, tallage and purveyance covered a broad range of meanings, including the kinds of taxation associated with villeinage and servility. Tallage was more associated with arbitrary tax.<sup>132</sup> The vocabulary associated with taxation became a sensitive issue from the early thirteenth century, after royal writs began to distinguish between tallage of peasants and aid from freemen.<sup>133</sup> A peasant was subject to tallage, to making payments ‘at the will of the lord’, a criteria applied by courts to determine that an individual was a villein. For instance, a jury summoned in the case of the villagers of Stoughton affirmed that the villagers’ ancestors ‘did villein customs as in the redemption of flesh and blood, tallages and other works with forks and flails as villeins do. They were villeins of the abbot’s predecessors and performed villein customs at the will of those abbots as in tallages, redemption of flesh and all other villein conditions’.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Harry Rothwell ed., *The Chronicle of Walter of Guisborough*, Camden Society, 3rd ser., Vol. 89, London, 1957, pp. 292-93.

<sup>132</sup> Paul Freedman, *op. cit.*, p. 244.

<sup>133</sup> Paul R. Hyams, *Rancor and Reconciliation in Medieval England*, Cornell University Press, New York, 2003, pp. 191-192.

<sup>134</sup> George F. Farnham, *Leicestershire Medieval Village Notes*, Vol. 4, 1930, pp. 153-4.

Tallage could be exacted ‘at the will of the lord’, which according to Bracton’s definition of tallage, was a mark of villein status.<sup>135</sup> The context suggests that the petitioners may have been using the word tallage with the connotations of unfreedom, as meant by the Earl of Hereford when he wrote that ‘to be tallaged at will led to ‘servage’.<sup>136</sup> By using the word ‘tallage’, the petitioners were clarifying the repercussions of taxation for their legal status. By describing the burdens they suffered, they asserted that the prosperity of the realm, and their own status as legal subjects, were both endangered by the King’s taxation. Although the petition considers ‘tallage’ a lord’s right towards his serfs, it indirectly echoes peasants’ plaint and in a way asserts the validity of the complaint of the latter against taxation ‘at the will of the lord’.

The *Confirmatio Cartarum*, a royal letter patent issued in 1297 by King Edward I, explicitly addressed the same grievances. It puts forward that the crown had heard these connotations invoked by the plaintives, and guaranteed that such payments would not be added to custom, and that such levies would only be taken with the common

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<sup>135</sup> *Bracton Online* (*Bracton: De Legibus Et Consuetudinibus Angliae*), <http://hls.law.harvard.edu/bracton/index.htm>, accessed 01 September 2010.

<sup>136</sup> Wendy Scace, *op. cit.*, p. 18



consent of the realm, and for the common profit.<sup>137</sup>

Barons were not the only ones to claim that they were in danger of being reduced to complaining like oppressed peasants. Ecclesiastics once again adopted peasant complaint to show that the Church was being excluded from access to justice. Instead of a petition, another type of writing demonstrates this well is a poem entitled *Song of the Church*.<sup>138</sup> The poet portrays the distress and expression of grief by the Church, compared to the complaint of a widowed lady:

Formerly holy Church was free and uppermost,  
loved and cherished, nothing more so.  
But now she is in servitude  
and so much despised and brought low.<sup>139</sup>

The poet is drawing on the tradition in which Jeremiah's laments about the subjugation of the Israelites<sup>140</sup> is inferred as a prophecy about the Church. The poet is assimilating biblical lament against

<sup>137</sup> William Stubbs ed., *Select Charters and other illustrations of English Constitutional History*, 8th ed. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1905, p. 487-94.

<sup>138</sup> Isabel S. T. Aspin, ed., *Anglo-Norman Political Songs*, Anglo-Norman Texts, Vol. IX, Blackwell, Oxford, 1953, pp. 36-48.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Thousands of years ago, according to the Old Testament, the Jews were slaves in Egypt. The Israelites had been in Egypt for generations, but when they become so numerous, the Pharaoh feared their presence. He feared that one day the Israelites would turn against the Egyptians. Gradually and stealthily, he forced them to become his slaves. He made the slaves build grand 'treasure cities'. But the Pharaoh was still worried that his Israelite slaves would rise up against him. So he ordered a terrible punishment - all the first-born male babies of the Israelites were to be killed. The Pharaoh gave orders to the midwives that 'Every son that is born, you shall cast into the river'.

slavery with the vocabulary of legal unfreedom. Formerly the clergy were of free status; now they are brought to the condition of serfdom. The cause of such subjugation is that the Church is compelled to finance the crown to fund foreign wars:

The King is going to Syria with good intent;  
He will live on stolen goods  
That the clergy hand over to him.  
He will never accomplish a successful  
Enterpurveyance to redeem holy Church,  
It is certainly my opinion.  
Whoever wants to have an example,  
may look at the King of France and his achievement.  
The tax is grievous  
But we must suffer it.<sup>141</sup>

It is not just ‘tax’, but ‘tallage’, that is at issue. As seen earlier, tallage was not simply ‘taxation’. The poet is using an Anglo-Norman legal word with broad meanings that included various kinds of taxation, including impositions on the unfree. The poet’s point is that the Church is compelled to protest like a slave or a villein.

The inferences of the distinction between tallage and aid were discussed by the clergy as a threat to good relations between the Church and secular power. The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 decreed that the clergy must not agree to royal demands without prior

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

consultation of the Pope.<sup>142</sup> The papal bull issued by Boniface VIII in 1296 forbade clergy to pay tax to laymen from the revenues of their Churches. The competition between royal and papal power engendered a range of writings including treatises and pamphlets.<sup>143</sup>

In a passage from one of the above-mentioned documents, the Clerk complains that the liberties of the Church are infringed because goods are stolen from them by kings, princes, and nobles:

In my time, I have seen the Church held in great honour among Kings and princes and nobles everywhere; yet now, by contrast, I see her wretched. The Church is made a prey for you all; many things are taken from us, and none given. If we do not surrender our goods, they are snatched from us; our rights are trampled upon; our liberties infringed.<sup>144</sup>

The Clerk's claim is that taxation puts ecclesiastical and monastic lords in a position analogous to that of the oppressed peasant. He appropriates peasant complaint to illustrate the state of legal subjecthood to which taxation reduced the Church.

Two treatises addressed explicitly to Edward III show the *idea of*

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<sup>142</sup> Cary J. Nederman (ed. and trans.), *Political Thought in Early Fourteenth-Century England: Treatises by Walter of Milemete, William of Pagula, and William of Ockham*, Arizona Centre for Medieval Studies in collaboration with Brepols, Tempe, AZ, 2002, p. 142.

<sup>143</sup> R. W. Dyson (ed. and trans.), *Three Royalist Tracts, 1296–1302*, Thoemmes Press, Bristol, 1999, p. 10.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

peasant plaint put to the defence of the Church.<sup>145</sup> Both texts devote a great deal of space to the laments of the poor and the enslaved against unjust treatment. The author begins the *Epistola* by announcing that he will advise the King so that he ‘may do justice to each individual’. The most important duty of a King is to ensure justice to all. However, today exactions are transgressing common law, and the victims lament:

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And therefore, those from whom goods are taken cry to God. What they cry to God, I cannot express. Indeed, God knows and God freely hears those paupers; wherefore, the Psalmist says, ‘The Lord has heard the desire of the poor, your ear has heard the hope of his heart’ (Psalms 9: 17) ... and Ecclesiasticus 21: 6 proclaims, ‘A plea from a poor man’s mouth goes straight to the ear of God and the cry of the innocent rises to God.’ Exodus 3: 9 says, ‘The cry of the Israelites, who have been weighted down under burdens by the Egyptians, ascends to God, and God hears their groans.’ Wherefore it is read in Job 24: 12: ‘The souls of the wounded cry out to God and God does not allow them to go away unavenged.’<sup>147</sup>

The complaints of the King’s subjects are expressed by means of the language of biblical lament of the poor and enslaved Israelites. This

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<sup>145</sup> The *Epistola ad Regem Edwardum III* and the *Speculum Regis Edwardi III* are now both attributed to William of Pagula (d. 1332), an Oxford-trained canon lawyer and secular priest. Both the *Epistola* and the *Speculum* advise the King on issues of taxation. The treatises are closely related in content, though somewhat distinguished in style.

<sup>146</sup> Joseph Moisant ed., *De speculo regis Edwardi III*, Picard, Paris, 1891, p. 80.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

is similar to the use of the Lamentations of Jeremiah in the *Song of the Church*. The *Epistola* and the *Speculum* use a range of devices of this kind for representing complaint against the King's injustices. The *Epistola* uses the language of widows' and orphans' supplications. The Lord does not ignore the orphan's supplication nor the widow's as she pours out her story with groans.<sup>148</sup> The author also describes how complaints are brought in the courts. Those responsible go unpunished, and so justice is not done:

But if a complaint be made in your court concerning this sort of servant, that servant who has taken the aforesaid goods will absent himself and then he will not be found, and the other servants will excuse themselves completely, since all of them have been taking a hand in robberies of this kind.<sup>149</sup>

In another injustice, described in the *Speculum*, many creditors go unpaid, and their cases unanswered:

'If someone has a quarrel with you i.e. brings a complaint, you should be more concerned for their case until there is agreement between you concerning the truth, and thus your counsellors should stand up immediately for justice.' But understand, Lord King, that thousands and thousands of people have cases against you for the debts you have not paid.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

God's justice, where plaintiffs are heard, is contrasted with that in the King's courts, where they are not. In the *Speculum*, the author claims that the King's subjects 'engage in sighs and tears' when the King reaches their neighbourhood. One cause of this sorrow, he says, is that the outriders who went ahead of the King's purveyors impose labour services on the people:

Another cause of the people's sorrow is that the scouts for your court, servants, and others seize men and horses working around the fields, and animals that plough the earth and carry seed to the field, so that the men and animals work two or three days in your service, receiving nothing for the work...<sup>151</sup>

The image of imposed labour services occurs again to support the point that seizing the goods of others is illegal:

... you through your ministers seize infinite goods from others, although they are unwilling, just like a thief. You ought to know that as liberality is a sign of nobility, so robbery is a sign of barbarism. Wherefore many nobles, who are counted nobles by the opinion of men, are barbarians, since they do not stop seizing the goods of paupers, although unwilling, from whose labours they live.<sup>152</sup>

By applying the language of villeinage to purveyance, William of Pagula is contributing to debate about the legal basis of

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., p. 154

purveyance.<sup>153</sup>

The *Song of the Church* mobilizes the complaints of the poor against servitude as complaints with a relevance and charge for lords as well as peasants. The author develops his arguments in ways particularly supportive of ecclesiastical lords. In the *Epistola*, he suggests that the King is acting illicitly as lord of the clergy, since the goods of the Church really belong to the poor and the clergy are in bondage to the poor.<sup>154</sup> Purveyance is, therefore, robbery, a criminal act in common law.<sup>155</sup> Elsewhere in the *Epistola* he argues that purveyance violates the provisions of Magna Carta, and in the *Speculum* he calls for reform of privileges and statutes that permit such injustices to ‘the holy Churches or the paupers or even to the community of this Kingdom’.<sup>156</sup>

Another genre that makes prominent use of peasant plaint in this period is the chronicle. The St Alban’s monk Matthew Paris (d. 1259) describes the English as lamenting slaves: ‘and all English people were reduced to lamentation and servitude’; their condition is worse than

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<sup>153</sup> G. L. Harris, op. cit.

<sup>154</sup> Joseph Moisant, op. cit., p. 140.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

that of the Egyptians' slaves.<sup>157</sup> He suggests analogies between the history of the peasants and the history of the religious houses. Matthew describes William the Conqueror's evil treatment of the monasteries in 1071 as follows:

In the year of our Lord 1070 King William, stirred by a devilish spirit, or bewitched by the counsel of evil men, acquired all the monasteries of the English (that in the times of most pious English Kings rejoiced in peace and liberty), insatiably despoiling them of gold and silver, not mindful of the sanctions, the holy fathers, of charters, or of statutes; moreover he did not even spare their chalices or reliquaries. But all episcopacies and abbacies, that held baronial tenures, to such a degree that they had freedom from all secular services, he subjected to military service, enrolling episcopacies and abbacies at his own will, how many knights he wished each of them to produce for him and his successors in time of war.<sup>158</sup>

Matthew describes the conquest as a loss of liberty for the Church. Previously free from any servitude to lords, now ecclesiastics are obliged in perpetuity to provision the King in times of war. The monasteries are placed under a different kind of servitude from that of villeins, but again the burdens imposed are arbitrary, and at the will of the King. Matthew describes how this arbitrary exercise of lordship affected his own house of St Albans, when William the Conqueror

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<sup>157</sup> Frederic Madden, ed., *Matthaei Parisiensis, Monachi Sancti Albani, Historia Anglorum*, 3 vols., Rolls Series, Vol. 44, Longmans, Green & Co., London, 1869, pp. 28-29.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.



arbitrarily deprived St Albans of possessions and treasures to give them to Westminster.

Peter Langtoft <sup>159</sup> traces the colonization and loss of the lands of the English using similar language in his Anglo-Norman verse chronicle:

The fifth wound William the Conqueror gave, When  
he conquered England, and made himself its lord.  
He slew King Harold, who lost the honour; Earls and  
barons perished in the battle.  
The English have lived till now always  
Under foreign rule, in serfdom and suffering.  
You will find their grief in the history that follows.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Peter Langtoft, also known as Peter of Langtoft (Old French: Piers de Langtoft; died c. 1305) was an English historian and chronicler who took his name from the small village of Langtoft in the East Riding of Yorkshire. Langtoft was an Augustinian canon regular at Bridlington Priory who wrote a history of England in Anglo-Norman verse, popularly known as Langtoft's Chronicle, which narrates the history of England from the legendary founding of Britain by Brutus to the death of King Edward I. The first part of Langtoft's Chronicle is translated from Wace's Roman de Brut, and the second part is drawn from a number of sources, including Henry of Huntingdon's *Historia Anglorum*. The third part is widely considered to be original work by Langtoft, and he includes in it details not recorded elsewhere such as the fate of Gwenllian, daughter of Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, Prince of Wales. On the whole, the Chronicle is virulently anti-Scottish and contains nine 'songs', in both Anglo-Norman and Middle English, supposedly capturing the taunts between English and Scottish soldiers during the Anglo-Scottish conflicts of the late-13th and early-14th centuries. Langtoft's Chronicle was the source of the second part of Robert Mannyng's Middle English Chronicle, completed around 1338. Piers Langtoft's Chronicle, as translated, illustrated and improved by Robert of Brunne, was also transcribed and published, in two volumes, by Thomas Hearne in 1725. H  l  ne Dauby, « From Trevet to Gower and Chaucer », *Anglophonia/Caliban* [Online], 29 | 2011, Online since 15 May 2015, connection on 05 April 2016. URL : <http://caliban.revues.org/732>

<sup>160</sup> Thomas Wright, ed., *The Chronicle of Pierre de Langtoft*, Rolls Series, Vol. 47 Longmans, London, 1868, p. 288-90.

Like Matthew Paris,<sup>161</sup> Langtoft describes the position of the conquered English in terms of grievous villeinage. The English have, henceforth, lived in 'servage' and in suffering that is related in the chronicle. Peter Langtoft handles the narrative of William's rule by focusing on its impact on ecclesiastics in the northeast of England. He describes how William's army puts down a rebellion, laying waste to the land so that between York and Durham no soil is turned, no corn sown, for nine years; Churches are destroyed and plundered by the Normans who acted in a way similar to that of robbers. However, when William learns of this he requires redress but does not punish the plunderers:

When King William knows the truth, How holy  
Church is so ill treated,  
He has immediately given command  
to all his officers, That amends  
be at once made for every trespass,  
And that holy Church be fully infeoffed  
In the franchises with that it was endowed,

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<sup>161</sup> Matthew Paris, known as Matthew of Paris, c. 1200 – 1259, was a Benedictine monk, English chronicler, artist in illuminated manuscripts and cartographer, based at St Albans Abbey in Hertfordshire. He wrote a number of works, mostly historical, which he scribed and illuminated himself, typically in drawings partly coloured with watercolour washes, sometimes called "tinted drawings". Some were written in Latin, some in Anglo-Norman or French verse. His *Chronica Majora* is an oft-cited source, though modern historians recognise that Paris was not always reliable. He tended to glorify Emperor Frederick II and denigrate the Pope. However, in his *Historia Anglorum*, Paris displays a highly negative view of Frederick, going as far as to describe him as a "tyrant" who "committed disgraceful crimes". John Allen Giles (translator), *Matthew Paris, English History, from 1235 to 1273*, George Bell and Sons, London, 1852, p. 5

And that the plunder be there restored.  
But not one of the plunderers was further punished,  
Nor underwent penance for his wickedness.<sup>162</sup>

The language and detail make this episode a historical antecedent for the exaction of purveyances. Langtoft was a canon of Bridlington in east Yorkshire, part of an area particularly vulnerable to purveyance.<sup>163</sup> Abuses of purveyance are the injustices most frequently complained about in an inquiry instituted in Lincolnshire by Edward I in 1298.<sup>164</sup> The region suffered because it was on the road north, a route frequently taken by the royal household and armies, often in connection with military campaigns against the Scots. It also suffered because it produced an important source for provisioning the household and armies with corn. The Normans' pillaging of the northeast results in failure to till the land, runs counter to law, and disenfranchises its ecclesiastical victims. William the Conqueror's dispensation of justice provides a model for legal process with regard to purveyance.<sup>165</sup>

The last text to be discussed in this section is an Anglo-Norman

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<sup>162</sup> Thomas Wright, ed., op. cit., p. 413-21.

<sup>163</sup> Mary-Rose McLaren, op. cit., p.24-26.

<sup>164</sup> Walter Sinclair Thomson, '*A Lincolnshire Assize*', op. cit.

<sup>165</sup> Thomas Wright, op. cit., pp. xix-xx

and Latin text entitled *Against the King's Taxes*.<sup>166</sup> Some historians have read this text as reflecting the point of view of the peasant. Others, however, claim that it 'reflects the mood of the lesser landowning classes'.<sup>167</sup> Another group classify it as 'a new literature of protest' that emerged 'because there was more to protest about'.<sup>168</sup> Others claim that it has 'a populist agenda', noticing that the author insists that 'the voice of the 'commune' be heard in shaping national policy'.<sup>169</sup> Nevertheless, in the light of the analysis of peasant plaint in this chapter, one can assume to be in a position to revise these analyses.

In particular, one can claim to be in a position to note the similarities between this poem and the appropriation of peasant plaint in texts that defend the Church. *Against the King's Taxes* echoes many of the points made in the literary and judicial complaints already discussed, namely generalized corruption prevailing in Late Medieval England:

Now the fifteenth<sup>170</sup> runs in England year after year,

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<sup>166</sup> Aspin, op. cit., pp. 105-15

<sup>167</sup> G. L. Harris, op. cit., p. 251

<sup>168</sup> Mary-Rose McLaren, op. cit., p. 142-3

<sup>169</sup> V. J. Scattergood, *Authority and Resistance*, in Susanna Fein ed., *Studies in the Harley Manuscript*, Michigan University, Michigan, 2000, pp. 163-7.

<sup>170</sup> Taxes were raised in many different ways in Late Medieval England. In the early 13th century a new variation - the subsidy based on a fraction of the value of moveable goods- was developed, and went on to become a mainstay of medieval taxation. Initially, the fraction varied with each assessment, but from 1334, the process was simplified by fixing the sums required from each community at the amounts that had been levied in 1332. These were based on one fifteenth for rural and one tenth for urban areas and the royal demesne. The tax was therefore known as a *fifteenth and tenth* from

thus doing harm to all; by it those who were wont to sit upon the bench have come down in the world; and common folk must sell their cows, their utensils, and even clothing. It is ill-pleasing thus to pay the fifteenth to the uttermost farthing. One thing (above all) is dishonest, whereby the people are oppressed; not half the tribute raised in the land reaches the King. Because he does not receive the tax in its entirety just as it is granted to him, the people must pay the more, and thus they are cut short.

The author goes even further into detail by explaining that

... all that is levied is not surrendered to the King. Still more hard on simple folk is the wool collection; commonly it makes them sell their possessions. It cannot be that such a measure, crushing the poor under a grievous load, is pleasing to God. The law that makes my wool the King's is no just law. An even greater offence, as men bear witness, is that they forcibly keep back two or three stones weight in the sack. To whom will this wool go? Some reply that never shall King nor Kingdom get it, but only the wool collectors. Such a false weight of wool is a calamity.<sup>171</sup>

Here the author emphasizes that taxation is so heavy that it is counter-productive; people are forced to sell their means of livelihood and so become economically inactive. Moreover, the yield of the tax collection and the wool levy are subject to corruption among officials. Thus, the poor are the only ones who pay, while the rich go free from

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that time until its abolition in the 17th century. Christopher Corèdon, and Ann Williams, *A Dictionary of Medieval Terms and Phrases*, D. S. Brewer, Cambridge, 2004.

<sup>171</sup> Wendy Scase, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

any obligation.

The author nowhere mentions explicitly the impact of taxation on the Church. Yet the specifying taxation as the ‘fifteenth’ is applied to clergy as well as laity. Moreover, the language of the above text chimes with that of other texts that use peasant plaint to defend the interests of the Church. Just as *Song of the Church* suggests that such taxation is robbery, so *Against the King’s Taxes* characterizes it as ‘rape’, and calls the tax ‘tribute’, a word that links royal taxation with the subjection and enslavement of conquered peoples. It also hints at the impact on classes above the poorest: those who used to sit in comfort are brought low.

The language of *Against the King’s Taxes* also suggests the appropriation of peasant plaint in the interests of other groups. The author skilfully intercuts Anglo-Norman and Latin. In a further appropriation of the peasants’ laments, he addresses complaints not to the King, as a source of common law and justice, but to God:

When the last judgement comes,  
that great day of wrath,  
if they the corrupt rich do not mend their ways  
they must surely perish.  
The King shall say to the unrighteous:  
‘depart from me’, and to the righteous: ‘come’.  
God who was crowned with piercing thorns,  
by thy heavenly grace take pity  
on thy people so that this world

may have respite from such affliction;  
to state the substance of the case it is like robbery<sup>172</sup>

In addition, the management of point of view hints at the wider implications of injustice towards peasants. For the most part injustices to the poor are used in the third person, ‘the people are aggrieved’ the author witnessing to the testimony of others (see Appendix VIII) ‘gens gravatur’, ‘it is grievous to simple people’ ‘greve a simple gent’. But from time to time, the author switches into the first person: ‘The law that makes my wool ‘mea lana’ the King’s is no just law’, ‘I see’ ‘Je voy’, ‘I doubt’ ‘Je me doute’, ‘I do not know’ ‘Je ne say’, suggesting identification with the complaints of the poor. William of Pagula in the *Speculum* deplores the lamentation that attends the King’s arrival in the countryside, while he expresses fear of oppression in the first person:

And it is no wonder that there are sighs and lamentations upon your arrival, since in truth, that is God, I say that for my own person, whenever I hear rumours of your arrival and I hear your horn, I tremble all over, whether I am at home, or in the field, in Church, or in the study, or even at mass. For when someone of your household beats on the gate, I tremble even more. But when he beats on the door, then I tremble most of all. And thus, the closer he approaches, the more I tremble and am very fearful.<sup>173</sup>

The latter, variant version of the *Song of the Church* similarly

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<sup>172</sup> Wendy Scase, op. cit., p. 32.

<sup>173</sup> Joseph Moisant, op. cit., 110.

suggests experience of suffering in the first person:

The tax is grievous but we must suffer it. But those who ought to collect it do us harm. But whatever anyone may say to us,, let each pray in his heart, if God wills to hear him, that the Lord God may curse them, all those who lend aid to take away what is ours.<sup>174</sup>

Here, the author shifts in an additional final sentence to the first-person plural.

In the absence of the King, and during the reign of corrupt royal agents, the poet must plead in the divine court on behalf of his plaintiffs. He calls for Divine judgement, instead not in royal justice.

#### **IV. Peasant Complaint and Vernacular Poetry**

The previous section investigated the ways in which the relations between peasant complaint and legal complaint are negotiated in Anglo-Norman and Latin literary and judicial writings. The final section of this chapter attempts to explore engagement with peasant complaint in vernacular lyric poetry. Two early Middle English peasant complaint poems in particular helpfully focus issues of the relations between vernacular writing and the judicial complaint of the royal courts; these are *Satire on the Retinues of the Great*,<sup>175</sup> and *Song of the Husbandman*.

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<sup>174</sup> Aspin, op. cit., p. 46.

<sup>175</sup> This monologue against the pretensions of low-born horse grooms is a riotous jumble of alliterative invective and coarse insult. Such crude horse-handlers, it seems to say, are



Both poems describe peasant plaint in the light of the new judicial process, they shape ideas about the place of the English language in legal process, and about the vernacular as a medium for literary composition.

*Satire on the Retinues of the Great* is not obviously related to peasant or judicial plaint. At first sight, it is set apart both stylistically, and in subject matter. Its subject is horsemen, grooms, stable-boys and their hangers-on. Its language is vigorous, plain, and simple. The author's obsession with the lower forms of life associated with the stables has confused critics.<sup>176</sup> Though it has been suggested that the poem is a satire on the 'idle attendants and servants who preyed upon the produce of the industrious peasantry'<sup>177</sup>, more recent critics explain that the reason for the focus on grooms is 'the demands made on

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the polar opposite of what is chivalric (a word related to French *cheval*, "horse"). The insults carry a good dose of moral condemnation, with the speaker sending the *rybauds* to the Devil as tribute. The poem is framed as a roll — a presentation of an unpaid bill — with the scoundrels being itemized in their disgusting habits and vices. The eighth stanza highlights the lyric's raucous vernacularity by inserting Anglo-Norman business language (in rhyme-words) to sharpen the crudity of the churls' greedy transactions. The last stanza equates hurling insult with spewing vomit. As the speaker draws the lineaments of the groomsmen's repulsive vulgarity, his dip into the genre of insult seems to taint himself as well. Source: <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/fein-harley2253-volume-3-article-88-introduction>, connected April 6, 2016, 5:40 pm.

<sup>176</sup> V. G. Scattergood, op. cit., p. 194.

<sup>177</sup> Thomas Wright, op. cit., p. 237.

farmers by the King's and nobles' horsemen as they travelled through the country'.<sup>178</sup> This concern with predatory horsemen represents a common topic in complaints against purveyance. In denouncing horses and horse-attendants, the poet is attacking a popular target often mentioned in peasant complaints. Royal horses and their attendants were a burden on the countryside because they required provisions, and because they sometimes required stabling, accommodation, and sustenance on their travels. For example, one John Sutton petitioned the King and council in Parliament about the losses incurred when Gyles de Beauchamp lodged men and horses without paying when the King travelled to Pontefract. The royal inquiry into maladministration in Hertfordshire commissioned in 1341 specifically invited complaints about 'our horse-keepers and their servants'.<sup>179</sup>

In addition to the inclusion of topics associated with peasant complaint against purveyance, *Satire on the Retinues of the Great* positions itself in relation to the forms and language of judicial complaint. As seen above, victims of purveyance could attempt to get redress in a number of ways, from presenting tally-sticks<sup>180</sup> for payment, to

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Gwilym Dodd, *Justice and Grace: Private Petitioning and the English Parliament in the Late Middle Ages*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007, p. 40.

<sup>180</sup> A tally (or tally stick) was a stick marked with cuts or notches, which indicated payment made, it was then cut in half-lengthwise by the talliator so each party to the transaction had a copy of the exchange, in effect a receipt. These sticks were also used as money within departments of the \*exchequer for instance. Tally sticks continued in use until

petitioning royal inquiries or asking Parliament for redress of their losses. The poem is an inflection of the complaint. The language and form of the poem reveals loss and demand payment, while the naming of offenders is done in the form of rhetorical complaints.

*Song of the Husbandman* echoes many of the complaints about injustices to peasants explored in this chapter. Taxes are heavy; tax collectors are dishonest and abusing.<sup>181</sup> The horsemen profited from the extortion from the poor. Farmers found themselves compelled to sell their means of livelihood, their tools, animals, and even their seed to the point that the land lies fallow. With natural disasters on top, people are reduced to beggars the poem states.

Many critics and historians have described *Song of the Husbandman* as vernacular testimony to the injustices felt by peasants in early fourteenth-century England, but as in many other texts, the peasant's plaint in this very poem is accorded a relevance beyond his own class. The peasant speaker aligns the complaints of the oppressed peasant with that of other social groups. The peasant laments that all orders and degrees are oppressed. The poor are impoverished, and so are the wealthy.<sup>182</sup> The rich are illegally

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1826. Source: Christopher Corèdon, and Ann Williams, *A Dictionary of Medieval Terms and Phrases*, D. S. Brewer, Cambridge, 2004.

<sup>181</sup> Rossell Hope Robbins ed., *Historical Poems of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1959, pp. 7-9.

<sup>182</sup> Richard Newhauser, 'Historicity and Complaint in the *Song of the Husbandman*', in Susanna Fein, ed., *Studies in the Harley Manuscript: The Scribes, Contents, and*

subject to extortion, and their lands and labourers are reduced to poverty. Nevertheless, it is important to notice that, like many other complaints that mobilize peasant plaint, the poem focuses on reduction in social status. The rich are reduced to the condition of the peasant, not merely economically but also socially. Religious orders, barons, bondsmen, clerks, and knights are all reduced to the condition of the socially despised. The peasant's lament against servitude is a lament on behalf of all who have been reduced by royal taxation to a position analogous to that of the villein. The poem is a plaint for those whose lands and tenants have been aggrieved, and for those who have been deprived of their wealth.

The bailiffs with their writs threaten to reduce the speaker to a fool. The poet points up the intimate connection between the writ<sup>183</sup> and villeinage: the fulfilling of the writ collocates with the making into a fool of the complainant. The utilisation of the peasant plaint in *Song of the Husbandman* is comparable with its use in the Latin and Anglo-Norman literary and judicial texts. While these texts use peasant plaint to voice the complaints of the lords, plaint written by peasants themselves work on behalf of other social groups of status similar to theirs.

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*Social Contexts of British Library MS Harley 2253*, Western Michigan University, Michigan, 2000, pp. 205-6.

<sup>183</sup> A writ is a formal written document; *specifically* a legal instrument in epistolary form issued under seal in the name of the English monarch. It can also mean an order or mandatory process in writing issued in the name of the King or of a court or judicial officer commanding the person to whom it is directed to perform or refrain from performing a specified act. *Miriam-Webster Dictionary*, 2010.

Both *Satire on the Retinues of the Great* and *Song of the Husbandman* relate English poetry to judicial plaint.<sup>184</sup> Unlike many other texts, *Satire on the Retinues of the Great* is complaint inflected in dialectal register. Language mixing was commonly used in law and business.<sup>131</sup>

The poet takes this to extremes; alongside the Anglo-Norman legal and administrative words is a whole lexicon of vernacular pejoratives. This vocabulary characterises the voice of the plaintiff. The plaintiff and his roll are subject to ridicule as well as admiration. His complaint is unrefined as are the abuses that victim complained about. The poet's criticism is like the stable boys' vomit: '*its excessive consumption makes you spew, as it makes me narrate/plead*'. (See appendix)

*Satire on the Retinues of the Great* both rejoices and mocks the vigour of vernacular plaint. *Song of the Husbandman* gives the voice of the peasant plaintiff vernacular character. The poet witnesses to the lamentations of the people. The first lines frame the poem as the complaint of peasants. The shift to the first person reveals a move from the voice of the poet to the voice of the peasant, and the poem relates the vernacular to plaint in the royal courts.

To analyse how these poems give vigour to the vernacular aspect of peasant plaint in relation to the judicial process, there is need to address the difficult question of the role of Middle English in the law.

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid., pp.32-3.

The role of written English is less problematic than its spoken form. Historians have studied the languages in which statutes were written, court rolls were composed, and law was taught. In the late thirteenth century, the first surviving law reports, law treatises, and instructional texts were written in French or Latin, statutes were published in Latin or French, and court rolls were also written in these languages, but not in English, which was excluded as a medium for legal literature.<sup>185</sup>

It is much harder to ascertain what language was employed in oral communications, and how far English was spoken in the field of legal dealings. Furthermore, scholars have been rather more interested in litigants' engagement with the processes of the law than with linguistic transactions associated it. There is no agreement on whether, in the early Anglo-Norman royal courts, English was the language of the oral communications that took place in court. The Norman origin of the nobility and the administration rather suggest the probability of the use of French in court.<sup>186</sup>

Nevertheless, it has also been argued that English may have been used, especially in the lower courts, and perhaps in the criminal courts where the natives who were mostly Anglo-Saxons, and hence the use

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<sup>185</sup> Paul Brand, *The Languages of the Law in Later Medieval England*, in D. A. Trotter ed., *Multilingualism in later Medieval Britain*, D. S. Brewer, Cambridge, 2000, pp. 63–76.

<sup>186</sup> Paul Brand, *op. cit.*, pp. 64–9.

of the mother tongue was more practical.<sup>187</sup> French was preferred to Latin for writing statutes, because French is easier to paraphrase in English for the purposes of public proclamation of legislation.<sup>188</sup> In court, formal written documents were most likely translated from Latin or French into English when read out by the clerk.<sup>189</sup> Lawyers probably translated English proceedings into French written records when reporting cases.<sup>190</sup> However, technical ‘terms and processes’ were generally not translated because they were felt to have no English equivalents. Linguistic conventions did not mark spoken English as they did written English, which was considered as a language without legal status compared to Latin and French.<sup>191</sup>

The increasing importance of the plaint in the late thirteenth century probably intensified the ambiguity over the status of English as a means of legal proceedings. In theory, plaint originated from a wide social spectrum, including mostly the lower orders, mainly peasants.

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<sup>187</sup> John Hudson, *The Formation of the English Common Law: Law and Society in England from the Norman Conquest to Magna Carta*, Longman, Harlow, 1996, pp. 64-8.

<sup>188</sup> Mark Ormrod, ‘The Use of English: Language, Law, and Political Culture in Fourteenth century England’, *Speculum*, Vol. 78, 2003, p. 770-1.

<sup>189</sup> J. H. Baker, ‘The Three Languages of the Common Law’, in *The Common Law Tradition: Lawyers, Books and the Law*, The Hambledon Press, London, 2000, p. 226.

<sup>190</sup> Mark Ormrod, *op. cit.*, p. 774.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 772-3.

Nevertheless, bills or written complaints were written in Anglo-Norman or sometimes Latin. In the late fourteenth century the first bills were written in English.<sup>192</sup> As English was not a language of complaint record, the monolingual and illiterate required assistance by a bilingual person to record the grievance in French or Latin.<sup>193</sup> Complaints were presented ‘*by anyone who could write or get another to write for him*’,<sup>194</sup> and conventional forms in which bills were written implies that they must have been written by people with legal knowledge and training. Early bills are simple and not rigid in form and the language of the early commons’ petitions to Parliament is markedly less professional than that of the statutes based on them.<sup>195</sup> In the case of peasant complaints, bills must have been marked as English complaint written down in French or Latin.

Both *Satire on the Retinues of the Great* and *Song of the Husbandman* represent the vernacular aspect of peasant complaint and its relation to judicial process rather differently from *Poem on Disputed Villein Services*. These poems are texts that record oral and vernacular

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<sup>192</sup> R. W. Chambers and Marjorie Daunt eds., *A Book of London English*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1931, p. 272.

<sup>193</sup> William Craddock Bolland ed., *Select Bills in Eyre AD 1292–1333*, Selden Society, Vol. 30, Quaritch, London, 1914, p. 158.

<sup>194</sup> H. G. Richardson and G. O. Sayles eds., *Select Cases of Procedure without Writ under Henry III*, Selden Society, Vol. 60 Quaritch, London, 1941, p. xlvi.

<sup>195</sup> Paul Brand, *The Origins of the English Legal Profession*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1992, pp. 3–4.



plaint. The complaint against the horsemen in *Retinues* is read aloud from a written text. *Song of the Husbandman* records complaint heard by the narrator. *Retinues* uses the vocabulary of Anglo-Norman administrative texts alongside a specialized lexicon of vernacular terms of abuse, while *Song of the Husbandman* suggests that the structure of the written petition is a series of grievances.

Petitions and complaints were written in either Latin or French, and since the petitioners spoke English they must have had their complaints written by individuals with legal knowledge that the peasants themselves were aware of, but could not express their complaints using the official languages of law. Poems narrating the stories of abuse on the part of representatives of the state, and hence the upper class, can tell a lot about the general mood of discontent and very probably the desire of the lower class for reform which were either directly or indirectly expressed by the poets. It can be argued that literature does not reach the significance of legal documents that can be used as evidence of class struggle in Late Medieval England. However, the above poems represent inestimable records about a relatively undocumented period, and are among the scarce pieces of evidence that there existed a class-conscious faction of society, and that the latter used all possible means to express their strong desire for redress ranging from legal complaint and petitions to open rebellion.

Be it in verse or in legal prose, or even in open rebellion, conflict between the haves and have-nots in Medieval England did exist.

Though not as articulate as modern class struggle, and although modern means to unite the proletariat class did not exist, peasants in villages, and craftsmen in towns found ways to express grievances to their oppressors with all possible means. And as one historian noted, most of social change, and in our case, the rise of class-consciousness, remains part of the unseen history, one that takes shape in people's minds and awaits for the opportune occasion to emerge. The colossal scale that revolts in the following centuries reached is evidence that revolt was the outcome of ideas that had been taking shape many years before they occurred.

Added to the hardships of lordship and customary dues, the English working class found itself burdened with climate change that caused harvest failures, famine, and plague. The next chapter attempts to investigate these aspects of such a calamitous period, and the effects of natural disasters on society in Late Medieval England.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Famine, Plague, and War Defeats**

**(1315-1381)**

The interminable struggle between the ruler and the ruled in Late Medieval England was interrupted by a phenomenon known as the Black Death. The coming of the plague to the Island was a landmark for a new and even fiercer strife between the two classes. When this plague came, it found the population weakened by famine, and burdened with never-ending war taxation. What were the causes and effects of the catastrophes that stroke England? How did they contribute in turning English society from one of servitude to one of revolt?

#### **I. The Great Famine of 1315–1317**

In the mid-1310s, the climate saw extreme disturbances, and it rained heavily and constantly for much of the summer of 1314 and most of 1315 and 1316. This torrential rain caused floods, the result of which crops rotted and livestock drowned in the wet fields. The result was the Great Famine,

which is estimated to have killed at least five per cent of the population of England.<sup>196</sup>

The *Sempringham Annals* say that there were great floods of water throughout England, and the wheat and hay were destroyed. There was great famine and great shortage of wheat throughout the land. The price of a quarter of wheat rose to twenty-four shillings and more, a quarter of barley cost sixteen shillings and a quarter of oats cost twenty shillings, many times the usual price. The available bread could not appease the hunger of the English people. Soaked from the unending rain, grain contained far less nutrients than ordinary one.<sup>197</sup>

In March and April 1315, King Edward II attempted to alleviate his subjects' misery by ordering the regulation of the price of basic foodstuffs. According to the *Anonimalle*, King Edward passed these regulations without the approval of the magnates who were apparently indifferent to the lower classes' grievances if not opposed to any kind of concession given to them.. An opposed version in the *Vita*,<sup>198</sup> claims that it was the earls and barons who developed the regulations, 'looking to the welfare of the state'. These attempts resulted in traders

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<sup>196</sup> Scott G. Bruce, ed., *Ecologies and Economies in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, Leiden, Boston, 2010, p. 45.

<sup>197</sup> Wendy R. Childs, John Taylor, ed., *The Anonimalle Chronicle 1307 to 1334: From Brotherton Collection MS 29*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2013, p. 88.

<sup>198</sup> 'Vita Edwardi Secundi: The Life of Edward the Second', *English Historical Review*, December 2005, Vol. 120, pp. 1421-1422

refusing to sell the few goods they had at a low price.<sup>199</sup>

The *St Albans Chronicler* states that when King Edward visited St Albans in 1315, he had difficulties even providing food for his household. Still, the King was in a better situation than the majority of his subjects: in Northumbria, already weakened and despoiled by Scottish raids, animals like dogs and horses were eaten. Its warden, Maurice Berkeley, sent letters to King stating that ‘no town was ever in such distress’, that the garrisons were deserted, dead of hunger or reduced to eating horses, and that if the latter did not send help straightaway, ‘the town will be lost by famine.’<sup>200</sup>

For other regions, starvation drove people to far worse horrors than eating domestic animals. Reports of cannibalism were common, and the St Albans chronicler even states that some people resorted to eating children. After the food shortage, came a ‘severe pestilence’, that had many more victims. The important number of bodies made it difficult to bury them. Many people begged for food, stole whatever they could, and even killed others for little food.

The level of poverty and starvation was unprecedented; ‘Such a scarcity has not been seen in our time in England, not heard of for a hundred years’, says one chronicler. Others talk of misery ‘such as our age has never seen’ and ‘such a mortality of men in England and

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<sup>199</sup> Wendy R. Childs, John Taylor, ed., op. cit.

<sup>200</sup> Stephen T. Driscoll, ‘Excavations Within Edinburgh Castle’, *Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, Edinburgh, Monograph series, Issue n° 12, 1997, p. 211.

Scotland through famine and pestilence as had not been heard of in our time.’ The vain regulations concerning the price of foodstuffs were annulled at the Lincoln Parliament of early 1316. The Bridlington chronicler contentedly states: ‘How contrary to reason is an ordinance on prices, when the fruitfulness or sterility of all living things are in the power of God alone, from that it follows that the fertility of the soil and not the will of man must determine the price.’<sup>201</sup> In 1317, the weather finally improved and the famine gradually loosened its hold. However, the worse was to come: the outbreak of the Black Death was three decades away. This catastrophic period in the history of England was the first of a series of large-scale crises that struck the country in the fourteenth century. It caused millions of deaths and signalled a clear end to an earlier period of growth and prosperity during the previous two centuries.<sup>202</sup>

### A. Causes of food shortage

The Great Famine began with bad weather in spring 1315, widespread crop failures lasted through until the summer of 1317, and the country did not fully recover until 1322. It was an epoch marked by extreme levels of criminality, disease, mass death and, as mentioned above, some say even cannibalism and infanticide. It had consequences

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<sup>201</sup> M.H. Keen, *England in the Later Middle Ages*, Routledge, London, 2003, p. 48

<sup>202</sup> T. H. Aston, *op. cit.*, p. 357

for the Church, state, society and future calamities to follow in the fourteenth century. A poem entitled *Poem on the Evil Times of Edward II*, composed by anonymous authors around 1321 describes the situation as divine punishment for people's over-pride:

“When God saw that the world was so over proud, He sent a dearth on earth, and made it full hard. A bushel of wheat was at four shillings or more, Of that men might have had a quarter before.... And then they turned pale who had laughed so loud, And they became all docile who before were so proud. A man's heart might bleed for to hear the cry Of poor men who called out, 'Alas! For hunger I die ...!'”<sup>203</sup>

Famines became familiar in Medieval Europe. In England, famine struck in 1315–1317, 1321, 1351, and 1369. There was often not enough to eat for most people, and life expectancy was relatively limited. The average life expectancy in 1276 was about 35 years. Between 1301 and 1325 during the Great Famine it fell to 29, while between 1348 and 1375, Black Death and subsequent plagues, reduced it to only 17.<sup>204</sup>

During the period prior to 1300, the population of Europe had exploded, reaching levels that were not reached again until the nineteenth century. However, the wheat yield had been dropping since

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<sup>203</sup> Rosemary Greentree, *The Middle English Lyric and Short Poem*, D. S. Brewer, Cambridge, 2001, p. 162

<sup>204</sup> Anne B. Rodrick, *The History of Great Britain*, Ann Baltz Rodrick, Connecticut, 2004, p. 30

1280 and prices had been rising. For every seed planted, only two were harvested; one was used as seed for the following year, and one for food. Modern farming ratios reach up to thirty seeds or more for each one planted.<sup>205</sup>

The arrival of the Great Famine coincided with the end of the Medieval Warm Period. Between 1310 and 1330, northern Europe witnessed some of the worst periods of bad weather in the entire Middle Ages, characterized by severe winters as well as rainy and cold summers. Changing weather patterns, the incompetence of medieval governments in dealing with such disasters, all along with high population level made things even worse.<sup>206</sup> In the spring of 1315, abnormal heavy rain began to fall. During the following spring and summer, it continued to rain and the temperature remained cool. These conditions caused pervasive crop failures, which meant scarcity of food for both animals and the cattle. The price of food began to augment. Food prices in England doubled between spring and midsummer. Salt, which was the only way to preserve meat, became difficult to obtain due to the fact that was more difficult to extract the wet weather; its price went from 30 shillings to 40 shillings.<sup>207</sup> Because of the general

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<sup>205</sup> Cantor, Norman L. *In the Wake of the Plague: the Black Death and the World it Made*, Free Press, New York, 2001, p. 74.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Andy Wood, op. cit., p. 30



poverty, the low amount of harvests meant some people would starve to death. Stores of grain for long-term emergencies were restricted for the use of the lords and nobles. People began to eat wild edible roots, plants, grasses, and nuts they found in the woods.<sup>208</sup>

In the spring of 1316, it continued to rain on a population destitute of energy and reserves to sustain itself. All sections of society from nobles to peasants were affected, but especially the peasants who formed the majority of the population and who had no reserve food supplies. To provide some measure of relief, dead animals were butchered, grain for seed was consumed, children were abandoned, and some elderly people are said to have voluntarily refused to eat in order to provide nourishment for the younger to survive. The climax of the famine and continued bad weather were reached in 1317. Finally, in the summer of the same year, the weather returned to its normal patterns. However, people had become weak because of diseases such as pneumonia, bronchitis, and tuberculosis. Additionally, much of the seed stock had been eaten. It was not until 1325 that the food supply returned to relatively normal conditions and the number of people began to rise again. Death toll probably reached 10–25% of the population in many cities and towns. While the Black Death (1338–1375) killed more people, it lasted for no more than months. The Great

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<sup>208</sup> Michael Hewitt, *A Most Remarkable Family: A History of the Lyon Family from 1066 to 2014*, Author-house, Warrington, 2014, p. 42

Famine, however, lasted for years.<sup>209</sup>

### **B. Consequences of the Great Famine**

The famine is called the Great Famine not only because of the number of people who died, the vast geographic area that was affected, or because of the length of time it lasted. It is named so because of its lasting consequences. A major consequence was for the Church. In a society where the final recourse to all problems had been religion and where Roman Catholicism was the only tolerated faith, no amount of prayer seemed effective against this calamity, which undermined the institutional authority of the Catholic Church. This helped pave the way for later movements that were deemed heretical by the Church because they opposed the Papacy and blamed the failure of prayer upon corruption within the Church.<sup>210</sup>

Moreover, there was an increase in criminal activity. In the fourteenth century, medieval Europe had already experienced widespread social violence, rape and murder were demonstrably very common. With the famine, even those who were not normally disposed to criminal activity would opt for any means to feed themselves or their family. After the famine, England took on a tougher and more violent stroke; it had become an even

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid., p. 50

<sup>210</sup> Ronald H. Fritze, William Baxter Robison, ed., *Historical Dictionary of Late Medieval England, 1272-1485*, Greenwood Press, Connecticut, 2002, p. 109

less amicable place than during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The Great Famine marked a clear end to a period of unprecedented population growth that had started around 1050. Finally, the Great Famine had consequences for future events in the fourteenth century such as the Black Death when an already weakened and vulnerable population would be easily struck. The effects of the Great Famine were long lasting on the English society as well as on the feudal system itself. Having severely checked the number people among the lower class, the supply and labour prices skyrocketed; a result of both the awareness of the labour force of its central role in society, and competition between landowners for working hands.<sup>211</sup>

Although the decline of the feudal system did not take shape until about the end of the sixteenth century, the origins of the whole process of this colossal societal and economic change can be traced back to this period. The Black Death found the English population weakened by malnutrition and unhygienic conditions caused by wet weather and repeated crop failures and epidemics that undermined the country's livestock.

## II. The Black Death (1348-49)

Added to the series of climate fluctuations that medieval England witnessed, famine made the population of England weak and vulnerable to disease. Such an unhealthy environment and the unhygienic life led by the people of the period were typical for the

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<sup>211</sup> A. R. Bridbury, *Medieval England: A Survey of Social and Economic Origins and Development*, Troubador Publishing Ltd., Leicester, 2009, p. 195

spread of any epidemic. It was under such conditions, that the Black Death found the English population.

### A. Origins of the Epidemic

The first occurrence of plague swept across England in the years 1348-49. It travelled across the south in bubonic form during the summer months of 1348, before mutating into a more deadly pneumonic form in winter. It reached London in September 1348, and spread along the coast early during the year 1349. By spring, it was devastating Wales and the Midlands, and by late summer it leaped across the Irish Sea and penetrated the north.<sup>212</sup>

Indeed, the onset of the plague created panic all over the British Isles. An account of the plague's journey across Britain is described below:

'Sometimes it came by road, passing from village to village, sometimes by river, as in the East Midlands, or by ship, from the Low Countries or from other infected areas. On the villis of the bishop of Worcester's estates in the West Midlands, they (the death rates) ranged between 19 per cent of manorial tenants at Hartlebury and Hanbury to no less than 80 per cent at Aston.... It is very difficult for us to imagine the impact of plague on these small rural communities, where a village might have no more than 400 or 500 inhabitants. Few settlements were totally depopulated, but in most others whole families must have

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<sup>212</sup> Mairi Cowan, *Death, Life, and Religious Change in Scottish Towns c. 1350-1560*, Vol. 1350, N° 1560 Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2013, p. 160

been wiped out, and few can have been spared some loss, since the plague killed indiscriminately, striking at rich and poor alike.'<sup>213</sup>

The Black Death entered south-western England in the summer of 1348 and by all accounts struck Bristol with shocking force. The quote below precisely tells where the Black death hit in England on its first arrival there.

'In this year, 1348, in Melcombe in the county of Dorset, a little before the feast of St John the Baptist, two ships, one of them from Bristol, came alongside. One of the sailors had brought with him from Gascony the seeds of the terrible pestilence, and through him the men of that town of Melcombe were the first in England to be infected.'

<sup>214</sup>

Rumours of a terrible plague sweeping like wildfire across Europe had been rumbling for some time, and the quote below explains how the trading port of Bristol was the first major town in Britain to be affected, for it had close connections with the Continent where the first ships carrying the disease first appeared months before.

'Then the dreadful pestilence made its way along the coast by Southampton and reached Bristol, where almost the whole strength of the town perished, as it was surprised by sudden death; for few kept their beds more than two or three

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<sup>213</sup> W. M. Ormrod, Phillip Lindley, *The Black Death in England*, Paul Watkins, Stamford, 1996, p. 23

<sup>214</sup> Susan Scott, Christopher J. Duncan, *Biology of Plagues: Evidence from Historical Populations*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001, p. 88

days, or even half a day.'<sup>215</sup>

Bristol was the second largest city in Britain and was the principal port of entry for the West Country. Within it lived up to 10,000 people, tightly packed together in conditions that were far from sanitary as the lines below explain: *'Filth running in open ditches in the streets, fly-blown meat and stinking fish, contaminated and adulterated ale, polluted well water, unspeakable privies, epidemic disease, - were experienced indiscriminately by all social classes.'*<sup>216</sup>

The unhygienic conditions in Bristol were most likely similar to those of medieval towns. People had a tendency to empty their chamber pots<sup>217</sup> out of their windows into the street. Many houses kept pigs that instead of being grazed outside the city walls, often roamed the streets in search of food. Most people in towns drew their water from the river, which local brewers also used.

The Black Death could spread very rapidly under these conditions. Contemporary writers give a frightening account of its effects. Chronicler Henry Knighton states that:

'Almost the whole strength of the town perished.' A

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<sup>215</sup> Robert S. Gottfried, *The Black Death, Natural and Human Disaster in Medieval Europe*, Macmillan, New York, 1983, p. 58

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60

<sup>217</sup> A chamber pot is a container that is kept in a bedroom and that is used as a toilet. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 8th edition, Oxford University Press, 2010.

contemporary calendar said that: 'The plague raged to such a degree that the living were scarce able to bury the dead.....At this period the grass grew several inches high in the High St and in Broad St; it raged at first chiefly in the centre of the city.'<sup>218</sup>

Another chronicler, Geoffrey the Baker, described the plague's arrival:

'The seventh year after it began, it came to England and first began in the towns and ports joining on the seacoasts, in Dorsetshire, where, as in other counties, it made the country quite void of inhabitants so that there were almost none left alive. From there it passed into Devonshire and Somersetshire, even unto Bristol, and raged in such sort that the Gloucestershire men would not suffer the Bristol men to have access to them by any means. But at length it came to Gloucester, yea even to Oxford and to London, and finally it spread over all England and so wasted the people that scarce the tenth person of any sort was left alive.'<sup>219</sup>

A mass grave has been uncovered at Spitalfields, a district in east London, containing the remains of victims of the Black Death, which confirms the account below:

'The pestilence arrived in London at about the feast of All Saints [1st Nov] and daily deprived many of life. It grew so powerful that between Candlemass and Easter [2nd Feb-12th April] more than 200 corpses were buried almost every day in the new burial ground made next to Smithfield, and this was in addition to the bodies buried in other

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<sup>218</sup> Robert S. Gottfried, *op cit.*, p. 60.

<sup>219</sup> Edward Bascome, *A History of epidemic pestilences, Researches into their Nature, Causes, and Prophylaxis*, John Churchill, London, 1851, p. 54

graveyards in the city.<sup>220</sup>

The new Smithfield cemetery was hurriedly opened, but became so swamped that a local landowner, Sir Walter Manny, donated land nearby at Spittle Croft for a second cemetery.<sup>221</sup> London, the country's largest city, had all the related problems of overpopulation and poor hygiene. The Thames was a polluted mess and pits within the city were a constant source of pollution. Attempts to solve the sanitation problem were hindered by the Black Death itself. In 1349, the King blamed the town council about the state of the streets. The council replied that it could do nothing because many of street cleaners had died of the plague.<sup>222</sup> What made things worse was the fact that London was almost certainly hit by a combined attack of pneumonic and bubonic plague. Robert of Avesbury says describes the severity of the disease: *'Those marked for death were scarce permitted to live longer than three or four days. It showed favour to no-one, except a very few of the wealthy. On the same day, 20, 40 or 60 bodies, and on many occasions*

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<sup>220</sup> Rosemay Horrox, *The Black Death*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1994, p. 65

<sup>221</sup> Roger Highfield, Science Editor, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/science/science-news/3323344/Black-Death-targeted-the-weak.html>, 28 Jan 2008, accessed October 24, 2014.

<sup>222</sup> Ashok K. Dutt, H.N. Misra, Meera Chatterjee, eds., *Explorations in Applied Geography*, Prentice-Hall of India, New Delhi, 2008, p. 476



*many more, might be committed for burial together in the same pit.'*<sup>223</sup>

In January 1349, Parliament was prorogued because the plague had hit the place in which the meeting was to be held: *'[the plague] had suddenly broken out in the said place and the neighbourhood, and daily increased in severity so that grave fears were entertained for the safety of those coming here at the time.'*<sup>224</sup>

The plague did not reach London until the spring of 1350, and it is generally presumed to have killed between one third and half the inhabitants. In Durham, the Bishop's rolls records that *'no tenant came from West Thickley because they are all dead.'*<sup>225</sup>

The combination of plague and fear of a Scottish invasion caused such unrest within Durham that there were riots on the streets. These fears seem well founded, for the Scots were quick to take advantage of their English neighbours' distress. However, they probably paid a terrible price for their opportunism as the chronicle tells:

'The Scots, hearing of the cruel plague of the English, declared that it had befallen them through the revenging

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<sup>223</sup> Catharine Arnold, *Necropolis: London and Its Dead*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2006, p. 24

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> J. F. D. Shrewsbury, *A History of Bubonic Plague in the British Isles*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, p. 116

hand of God, and they took to swearing by 'the foul death of England' - or so the common report resounded in the ears of the English. And thus the Scots, believing that the English were overwhelmed by the terrible vengeance of God, gathered in the forest of Selkirk with the intention of invading the whole realm of England. The fierce mortality came upon them, and the sudden cruelty of a monstrous death winnowed the Scots. Within a short space of time, around 5000 of them had died, and the rest, weak and strong alike, decided to retreat to their own country.<sup>226</sup>

The retreating army carried the plague to Scotland in autumn 1349 and reached its highest virulence in the spring of 1350:

'In 1350, there was a great pestilence and mortality of men in the Kingdom of Scotland, and this pestilence also raged for many years before and after in various parts of the world. So great a plague has never been heard of from the beginning of the world to the present day, or been recorded in books. For this plague vented its spite so thoroughly that fully a third of the human race was killed. At God's command, moreover, the damage was done by an extraordinary and novel form of death. Those who fell sick of a kind of gross swelling of the flesh lasted for barely two days. This sickness befell people everywhere, but especially the middling and lower classes, rarely the great. It generated such horror that children did not dare to visit their dying parents, nor parents their children, but fled for fear of contagion as if from leprosy or a serpent.'<sup>227</sup>

Another chronicle, the Book of Pluscarden reports that the victims were: '*attacked with inflammation and lingered barely four and*

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<sup>226</sup> Rosemay Horrox, op. cit., p. 78

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

*twenty hours.*' Given the acuity of the plague and the symptoms described, it seems likely that the cold Scottish weather provoked an outbreak of pneumonic plague. Wales and Ireland did not escape the effects of the Black Death:

'In the following year, it laid waste the Welsh as well as the English; and then it took ship to Ireland, where the English residents were cut down in great numbers, but the native Irish, living in the mountains and uplands, were scarcely touched until 1357 when it took them unawares and annihilated them everywhere.'<sup>228</sup>

The plague in Wales and the Marches were as pitiless as elsewhere. At WhitChurch, an inquest into the death of John le Strange revealed that John had died on 20 August 1349. His eldest son, Fulk, died two days before the inquest could be held on 30 August. Before an inquest could be held on Fulk's estate, his brother Humphrey was dead too. John, the third brother, survived to inherit a shattered estate, in which the three water mills that belonged to him were assessed at only half their value 'by reason of the want of those grinding, on account of the pestilence. *'His land was deemed worthless because all its tenants were dead and no-one is willing to hire the land.'* Even in Wales, the overall social system was in its way to decay; most of the working class were decimated by the plague, and the remaining seem unable, or perhaps unwilling to return to the old system. The Welsh poet, Jeuan Gethin, describes the fear that the plague engendered in its victims:

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

'We see death coming into our midst like black smoke, a plague that cuts off the young, a rootless phantom that has no mercy or fair countenance. Woe is me of the shilling in the arm-pit; it is seething, terrible, wherever it may come, a head that gives pain and causes a loud cry, a burden carried under the arms, a painful angry knob, a white lump. It is of the form of an apple, like the head of an onion, a small boil that spares no-one. Great is its seething, like a burning cinder, a grievous thing of an ashy colour. It is an ugly eruption that comes with unseemly haste. It is a grievous ornament that breaks out in a rash. The early ornaments of black death.'<sup>229</sup>

Overall, between 30 and 45% of the population died in the Black Death of 1348-50. In some villages, 80% or 90% of the population died.<sup>230</sup>

Young people were the ones mostly hit. Modern research shows that it was very probable that the plague had profound consequences for the reproductive cycle of the population. By the 1370s, the population of England had been halved and it was not recovering.

### **B. Labour Shortage and the Issue of Wages**

Among the immediate consequences of the Black Death in England was a shortage of farm labour, and a corresponding rise in wages. The medieval world-view did not interpret these changes in terms of socio-economic development, and blamed degrading morals

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<sup>229</sup> Norman Davies, *The Isles: A History*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999, p. 419.

<sup>230</sup> Chris Given-Wilson, *Fourteenth Century England VI*, The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2010, p. 61.

instead. The landowning classes saw the rise in wage levels as a sign of social upheaval and insubordination, and reacted with force. Hence, in 1349, King Edward III passed the Ordinance of Labourers, fixing wages at their pre-plague levels. The ordinance was reinforced by Parliament's passing of the Statute of Labourers in 1351. The labour laws were enforced over the following decades.<sup>231</sup>

These legislative measures proved largely inefficient to regulate the market, but the government's brutal measures to enforce these laws caused public apprehension. The plague's greatest effect on the government was on war as no significant campaigns were launched in France until 1355.<sup>232</sup>

Another noteworthy consequence of the Black Death was the raising of the real wage of England. The higher wages for workers combined with sinking prices on grain products led to a problematic economic situation for the gentry. As a result, they started to show an increased interest for offices like justice of the peace, sheriff, and Members of Parliament. The gentry took advantage of their new positions and organised corruption spread. As a

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<sup>231</sup> James Bothwell, P. J. P. Goldberg, W. M. Ormrod, *The Problem of Labour in Fourteenth-Century England*, York Medieval Press, Woodbridge, 2000, p. 33.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

result of this, the gentry as a social class became highly disliked by commoners.<sup>233</sup>

This situation widened the gap between the working and the upper class, and enforced a feeling of antagonism especially on the part of the ruled class. However, the effects of the plague did not end here as explained in the following section. The Church, as well as the cultural life of the English people were subject to radical change.

### **C. Religious and Cultural Consequences**

The omnipresence of death also inspired greater piety in the upper classes, which can be seen in the fact that three Cambridge colleges were founded during or shortly after the Black Death. Increase in public participation may have served to challenge the absolute authority of the Church hierarchy, and thus possibly helped pave the way for the Protestant Reformation.

The high rate of mortality among the clergy naturally led to a shortage of priests in many parts of the country. The clergy were seen to have an elevated status among ordinary people. However, as the Church itself had given the cause of the Black Death to be the inadequacy of the behaviour of men, the higher death rate among the

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<sup>233</sup> Allen, R.C., 'The Great Divergence in European Wages and Prices from the Middle Ages to the First World War', *Explorations in Economic History*, Vol. 38, 2001, pp. 411–47

clergy led the people to lose faith in the Church as an institution. Corruption within the Catholic priesthood also angered the English people. Such dissatisfaction led to anti-clericalism and the rise of Lollardy whose ideas paved a path for Reformation in England. The Statute of Praemunire <sup>234</sup> illustrates the resulting change in the power of the papacy in England.

The Black Death also promoted the use of vernacular English, as the number of teachers who were proficient in French dropped. This, in turn, contributed to the late-fourteenth century flowering of English literature, represented by writers such as Geoffrey Chaucer and John Gower. <sup>235</sup>

The series of *unlucky* events did end in famine and plague. Politics too was a major actor of change on the English scene, and had a more or less direct impact on class conflict, and hence the rise of class-consciousness on the part of the working class.

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<sup>234</sup> The Statute of Praemunire was an Act of the Parliament of England enacted in 1393, during the reign of Richard II. Its intention was to limit the powers of the papacy in England. The word *praemunire* originally referred to the writ of summons issued against a person accused under this and similar statutes; and later came to mean offences against the statutes. Source: Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 8th edition, Oxford University Press, 2010.

<sup>235</sup> William Spalding, *The History of English Literature*, Oliver and Boyd's, London, 1872, p. 7

### III. The Unsuccessful Turning Point of the Hundred Years War:

1360

Medieval people glorified kings who defeated the enemies at war, and victory meant plunder of the defeated and full coffers, which meant less taxation and the gentry's purses even better off. Barons and the higher clergy alike willingly financed foreign wars in the hope to have their share after victory is achieved. This was the case with the Hundred Years' War until a series of defeats were inflicted on the English armies, and war was not as rewarding as it used to be.

The first sign of general decadence was the downfall, in the later years of King Edward III, of the military and naval power. When in the year 1360 the Treaty of Brétigny (1360) made over to the English Crown a third of France, English seamanship held supremacy in Western waters. No harbour-master dared to steal or annoy the traders who brought the English wool, no foreign craft dared board the vessels that sailed under the English flag. Throughout the whole of Europe, no chivalry was able to contend with the archers of England. The English were the governors of Southern France.

The English supremacy, which lasted for many years, was destined to perish rapidly. The political changes in Spain were the immediate cause of Continental revolt against the English domination. In 1369, King Henry of Castile, having been restored to his throne by French arms in the face of English opposition,



entered into a naval alliance with France, which secured to the confederates the mastery of the Channel. The English importance in the European political scene, the prosperity of the English commerce and the English military hold over France, depended on naval superiority. That superiority was quelled by the unified fleets of Castile and France.<sup>236</sup>

The English position in Aquitaine was at the same moment being undermined even among the English soldiers, whose discipline proper to an army of occupation was wanting. The regiments, or 'companies' as they were called, were officered by soldiers of fortune who had not scrupled, when active employment was wanting in the English service, to follow Du Guesclin over the Pyrenees and help the French to turn the English ally off the throne of Castile. The only means, by which King Edward held these men in hand, was paying them higher wages.

In order to keep his soldiers, the King oppressed his subjects with heavy taxes. When at last the companies began to make unauthorized raids into the territory of the French King to obtain compensation for their arrears, the opportunity most desired by the latter monarch had arrived. He had now the justification for declaring war against the English. In the spring of 1369, French armies

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<sup>236</sup> Christopher Allmand, *The Hundred Years War: England and France at War, c.1300-c.1450*. Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 84

invaded the isolated English possession of Ponthieu in the north of France. The loss of the province was the responsibility of the ministers who had failed to garrison it during the winter as had eventually happened in Aquitaine.

However, for the simple peasant or worker, and members of the lower class in general, the real causes of the defeats in the war with France, as mentioned above, were not very far to seek. Under a King too old to govern by himself, and his heir, the Black Prince abroad, the opportunity was offered to swindlers and embezzlers to fill their purses even by betraying their own country.<sup>237</sup>

#### **A. The First Poll Tax (1377)**

King Edward III's continuous demands for economic support during the Hundred Years' War left the government with exhausted reserves and angered his subjects whose confidence in his government was waning as he became influenced by unpopular advisers, especially John of Gaunt. The 1371 Parliament was called to avoid a revolt among merchants in London and Norwich who had been overtaxed. At this time, lay ministers who became in a stronger position replaced clerical ones in a real rivalry between the Bishops and the financiers. The Good Parliament of 1376 denounced the corruption of Gaunt and

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<sup>237</sup> John Barnie, *War in medieval English society: social values in the Hundred Years War, 1337-99*, Cornell University Press, New York, 1974, p. 19.

the administration that closed its eyes to the actions of men like Richard Lyons who was impeached because he charged usurious interests on his loans to the King and found means to be repaid far more than he had lent. The Parliament then led by Peter de la Mare refused to grant further funds. More importantly, it accused the King's advisers of being the cause of the royal poverty, leading to the need for more taxes. By the arrival of King Richard II <sup>238</sup> to the throne in 1377, the problem of government was primarily how to finance war. Consequently, a four pence poll tax was levied that year. The question was whether the impoverished populations were ready to ruin themselves to finance a war from which they had no benefit, knowing that young King Richard I was surrounded by people they described as thieves and swindlers. <sup>239</sup>

Were the peasants and other people of the lower classes aware of what was happening in the political scene? The 1381 insurgents' demand for the heads of Gaunt and other people accused of corruption is a sign that they were, and their demands as the following sections

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<sup>238</sup> Richard II (1367–1400) the king of England from 1377 to 1399, following his grandfather King Edward III. He became king at the age of 10, relying on his uncle John of Gaunt to help rule the country, and was successful in defeating the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. The rest of his rule was spent trying to control the other powerful men of the country, particularly Henry Bolingbroke, John of Gaunt's son. In 1398, Richard sent Henry abroad, but he returned the following year and seized power, ruling as King Henry IV. Richard was put in prison, where he died, possibly murdered. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 8th edition, Oxford University Press, 2010.

<sup>239</sup> Christopher Allmand, *op. cit.*, p. 92

show strengthens the idea of the existence of labour class-consciousness among them.

### **B. The Second Poll Tax (1379)**

As mentioned earlier, in the last year of Edward III's reign (1377), a poll tax had been imposed by the nobles through Parliament on all people above the age of fourteen to finance an unsuccessful, and thus, very unpopular war against France. In 1379, a tax proportional to wealth was passed. The need for funds was greater than ever, and this led the government to resort once more to a poll tax. The tax was collected from the whole population, regardless of the bewildering news about the wealth of its instigators. These two taxes were graduated, according to people's properties and issued on every English adult. Added to the other customary dues, the tax became a heavy burden on the shoulders of the populace. If they could not pay in cash, they paid with anything else such as seeds, tools, and other vital belongings that were supposed to help them subsist in those years of unfavourable climate and poverty. Parliament stood against further taxing trade and property to finance war. In fact, the Members of Parliament were defending the interest of the upper class they originated from and represented in the Commons. As a result, commissioners were sent to make sure everyone, save for known

beggars, pay the poll tax. Those who refused to pay were arrested.<sup>240</sup>

The peasants who yielded to their lords' demands at first, started to question the utility of their taxation when no improvement was seen on the battlefield as well as in their living conditions. Suspicion on the competence and fidelity of the King's councillors was another matter of concern to them. Such concern explains the accusation of the Kings' advisors of being 'traitors'.<sup>241</sup> Peasants did not consider tax evasion as a sin but rather as the only means by which people could defend themselves from powerful thieves.

### **C. The Third Poll Tax: March (1380)**

The living conditions of the English lower class during the period prior to the revolt do not explain the reason for its outburst precisely in the summer of 1381. The existence of combustible material does not justify its explosion without a spark that provoked it. The spark in the case of the revolt of 1381 was directly linked with the perpetual struggle of the English serf for freedom and his continuous attempts to resist war taxation.

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<sup>240</sup> R. H. Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free, Medieval Peasant Movements and the English Rising of 1381*, Maurice Temple Smith Ltd., London, 2003, p. 206

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*

In February 1381, the ministers set to work to collect a poll tax, which had been raised in January. The method adopted was to appoint a small body of collectors and sub-collectors for each shire, to make sure that as many shillings as there were adults over fifteen years of age from each place were paid. The grievance that became apparent at once was that this form of levy bore most severely on the poorest places. In poor villages, where there was no moneyed resident to compensate for eventual insufficiencies in tax collection, every villein and cottager had to pay the full amount of money.<sup>242</sup>

The remedy for this inequitable taxation was to make false returns to the commissioners of the poll tax. The result was that every shire of England returned an incredibly small number of adult inhabitants liable to the taxation. This can be proved with absolute certainty by comparing the returns of the earlier one-groat poll tax of 1377 with those of the one-shilling poll tax of 1381. To the former tax, all persons over fourteen had to contribute, to the latter all persons over fifteen, so that there should have been a small, but still perceptible falling off in the returns. Instead of the slight diminution in taxable persons expected, the commissioners of the poll tax reported that there were only two-thirds as many contributories in 1381 as in 1377. The adult population of the realm had ostensibly fallen from 1,355,201 to 896,481 persons (see Table below). These figures were the proof of a colossal and deliberate attempt to evade taxation by a general

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<sup>242</sup> Montague John Guest, *Lectures on the history of England*, Macmillan, London, 1888 p. 312

falsification of figures.

**Table:** Number of taxable population registered in 1377 and 1388

	1377	1381
Number of registered taxable population	1, 355,201	896,481

**Source:** Petit-Dutaillis, Charles, *Studies and Notes supplementary to Stubbs' Constitutional History*, Longmans, Green & CO. London, 1915, p. 280

On February 22, 1381, the King's Council issued a writ to the Barons of the Exchequer stating that instant efforts must be made to collect the whole poll tax, as the sum received was far below what had been expected. On March 16, an additional directive was issued declaring that ample evidence proved that the collectors and constables had behaved with shameless negligence and corruption. A fresh body of commissioners travelled round the shires to compare the list of inhabitants returned in the first list with the actual population of the townships, to compel payment from all persons who had evaded, and to imprison all who resisted their authority. It is said that John Legge, one of the King's sergeants-at-arms, suggested this commission to the ministers. The reputation of having done so cost him his life.<sup>243</sup>

The commissioners were directed to set to work on fifteen shires

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<sup>243</sup> Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Reading the Middle Ages, Volume II: Sources from Europe, Byzantium, and the Islamic World*, University of Toronto Press, Ontario, 2013, p. 480.

only, including all those of the southeast in addition to Somerset, Devon, Cornwall, Gloucestershire, and the West Riding of Yorkshire. The second roll of commissioners began to work in April and May. Their reports sufficed to show that the ministers had been right, and that wholesale fraud had been practised against the Government during the first levy of the poll tax. In Norwich, 600 persons were discovered to have evaded the original collectors, in Norfolk about 8,000, but still more striking was the case of the county of Suffolk, where no less than 13,000 suppressed names were collected in a few weeks. Nevertheless, the revision had not gone far when a full-scale explosion of popular wrath occurred.

The explanation of the outburst is simply that the countryside was seething with discontent since the poll tax had been imposed. The poll tax itself was so heavy for the poorest classes that they unanimously tried to defend themselves by the simple device of false returns. The Government wanted to chastise tens of thousands of people, and had entrusted it to commissioners with no armed force, except half a dozen clerks and sergeants. Their task was so revolting, their compelling power so weak, that after a month of friction when thousands of shillings had been extorted from the needy evaders of the tax, trouble commenced.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> Christian Drummond Liddy, *op. cit.*, p. 93.



Massive tax evasion for the above-mentioned reasons might be considered as the proof that people of the same class suffered the same grievances, whose natural outcome was a sense of unity due to a common interest being threatened by a now rival class seeking to secure its wealth and position regardless of the economic changes that followed the Black Death. The natural outcome of this common feeling of objection was expressed in the spontaneous aspect of the English Rising of the same year.

If today's trade unions and other working class association go on strike or boycott regulations that do not appeal to them, the Late Medieval labourer expressed his discontent through quite different means such as revolt and bloodshed. Below is the most outstanding instance of such outbursts of anger that might show how aware these people were in defending their common interest.

#### **IV. The English Rising of 1381**

The Rising is debatably known as the Peasants' Revolt, but which in fact involved peasants as well as craftsmen and London citizens without whose help, the Essex and Kentish men would never have entered the well protected town. Another reason for objection to this appellation is that 60% of the English population was composed of peasants. Therefore, the large number of peasants among the rebels is natural.

The Rising started in Essex on 30 May 1381, when a tax collector tried, for the third time in four years, to levy a Poll Tax. The war against France had taken an unsuccessful turning and the government's reputation was damaged. The 1381 tax was the spark that set fire in almost the whole country.



Map : Extension of the Revolt of 1381 in England

Source: R. B. Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, op. cit., p. 100

The rebels were not just protesting against the government. Since the Black Death, poor people had become increasingly angry that they were still serfs. They were demanding freedom and equality to all men, less harsh laws, and a fairer distribution of wealth. Soon both Essex

and Kent were in revolt. The rebels coordinated their tactics by letter. They marched on London, where they destroyed the houses of government ministers. They also had a clear set of political demands. On 15 June, the 14-year-old King, Richard II, met the rebels' leader Wat Tyler. William Walworth, the Lord Mayor of London, attacked and killed Tyler. Before the rebel army could retaliate, Richard stepped forward towards them and promised to abolish serfdom. The peasants went home, but later government troops toured the villages hanging men who had taken part in the Revolt. Although the Revolt was defeated, its demands – less harsh laws, money for the poor, freedom and equality – all became part of our democracy in the long term.<sup>245</sup>

### **A. Causes of the Revolt**

Historians have identified a number of factors that caused the Rising. Three hundred years after the Norman Conquest, peasants were still villeins who belonged to their lords under the feudal system.

As stated above, the Black Death (1348 - 1350) had killed many people. This meant there was a shortage of workers and wages went up. Parliament passed the Statute of Labourers (1351), which set a maximum wage and warned that people would be punished with prison if they refused to work for that wage. Since 1360, an itinerant priest

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<sup>245</sup> R. H. Hilton, T. H. Aston, *The English Rising of 1381*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987, p. 211.

called John Ball had been preaching that class differences were groundless. His famous motto ‘*when Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?*’ has been a source of inspiration to levellers of all kinds. After 1369, the war against France began to go badly. This would have made people despise the government who had been accused of corruption and of robbing both the King and the people of their money to fill their purses instead of financing the war against France.<sup>246</sup>

### **B. Brief Account of the Revolt**

In 1377, Richard II became King at the age of ten, and his uncle, John of Gaunt, ran the country. As mentioned earlier, series of poll taxes to pay for the war against France were levied. The taxes had to be paid by everyone over the age of 15 no matter how much money they earned. In March 1381, the government demanded a third poll tax in four years. When people refused to pay, Parliament appointed commissioners to compel them to do so.

On 30 May 1381, Commissioner Thomas Bampton entered the village of Fobbing in Essex. The brutal methods used by this latter made the villagers angry. Following his attempt to arrest the villagers’ spokesperson, the angry masses started a riot, and the tax collectors were put to death. Soon

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<sup>246</sup> Fiona Somerset, Jill C. Havens, Derrick G. Pitard, *Lollards and Their Influence in Late Medieval England*, Boydell Press, Woodridge, 2003, p. 282.

both Essex and Kent were in revolt.

The rebels marched on London. The leader of the men of Essex was called Jack Straw. On 7 June 1381, the Kentish rebels asked an ex-soldier named Wat Tyler to be their leader. John Ball who had been imprisoned by the Archbishop of Canterbury for heresy, was freed by the rebels. Soon, people resentful of the government practices and the hardships of serfdom joined the rebels. Fiery letters were soon sent round the countryside, calling people to join them. On 13 June, supporters of the rising opened the gates of London to the rebels who entered the city and attacked the houses of Richard's advisers, including John of Gaunt and Simon Sudbury, the Archbishop of Canterbury.

On 14 June, Richard called the rebels led by Richard Wallingford for a meeting at Mile End and met a group of rebels. There, the insurgents demanded that the King dismiss some of his advisers and abolish serfdom. Richard agreed and many of the rebels went home. During the talks, a group of rebels broke into the Tower of London and beheaded Archbishop Sudbury.

On 15 June, Richard went to Smithfield to meet Wat Tyler, the military leader of the revolt, and probably a veteran of the war with France. The latter had refused the deal with Wallingford, and came with an even longer list of demands including that the Church be disendowed of its properties, in addition to lower rents of land.

One account of the meeting says that during the meeting William Walworth, the Lord Mayor of London, attacked and killed Tyler. Soon, Richard stepped forward telling the rebels: ‘*I will be your King and leader*’. Tyler’s mysterious death marked the end of the revolt, and the beginning of the Government’s retaliation. It was claimed that King Richard would not keep promises made under duress. Therefore, rebel leaders like John Ball and Jack Straw were tried and beheaded, and a massive campaign to put down the rebellion all over the country began.<sup>247</sup>

### C. The Aftermath of the Revolt

Contemporary chroniclers of the events in the revolt have formed an important source for historians. The chroniclers were biased against the rebels’ cause and typically portrayed the rebels as ‘beasts, monstrosities or misguided fools’. London chroniclers were also unwilling to admit the role of ordinary Londoners in the revolt, preferring to place the blame entirely on rural peasants from the southeast. Among the key accounts was the anonymous *Anonimale Chronicle*, whose author appears to have been part of the royal court and an eyewitness to many of the events in London. Chronicler Thomas Walsingham was present for much of the revolt, but focused his account on the terror of the social unrest and was extremely biased against the rebels. The events were recorded in France in Jean

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<sup>247</sup> Peter L. Larson, *Conflict and Compromise in the Late Medieval Countryside: Lords and Peasants in Durham, 1349–1400*, Routledge, New York, 2012, p. 220

Froissart's Chronicles.<sup>248</sup> He had well-placed sources close to the revolt, but was inclined to elaborate the known facts with colourful stories.<sup>249</sup>

At the end of the 19th century, there was a surge in historical interest in the Peasants' Revolt, spurred by the contemporary growth of the labour and socialist movements. By 1907, the accounts of the chroniclers were all widely available in print and the main public records concerning the events had been identified. Some researchers began to use the legal indictments that had been used against suspected rebels after the revolt as a fresh source of historical information, and over the next century extensive research was carried out into the local economic and social history of the revolt, using scattered local sources across southeast England.

Interpretations of the revolt have changed over the years. Historians of the centuries to come established the idea that the revolt had marked the end of unfree labour and serfdom in England. Others describe it as 'one of the most portentous events in the whole of our history'. In the 20th century, this interpretation was increasingly challenged by historians who revised the impact of the revolt on further

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<sup>248</sup> Froissart's Chronicles (or Chroniques) are a prose chronicle of the Hundred Years' War written in the 14th century by Jean Froissart (c. 1337–c. 1405). The Chronicles open with the events leading up to the deposition of Edward II in 1326, and cover the period up to 1400, recounting events in western Europe, mainly in England.

<sup>249</sup> Rita Copeland, *Criticism and Dissent in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, p. 298.

political and economic events in England. Mid-20th century Marxist historians were both interested in, and generally sympathetic to the rebel cause, a trend culminating in Rodney Hilton's 1973 account of the uprising, set against the context of wider peasant revolts across Europe during the period. The Peasants' Revolt has received more academic attention than any other medieval revolt, and this research has been typically interdisciplinary in nature, involving historians, literary scholars and international collaboration.<sup>250</sup>

The Peasants' Revolt became a popular literary subject (See Chapter Four). Geoffrey Chaucer used the rebel killing of Flemings as a metaphor for wider disorder in *The Nun's Priest's Tale* part of *The Canterbury Tales*. William Langland, the author of the poem *Piers Plowman*, which had been widely used by the rebels, made various changes to its text after the revolt in order to distance himself from their cause.<sup>251</sup> Had not there been a lack of organization among the rebels and their leaders, the 1381 Rising would have been called the 1381 Revolution, and the English would have forerun the French by centuries.

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<sup>250</sup> Steven Justice, op. cit., p. 59.

<sup>251</sup> Larry Scanlon, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Literature 1100–1500*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009, p.62.



# Chapter Four

## Social Unrest after the 1381 Rising

Most historians consider the revolt of 1381 as a turning point in English history marking the beginning of the decline of the feudal system. However, despite the importance of this event, it should be considered as part of a process that began in the early 1300s and continued far beyond the period on which this study is focused.

The process of social unrest and class conflict started long before 1381, and did not end by the suppression of the rising. Below is a series of revolts through which this work attempts to consolidate the idea of labour class-consciousness.

### I. The Kentish Rebellion (May 1450)

The Kentish Rebellion was directed against the government of Henry VI of England. It was under the leadership of Jack Cade <sup>252</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> Jack Cade was the leader of a popular revolt against the government of England in 1450. At the time of the revolt, the weak and unpopular King Henry VI was on the throne. While little is known about the rebel leader himself, the events of the rebellion to which he gave his name are well recorded in fifteenth-century chronicles. The Jack Cade Rebellion stemmed from local grievances concerned about the corruption and abuse of power surrounding the king's regime and his closest advisors. Furthermore, the rebels were angered by the debt caused by years of warfare against France and the recent loss

who planned a rebellion among Kentish small property holders angered by high taxes and prices.

The similarities between the Peasants' Revolt and the Kentish rebellion outnumber the differences. Both started in the southeast, and its members were mainly peasants. Both claimed for and carried out the punishment they desired to the people they called traitors. Both, in effect, came in time of heavy taxation and widespread corruption among the ruling class. The latter led to chaos and waste of the nation's wealth.

### **A. Social Disorder and Government Bankruptcy**

The intermittent struggle with France known as the Hundred Years' War depleted the English treasury and left the royal coffers constantly in need to be refilled. Heavy taxation was the only remaining resort. However, people were aware that added to the burden of this taxation was the greed of royal officials, who increased their wealth at the expense of proper administration of the tax system.<sup>253</sup>

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of Normandy. Leading an army of men from Kent and the surrounding counties, Jack Cade marched on London in order to force the government to end the corruption and remove the traitors surrounding the king's person. Source: Kaufman, Alexander L. *The Historical Literature of the Jack Cade Rebellion*, Ashgate, Burlington, 2009.

<sup>253</sup> Ronald H. Fritze, William Baxter Robison, *op. cit.*, p. 392

The revenues from the traditional sources of taxation declined in later medieval England, and a series of experiments in the form of poll taxes began: in 1377, a flat rate tax in which every person paid the same amount of money was levied, followed by a graduated tax, based on the person's wealth, in 1379. By 1381, the unpopularity of these taxes had contributed to the outbreak of a Peasants' Revolt.<sup>254</sup>

The Kentish Rebellion is an indicator of the disorderly state of Late Medieval England, and of the failure of the rule of law. Disorder took the form rebellions such as Perkyng's uprising at Abingdon in 1431, a war between the Earl of Devon and Lord Bonville in the West Country that began earlier and had continued intermittently ever since. John Kemp, Archbishop of York, had begged Parliament in 1429 to provide the Crown with the necessary funds to suppress disorder, a necessarily expensive business. For this reason, his request was not considered. The government of King Henry V<sup>255</sup> had taken firm and resolute steps to deal with agitators, but with his death, too many people had lapsed back into their previous habits of disorderly and

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<sup>254</sup> Ibid., p. 413

<sup>255</sup> Henry V (1387–1422) king of England (1413–22) and son of Henry IV. He is regarded as a symbol of English patriotism, especially because of Shakespeare's play *Henry V*. He took an English army to France during the Hundred Years War and defeated the French at the Battle of Agincourt (1415), putting an area of France under English control. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 8th edition, Oxford University Press, 2010.

criminal behaviour.<sup>256</sup>

During this period, the whole country felt the disgrace of defeat in battle, which led to the loss of Normandy, but such a loss was a lesser grievance because there was enough feeling of wrong at home to make people take up arms to resolve domestic problems rather than riot because of the loss of a remote province. In fact, this war defeat provided an occasion for the discontented to voice their wrath despite the fact that the main cause of the rebellion was the desire for a better and trustworthy government that made better use of the taxes the people paid.<sup>257</sup>

## **B. The Outbreak of Rebellion**

Before dealing with the rebellion, a brief description of its leader seems necessary. The identity of Jack Cade, the presumed leader of the revolt, remains a mystery. However, from the competent way in which he managed the forces that he led, one can assume he must have had military experience in France, and may even have been placed in command of a considerable number of men. He showed in the movements of his forces a high degree of military skill. It is difficult to

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<sup>256</sup> Michael D. Miller, *An Analysis of the Causes of the Wars of the Roses, and the Course They Took*, [http://www.warsoftheroses.co.uk/chapter\\_39.htm](http://www.warsoftheroses.co.uk/chapter_39.htm), 2003, accessed November 1, 2014.

<sup>257</sup> Alexander Kaufman, *The Historical Literature of the Jack Cade Rebellion*, Ashgate Publishing Ltd., Surrey, 2009, p. 38.

believe that such people would have followed him in so desperate an enterprise unless they had confidence in his military abilities. He had a strong and dominating personality and considerable intelligence, but these on their own would not have been enough.<sup>258</sup>

King Henry VI and Queen Margaret were still at Leicester dealing with the remaining business of the Parliament that had impeached Suffolk when the news of Suffolk's death and the even more ominous tidings of Jack Cade's rebellion reached them. Cade had moved with remarkable speed, so that by the second week in June he was encamped on Blackheath with his host. He was able to threaten the City, and it was known that he was in communication with some Londoners who were ready to fight for his cause. Thomas, Lord Scales was authorised to raise troops from soldiers returning from Normandy. Meanwhile, a delegation was dispatched to listen to the rebels' complaints.

Jack Cade presented complaints and requests from which one can deduce the rebels' grievances. Comprising fifteen articles, the 'Complaint' focused on the corrupt practices of the King's officials in Kent, who were charged with extortion, perversion of justice, and election falsification. The commons also called for an inquiry into the loss of Normandy and into the misappropriation of royal funds by the King's servants. The overbearing

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<sup>258</sup> David Charles Douglas, A. R. Myers, *English Historical Documents, 1327 – 1485*, Routledge, London, 1995, p. 25.

attitude of the King's favourites, and their corrupt ways, was another cause of complaint. The nobility interfered with the elections to Parliament regardless of the wishes of the true electors. Moreover, Cade and his followers claimed that Normandy had been lost through 'treason', and the traitors, were left at large and even enjoyed high positions instead of receiving the punishment they deserved.<sup>259</sup>

Eventually, by extraordinary efforts, Lord Scales had raised a force, and in mid June 1450, the King and his Lords rode through the City, clad in full armour, to meet the rebels at Blackheath. Forewarned, Jack Cade and his army had slipped away into the impenetrable forests of the Weald of Kent. The Royal army followed and was defeated in an ambush. The losses were trivial; some twenty-five killed in all, but included two Royal commanders. Having scored this success, Cade returned to his camp at Blackheath. This defeat caused anxiety in the Royal camp, where many openly spoke with approval of Jack Cade's demands, and soldiers turned mutinous. What made things even worse is that King Henry VI ignored the offers of the Lord Mayor and Aldermen to resist Cade, and retired to the safety of Kenilworth castle leaving London to its fate.

Jack Cade now advanced on the City and arrived in Southwark on July 2, 1450. He forced his way over London Bridge the next day, cutting the ropes of the drawbridge with his own sword to imply that

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<sup>259</sup> Ibid.

he had come with no intention of retreat. The Lord Mayor and the Aldermen met, but so many were in sympathy with Cade, and were unable to resist him.

At first, Jack Cade was able to keep his men in order and prevent them from looting. However, with so many riches around them, good discipline did not last for long. Soon Cade's men began to rob, and there were frequent scuffles with citizens determined to defend their property. Lives were lost on both sides and disorder increased with the arrival of large troops from Essex. To prevent rebels from mounting an attack upon the Tower, Lord Scales surrendered Lord Say and William Crowmer to them. Glad to get their hands on the hated Treasurer, the rebels prosecuted Lord Say in Guildhall. There he boldly demanded trial by his peers, but he was beheaded in Cheapside. Crowmer suffered the same fate at Mile End without any form of trial. The heads of the victims were displayed on London Bridge.

Meanwhile, there were other disorders in the countryside. These displayed the popular hostility to Queen Margaret and her deep unpopularity. William Ainscough, Bishop of Salisbury, who had married King Henry VI and Queen Margaret, paid with his life for imposing a 'French woman' upon England. William Booth, Bishop of Lichfield, and Walter Lehart, Bishop of Norwich, respectively the Queen's Chancellor and Confessor were attacked in their own dioceses,

and hardly escaped with their lives.<sup>260</sup>

### **C. The Government Reaction and Revolt Suppression**

By the end of the first week in July, the Lord Mayor, the Aldermen, and Lord Scales had begun to recover their self-confidence. Cade and his men who were greeted by some on entering the City at first were no longer welcome. Lord Scales started reaction at night at the head of the Tower garrison, while the citizens who had turned hostile to the rebellion after the pillaging and destruction caused by Cade's mob were called to arms as well. The streets were soon cleared of the rebels, and a ferocious fight began for possession of London Bridge. The battle lasted the whole night. Many were killed, and some were thrown into the river. At dawn, Lord Scales was in possession of the northern half of the bridge with the intention to renew the assault on the southern half.

This attack was delayed by the arrival of William of Waynflete, Bishop of Winchester, who had been sent by the Chancellor, Cardinal John Kemp, and Archbishop of York in an attempt to dissuade rebels from their intent peacefully.

The Bishop brought a bag full of blank forms of pardon, and he freely offered these to all who agreed to abandon the rebellion and return home. Greatly shaken by the ferocity of Lord Scale's night attack

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<sup>260</sup> Michael D. Miller, [http://www.warsoftheroses.co.uk/chapter\\_39.htm](http://www.warsoftheroses.co.uk/chapter_39.htm) op. cit., 2013, accessed September 10, 2016.



on the bridge, and frightened of his further assault, as many as 2, 000 took the Bishop's pardons. Despite this, Jack Cade continued in arms with the few who remained loyal to him.<sup>261</sup>

Later, Jack Cade fled to Rochester where he demanded Parliamentary ratification of the Bishop's pardons but was pushed out of the town. He also made a vain attempt to take Queensborough Castle. By then, his force had become so small that the new sheriff of Kent, John Eden, cornered and killed him near Haywards Heath in the second half of July. The troubles in Kent did not end there; a commission of *oyer et terminer* was sent to Canterbury to try the rebels who had not been pardoned or had abused their pardons.<sup>262</sup>

Soon, the commission had to abandon work because several other rebels raised the standard of revolt, which made it impossible to arrest all the accused. It was not until the 'harvest of heads', presided over by Richard, Duke of York in January 1451, and the subsequent progress by King Henry VI through the County, that peace in Kent could be restored. A similar attempt was made to punish the Wiltshire rebels for murdering the Bishop of

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<sup>261</sup> A. R. Myers, *Crown, Household and Parliament in Fifteenth Century England*, Hambledon Press, London, 1985, p. 80

<sup>262</sup> Ibid

Salisbury. It had to be abandoned when the whole of Wiltshire rose in arms. In the end, the Wiltshire rebels were pardoned as well.<sup>263</sup>

King Henry VI and Queen Margaret were very shaken by the course of events. The weakness of the government was plain, and the abandonment of the Capital by the King opened the way to criticisms to the latter. Even worse was the fact that Jack Cade's rebellion was not put down by the government, but by the resolution of the citizens of the City of London and the courage of Lord Scales and the soldiers of the Tower garrison.

Here again, confrontation with two social classes is conspicuous. One was accused of corruption and misgovernment, and another determined to redress things by means of open rebellion. Having discovered that direct attack on the government would not work, the majority accepted pardons and returned home, and a small number remained in arms. Nevertheless, both King and government, and the class they represented, were aware that the prolongation of their retaliation plan would lead them to their ruin. Their only resort was to grant them pardon.

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<sup>263</sup> Michael A. Hicks, *Revolution and Consumption in Late Medieval England*, Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2001, p. 78.

## II. John and William Merfold Revolt (July 1450)

John and William Merfold were yeomen brothers in Sussex in the mid fifteenth-century. Both were indicted in 1451 after publicly inciting the killing of the nobility, clergy, and the deposition of King Henry VI. They also advocated rule by common people. Minor uprisings spread throughout Sussex until authorities intervened and four yeomen were hanged. The Merfold statements followed the above-mentioned major rebellion in Kent led by Jack Cade, and are considered demonstrative of underlying economic conditions as well as class and social conflicts in fifteenth-century England.<sup>264</sup>

### A. Start of the Great Slump

Compared with the economic boom that occurred in twelfth century England, the economic situation was very miserable in the mid-fifteenth century. Historians now refer to the mid-fifteenth century as the era of the 'Great Slump'. This economic downturn was especially severe for certain sections of English society. Magnates saw their rental income fall, and Woollen cloth manufacturers experienced a decline in woollen cloth exports. Consequently, a great number of workers involved in woollen manufacture found themselves unemployed. As is the case with most recessions, certain sectors of

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<sup>264</sup> Rowena E. Archer, *Crown, Government and People in the Fifteenth Century*, St Martin's Press, New York, 1995, p. 15.

society did quite well, such as agricultural labourers. John Hatcher and Mark Bailey have suggested that: “*By the middle of the fifteenth century the purchasing power of a day’s labour seems to have more than doubled*”.<sup>265</sup>

Nonetheless, the recession was profound. King Henry VI’s Lancastrian Government shared in this economic gloom. On November 6, 1449, a new session of Parliament met at the Dominican Friary in London. Immediately, the Commons petitioned Henry VI on the state of royal finances.

“The Commons assembled in this your present Parliament pray you to consider; whereas your chancellor of your realm of England, your treasurer of England, and many other lords of your council, by your high command, showed and declared the state of this your realm to your said commons at your Parliament l; last held at Westminster; that was, that you were in debt for £372,000, that is a great and grievous sum.”<sup>266</sup>

According to the Commons Petition, royal income was only £5,000 a year, while royal expenditure was £24,000. Such financial problems imposed severe constraints on Henry’s Government, which in turn was a great source of instability in mid-fifteenth century England. In addition, financial pressures meant that the Lancastrian

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<sup>265</sup> John Hatcher, Mark Bailey, *Modelling the Middle Ages*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, p. 48

<sup>266</sup> ‘*The Parliament Rolls of Medieval England 1275-1504, Volume XII*’, p. 107

government could not properly defend Normandy against the encroaching French Forces. Henry VI and his ministers were held responsible for the financial mess in which they found themselves in 1450. In part, King Henry VI was the victim of the 'Great Slump'. It has been estimated that English woollen cloth exports had collapsed by a third between 1440 and 1450. There had also been a decline in imports of wine in this period. This major decline of international trade in turn meant a great reduction of crown revenue from customs duties from £40,000 by the end of King Henry V's reign to £28,000 between 1446 and 1448 under King Henry VI.<sup>267</sup>

On the other hand, the Lancastrian Government, headed by King Henry VI himself contributed to the economic downfall of the country. The banning of English wool to Burgundy, an independent Duchy in North Western Europe, found the Government too weakened by the war with France to respond to this prohibition. The Commons Petition in the Parliament that met at Westminster in February 1449 expressly complained that:

“As yet no redress has been made, to the most intolerable harm of all the commons of this realm. . . many cloth makers, that is to say male weavers, fullers and dyers. And female combers, carders and spinners.”<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> Ralph Alan Griffiths, *The Reign of King Henry VI: The Exercise of Royal Authority, 1422-1461*, The University of California Press, California, 1981, p. 120

<sup>268</sup> Willystine Goodsell, *A History of the Family as a Social and Educational Institution*, Macmillan, New York, 1915, p. 278.

King Henry VI was unreasonably generous in making grants. Right at the beginning of his rule, in 1438, one of Henry's council clerks had complained that he had pardoned a collector of customs, thereby losing the Crown £1,300. In 1448, he expressly willed the huge yearly sum of £1,000 to the building costs of King's College, Cambridge; the money dried up soon. By 1450, Government was reduced to mortgaging its future income to meet its current debts. The proceedings of the February 1449 Parliament also record a grant of about £1,700 to the Duke of Somerset and £1,000 to the Duke of Suffolk. Both were to be paid from taxation revenue due to the Government in 1450.<sup>269</sup>

Karl Marx pointed out the link between economic factors and political events. There is clearly some link between economic pressure and later political conflict. The 'Great Slump' of 1440 to 1480 was the clear backdrop to the conflict between the Lancastrian and Yorkist forces in England between 1455 and 1465.

The effect of war on the working classes was much lower than in similar fratricide wars in Europe. Although there have been few long sieges, they were in relatively remote and lightly populated areas. In heavily populated areas, belonging to both factions, opponents engaged in decisive battles as a quick solution to the conflict.

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<sup>269</sup>James Masschaele, *Jury, State, and Society in Medieval England*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2008, p. 250.

Yet even the illiterate working class was aware of the extent to which the war was disastrous for the already declining influence of England. By the end of fighting, England did not have any possessions except Calais, which was eventually lost during the reign of Mary I. Though later the English rulers continued to campaign on the Continent, no French land was restored. The long years of taxation and class conflict within the Kingdom proved worthless, and the ordinary man in England who had suffered the effects of the war was fully aware of and outraged by the way the country was ruled.

It is worth noting that various European duchies and kingdoms played an important role in the war, especially the kings of France and Burgundy, who helped York and Lancaster in their struggle against each other. Providing them with military and financial assistance, as well as offering shelter to defeated nobles and aspirants. Hence, they prevented the emergence of a united and strong kingdom in England, which would constitute a potential formidable enemy.

### **B. Social Unrest in Fifteenth-Century England**

For 150 years following the onset of the Black Death in 1348-9, England witnessed a sheer decline in population, agricultural production, prices, and credit available for trade. This phenomenon reached its apex between 1440 and 1480, in the downturn known as the Great Slump. Economic activity associated with wool trade was especially affected, and Kent, Sussex and Wiltshire all suffered during the slump. This situation was aggravated by the final conflicts of the Hundred Years' War, that devastated

regions of France critical to English trade, resulted in economic blockades, and caused some to blame Henry VI for their economic hardship.

For artisans or labourers who had previously known greater prosperity, even small fines and customary emblems of authority became intolerable. Articles of impeachment from 1449 to 1450 against William, the Duke of Suffolk, suggest that he and other noblemen used their privileged access to the courts to oppress their subjects and advance themselves personally. These injustices and ‘systematic abuse of power in the King's name’ were as widespread in Kent and Sussex as anywhere in England, and led to a series of insurrections. January of 1450 saw an uprising by a labourer named Thomas Cheyne. Uprisings followed in February and March.<sup>270</sup>

The uprising was deeply unsettling to the nobility. Without peace and prosperity, complained the Commons, the year 1450 saw many ‘murders, manslaughters, rapes, robberies, riots, affrays and other inconveniences greater than before.’ However, the aftermath of the uprising in no way satisfied the English poor. While Henry VI showed clemency to his principal rival Richard Duke of York during the Wars of the Roses, he was merciless to Jack Cade and his followers. Residents of Sussex who had followed Jack Cade and received pardons were later hunted by royal forces and either imprisoned or killed. On 26 July 1450, or possibly earlier, John and William Merfold stated in a public market that the King was a natural fool and should

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<sup>270</sup> Mate, Mavis. “The Economic and Social Roots of Medieval Popular Rebellion: Sussex in 1450-1451”. *Economic History Review*, Vol. 45, 1992, pp. 661–676.



be deposed: “[They said] the kyng was a natell fool, and wold ofte tymes holde a staff in his hands with a brid on the ende playing therewith as a fool, and that anoder kyng must be oreynd to rule the land, saying that the kind was no person able to rule the land.”<sup>271</sup>

Eventually, that August a gentleman named William Howell of Sutton encouraged men from the towns of Chichester, Bramber and Steyning to join him in rebellion, and asked that constables and their men join him after ‘Saint Bartholomew’s day,’ the 27 August. In September, forty men ‘armed for war’ came to Eastbourne.

In October, John Merfold declared in a public alehouse that the people would rise and ‘*wolde leve no gentilman alive but such as thyme list to have.*’ Throughout October and November, men armed with clubs, bows and arrows congregated near Horsham, Robertsbridge and throughout Wealden. While roving throughout Sussex these bands beat and pillaged the properties of noblemen and clergy. At Robertsbridge, they objected to dues collected by the local clergy, and revolted against high land rents at Eastbourne. Rebels at Hastings declared their desire for a new King, and chastised rebels from Kent for surrender following Jack Cade's rebellion.<sup>272</sup>

During Easter week in the spring of 1451, men gathered

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<sup>271</sup> David Charles Douglas, A. R. Myers, op. cit., p. 259.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid.

at Rotherfield, Mayfield, and Burwash within Sussex, and in some settlements within Kent. Most were young, and their number included artisans such as carpenters, skinners, masons, thatchers, dyers, tailors, smiths, cobblers, weavers, shinglers, tanners, butchers and shoemakers. Indictments show that only few were agricultural labourers or husbandmen, and fewer still were landless. The rebels demanded that the King be deposed, all lords and higher clergy be killed, and that 12 of their own men be appointed to rule the land. According to indictments prepared at the time, “[*The rebels wished*] as *lollards and heretics, to hold everything in common.*”<sup>273</sup>

Royal authorities responded swiftly by arresting suspected rebels. Four Sussex men were hanged, and resistance was broken. Most peasant rebellions, including the English Rising of 1381, expressed some faith in existing social harmony and the King's willingness to support their cause. One manifesto produced by the Kentish rebellion led by Jack Cade declared, ‘*we blame not all the lordys... ne all gentyllmen, ne yowmen, ne all men of law, ne all bysshops, ne all prestys, but all such as may be fownde gylty by just and trew enquiry and by the law.*’<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>273</sup> James Gairdner, *Lollardy and the Reformation in England: An Historical Survey*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006, p. 393.

<sup>274</sup> John A. Wagner, *Encyclopedia of the Wars of the Roses*, ABC-CLIO, Inc., California, 2001, p. 133.

The Sussex revolts of 1450-51 incited by the Merfolds had no such faith in the established social order, and threatened to specifically target lords, bishops, priests, and even the King.

Historian David Rollison has argued that the socially and politically radical statements by John and William Merfold support the hypothesis that the uprisings were motivated by longstanding class antagonisms. Rollison follows contentions by historian Andy Wood and the fifteenth-century English jurist Sir John Fortescue, who argue that the economic recession of the mid-fifteenth century only magnified routine class antagonisms between village communities and the gentry. Generally, it can be assumed that the idea that even Kings could be disciplined or deposed by popular will was a major aspect of English politics in the centuries following the Magna Carta. Those in Sussex responding to the Merfolds' declarations were likely motivated by economic and social concerns. These included seigneurial exactions, weeding, reaping and collection duties, all of which were ignored or denounced by yeomen and labourers during the uprisings. Court rolls from Sussex during the period often mention tenant poverty, inability to pay fines or taxes, and abandonment of land or livestock.<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> Frank W. Thackeray, John E. Findling, *Events that Changed Great Britain, from 1066 to 1714*, Greenwood Press, Connecticut, 2004, p. 25.

### III. The Cornish Rebellion (1497)

This rebellion took place in Cornwall, southwest of Britain. Its primary cause was a response of people to the raising of war taxes by King Henry VII on the impoverished Cornish, to raise money for a campaign against Scotland. The rebellion was motivated by brief border skirmishes that were inspired by Perkin Warbeck's pretence to the English throne. Tin miners were angered as the scale of the taxes overturned previous rights granted by Edward I of England to the Cornish Stannary Parliament that exempted Cornwall from all taxes of 10ths or 15ths of income.<sup>276</sup>

The primary cause of the rebellion was Henry VII's tax levy, but the unrest of the Cornish preceded the event. Strong Arthurian tradition among the Cornish suggests that the people may have viewed the ascendance of the Welsh House of Tudor following their success in the Wars of the Roses to the throne as a fulfilment of prophecy. The popular theory appeared true at first with Henry appointing loyal Cornish men to high posts in his court, even naming his first son Arthur. However, because of a widening language and cultural gap, popular support for the Crown would not persist.<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> Katie Stevenson, *Chivalry in Scotland*, Cambridge University Press, Boydell, 2006, p. 84.

<sup>277</sup> Anthony Fletcher, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

### A. Outbreak of the Rebellion

In reaction to King Henry's tax levy, Michael Joseph known as An Gof, a blacksmith from St. Keverne and Thomas Flamank a lawyer of Bodmin, incited many of the people of Cornwall into armed revolt against the King. An army of some 15,000 men marched into Devon, attracting support in terms of provisions and recruits as they went. Apart from one isolated incident at Taunton, where a tax commissioner was killed, their march was '*without any slaughter, violence or spoil of the country*'.<sup>278</sup>

From Taunton, the rebels moved on to Wells, where they were joined by their most eminent recruit, James Touchet, the seventh Baron Audley, a member of the old nobility and a skilful soldier. Despite this welcome and prestigious acquisition of support, An Gof, the blacksmith, remained in command of the army. Audley joined Thomas Flamank as joint 'political' leader of the expedition.<sup>279</sup>

After issuing a declaration of grievances, the army left Wells and marched to Winchester passing through Bristol and Salisbury, remarkably, unopposed as they progressed across the south of England. So far, the King had shown no sign of willingness to concede the issue, and it was assumed

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<sup>278</sup> Francis Bacon, Brian Vickers, *The History of the Reign of King Henry VII and Selected Works*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, p. 137.

<sup>279</sup> Anthony Fletcher, Diarmaid MacCulloch, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

that only force of arms would resolve the matter. Flamank conceived the idea of trying to broaden the rising to force the monarch into concessions by mobilising wider support for the Cornishmen. He proposed that they should head for Kent, ‘the classic soil of protests’, the home of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 and Jack Cade's rebellion, to rally the volatile men of Kent to their banner. It was a subtle and ambitious strategy but sadly misinformed. Although the Scottish War was as remote a project to the Kentish men as to the Cornish, they not only declined to offer their support but also went so far as to offer resistance under their Earl. Sadly disillusioned, the Cornish army retreated and some of the men quietly returned to their homes. The remainder, were prepared to give battle against the King himself.<sup>280</sup>

Moving back west, by 13 June 1497 the Cornish army arrived at Guildford. Although shocked by the scale of the revolt and the speed of its approach, King Henry VII had not been inactive. The army of 8000 men assembled for Scotland under the command of Giles, Lord Daubeney, Henry's chief general and Lord Chamberlain, was recalled. Then the Earl of Surrey was sent north to conduct a defensive, holding operation against the Scots until the King had quelled his domestic issues. The Royal family and the Archbishop of Canterbury moved to the Tower of London for safety. It is said there was a general cry of ‘*Every man to harness! To harness!*’ and an army of citizens rushed to

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<sup>280</sup> Anthony Fletcher, op. cit., p. 25.

the walls and gates. Then, the same day in which the Cornish arrived at Guildford, Daubeney and his men took up position upon Hounslow Heath. There, they were cheered by the arrival of food and wine dispatched by the Lord Mayor of London. The Crown decided to take the offensive and test the strength and resolve of the Cornish forces. Lord Daubeney sent out a force of 500 mounted spearmen and they clashed with the Cornish at 'Gill Down' outside Guildford on Wednesday 14 June 1497. The Cornish army left Guildford and moved via Banstead and Chussex Plain to Blackheath where they pitched their final camp, looking down from the hill onto the Thames and City of London. Despite unrest among the Cornish forces, An Gof held his army together. However, some Cornish deserted by morning, leaving him with only some 9-10,000 Cornish loyal rebels in arms.

The Battle of Deptford Bridge, also known as Battle of Blackheath, took place on 17 June 1497 on a site in present-day Deptford southeast London, adjacent to the River Ravensbourne and was the culminating event of the Cornish Rebellion. Henry VII had mustered an army of some 25,000 men and the Cornish lacked the supporting cavalry and artillery arms essential to the professional forces of the time. After carefully spreading rumours that he would attack on the following Monday, Henry moved against the Cornish at dawn on Saturday 17 June 1497. The Royal forces were divided into three sections, two under Lords Oxford, Essex and Suffolk, to wheel round the right flank and rear of enemy while the third waited in reserve. When the Cornish were surrounded, Lord Daubeney and the third section were

ordered into frontal attack.

At the bridge at Deptford Strand, the Cornish had placed a body of archers utilising arrows a full yard long to block the passage of the river. Here Daubeney had a tense time, before his spearmen eventually captured the crossing with limited losses. The '*Great Chronicle of London*' says that these were the only casualties suffered by the Royal forces that day but, in view of the severity of the later fighting, this seems most improbable.<sup>281</sup>

### **B. Suppression of the Rebellion and Its Aftermath**

Through ill advice or inexperience, the Cornish had neglected to provide support for the men at Deptford Strand Bridge and the main array stood well back into the heath, near to the top of the hill. Lord Daubeney and his troops poured across in strength and attacked the enemy with great force. At this late stage, the rebels' hearts were no longer in the battle and they were already contemplating its aftermath and the King's revenge.

The two other Royal divisions attacked the Cornish precisely as planned and being neither well-armed nor having an experienced leadership, and without horses or artillery, they were defeated and put to flight with no great difficulty. Estimates of the Cornish dead range

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<sup>281</sup> Ibid., P. 98.



from 200 to 2000, and a general slaughter of the broken army was well under way when An Gof gave the order for surrender, and was captured. Baron Audley and Thomas Flamank were taken on the field of battle.<sup>282</sup>

After Midnight, Henry VII had returned to the City in triumph, knighting deserving parties on the way. Later, severe monetary penalties impoverished sections of Cornwall for years to come. Prisoners were sold into slavery and estates were seized and handed to more loyal subjects. The remaining rebels that escaped went home ending the rebellion. An Gof and Flamank were both sentenced to the traitor's death of being hanged and decapitated at Tyburn on 27 June 1497. An Gof is recorded to have said before his execution that he should have '*a name perpetual and a fame permanent and immortal*'. Thomas Flamank was quoted as saying '*Speak the truth and only then can you be free of your chains*'. Audley, as a peer of the realm, was beheaded on 28 June at Tower Hill. Their heads were then displayed on pikes on London Bridge.<sup>283</sup>

To conclude, fourteenth and fifteenth century England was tumultuous, and witnessed different sorts of conflict. Some were between striving sections of the nobility, but most were between the

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<sup>282</sup> Bernard Deacon, *A Concise History of Cornwall*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2007, p. 90.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23

working class, be they peasants in villages, or craftsmen in towns and an upper class that refused to admit the changes brought about by the famines plagues, and wars whose obvious effects did not emerge until the following centuries, but whose roots lay in this very period.

Plagues led to labour shortage, and wars engendered government bankruptcy. The effect of the first was class conflict, and the second led to over taxation and popular protest to them. The victim of both was mostly the working class whose feeling of oppression naturally led to spontaneous response to revolts, and to an embryonic phase of a common feeling of belonging to the same class whose potential strength could make a change.

Though not as organized as twentieth century trade unions, these confederations, as the 1381 rebels called themselves, are the evidence that labour class consciousness has its real origins in this period, and not as a result of the Industrial Revolution as many historians claim.

In trying to understand the meaning and significance of any literary text, particularly one from a culture that is as alien to modern readers as that of late medieval England, it is necessary to put that text into some broader context. To understand medieval literature requires a thorough understanding of the social structure, social change and social conflicts of the period. In this perspective, many works of medieval literature could be considered as real witness accounts of this tumultuous epoch. Literary critics thus ask if any particular piece of imaginative literature provides a dissident or

questioning voice that challenges orthodox views about class and status inequalities.<sup>284</sup>

The reality of social inequality in late medieval England and its centrality for the social commentators of the time are points that hardly need labouring. The main interest here lies rather in late medieval responses to such inequality and in how they are represented in both the literature of the time and modern historiography. Such responses can be divided into three main categories: deference, individual ambition and social conflict.<sup>285</sup>

#### **IV. Social Interaction in Medieval English Literature**

The necessity for hierarchy and inequality within society were commonplace in the official social conjecture of the late medieval period itself. In his *Pilgrimage of the Life of Man* (1426), John Lydgate took for granted the absurdity of the idea that all people should be of one social condition. Such equality between rich and poor would only produce ‘confusion’ in the world and would cause all to suffer. Medieval authors had long presented the social hierarchy in terms of the three estates of those who pray, those who fight and those who work; and this familiar model of society

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<sup>284</sup> Daniel R. Schwarz, *The Humanistic Heritage: Critical Theories of the English Novel from James to Hillis Miller*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Pennsylvania, 1986 p.118.

<sup>285</sup> Peter Brown, ed., *A Companion to Medieval English Literature and Culture, c.1350–c.1500*, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, Oxford, 2009, p. 25.

continued in the later Middle Ages.<sup>286</sup>

### A. Social Inequality in Medieval Literature

Poets such as John Gower in his *Vox clamantis*, claimed that the social order consisted of three estates. These included the clergy, whose duty is to teach society the way to salvation; the knights, who bear arms to defend society; and the peasantry, who till the fields to feed society. Yet, in reality, the tripartite theory hardly provided an accurate picture of the contemporary social hierarchy. Rather, the prime purpose of the theory was to offer a moral justification of social inequality and, in particular, to urge the members of the third estate to accept the rule of their superiors.

In the tripartite theory, the clergy constituted the first estate in order of pre-eminence, with the other estates ranked beneath them. In practice, the inhabitants of late medieval England were perfectly capable of adopting an alternative vision of the social pyramid. Here the hierarchy of wealth, status and power cut across the division between clergy and laity so that the ranks within each could be horizontally equated.<sup>287</sup>

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<sup>286</sup> Shannon Gayk, *Image, Text, and Religious Reform in Fifteenth-Century England*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010, p. 87.

<sup>287</sup> Peter Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

Society was then seen as being divided not into the three classic orders of the tripartite theory but rather between what Thomas Walsingham's *Historia Anglicana* called *proceres* (nobles), *mediocres* (the middling) and *pauperes*. Chancellor Bishop John Stafford adopted this perspective in a sermon preached to the Parliament of 1433 that divided society into three groups. The 'mountains'; prelates, nobles and magnates, whose duty was to promote social peace; the 'hills' i.e. the knights, esquires and merchants, whose duty was to provide justice; and, the peasants, craftsmen and common people, the 'plain' of society, whose duty was to obey their betters.<sup>288</sup>

Even finer social classifications were possible. In his mid-fifteenth century *Book of Nurture*, John Russell, marshal to Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, had to deal with the thorny problems posed by the order of precedence in seating arrangements in a noble household. He divided potential guests into five groups, each of which in turn had its own internal gradations according to birth, income and dignity. Within each group, there was a horizontal equation between the ranks of the clergy and the laity, from archbishops and dukes,

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<sup>288</sup> James G. Clark, ed., *The Chronica Maiora of Thomas Walsingham 1376–1422*, The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2005, p. 242

through bishops and earls, until parish priests and esquires.<sup>289</sup>

### **B. Social Deference and Ambition**

How did people of late medieval England respond to these prevailing structures of social inequality? Were the social hierarchies of the day accepted by all or did they provoke resistance from those who found themselves excluded from access to wealth, status and power?

Our first model of English society in the Later Middle Ages is that presented by some historians who see England before the eighteenth century as a ‘deference society’. This society is characterized by ‘*an ordered gradation*’ of social ranks that are hierarchically arranged ‘by scales that regulate the respect and the kind of service that one man or woman may expect of another, or may expect to pay another’.

‘In the minds of men of that age, the relations of deference and service that persisted between the grades of society were the basis of social order, of its essence: they had not yet come to regard social distinctions as divisive, as forces with the potential to tear society apart’.<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>289</sup> Alessandra Petrina, *Cultural Politics in Fifteenth-Century England*, Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden (The Netherlands), 2004, p. 338.

<sup>290</sup> Peter Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

This emphasis on the need to see societies in terms of how contemporaries themselves perceived them, and the consequent belief that pre-industrial societies, including that of late medieval England, were neatly ordered and harmonious status-hierarchies is now a prevailing view among social historians. Pre-industrial society is presented to the modern reader as lacking social mobility and as being a society in which social hierarchy depended upon some consensus about social evaluation.<sup>291</sup>

As a result of such consensus, social conflict is seen as being paralysed from within by the stranglehold of some ‘common culture’ or ‘dominant ideology’, a view actually predicted in the fifteenth century by the preacher Robert Rypon in his sermon *Loquentes vobismetipsis*: ‘*the unity of the state exists in the agreement of its minds*’. In the field of urban history, for instance, a number of historians have argued that shared ideological norms, a belief that to disobey one’s social superior was ‘*to commit a sin*’, and a general acceptance that ‘*the rich should lead and dominate*’, formed the basis of urban political life. It was this ideal of community and of harmony between the social classes that was symbolized by urban dramas such as the York Corpus Christi cycle; a collection of brief plays that together tell Biblical history from Creation to Doomsday; the most

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<sup>291</sup> Rosemary Horrox, W. Mark Ormrod, op. cit., p. 113

complex of the medieval cycles.<sup>292</sup>

Deference to one's superiors stressed by the established social theory of the medieval period had two different facets. First, it involved hostility to individual social mobility and a stress on the need to accept one's place on the social hierarchy. As Wimbledon said each man should admit what estate 'God hath clepid him and dwell he there in', and accepting the need to work 'according to his degree'.<sup>293</sup>

Evidence of hostility to individual social advancement can also be found in John Wyndham's denouncing the *arriviste* Pastons as 'churls of Gimingham' or that made Margery Kempe<sup>294</sup> tell her husband that he should never have married someone of her status, her father having been a mayor of Lynn and alderman of the Trinity guild there. Within literature, this opposition to social mobility can be seen in works such as Gower's *Vox clamantis* where he claims that: 'When a poor man is elevated in the city through an unexpected fate, and

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<sup>292</sup> Ibid. , p. 27.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

<sup>294</sup> Margery Kempe (c. 1373–after 1438) was an English Christian mystic, known for dictating *The Book of Margery Kempe*, a work considered by some to be the first autobiography in the English language. Her book chronicles her domestic tribulations, her extensive pilgrimages to holy sites in Europe and the Holy Land, as well as her mystical conversations with God. She is honoured in the Anglican Communion, but was never made a Roman Catholic saint.



*the unworthy creature is allowed to reach the height of honour, then nature suddenly groans at the changed state of things and grieves at the unaccustomed rarity'.<sup>295</sup>*

The deferential position meant that medieval social theorists not only criticized individual social ambition but also attacked any broader attempts to disrupt the social order or to alter the balance of privileges enjoyed by particular groups. Hence, social inequality was thus presented as part of the hierarchical ordering of the universe as a whole, from God, down through angels, men, women, animals, plants and minerals – a hierarchy within which the lower should always serve the higher. To challenge this arrangement was to be guilty of the sin of pride by questioning the wisdom of God who had ordained everything in its rightful place.<sup>296</sup>

Clerical writers, such as William Langland, Thomas Brinton and John Bromyard, who attacked the abuses of landlords who mercilessly tallaged their tenants, vouched for the virtues of patient poverty to the people who suffered. Like wild beasts suffer in winter and are recompensed by God with the bliss of summer, so the poor who

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<sup>295</sup> Edward Miller, John Hatcher, *Medieval England: Towns, Commerce and Crafts, 1086-1348*, Routledge, New York, 2014, p. 412.

<sup>296</sup> Peter Brown, *op.cit.*, p. 27.

suffered in this life would be rewarded with joy in the next.<sup>297</sup>

Those among the lower orders who refused to accept their traditional position within society were likely to be met with open hostility. Gower's *Vox clamantis*, for instance, portrays the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 as a frightening vision in which farmyard beasts turned into voracious monsters and refused to recognise their place, 'the asses demanding to be as horses and the domesticated fowl daring to assume the eagle's prerogatives for themselves'.<sup>298</sup>

However, deference was not simply an abstract theory set out in teachings or verses, nor was it merely a behaviour in the snobbery of the aristocrat against the ambitious men who are *lower in status*. Deference was alive in a variety of social institutions and in the concrete practices of everyday life. Russell's concern with the due hierarchy in the banqueting hall was typical of a broader concern that all people should be put in their proper place. This concern with precedence can be seen in many areas of late medieval English society from the seats arrangements in Parliament down to parish Churches, where parishioners occupied the benches or went up to

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<sup>297</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>298</sup> Marion Turner, *A Handbook of Middle English Studies*, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford, 2013, p. 131.

make their offerings according to their social standing.<sup>299</sup>

Despite the fine words of clerical moralists and of poems such as the mid-fifteenth-century *Farewell this World*, for whom Death was the ultimate leveller, even the ritual of death and burial tended to reflect the realities of secular social stratification, with the wealthy being able to acquire burial locations of particular spiritual potency. The need to reinforce the existing social hierarchy allowed even the institution of individual confession. Religious manuals such as *Of Shrifte and Penance* taught that to harm one's lord by working slowly was to break the commandment against theft. Priests were required to test their parishioners in confession on whether they had 'failed in reverence to their lords or . . . withheld their bounden services to their lords', whether they had worked 'feebly and remissly' and whether they had been guilty of murmuring and withdrawing from work when rebuked for their neglect.<sup>300</sup>

Yet, despite the emphasis on the need for all to know their place in the social hierarchy, the view that later medieval England was primarily a 'deference society' cannot be taken for granted. It may be convenient to turn one's attention to the accounts of late medieval society offered by contemporary historians, which focus on the

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<sup>299</sup> Larry Scanlon, ed., op. cit., p. 28

<sup>300</sup> Peter Brown, op. cit., p. 28.

importance of personal ambition and of individual social mobility, both within and between the different classes and ranks of society.

Much of the social mobility of the late medieval period was characterised by the high mortality resulting from regular outbreaks of epidemic disease. The English population fell from around five million before the Black Death of 1348–9 to about 2.75 million in 1377, and by 1524, it was perhaps still as low as 2.25 million or less. Replacement rates for the population as a whole meant that places on the higher ranks of the social tree were now waiting to be occupied. Within village society, evidence about declining population and the leasing of manorial demesnes meant that land was available and was relatively cheap. As a result, the numbers of cottagers and small- holders could decline, as at Halesowen where numbers of small holders dropped from forty-three per cent of the village's population before the Black Death to only thirty-five per cent, whereas the proportion of wealthy peasants rose from eighteen to twenty-six per cent.<sup>301</sup>

Middling peasants could now rise into the higher ranks of village society and those formerly below them took their places. Rising wages and low grain prices meant that the incomes of labourers and cottagers were likely to improve, to the apprehension

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<sup>301</sup> Francis Aiden Gasket, *The Great Pestilence (A.D.1348-9)*, Simpkin Marshall, London, 1893, p. 23.

of moralists such as Langland who, in *Piers Plowman*, criticizes those labourers who would not accept to eat old vegetables, preserved bacon and cheap ale but instead demanded high wages so that they could buy fresh meat and fish. The gains of this period were often greatest for the upper ranks of village society. Those elite peasants were able to pay the entry fines necessary to acquire vacant holdings, and procure the needed money or credit to acquire property on the land market, and own the livestock required for a larger holding, and more importantly to improve their position in society.<sup>302</sup>

The degree that the upper peasantry obtained varied from place to place and, in some villages, the middling peasants had a greater share in the post-plague advances, but in places where the gains of the rich were greater, village society became more divided. Moreover, even the richer peasants faced difficulties in transmitting their gains to future generations. The lack of heirs and the effects of agricultural depression, particularly in the mid-fifteenth century, meant that holdings were often soon dispersed rather than being passed on intact to the next generation. As a result, while men could rise *within* village society, promotion to the gentry was rarely the outcome of land accumulation alone.

Both medieval poets and modern historians tend to describe

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<sup>302</sup> Bryon Lee Grigsby, *Pestilence in Medieval and Early Modern English Literature*, Routledge, New York, 2004, p. 61.

medieval urban society as particularly mobile. Accordingly, trade would function as a means of social advancement when it recommended the rates of gain from goods needed to help beginners in the trade to do better in their trade. Higher on the urban social scale, the London trades tended to welcome people from the ranks of husbandmen' and yeomen, and £1 or £2 could be enough to enter the metal and leather-working trades.<sup>303</sup>

In the provinces, entry to the ranks of the artisans was even more open. Tradesmen in Chester and other north-west towns originated from families of 'low birth', including the peasantry. Some historians argue that, once on the ladder, lesser families could aspire to join the ranks of the wholesale traders; with the sons of workers in base metals climbing up to the rank of goldsmiths and the families of the lesser victualing trades becoming members of the companies of vintners and grocers. The high mortality rates of the period and the tendency for merchants to divide estates and fortunes on their deaths made towns relatively open to outsiders with sufficient wealth.<sup>304</sup>

In Preston, for instance, over two-thirds of the aldermen were first-generation members of the town's guild merchants around 1397.

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<sup>303</sup> Peter Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

<sup>304</sup> Samuel Kline Cohn, Jr., *op. cit.*, p. 7.

If town government was becoming more formally oligarchic in this period, urban society was never dominated by hereditary monopolies of long-lasting mercantile dynasties. This meant that those who were rich enough were assured to have entry into the ruling plutocracy.

Traditionally, promotion of urban merchants, particularly those of London, to membership of the rural gentry was a common form of late medieval social mobility and this was apparently one of the routes to social respectability. Many successful merchants, however, showed little interest in using their wealth to gain access to the ranks of the gentry and contented themselves with the title of ‘merchant’ as a proclamation of their own gentility.<sup>305</sup>

Still popular with literary critics, the view of the late medieval period is seen as a stage of emergence of a commercial middle class, which embodied a new society of money, trade and economic individualism that was satirized by Chaucer in the *Shipman’s Tale* and the *Wife of Bath’s Prologue*. However, recent economic historians tended to concentrate on the two centuries prior to the Black Death, the period that was vital in the commercialization and urbanization of medieval English society.

A number of towns experienced the emergence of a wealthy merchant class in the late fourteenth century. This is particularly

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<sup>305</sup> Peter Brown, ed. op. cit., p. 30.

true to textile centres such as Colchester that witnessed a switch from raw wool to manufactured cloth in England's export trade that began in this period. This period also saw the rise of lay lawyers, administrators, professionals and bureaucrats. The existence of endemic plague, with its high mortality rates and poor replacement rates, meant that social mobility prevailed not only in the towns and within the village community but also within the upper ranks of landed society, among the gentry and the aristocracy as well.<sup>306</sup>

Service in office, to the Crown, provided another main avenue of personal advancement within late medieval English society. Among the most outstanding examples of such promotion occurred in time of war when military service offered interesting awards and the opportunity for soldiers to move up through the ranks. Robert Knolles was a bowman when he began his soldierly career in the 1340s but rose to being a company commander and, finally, to a knighthood, his profits from wartime plunder being reinvested in property in London, Kent, Norfolk, and Wiltshire.

Service to the Crown in administrative office was another means of individual advancement. This was certainly the case in this period, as it had been before, for ambitious clerics. Thomas Savage's service as dean of the chapel of the royal household and

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<sup>306</sup> Sheila Fisher, *Chaucer's Poetic Alchemy: a Study of Value and Its Transformation in The Canterbury Tales*, Garland Publishing, New York, 1988, p. 252.



president of the council led to his promotion to the Churches of London and York. He spoke for many like him when he told the King that ‘he was of little substance but a poor gentleman and a younger brother and had nothing to take to but of the King’s grace as though his highness had made him out of clay and brought him to the honour that he has come to’.

However, as shown by the poem of complaint *Male Regle* 1406, by Thomas Hoccleve, clerk of the Privy Seal Office, not all of those in royal service obtained the benefices, promotion, or rewards that they desired. Indeed, the costs of obtaining the university degrees that were increasingly required for promotion within the late medieval Church may have reduced the chances of clerical preferment of those of humble birth in this period. For the sons of urban artisans, however, the Church may still have offered an easier route to social advancement than entry into the merchant class.<sup>307</sup>

Clerics too enjoyed the rewards of royal administrative service. From the late fourteenth century, lay administrators were increasingly providing the educational, literacy and administrative skills that had traditionally been the monopoly of clerics. Families such as the Rempstons of Nottinghamshire, who came to local prominence based on the profits arising from the service of Sir Thomas Rempston to the house of Lancaster around 1399, illustrate the rewards available

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<sup>307</sup> Peter Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

from such administrative service. The strong staff of the royal Chancery was mostly clerical in 1388 but by 1461, it became largely lay in composition, even though the Chancery did not follow the Exchequer in the process of laicization until around 1400, which was crucial for the emancipation of many judicial, legal and administrative functions from clerical control.<sup>308</sup>

The people successful in administrative office had often been trained in law, which was an increasingly popular path to social advancement. This path is exemplified by the promotion of Thomas Kebell, the younger son of an *upstart* gentleman from Leicestershire. On his death, this man was found to have amassed an estate of over 3,000 acres and a wealth of over £800 worth of chattels from a career that had begun with entry to the Inner Temple and ended with his promotion to the posts of attorney-general of the duchy of Lancaster, and of sergent-at-law and finally King's sergent. Poets such as Gower, whose *Mirour* called on the King to seize ill-gotten gains of those who grew rich from the law condemned the legal profession for being a route to social promotion. In practice, the profits of a legal career provided the means by which families like the Willoughbys of Wollaton were able to obtain land and join the upper gentry, their new position often strengthened by marriage to an

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<sup>308</sup> J.A.F Thomson, *The Transformation of Medieval England 1370-1529*, Routledge, Oxon, 2014, p. 132.

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The legal profession also produced such a vivid example of mobility as the de la Pole family, who began life as merchants of Hull and later became dukes of Suffolk but, in terms of its overall impact, the law probably had a greater effect on social mobility than commerce or the Church. Certainly, the yeomen who rose to gentility were far more likely to do so thanks to manorial administration, law and the other occupations than through agriculture alone.

Finally, promotion through royal service was only one example of social mobility by means of service to some great lord. Sir Edward Dallingridge, for instance, made valuable links with the first and second earls of Arundel and with Sir Edward Despenser, with whom he served in the war with France, as well as with Duke of Brittany. These connections probably helped his procurement of office in local government. More specifically, waged service to some lord was a potential way to social promotion. Again, in this domain, legal training was useful. Even Westminster lawyers served as estate officials, while most of them ended up in the provinces engaged in a wide range of legal-administrative posts, such as clerks of the court, stewards, accountants, rent-collectors, general administrators and other

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<sup>309</sup> Felicity Heal, *of Prelates and Princes, a Study of the Economic and Social Position of the Tudor Episcopate*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008, p. 173.

occupations.<sup>310</sup>

Indeed, all of the paths to personal advancement mentioned above tended to be made easy by the vertical social ties of personal patronage either in trade, in a military career or in law and estate administration in which men such as Thomas Kebell took the most of their access to great magnates.

Patronage was important for a successful career in the Church, as shown by the assistance from William Wykeham's manorial lord that facilitated his access to the bishopric of Winchester. Once successful, clerics who had risen socially could become the supporters of others. For instance, Thomas Rotherham, having climbed from anonymity to become archbishop of York, then helped sponsor the clerical career of Geoffrey and John Blythe, two of his nephews, by raising them to wealthy canonries at York Minster. Both men eventually were later promoted to the Episcopal bench. As he put it, 'he was especially kind to his kinsmen, showering them with temporal possessions, others with marriages and yet others with benefices'.<sup>311</sup>

The later Middle Ages were thus a period when individuals

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<sup>310</sup> Eric William Ives, *The Common Lawyers of Pre-Reformation England: Thomas Kebell, a Case Study*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983, p. 23.

<sup>311</sup> Robert Lowth, *The life of William of Wykeham, Bishop of Winchester*, The Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1777, p. 119.

were ready to take full advantage of the opportunities available to them. This, of course, does not mean that people's attitudes in this epoch had suddenly become markedly different from those of previous centuries. On the contrary, the Church, education, the law and Crown service had been a source of social improvement from at least the twelfth century, and the pace of such mobility had hastened as early as the reign of Edward I (1272–1307). The period from the mid-fourteenth century witnessed a further widening of the opportunities for people to put existing aspirations into practice because of high mortality, warfare, the growth of government and an expansion of lay literacy.<sup>312</sup>

Consequently, medieval English society developed socially and geographically into a mobile one as people of lower social rank coming from areas distant from the capital began to enjoy the profits of careers seeking. The extent and means of social mobility were relatively narrow if compared with those found in modern society. During the twenty-three years of Edward IV's reign, for instance, only eight barons were created by promotion into the peerage from the ranks of the gentry. The fifteenth century may have been a time of relative stability for the landed elite when compared with the century that followed the Conquest or with the failure of families in the thirteenth century through debt or political miscalculation.

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<sup>312</sup> Peter Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

Hindrances to social mobility in the later Middle Ages tended to be a matter of practicality, such as the limited land market of the period. The costs of obtaining the university degrees increasingly needed for clerical promotion, rather than the result of any internalization of the ideology of deference or of any formal or legal barriers to movement between the orders.<sup>313</sup>

The importance and degree of personal ambition in the later Middle Ages have important implications for how English society in this period can be conceived. People's willingness to seize the openings that were becoming available tends to cast some suspicion on the view of England as simply a deference society. It reveals a divergence between, on the one hand, the deferential ideal of keeping to one's place in the social hierarchy that was so often described in different sources and, on the other, the attitudes and values that were inherent in people's behaviour. These non-deferential values did not always remain implicit but could also be explicitly expressed. For instance, the attempt of the authorities to keep everyone in their place by requiring everyone to dress in a manner appropriate for their 'estate and degree' through the Sumptuary Act of 1363 is well known. It is worth mentioning that there is no evidence that this law was ever enforced and that, in the very following Parliament, the Commons asked for the law to be repealed, and the King admitted in

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<sup>313</sup> Ibid.

reply that ‘*all people shall be as free as they were at all times before the said ordinance*’.<sup>314</sup>

While authors such as Gower and Chaucer could denounce those who considered the Church as a means of personal advancement, the wills of clerical testators such as William Wykeham and Thomas Rotherham, reveal an explicit awareness that educational provision was a means by which men like these rose in rank from humble backgrounds.

While individual social mobility is often considered a conservative force, functioning as a safety valve for social tension and creating an impediment to class-consciousness, the tendency for people in late medieval England to take advantage of the openings available to them could engender a broader social change and resulted in a redistribution of wealth and opportunity. An obvious example is the way in which, to the discontent of the landlords and the authors of literary works such as *Piers Plowman*, Gower’s *Mirour* and *Vox clamantis*, wage-labourers used the post-plague labour scarcity to claim higher wages and to obtain short-term contracts that left them free to pursue better terms elsewhere if they wanted. Women in towns such as London and York took advantage of the high mortality and labour shortage of this period to enter crafts from which

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<sup>314</sup> Rosemary Horrox and W. Mark Ormrod, *op.cit.*, p. 42.

they had previously been excluded even if women generally tended to remain in low-status forms of employment.<sup>315</sup>

In a way, ambition and the pursuit of social and economic advancement can be considered as a form of struggle, the outcome of a conflict of interest, different from violent demonstrations, but similar in aim; a social class attempting to get rid of the sway of another over its fate.

### **C. Social Conflict**

Social ambition has a broader historical connotation in the sense that personal ambitions could also be voiced in the form of wider social struggles. If one often thinks of social conflict refers to popular struggles such as workers' strikes or peasant revolts, it is worth noting that those seeking to defend their existing privileges from the ambitions of those beneath them in the social hierarchy can also engender conflict. Thus, the endeavour to maintain the exclusion of the lower classes from wealth, status or power, can be seen in the case of the Statutes of 1349 and 1351, which attempted to keep down wages in a time of post-plague labour shortage, or in the sumptuary legislation of 1363.<sup>316</sup>

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<sup>315</sup> Byron Lee Grigsby, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

<sup>316</sup> Peter L. Larson, *op. cit.*, p. 78.



Many historians such as Scott Waugh claim that the immediate post-plague period was one of growing social tensions as an offensive from above in defence of the social status quo that contravened with the awakening ambitions of peasants and labourers from below these tensions that exploded in the dramatic events of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. This revolt even witnessed revolutionary demands for the expropriation of the landlord class. However, it needs to be noted that the peasant struggles of the later Middle Ages did not seek a revolutionary transformation of society but rather sought to effect a marginal social restructuring of resources through action that did not exceed the local level. The non-deferential attitudes and principles underlying such social resistance are rarely made explicit and have to be deduced instead from the willingness of peasants and labourers to assert their interests in their actual deeds. An illustration of this conflict is the tenant of the prior of Worcester who convinced his fellows not to answer in court for their refusal to perform their customary services because this arrangement was unreasonable. Certainly, literary works of the period, including poems such as Gower's *Vox clamantis*, or anonymous works such as *On the Rebellion of Jack Straw* (1381) and *On the Slaughter of Archbishop Sudbury* (1381), have a tendency to present popular protest from the viewpoint of its adversary class rather than from that of those who actually participated in it.<sup>317</sup>

<sup>317</sup> Peter Brown, op. cit., p. 35.

Works such as *What Profits a Kingdom* (1401) presents popular revolt as a response to injustice, but are still more tending to cite the harm done in such risings as a warning to the lords about how they should behave than to sympathize with the actions of the rebels. Yet, if it is rarely possible hear the voices of the late medieval commons directly, the meaning of the local social struggles undertaken by the peasants and labourers of late medieval England should not be neglected. The decline of serfdom, the assertion of personal and tenurial freedom, the weakening of labour services, the end of manorial restrictions and impositions, the shift to low money rents, and the virtual disappearance of entry fines on many manors are certainly the result of such struggle. An instance of such successful peasant resistance to manorial obligations and restrictions is to be found in the struggles of the tenants of the Bishop of Worcester in the fifteenth century. Although the peasants there did not question their lord's right to claim rent, they did successfully challenge his claims for further manorial dues, including tallages, heriots<sup>318</sup> and court fines. The bishop's court rolls tell that manorial levies were not collected '*because the tenants refuse to pay*'.<sup>319</sup>

Likewise, in spite of the state's efforts to limit wage increases

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<sup>318</sup> A heriot is a feudal duty or tribute due under English law to a lord on the death of a tenant, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/heriot>, accessed September 20, 2016.

<sup>319</sup> S. H. Rigby, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

and to restrict the movement of employees, wage-labourers in both town and country benefited from a marked increase in real wages and a mobility of labour during this period. Workers frequently refused to swear to follow the labour legislation, and even attacked the royal justices who tried to impose it. The difficulty facing the historian is how to compare instances of conflict and resistance with those of deference and submission. Certainly, not every tenant entered endless struggle with his lord: even with the increasing living standards of the later Middle Ages, most peasants and labourers were chiefly concerned with the task of securing their daily subsistence. It was perhaps this dull economic pressure, rather than any enthusiastic internalization of deference, that explains the failure of society to total break down, as it seemed to do during the 1381 rising. None the less, historians support the idea of conflict rather than conciliation, because such conflict was a decisive factor of social change and of the paths of long-term economic change, which such revolution opened up.

Brenner interprets the later Middle Ages by claiming that the successes of the English peasantry in their conflict with their lords in the later Middle Ages were not simply the outcome of population decrease that strengthened the tenants' bargaining position against their landlords. Instead, he argues that the ability of the peasants to organize to get rid of manorial impositions was itself an independent variable in the social balance: population decline could just have led to the strengthening of serfdom. Even those who do not share

Brenner's denial of any causal role to population fluctuations in causing social change can still accept his conclusion that such fluctuations acquired their significance 'only in connection with specific, historically-developed systems of social-property relations and given balances of class forces'.<sup>320</sup>

An understanding of late medieval England as a 'deference society' may provide the starting-point for analysis but, an assessment of the extent of contemporary social mobility and consciousness about the significance of social conflict are also crucial to understand the reality of the social changes that took place in this period. It was in this quickly changing society that poets such as Gower, Langland, Chaucer and many others were writing. When these authors came to discuss the meaning of a good society, they did so by dealing with the subjects of deference, ambition and social conflict. These authors presented deference as a vital element for the establishment of an equitable social order. In his *Confessio Amantis*, Gower compares rulers to the 'crop' whose natural position is above the 'root'; hence, the temporal rulers should maintain their position while the people should continue in obedience.<sup>321</sup>

Similarly, Langland advises the poor to remember wise Cato's

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<sup>320</sup> T. H. Aston and C. H. E. Philpin, eds., op. cit., p. 153.

<sup>321</sup> Tim William Machan, *Textual Criticism and Middle English Texts*, The University Press of Virginia, Virginia, 1994, p.104.

words: ‘bear patiently the burden of poverty’. Both the orthodox Langland and the author of *Pierce the Ploughman’s Crede* (probably Geoffrey Chaucer),<sup>322</sup> agreed that those of *low birth* were more suitable to labouring and cleaning out ditches than to pursuing wealth, position and power promotion within Church could bring. Those individuals who sought to attain a higher rank on the social hierarchy were likely to be confronted with the moral resentment of Gower or, with the ironic satire of Chaucer’s characters; Franklin and the five Guildsmen in the *Wife of Bath*. Those whose collective struggles challenged the existing social hierarchy provoked an even more aggressive reaction from works such as Gower’s *Vox clamantis*, that presented the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 as evil inspired. In Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale*, the grievances and the insurgence of the ‘cherles’ are cited as major instances of the evil influence of Saturn on human life.<sup>323</sup>

However, if deference was the ideal choice for the lower classes of late medieval England, those people refused such deference, in their actual, daily practice, chasing instead the paths of desire and social resistance, which determined the future of England’s social and economic development in its earliest modern form.

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<sup>322</sup> A. Hudson, “*The Legacy of Piers Plowman*”, in *A companion to Piers Plowman*, ed. J.A. Alford, Berkeley, London, 1988, p.48

<sup>323</sup> Peter Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

## General Conclusion

Having examined the English society from as many perspectives as the scope of this research allows, the question of whether the English labourer was fully aware of his belonging to one homogenous class, or whether this labourer accepted his social status *per se* has been answered.

Historians belonging to different schools of thought approached the English society, each with his own convictions. Marxists believe that the tumult that prevailed following the years of the Great Famine and the Black Death perfectly corresponds to their theory of class struggle between a class that owned the means of production, and one which had nothing but their hands to work with. Social theorists rather see that Medieval English society was one in which social status, rather than social class determined the position of its members, denying the Marxist interpretation of the struggles that existed during this period.

By contrast, some historians argue that society and social interaction during this period can only be understood through thorough investigation and critical reading of the surviving primary sources.

In fact, only a combination of this latter approach with the previous ones can shed light on the nature of conflict in village as well as urban society. This approach also enables the researcher to better grasp the peculiarities of the social organization of villagers, lord peasant interaction, and the different types of clashes that characterised the relationship between lord and peasant, and the way these conflicts were resolved.

Social conflict was by no means confined to rural England in medieval times. Urban social conflict also took several forms, from oligarchic struggle for parliamentary representation, to contest for wealth, status, and social advancement. The best means to understand the conflicting relationship between lord and peasant is a chronological examination of the intermittent disputes starting from the early 1300s to the Cornish rebellion of 1497. These conflicts were mostly the result of over taxation or were due to an attempt to exact the maximum services by some stubborn lord or prelate. Conflicts also varied in nature, from violent attacks and threats to legal plaint to a local or the royal court when the law allowed.

Vernacular poetry also proved to be a good source for historical study of society during this period. Poetry was a more or less influential means of denouncement or defence of unrest, depending on the side, which the poet decided to take or found himself in. Between 1315 and 1360, famine, plague, and defeats in the Hundred Years' War were decisive elements in shaping the relationship between the different social strata of the period.

Whatever their causes war, famine and food shortage led to higher prices among a growing population, which logically led to discontent, and even to heresy among the demeaned class whose unhealthy and precarious living conditions made the English vulnerable to disease, but marked the beginning of the decline of the feudal system. When the Black Death entered the scene in 1348-49, it was met with a malnourished society, with unhealthy living conditions, and primitive medicine. The result was obviously devastating in terms of the number of casualties. A helpless church was accused of

corruption, and of being one cause of such a divine punishment. Economically speaking, the Black Death led to labour shortage and increase in demand for working hands.

Fully aware of the situation and the advantages it could bring, the working class claimed for higher wages. The governing class made use of all the possible means available, including an Ordinance of Labourers and Parliament itself, to issue the Statute of Labourers to maintain the pre-plague situation. The role of the Justices of the Peace was to enforce the laws issued. During this period, came a series of defeats in the Hundred Years War. After years of plundering and supremacy, the English armies found themselves faced with a more self-confident France, ready to oust the English from what they considered *their* land.

The king's resort to mercenary armies meant the need for money by a now-bankrupt treasury, and an angry population blaming the government for defeats and accusing it of corruption and incompetence. Now that war in France was not rewarding anymore, the lords refused to finance it alone, claiming that the money of the country was in the hands of the labouring class (referring to higher wages as a result of labour shortage). And so began the series of Poll taxes that led to the majority of the revolt that ensued.

The colossal response to these revolts by the angered and politically conscious population is clear evidence that the English working man, in town or village, acted consciously to achieve some political change in the country. Although their immediate results were quite unimpressive, their long term achievements were the abolition of slavery, and the laying of early modern England foundations.



Literature of the period and its authors are considered inevitable witnesses of social unrest in the period. Whether they defended the cause of the rebels or the interest of the ruling class, the analysis of both clearly illustrates the socially antagonistic relationship between lord and peasant, and between the social *elite* and those ambitious to better their status at any cost.

Last, but not least, the overview of English society in Late Medieval period clearly shows that the relationship between the different social classes was far from being that of harmony and deference. Rather, it was a period in which one class aspired for change while another struggled to keep the course of things in their pre-plague situation.

Who won and who lost is not the driving force of this study; the aim is rather to demonstrate that social unrest during this period is the proof of the rise of a labour class-consciousness, the precursor of the reformation as well that of the birth of modern England that grew and matured with the advent of the Industrial Revolution.

# Glossary of Medieval Terms

**Cordwainer** A leather worker, shoemaker. The title cordwainer applied not only to the maker of leather goods but also to the merchant who imported cargoes of Spanish leather.

**Epistolary.** A liturgical book containing the Epistle readings for mass arranged according to the liturgical year. *Inferiore mediocres*

**Leet.** A group of tithings organised for the administration of frank-pledge and breaches of the peace. The leet had a court but was limited in the punishments it could administer to amercements alone.

**Lollardy.** Name given to beliefs considered heretical in the late 14c, held by John Wyclif and his followers. Lollard was not intended to be a complimentary name. Their complaints against the Church were wide-ranging. They disliked the subjection of the English Church to Rome, the doctrine of transubstantiation, clerical celibacy, temporal rule by the clergy, the consecration of physical objects, masses for the dead (obits), going on pilgrimage, and the veneration or worship of images. In 1401 the edict *De haeretico comburendo* was passed, allowing for the burning of Lollards. Fierce suppression continued through the reign of Henry V.

**Lorimers** A maker of the metal pieces of a horse's bridle and stirrup irons; also one who made small pieces of iron-work.

Manorialism: the manorial organization, or its principles and practices in the Middle Ages.

Oyer and terminer. Lit. 'hear and decide'. Oyer is the legal term for the hearing of a case in court. However, the complete phrase is a 'commission of oyer and terminer' for a judge in eyre to hear cases. Oyer shares its roots with Oyez = Hear me! uttered by the town crier, summoning people to hear his message.

*potentiores* Lit. 'the powerful'. Term used of the senior men of the great London guilds, those who controlled their guild and with others sought to influence and control London. The word was also used of men outside London, those who were wealthy and influential, being involved in local politics and sitting on town councils. The word was sometimes used to refer to the council on which the men sat.

Purveyor. A royal official who arranged the king's accommodation during his itineraries. Traders were required to allow the king's purveyors first choice of all the goods on sale. Although payments were prescribed, a fair rate was rarely paid for supplies. Indeed there were frequent complaints that suppliers were not paid at all. Also, there were many impostors requisitioning for themselves. The name was changed from purveyor to achatour = buyer, in an attempt to eliminate corruption – a hopeful but futile exercise. The Latin term was praecursor.

Tallage. Tax imposed by both the Norman and the early Plantagenet kings upon towns and demesne lands of the crown. Royal tallages were sometimes imposed before parliament claimed its right of review of money matters. A villein would also have to pay his lord tallage among other dues. Tallage became the word for any impost demanded by a superior. The Latin is tallagium

Villein land held by a tenant who rendered to a lord specified duties of a servile nature.

Source: Christopher Corèdon , Ann Williams, *A dictionary of medieval terms and phrases*, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2004

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## Appendices:

### Appendix One:

#### THE BOCKING PETITION, c. 1300-30

Translated in J. F. Nichols, 'An Early Fourteenth Century Petition from the Tenants of Bocking to their Manorial Lord', *Economic History Review*, II (1929-30) 300-7, which provides a full discussion. Clauses 4, 5 and 6 are omitted.

1. To their very dear, honourable and rightful lord, the poor tenants of Bocking pray to your lordship for grace and remedy, that, whereas you have your Leet in your Manor of Bocking aforesaid on Saint Matthew's Day [September 21st] and the custom of the said manor is such that the tenants for the time being ought to make full presentment through thirty-six 'capital pledges', duly sworn, on that same day, of matters touching the Crown, as of indictments and of purprestures which may be redressed on that day, and for other matters of which they may be in doubt, they ought to have, and always have had, an opportunity of adjourning for further consideration until [the next meeting of the court] three weeks later to make full presentment, now comes John le Doo, your bailiff, and, on the first day of the leet, of his own conceit, without [making] inquest, [proceeds against] the presenters and against reason amerces them on a charge of

concealment before presentment has been made, and by such amercement has caused them to be grievously distrained, on which account they pray for remedy.

(This petition was made in the time of Prior Henry of Eastry.<sup>1</sup>)  
Reply was made that the deed had not been done by him nor by his wish, and that in future he would not suffer such evil to be done to any tenant of the vill but that they should be maintained in their customs in all matters.

2. And that whereas each free tenant had full liberty to sell his land in such wise that the purchaser should be enfeoffed to hold of the capital lord by the services and customs due therefrom, the said John le Doo came and caused the aforesaid tenants to be distrained when they had thus made purchase of your fief, so that they were not able to enjoy their purchase or hold [the tenement] in peace until they had paid a fine for their holding at his will, and for this cause they seek remedy.

Reply as before.

3. Furthermore, Sire, that whereas the aforesaid tenants who were liable to be amerced in your court ought, when so amerced, to be 'affeered' by their peers according to the extent of their trespass, then came the said John le Doo and refused to accept such affeerment, but has, of his own conceit, increased their burdens twofold or even threefold and by such means has vexed the tenants and brought them to destruction, against all reason and the Great Charter that Holy Church ought to uphold.<sup>2</sup> And for this they pray remedy.

Reply as before. . . .

7. And that whereas the aforesaid tenants ought to render certain services such as ploughings and other specified services according as the custom of the manor requires, the aforesaid John le Doo comes and demands other services and customs that they are not bound to render, and on this account causes them to be distrained

by the bedels of the Manor suffering no manner of delivery to be made for such distraint by warranty nor pledge, nor in any other manner by warrantors (*mainpernours*) in your own court, without naming the Prior in our plea, against whom we are not able to allege any charge concerning tort done. And for this they pray remedy.

Reply as before.

8. Moreover, whereas they ought by reason of their tenure to mow your meadows in your Manor aforesaid, and spread the grass and turn and load the hay, and afterwards carry it to your granges, by which service they ought to be and have been accustomed since whereof memory runs not to the contrary, to be quit of suit of court and of all other services from the day that they commence to mow for the three whole weeks next ensuing, your bailiff John le Doo comes and demands that they shall do suit at your court during the aforesaid three weeks, which demand is evidently against reason and contrary to their customs, and by this pretext he has grievously amerced them and caused them to be distrained, and for this they pray for remedy.

Reply as before.

<sup>1</sup> Prior of Christ Church, Canterbury, from 1284 to 1331.

<sup>2</sup> A rare example of an appeal by manorial tenants to the protection of Magna Carta, in this case the famous Clause 39. 'Afferment' was the assessment of an amercement.

## Appendix Two

THE SONG OF THE 'YORKSHIRE  
PARTISANS', 1392

Powell and Trevelyan, *Peasants' Rising and the Lollards*, pp. 19–20; Robbins, *Historical Poems*, pp. 60–1; cf. Chambers and Daunt, *Book of London English*, p. 276

And the jurors declare that the said John Berwald junior of Cottingham and others composed a certain rhyme in English and had it publicly proclaimed at Beverley on Sunday 21 July, at Hull on the following Sunday [28 July] and at other times in various places within the county of York during the sixteenth year of King Richard II [1392–3]. This rhyme runs as follows:

In the Countrey hard was wee,  
that in our soken shrewes should be  
with all forto bake;  
Among the fryers it is so,  
and other orders many mo,  
whether they slepe or wake.

And yet will ilke-an hel up other  
and meyntheyne him als his brother,  
both in wrong and right;  
And also will we stand and stoure  
mayntayn our neighbour  
with all our might.  
Ilke man may com and goe  
among us both to and fro,  
I say sikerly.  
but hething will we suffer non-  
neither of hobb nor of Jon,  
with what man he be.

For unkind we ware  
If we sufferd lesse or mare  
any villan hething,  
But it were quit double againe,  
and accord, and be full fayne  
to byde our dressyng.

And on that purpose yet we stand:  
who-so doth us any wrong  
In what place it fall,  
yet he might als weele,  
als haue I hap and sel,  
Doe againe us all.

*Glossary*

soken, *district*; bake, *support*; sikerly, *truly*; hething, *derision*; dressyng, *direction*.

## Appendix Three

## A SONG OF FREEDOM, c. 1434

Robbins, *Historical Poems*, p. 62

For thou art comen of good blood,  
 or for art a riche man of good;  
 For thou art well loued of moo,  
 and for thou art a yong man al-soo.

Thin ffadere was a bond man,  
 thin moder curtesye non can.  
 Euery beste that leuyth now  
 Is of more fredam than thow!

If thou art pore, than art thou fre.  
 If thou be riche, than woo is the.  
 for but thou spendyte well ere thou goo,  
 thin song for euer is 'well-ay-woo'.

## Appendix Four

## 'CRYSTE MAY SEND NOW SYCH A YERE',

c. 1450

Robbins, *Historical Poems*, pp. 62-3

Anoder yere hit may betyde  
 This compeny to be ful wyde,  
 And neuer on-odyr to abyde;  
 Criste may send now sych a yere.

Another yere hit may befall  
 The lest that is withyn this hall  
 To be more mastur then we all;  
 Criste may send now sych a yere.

This lordis that ben wonder grete,  
 They threton powre men for to bete;  
 Hyt lendith lytull in hur threte;  
 Cryste may send sich a yere.



## Appendix Five

The Complaints and Requests of the  
Commons of Kent, 1450

John Stow, *Annales*, ed. E. Howes (London, 1631), pp. 388–390

In the meane time the King sent notable men to the said Captaine and his fellowship, to know the purpose and the cause of their insurrection: unto whom the Captaine answered, that hee and his company were assembled there [at Blackheath in mid-June 1450] to redresse and reforme the wrongs that were done in the Realme, and to withstand the malice of them that were destroyers of the common weale, and to amend the defaults of them that were chiefe Counsellors to the King, and shewed unto them the Articles of complaints touching the misgovernement of the Realme, whercin was nothing contained but seemed reasonable, whereof a copie was sent to the parliament holden that time at Westminster, with also one other Bill of requestes by them made, of things to be reformed, and to have answer thereof againe, but hee had none. The bill of Articles they intituled.

*The complaint of the commons of Kent, and causes of the assembly on the Blackheath.*

1. Inprimis, it is openly noysed that Kent should be destroyed with a royall power, and made a wilde Forest, for the death of the Duke of Suffolke, of which the commons of Kent were never guiltie.<sup>1</sup>
2. Item, the king is stirred to live onely on his commons, and other men to have the revenewes of the crowne, the which hath caused poverty in his excellency, and great payments of the people, now late to the king granted in his Parliament.
3. Item, that the Lords of his royall bloud have bin put from his

<sup>1</sup> This unpopular Lancastrian lord had been intercepted and murdered (on 2 May 1450) off the Kentish coast as he was sailing into exile. R. L. Storey, *The End of the House of Lancaster* (London, 1966), pp. 43–68, provides valuable new insight into Cade's rebellion.

daily presence, and other meane persons of lower nature exalted and made chiefe of his privy counsell, the which stoppeth matters of wrongs done in the realme from his excellent audience, and may not be redressed as law will, but if bribes and gifts be messengers to the hands of the said counsell.

4. Item, the people of his realme be not paid of debts owing for stuffe and purveiance taken to the use of the king's houshold, in undoeing of the saide people, and the poore commons of this Realme.

5. Item, the kings meniall servants of houshold, and other persons, asked daily goods and lands, of [those] empeached or indited of treason the which the king graunteth anon, ere they so endaungered, be convict. The which causeth the receivers thereof to enforge labours and meanes applied to the death of such people so appeached, or indited, by subtile meanes, for covetise of the said grants: and the people so impeaced or indited, though it be untrue, may not be committed to the law for their deliverance, but held still in prison to their uttermost undoeing and destruction for covetise of goods.

6. Item, though divers of the poore people and commons of the Realme, have never so great right, truth and perfect Title to their Land, yet by untrue claime of infeffment, made unto divers states, gentiles, and the Kings meniall servants in maintenances against the right, the true owners dare not hold claime, nor pursue their right.

7. Item, it is noysed by common voyces, that the Kings Lands in France have beene aliened and put away from the Crowne, and his Lords and people there destroyed with untrue meanes of treason, of which it is desire, enquiries through all the Realme to be made, how, and by whom, and if such traytours may be found guilty, them to have execution of Law, without any pardon, in example of other.<sup>1</sup>

8. Item, Collectors of the 15 peny in Kent, be greatly vexed and hurt in paying great summes of money in the exchequer, to sue out a writ, called *Quorum Nomina*, for allowance of the Barons.

<sup>1</sup> An allusion to the French success in expelling the English from Normandy during the weeks that followed the battle of Formigny (15 April 1450).

of the [Cinque] ports, which now is desired that heereafter in the lieue of the Collectors, the Barons aforesaid may sue it out for their ease, at their owne costs.

9. Item, the Shrieves, and under-shrieve, let to ferme their offices and Bayliwikes, taking great surety therefore, the which causeth extortion done by them and by their Bayliffes to the people.

10. Item, simple and poore people that use not hunting, be greatly oppressed by inditements fained and done by the said Sherifes, under-sherifes, bayliffes and other of their assent, to cause their increase for paying of their said ferme.

11. Item, they returne in names of Enquests in writing into divers courts of the Kings, not summoned nor warned, where through the people daily lose great summes of money, well nye to the uttermost of their undoing: and make levy of amercements, called the *Greene Waxe*, more in summes of money, than can be found due of record in the Kings bookes.<sup>1</sup>

12. Item, the Ministers of the court of Dover in Kent, vex and arrest divers people through all the Shire, out of Castle Ward, passing their bands and liberty used of old time, by divers subtile and untrue meanes and actions falsely fained, taking great fee at their lust in great hurt of the people in all the Shire of Kent.

13. Item, the people of the said shire of Kent, may not have their fre election in the choosing [of the] Knights of the Shire, but letters have beene sent from divers estates to the great rulers of all the Countrey, the which enforceth their tenants and other people by force to choose other persons then the common will is.

14. Item, whereas Knights of the Shire should choose the Kings Collectors indiferently, without any bribe taking: they have sent now late to divers persons notifying them to be Collectours, whereupon gifs and bribes be taken, and so the Collectours office is bought and sold extortionously at the Knights lust.

15. Item, the people be sore vexed in costs, and labour, called to the Sessions of peace in the said Shire, appearing from the farthest, and uttermost parts of the West into the East, the which causeth

<sup>1</sup> A seal in green wax, used by the Treasurer's Remembrancer, was attached to royal summonses demanding the repayment of new debts to the Exchequer.

to some men five daies journey, whereupon they desire the said appearance to be divided into two parts, the which one part to appeare in one place, another part in another place, in relieving of the grievance and intollerable labors and vexations of the said people.

*The requests by the Captaine of the great assembly in Kent*

In primis, desireth the Captaine of the Commons, the welfare of our Sovereaigne Lord, the King, and all his true Lords, spirituall and temporall, desiring of our said soveraigne Lord, and of all the true Lords of his Councell, he to take in all his demaines, that he may raigne like a King royall, according as he is borne our true Christian King anoynted, and who so wil say the contrary, we all wil live and dye in the quarrell as his true liege man.

2. Item, desireth the said Captaine, that hee will avoyde all the false progeny and affinity of the Duke of Suffolke, the which hath been openly knowne, and they to be punished after the custome and Law of this Land, and to take about his Noble person, the true Lords of his royall blood of this his Realme, that is to say, the High and mighty Prince, the Duke of Yorke, late exiled from our said soveraigne Lords presence<sup>1</sup> (by the motion and stirring of the traiterous and false disposed the Duke of Suffolke and his affinitie) and the mightie Princes and Dukes of Excester, Buckingham and Norfolke, and all the Earles and Barons of this land: and then shall hee bee the richest King Christian.

3. Item, desireth the captaine and commons punnishment upon the false traitors, the which contrived and imagined the death of the high and mightfull excellent Prince the Duke of Gloucester, the which is too much to rehearse, the which Duke was proclaymed as traitour.<sup>2</sup> Upon the which quarrell, wee purpose all to live and die upon that it is false.

<sup>1</sup> Richard, duke of York, had been appointed King's Lieutenant in Ireland in July 1448; and Cade's revolt was, whether or not with the duke's approval, a 'Yorkist' movement.

<sup>2</sup> Humphrey, duke of Gloucester, died in mysterious circumstances soon after his arrest in February 1447.

4. Item, the Duke of Excester, our holy father the Cardinall, the Noble Prince Duke of Warwike, and also the Realme of France, the Dutchy of Normandy, Gascoine, and Guien, Anioy and Maine, were delivered and lost, by the meanes of the said traitors, and our true Lords, Knights and Esquiers, and many a good yeoman lost and solde ere they went, the which is great pitie to heare, of the great and grievous losse to our soveraigne Lord and his Realme.
5. Item, desireth the said Captaine and commons, that all the extortions used daily among the common people, might be layed downe, that is to say, the greene Wax the which is falsely used, to the perpetuall destruction of the kings true commons of Kent, Also the kings bench, the which is too greefefull to the shire of Kent without provision of our soveraigne Lord and his true Counsell. And also in taking of wheat and other graines, beefe, mutton, and all other victuall, the which is importable to the said commons, without the breefe provision of our said soveraigne Lord, and his true Councell, they may no longer beare it. And also unto the statute of labourers and the great extortioners, which is to say, the false trators, Sleg, Crowmer, Isle and Robert Est.

## Appendix Six

### SONG OF THE KENTISH REBELS, 1450

Robbins, *Historical Poems*, p. 63, cf. C. L. Kingsford, *English Historical Literature in the Fifteenth Century* (Oxford, 1913), p. 359, and above, no. 62

God be oure gyde, and then schull we spede.  
 Who-so-euur say nay, ffalse for ther money reuleth!  
 Trewth for his tales spolleth!  
 God seend vs a ffayre day!  
 a-wey traytours, a-wey!

## Abstract:

Most historians attribute the founding of modern England and the rise of labour class-consciousness to the period after the Industrial Revolution when workers started to call for the improvement of their conditions and appropriate wages in an organized way under the leadership of their respective trade unions. This work aims to demonstrate that the roots of modern England as it is known today are even deeper in the history of this country. The important number of facts about social unrest in fourteenth and fifteenth century England provided in this work, and the sources used to support these facts make it possible to assume that the late medieval class was fully aware of its strength and the importance of its role in society as a homogenous class having the same sufferings and goals. Hence, the idea of labour class-consciousness in this period is fully justified.

**Keywords:** Medieval England – Class-consciousness – Revolt – Labour – Taxation – Early Modern England

## ملخص:

يعزو معظم المؤرخين تأسيس إنجلترا الحديثة وارتفاع وعي الطبقة العاملة إلى الفترة التي تلت الثورة الصناعية عندما بدأ العمال يدعون إلى تحسين ظروفهم والأجور المناسبة بطريقة منظمة تحت قيادة نقاباتهم. ويهدف هذا العمل إلى إثبات أن جذور إنجلترا الحديثة كما هي معروفة اليوم هي أعمق في تاريخ هذا البلد. وقد ارتكز هذا البحث على عدد المهم من الحقائق حول الاضطرابات الاجتماعية في القرن الرابع عشر والخامس عشر انكلترا، ومصادر المستخدمة لدعم هذه الحقائق مما يؤكد فرضية أن الطبقة الكادحة في العصور الوسطى المتأخرة كانت على علم تام بقوتها وأهمية دورها في المجتمع كطبقة متجانسة لها نفس المعاناة والأهداف. وبالتالي، فإن فكرة الوعي الطبقي لهذه الطبقة خلال هذه الفترة له ما يبرره تماما

**كلمات البحث:** انكلترا في القرون الوسطى - وعي الطبقة - الثورة - العمل - الضرائب - بداية إنجلترا الحديثة

## Résumé :

La plupart des historiens attribuent la fondation de l'Angleterre moderne et la montée de la conscience de classe chez la classe ouvrière à la période qui a suivi la révolution industrielle lorsque les travailleurs ont commencé à réclamer l'amélioration de leurs conditions et des salaires appropriés d'une manière organisée sous la direction de leurs syndicats respectifs. Ce travail vise à démontrer que les racines de l'Angleterre moderne comme on la connaît aujourd'hui sont encore plus profondes dans l'histoire de ce pays. Le nombre important de faits sur les troubles sociaux dans l'Angleterre des XIVe et XVe siècles fourni dans ce travail, et les sources utilisées pour soutenir ces faits permettent d'assumer que la classe médiévale tardive était pleinement consciente de sa force et de l'importance de son rôle dans la société comme une classe homogène ayant les mêmes souffrances et les mêmes objectifs. Par conséquent, l'idée de conscience de classe ouvrière dans cette période est pleinement justifiée.

**Mots-clés :** Angleterre médiévale - Conscience de classe - Révolte - Travail - Taxation - Angleterre début de l'Angleterre