

SOME ADDITIONS TO ANDRÉ RÉVILLE'S  
ACCOUNT OF EVENTS AT BURY ST. EDMUND'S  
FOLLOWING ON THE REVOLT OF 1381.

MARY D. LOBEL.

Students of the history of Bury St. Edmunds are familiar with the main facts of the great rising which took place there at the time of the Peasant's Revolt. André Réville has made a detailed study of the course of events there in his book entitled "*Le Soulevement des travailleurs d'Angleterre.*" His account of the incidents following on the general amnesty of 1382, from which Bury alone was finally excluded, is full and accurate, but there are one or two points he has omitted which we propose to deal with here.

He made no use of the class of documents known as Ancient Petitions. The first relevant petition probably belongs to the year 1381 or 1382 and came from the prior and convent (P.R.O. *Ancient Petitions*, 967). They petitioned that the rebels of Bury who had so "horribly" scorned the Church and still did not wish to mend their ways or make satisfaction but continued in their rebellion, should not be received into the king's protection in the next parliament. They must have petitioned before December 22nd, 1382, when the king took the Bury rebels into his grace on their promising to pay 2,000 marks to the exchequer. The parliament referred to may be either the one held in the beginning of the year or in the October of the same year.

The next petition, also from the prior and convent, begged that the people of the town of Bury, parishioners and tenants of the abbey, might be bound by sufficient surety to be of good behaviour. It recalled the town's recent actions "*faitz horriblement come chose notoire*" (P.R.O. *Ancient Petitions*, 4703). The royal answer was endorsed as follows: "*Troevent les gentz de Bury Seint Esmoun bone et suffisante seuretee de la paix et de lour bone part en temps avenir.*"

This petition was evidently part of the abbey's great campaign to secure adequate guarantees against future outbreaks. The question of security had been mooted at an early date. In the parliament of 6 Richard II the Commons supplicated that pardon might be extended to all save those whose names were excepted in the preceding year. This was granted except in the case of Bury, concerning which it was added "qe ceux de Bury troeffent seuretee suffisante de lour bon port." Réville has described admirably the efforts made by the abbey to exact this surety, and also to get from the town the 500 marks of the 2,000 marks fine which in 1383 the king had assigned to the abbey for its relief and with the idea of making it the more ready to grant a pardon to the town (*Cal. Close Rolls*, p. 346). Equal efforts were made by the town to resist payment, at least until they had obtained from the abbey the pardon promised by the king.

The date of the petition would seem to be prior to the parliament of 1382, which ordained that the men of Bury should give surety and the method by which they should give it, though it is possible that it may have been made at any time before the parliament at Salisbury in May, 1384, when the abbot again petitioned the king on the subject and succeeded in getting a commission appointed to take recognizances from the townspeople for the payment of a sum of £10,000, if they ever injured the abbey in any way.

Early in 1385 the council made a final effort to get the remaining 1,000 marks of the fine paid, half to the Crown and half to the convent. The numerous writs and commissions issued are to be found in Réville's work. Great ingenuity was shown by the townsmen in avoiding the payment of the tax and the commission appointed on March 6th (*Cal. Pat. Rolls*, p. 592) was seriously hindered. Certain burgesses got two London citizens to bring an action for debt against John of Overton, one of the town bailiffs on the commission, with the idea of impeding the collection of the money. He was attached and arrested, but their object was

frustrated by the issue of a writ of *supersedeas omnino* to the sheriffs of London. The offending burgesses, Thomas Ikworth, Hervy Lacford and Thomas Hallesworth were mainprised and the supposed feigned suit was stopped, it being the king's will that the work of the commission should proceed uninterrupted. John of Overton was mainperned to answer the plaintiffs when his commission was executed (*Cal. Close Rolls*, p. 631). The Mayor and Sheriffs of London petitioned for the revocation of the writ, but the king refused to revoke it until after the octaves of St. John the Baptist, "which time seemed competent for the execution of the said commission." The case which turned out to be a genuine one was then proceeded with (*Cal. Close Rolls*, 1385-9, p. 54).

But by this time John of Overton's commission had been revoked on the complaint of the abbot in parliament, who demanded that the appointment first of Roger Rose and his colleagues and then of John of Overton and others might be cancelled as being derogatory to his liberties (*Cal. Close Rolls*, p. 38). This was done on December 3rd on condition that the sums already levied and received were paid by the commissioners. Another writ assuring the abbot that his liberties had not been in any way prejudiced and empowering him to collect the money himself in accordance with his privileges was issued early in the next year. He was to assess and levy the remnant of the fine according to the deserts and misdeeds of the townsmen and according to their estates and means, concerning which inquisition was to be made by the abbot and his ministers. A writ of aid was addressed at the same time to the alderman and others.

Presumably the abbot was successful in collecting the money for we hear of no more complaints. The burgesses, however, did not hear the last of this business until 1389. In 12 Richard II Roger Rose and the twenty-three burgesses, appointed in 1385 (*Cal. Pat. Rolls*, p. 586) as assessors and collectors of the fine, were attached to render account of their commission

before the barons of the exchequer. They appeared by their attorney, who pointed out that the alderman and his colleagues had been superseded by the bailiffs and others and that they had been ordered to deliver up their rolls, and the collectors the sums they had collected. A search in the rolls was then directed as to whether the fine had been paid or not. It was found that £1,000 had been paid to the king and 500 marks to the prior and convent. The discharge of the accused men was therefore ordered. Early in the next year the burgesses secured themselves against further molestation by obtaining an *inspeximus* of this process, a copy of which is still among the Corporation muniments at Bury.

The efforts of the governing body of the borough to collect the tax in 1385 had led to a quarrel between the rich and poor. We learn from the Patent Rolls that Roger Rose, the alderman, Edmund Lucas, James of Marham and twenty-one other burgesses of Bury, who had promised the fine of 2,000 marks for themselves and the whole town, were appointed on February 5th to assess, levy and collect the unpaid residue of the fine, which several men of the town had refused to pay. The twenty-four commissioners abused their power and favoured themselves and their friends at the expense of the poor of Bury. The result was that the fine was not paid by the appointed date and that a commission of enquiry was appointed to deal with the complaints of the poor men, and to compel the alderman, the constables of Bury and the collectors to deliver up their rolls. The poor men had appealed to the chancellor, complaining of the injustice of the collectors who had distrained on their houses and taken their goods and utensils. They begged that the bailiffs of the town and a king's serjeant might be appointed to survey the taxation rolls and the means of the people of the town, and redress any iniquities found (P.R.O. *Ancient Petitions*, 14953).

Another petition on the same subject has been preserved. John Berrard, Geoffrey of Middleton and others besought the king on behalf of his "porre people," to examine in the treasury Roger Rose and his fellow

collectors who, on the authority of a writ directed to the alderman, made the poor people of Bury pay more than a thousand marks on pain of imprisonment—"a fynes e ransomes par duresse denprisonement" (P.R.O., *E.C.P.*, 68/23).

Meanwhile the abbot's efforts to obtain a guarantee from the town that they would not damage or injure the abbey in any way in the future had been unceasing. At the parliament held at Salisbury in May, 1384, he propounded the terms on which the abbot and convent were prepared to make peace with the town. He presented the form of the recognizance which the inhabitants of the town were to make and asked that six of the principal burgesses, then at Salisbury, should not be allowed to go before they had given the required guarantee. He asked further that the king should summon fifty inhabitants named by the abbot for the purpose of making the recognizance in chancery, and that he should appoint a commission to take the recognizances of the rest of the town. These proposals were accepted by parliament and steps were taken to execute them. It is evident, despite Réville's opinion to the contrary, that the six burgesses at Salisbury were not made to enter into the obligation on the spot, as the abbot had suggested, for they all did so on July 2nd in chancery.

Between July 2nd and February 15th of 1385 seven hundred and twenty-two recognitions were made. Eighty-four of the richer burgesses and more prominent people made their recognizances in chancery. The lesser burgesses bound themselves *en masse*. The names of all of them are to be found on the Close Roll for 1385, and also copied into the cellarer's register, now in the Cambridge University Library Gg.4.4., fols. 346-9). The largest group, consisting of five hundred and sixty-three people, of whom forty-one were chaplains and sixteen women, took oath on August 11th, before the commission appointed by the king on July 24th, when he had empowered John of Waltham, keeper of the rolls of chancery, and five others to receive the recognizances for the payment of £10,000 from those inhabitants of

Bury who had not already made recognizances in chancery (*Cal. Pat. Rolls*, p. 498). Smaller groups appeared before the commissioners on August 18th, 19th and on September 2nd. All the people mentioned, probably all the householders of the town, recognised that they and their heirs were liable to the payment of £10,000 to the king, and of the same sum to the abbey on the next feast of St. Michael. This contract was followed by a clause cancelling the agreement provided that no armed insurrection or grievous trespass was committed, at any time in the future, against the abbot and convent. In case of either of these offences being committed the fine would be levied on the individuals concerned.

Réville does not appear to have observed the true explanation for the division into groups and the distinction between the inhabitants of the town who made their recognizances in chancery and those who made them before the commissioners at Bury. He says the townspeople were divided into twelve groups of varying size, three of them consisting of only one person and one consisting of as many as five hundred and sixty. Each of the twelve groups pledged themselves to pay £20,000 and thus, he adds, the whole town committed itself to the payment of £240,000. This interpretation seems to us highly improbable. Of the four groups of people who made their recognizances before the commissioners one consisted of the bulk of the inhabitants, (a hundred and sixty-three in number), the others of forty-four, thirteen and fifteen men and women respectively. No people of known importance figure in the smaller groups which are composed largely of servants and what are probably small tradesmen. They were not even conspicuous in the revolt and there seems to be no adequate explanation of why they should be burdened with so much larger a share of the total fine than the large group of people. The same difficulty applies to the three men who pledged themselves singly. If we account for Thomas Halesworth on the ground that he was a ring-leader we cannot do the same for John Marham the younger and John Coke, chaplain, against whom there

is no evidence. These difficulties disappear if we do not admit Réville's premiss that each group was responsible for £20,000. The numbers of the groups seem to us to have no importance and may well have been fortuitous. They depended on the number of people who happened to make their recognizance on the day in question. Each person bound himself in £20,000 to the king and to the abbey, as the wording of the memorandum inserted after the contract shows. If there was any breach of the peace the fine was to be forfeited, not by the group, but by the individual.