

THE RISING OF 1381 IN SUFFOLK: ITS ORIGINS AND PARTICIPANTS

by CHRISTOPHER DYER, B.A., PH.D.

THE REVOLT OF 1381 still baffles historians, to the point that an authority on the subject confesses that to him it seems 'historically unnecessary'.¹ It is true that the rising cannot be explained in simple economic terms, because the conditions of the mass of the population had reached a low point three generations before 1381, between 1294 and 1325, when a succession of poor harvests culminated in famine, and lords' demands for rents and the state's collection of taxes weighed most heavily.² The economy changed during the 14th century, as the plague epidemics that began in 1348-49, combined with other factors, ensured a drop in the numbers of people. This helped the survivors and their successors to improve their material welfare, for wage-earners in particular were able to demand increased wages, and after some difficult harvests up to 1375 food became relatively cheap. Peasants, that is small-scale rural cultivators, benefited from the more easy availability of land, and the relaxation of pressure on pastures enabled them to increase the numbers of their animals.³ We cannot therefore explain the rebels' behaviour as a reaction against impoverishment, but instead we must interpret the rising in a context of growing prosperity, or at least of an economic climate in which people could expect to better themselves. In bringing together the different strands of social and political change that lay behind the 1381 rising there are many advantages in concentrating on a single well-documented county, and Suffolk is ideal for this purpose.

As is well known, Suffolk in the Middle Ages was a county in which lay both good arable land and extensive patches of woodland, grassland, heaths and wetlands.⁴ The county was relatively densely settled, supporting about 120,000 people in 1377 – many more before the plagues – partly through agriculture, but also by means of fishing and the exploitation of such natural resources as peat, and above all through an intense commercial and industrial development.⁵ By 1350 at least ninety markets had a formal existence in the county. The settlements associated with these markets often showed the urban characteristics of a high concentration of population and a wide diversity of occupations, and by 1327 it is possible to identify more than forty places which possessed these features.⁶ In 1327 many craftsmen in the cloth industry were working in the small towns and villages of Babergh and Cosford hundreds in the south-west of the county and cloth-making developed further during the century. The countryside was divided into vills which often coincided with parishes. However, most people did not live in nucleated villages but in straggling groups of houses and hamlets. From these dispersed settlements the inhabitants worked irregular subdivided fields or land held in 'severalty' (enclosures). Manors rarely coincided with villages: the total domination of a village by a single lord is most commonly found on the estates of large ancient churches, such as the monastery of Bury St Edmunds in the west of the county, and the priory of Ely in the east. But three-quarters of the manors in Suffolk were held by laymen, and then mainly by the gentry, and such lords tended to hold no more than a fraction of a village.⁷ Although the church estates have left us more documents than those of lay lords, therefore tending to provide a slanted picture of society, lay manors are by no means lacking in evidence, and of the thirty-two manors whose records have been used in this study, nine belonged to members of the gentry.

Historians rightly think of Suffolk as a county of free tenants. They were plentiful at the

time of Domesday, and continued to be numerous in the later Middle Ages. However, alongside the freemen, on lay manors as well as those of churches, customary tenants and serfs formed an important part of the population.

TABLE I: ANALYSIS OF TENANTS RECOGNIZING NEW LORDS IN SUFFOLK⁸

<i>Manor (date)</i>	<i>Free Tenants</i>	<i>Tenants of Servile Holdings</i>	<i>Serfs by Blood</i>	<i>Total</i>
Bredfield (1361)	23 (42%)	19 (34%)	13 (24%)	55 (100%)
Iken (1363)	10 (29%)	12 (34%)	13 (37%)	35 (100%)
Earl Soham (1382)	2 (3%)	44 (70%)	17 (27%)	63 (100%)

Table I analyses three later 14th-century lists of tenants who recognized, or who should have recognized their new (lay) landlords in eastern Suffolk. The lists distinguish between free tenants, tenants who were personally free but who held land on customary or servile tenures, and those who were 'serfs by blood' (*nativi de sanguine*). The proportions of the different categories vary, but the formidable numbers of the latter two speak for themselves: assuming that these manors were not untypical, there must have been many thousands of servile tenants and serfs in late 14th-century Suffolk. From the landlord's point of view these tenurial and legal distinctions were all important, because of the heavier dues and rents (mostly in cash) that he could extract from the customary tenants and serfs. A distinctive feature of the Suffolk peasantry was their widespread practice of partible inheritance, and their involvement in a very active land market. Holdings varied greatly in size, with a majority, taking examples recorded between 1370 and 1383, having five acres or less. They must have relied on wage work or craft work to supplement the production of their land, as is shown by the 80 per cent of tax-payers in the incomplete 1380-81 poll tax who were identified as labourers or servants, or as having some non-agricultural occupation. At the other end of the social hierarchy were the very small number of substantial tenants. Only about one-eighth of the tenants held more than twenty acres of land, and an exceptional one in every thirty holdings exceeded thirty acres.⁹

The complexity of Suffolk's society seems to be reflected in the variety of incidents in the county in June, 1381.¹⁰ Our main source, the indictments drawn up by juries after the revolt, leaves an impression of a fragmented series of episodes. Bands of rebels under a number of leaders moved around the county sometimes attacking the property of nationally recognized 'traitors' like Sir John Cavendish, Chief Justice of King's Bench, but also indulging in acts of extortion that the juries represented as simple criminal acts. Further consideration suggests, however, that these activities had a coherent pattern. The rebels concentrated in important places in the government of the county, not just the two largest towns of Bury and Ipswich, but also the administrative centre of Ely's liberty of St Etheldreda at Melton. The rebels often chose as their victims leading figures in local government, such as escheators, justices of the peace and a knight of the shire. There seem to be many similarities between the events of 1381 and those of Kett's Rebellion in 1549. At the latter date it has been argued convincingly that the rebels intended to create an alternative county government, and a number of actions by the 1381 rebels support the view at least that they saw themselves as taking charge of their localities.¹¹ How else are we to interpret the attempt to force the constable of Hoxne hundred to levy ten archers from the hundred for the rebel forces, at a wage of 6d. per day each? Or the accusation that the rebel band based on Brandon were 'assuming to themselves the royal power'? It would be a grave error to assume that the rebels were behaving lawlessly; rather they were establishing

a new law. This form of rebellion, combined with the presence of some gentry and clergy among the leaders, might suggest that the revolt had a political rather than a social character. That the rebels had social grievances is indicated by the killing of Cavendish, who had personally enforced the Statute of Labourers in the county and was suspected of corruption in collusion with the monks of Bury. Two leading Bury monks, the prior and John Lakenheath, also lost their lives mainly because of the Abbey's old quarrel with the townsmen of Bury. The rebels revealed something of their aims by the burning of manorial court rolls, which happened in at least thirteen places in the county, and in dozens of other incidents throughout the south-east of England. This selective destruction was designed to remove the written records of customary tenure and servility, and to establish a new social order.

We can probe more deeply into the nature of the 1381 revolt and its causes by using the names of people indicted or pardoned after the rebellion, to investigate their lives and background. Fourteen biographies are included in the Appendix; the subjects were selected from the 150 or so known rebels simply because they appear in the manorial records which provide the main source of detailed local information. The sample is therefore a biased one. The indictments and pardons tend to contain the names of those accused of leading the rebellion. The manorial records tend to give more information about the upper ranks of peasant society. So rank-and-file rebels, and the village poor, cannot be so readily investigated. In spite of these drawbacks, this small sample is still a precious source of evidence. Given the patchy survival of documents, the recovery of so much information about relatively humble 14th-century individuals is remarkable.

As the biographical details of the rebels are printed below no more than brief comments on their salient features are needed here. Most of the leading rebels came from the peasant élite. The amount of land that they held, the number of animals that they owned, and the offices that they filled in the manorial administration, as bailiffs, chief pledges, jurors and affeerers, all point to this conclusion. In order to run their manors, landlords needed the services of men of substance who commanded respect among the tenants. In 1381 the same people continued to act as leaders, now in opposition to authority rather than as collaborators. There were also among the rebels, perhaps even in a majority, poorer people whose names are not commonly recorded, though they are represented among our fourteen by two landless youths, Thomas Draper and William Metefeld junior, and by the Lakenheath alewife, Margaret Wrichte. One of our fourteen stands out clearly above the others, Thomas Sampson. His lands, stock and wealth were much greater than those of Brightwold, Gardiner and the other rebels; whereas they were officials of manors, he held office at county level, as a tax-collector. He must be counted as a member of the lesser gentry. In examining the rebels as in our earlier survey of the rebellion itself, the similarity between the 1381 rebellion and that of 1549 is again apparent. Here indeed were 'substantial men with plenty of experience of petty administration'.¹² In judging the aims and motives of the rebels we should not, however, allow the presence of Sampson and a few other gentry to colour too strongly our assessment of the revolt. While we might speculate that Sampson and others of his class rebelled because of some antagonism towards the ruling group in the county, or because they imagined that the rebellion would lead to political changes, the great majority of the rebels were peasants, artisans and petty traders whose involvement must be explained in terms of their experiences at a much humbler social level.

The apparent suddenness of the 1381 revolt has created some of its mystery. A rising that breaks out without warning may indeed to a modern observer look 'unnecessary'.

However, there is sufficient evidence of disturbances and agitations in Suffolk earlier in the 14th century to suggest that the 1381 rebels were acting within a tradition of opposition to authority.

A well-documented case is that of the long struggle between the powerful Abbey of Bury St Edmunds and the men of Mildenhall. This large fen-edge manor brought the cellarer of Bury an enormous annual income, well over £200 in one year in the 1320s.¹³ In October 1320 Roger son of William Hervy of Mildenhall brought an action under the writ *Monstravit* against the Abbot, alleging that as Roger was a tenant in ancient demesne, the Abbot was not entitled to services beyond certain labour services. The disputed customs and services included the recognition fine (demanded by each new Abbot), *merchet* (marriage fine) and entry fines at will, typical of the uncertain and variable dues demanded of servile tenants. The case was tried in 1321. Domesday Book was consulted and this showed that Mildenhall had indeed belonged to Edward the Confessor, conclusive proof of the manor's ancient demesne status. This in theory meant that Roger and his fellow villeins were exempted from the impositions of the Abbot and could claim a special privileged status of 'villein sokemen'. However the Abbot's lawyers argued that Roger was a villein, that he and his ancestors had owed tallage, service as reeve, *merchet* and entry fines, so that he had no right to bring a case against his lord. Although two accounts of the case survive, neither tells us the outcome, but the fact that details were copied twice into Bury registers implies that victory, as was usual in such cases, lay with the landlord. The heading of the account in the *Pinchbeck Register* refers to the parties in the dispute as the 'villeins of Mildenhall', suggesting that Roger Hervy was acting as the representative of a group of tenants, the twenty-three holders of fifteen acres each (of which Hervy was one) and the fourteen tenants with thirty acres who were all performing very heavy labour services in the early 1320s.¹⁴

A Mildenhall manorial account of 1323–24 hints at continuing troubles. A dispute with a tenant, William Everard, had led to the seizure of his cow. More seriously, legal expenses had been incurred in 'a plea between the lord and the homage of Mildenhall', indicating a collective dispute spreading more widely than the earlier villeinage case. Fines on customary tenants going back to 1320 (perhaps the original cause of the Hervy law-suit) were still partly owed in 1323. The presence of disgruntled tenants at Mildenhall in 1327 presumably explains the burning of an Abbey barn there at the time when the townsmen of Bury rose against the monks.¹⁵

Troubles flared up again in 1341. Four Mildenhall tenants, Thomas Olyve (who held a sub-manor of considerable size), John Gernon, Simon Chapman and William Everard (all with more modest holdings) complained that their sheep folds had been broken down by the Abbot, a monk and a lay official. The Abbot replied that the folds were illicit, and that these tenants would be allowed to have them only when the Abbot wished. Also in 1341 a commission of *oyer* and *terminer* was sent by the crown in response to the Abbot's complaint that a session of the court leet held on 25 June had been disrupted. Forty-eight people (all named) were said to have prevented the Abbot's servants from executing the judgement of the Abbot's court, namely that brewers who had broken the assize of ale should undergo the ritual humiliation of being placed in the tumbrel. The crowd rescued the brewers (probably all women), assaulted the lord's bailiff, and stole his goods.¹⁶ There are elements of continuity between this riot and the earlier conflicts. Three members of the Hervy family, and all four tenants whose folds had been demolished were among the named forty-eight. Discontent with the Abbey's exercise of leet jurisdiction, which lay behind the 1341 disturbances, also gave rise to a petition from the tenants of Mildenhall, undated but probably belonging to this period.¹⁷ The petition appears to have come from the chief

pledges who were also free tenants, as they asked that no villein or customary tenant should be a chief pledge, and that no customary tenant should act as affeerer with a free man. They sought to protect the privileges of the chief pledges, excluding the bailiff from their deliberations, and demanding that the steward 'ought not and could not take any inquest on the day of the leet . . . unless by the chief pledges'. Another concern was the encroachments on the roads, including some made by the lord's officials. The petition bears some resemblance to a near contemporary one from Bocking in Essex, also directed by free tenants at another monastic landlord.¹⁸

Thus Mildenhall's tenants in the early 14th century seem to have been questioning the power of their lord, seeking the protection of the royal courts over villeinage, and quarrelling with the lord's monopoly over sheep folds and his full use of his powers of jurisdiction. There were evidently differences of attitude between the leading free tenants (who merely asked for reforms of short-term and small-scale problems and who seem to have felt no common interest with the villeins), and men like Hervy. His ancient demesne case may have been a defensive response to increasing seignorial demands, but it would be surprising if the dues mentioned really were novelties in the 1320s, and we may suspect that this law suit shows that the customary tenants had radical ideas about their ancient liberties and were prepared to dispute long-standing seignorial demands like recognitions and marriage fines. Needless to say, the people of Mildenhall were active again in 1381, principally in helping to track down and kill the Prior of Bury when he sought refuge in the area.¹⁹

If some Suffolk peasants were already objecting to the claims of their landlords in the 1320s and 1340s, they had ample reason to resent them after the mid-century epidemics. The economic trends of the post-plague era are clear. The labour shortage pushed up wages, and the reduced numbers of tenants and potential tenants increased their ability to bargain for better conditions with their lords. Landlords did make changes at this time. Some leased their demesnes, handing over the management of agricultural production to farmers in return for fixed cash rents. Leasehold tenures, which had begun to replace customary tenures on some manors before 1349, continued to spread, again providing lords with fixed rents in money, often at the substantial rate of one shilling per acre. Yet the institutions that governed social relationships remained obstinately unchanged by the new circumstances, because the interest of landlords lay in maintaining their control over tenants and serfs.

A series of small-scale incidents illustrates the constant frictions between lords and peasants. The most elementary duties of tenants were to pay rents and perform labour services; they failed to carry out these obligations collectively and persistently, suggesting some protest against the level or the form of rent or services. So at least twenty-four Felixstowe tenants failed to do their winter works in 1363, seventeen tenants of Chevington did not attend a harvest 'bedrip' in 1375, and seventy-three boon-works in one harvest season at Hundon were not performed by forty-nine tenants. In 1377 four tenants of Great Barton were found to have been in arrears with rents and services for periods as long as six and ten years.²⁰

Customary tenancies, which provided many landlords with the bulk of their rent income, were necessarily governed by many rules and restrictions. All transfers of customary land were supposed to pass through the lord's courts; if serfs bought or inherited free land they were expected to surrender it to the lord or receive it back on customary tenure; the upkeep of a holding, and especially its buildings and standing timber, were supervised by the lord. Tenants behaved as if they had freeholds, buying and selling land as they pleased. With the decreased demand for land, it was often in a tenant's interest to amalgamate holdings and

to demolish the redundant buildings. Lords were worried that they would lose track of tenancies and so not be able to collect rents, and that holdings without buildings would diminish in value.

Two examples will indicate the flagrant nature of some tenants' behaviour. Walter Baker of Chevington was reported in 1371 to have cut down trees worth 10s. 0d. growing on his holding, and to have carried them off and sold them without the necessary permission. Instead of repairing a ruinous barn as ordered, he dismantled the timber and doors to build a new house on a free tenement that he also held. At Earl Soham a serf, John Hamond, had in 1377 obtained illicitly a servile holding of twelve and a half acres, the buildings of which needed repair. When the court dealt with him two years later, he was asked if he would receive the holding in the normal way and agree to repair the buildings: 'he said, expressly, "no"'. He had other lands, notably a free tenement of seven acres which he had bought illegally in 1369, and for which he used the device of enfeoffment to trustees, normally the preserve of free tenants, so that he could enjoy the profits of the land for ten years without technically holding it himself.²¹ These cases indicate both the assertive spirit of tenants, and the ability of lords, albeit slowly and inefficiently, to discover some cases of indiscipline.

Serfs appear prominently in Suffolk records because they broke the rules that were intended to control them: they left the manor; they married without permission and evaded marriage fines (*merchet*); and they acquired free land illicitly. A radical response by serfs to their disadvantages was not to evade them but to assert their free status. A jury at Iken in 1364 had to deal with Richard de More's claim to be free, which revealed a history of a family's long struggle against servility. The lord of Gosbeck, probably either Richard or Ralph de Gosbeck,²² had claimed Richard's grandfather, Alexander de More, as his serf, and he had fled the sixteen miles to Iken, married there, and settled down. When the lord of Gosbeck learnt of this he went to Iken, but Alexander heard in time and escaped, so the raiding party had to be content with taking forty sheep that belonged to another serf, presumably in order to bring pressure on the lord of Iken, William de Sturmy. The two lords eventually reached a settlement whereby Sturmy received Alexander as his serf. As Richard was descended from Alexander, the 1364 jury had no choice but to declare that he was unfree. A marginal note in the court roll shows that the More family were still claiming to be free in the reign of Henry IV.²³ Lords were anxious to keep their serfs, and imposed heavy penalties on ill-disciplined serfs or their allies. In 1371 at Bredfield two servile tenants allowed a young relative, a ward, to leave the manor; they were threatened with an enormous amercement of 40s. 0d.²⁴

The records of manorial courts contain, as well as occasional major disputes of the Baker, Hamond and de More type, a constant succession of petty breaches of manorial discipline, such as the theft of the lord's corn at harvest time, or large-scale and persistent trespasses by tenants' animals in the lord's crops. Game and fish were poached, officials assaulted, and goods taken in distraint 'rescued'. The two-way nature of the conflicts must be emphasised. Peasants sought every possible loophole, while lords used all of their powers to protect their interests. The factor which gave an ancient struggle a new intensity was the growing self-confidence of the peasants, who were actually improving their material conditions at this time, for example by increasing the size of their flocks and herds.

The long campaigns of attrition waged by lords and peasants imposed strains on the administrative machinery. The officials of the manor and its courts were recruited from among the peasants. This gave the lord the advantage of unpaid administration by local people; undoubtedly they blunted the sharp edge of their lord's authority, and this helped

to contain conflict within the system. The officials were put into an ambiguous position in which they had to compromise between their duty to the lord and their loyalty to their neighbours. The period of post-plague tension must have imposed uncomfortable strains on the officials, in which the lord punished them (see Appendix, v) and neighbours withdrew their co-operation, like Thomas Wynke of Framlingham who 'would not inform the chief pledges of various trespasses and articles touching the leet'.²⁵ It is not surprising that election to office was sometimes refused, notably by a future 1381 rebel, Thomas Gardiner (see Appendix, v). At Brandon in 1370 the whole body of officials boycotted a court session at a time of unusual agitation in which the lord's property had been stolen and the reeve seriously assaulted; 'the whole homage', when summoned by the steward 'to be here . . . for various articles touching the lord', were amerced 20s. 0d. for their failure to attend.²⁶

Another essential ingredient in the troubles leading up to the 1381 rising was the antagonism aroused by the royal government. In the post-plague period landlords turned to the state for support, and the Statute of Labourers was designed to prevent increases in wages and to force workers to accept employment at the legal rates. Occasionally lords enforced the law in their own courts, for example at Redlingfield in 1378 John le Mowere, a 'common labourer', refused to work for the lady of the manor when ordered by the constable of the vill and the bailiff. He was 'attached by his body' to serve under a penalty of 20s. 0d.²⁷ The main task of enforcement fell on the royal courts, especially those of the justices of the peace. The Court of King's Bench itself held sessions in 1379 at Bury and Thetford, and dealt with many cases under the Statute, including one involving Thomas Sampson (see Appendix, xi). We can be sure that the labour laws were much resented, not because they held earnings down, but because of the unfairness of the almost random selection of a small proportion of wage-earners for prosecution. It was probably hostility to the Statute that led the constables of Lakenheath in 1379, John Carter and John Mayheu, to refuse 'to answer for certain articles' to King's Bench.²⁸

The central government also provoked hostility with its demands for taxation. The experiment with a parish tax in 1371 was an example of administrative bungling that hit Suffolk hard because its assessment was doubled when the yield of the tax was found to be much lower than expected.²⁹ A riot broke out at Lakenheath, a large fen-edge manor not unlike Mildenhall in its social structure, when before January 1371 John, Earl of Pembroke, the steward-in-fee of the Abbey of Bury, sent three officials to collect cash on behalf of the King in the Liberty of St Edmunds. Money from Lakenheath had not been paid, so they took chattels in distraint. Twenty-six named people, 'and others', responded by assaulting the officials, breaking one's wand of office, taking back the chattels, and keeping the unpopular visitors out of the village with threats and force. The Crown sent four commissioners to deal with this rising, among them John Cavendish, later to become Chief Justice of the King's Bench.³⁰ Nine of the rioters appear on Lakenheath lists of chief pledges and jurors for 1361 and 1376 (no court rolls survive at the exact time of the disturbance), so it appears that, as in 1381, the village élite adopted a leading role, among them the two constables who in 1379 refused to co-operate with the King's Bench.³¹ In 1381 Cavendish was to have another last contact with Lakenheath, when he arrived there as a fugitive from the rebels. The villagers assisted in his capture, notably when Katherine Gamen pushed a boat out of reach to prevent his escape. Their hostility to him was presumably not just because of his supposed corrupt alliance with Bury, or his general reputation, but because they had direct experience of his enforcement of the law.

The essential pre-requisite for the events of 1381 was provided by the combination of actions by landlords and by the royal government to create a universal sense of grievance among all sections of Suffolk's rural society including bailiffs, chief pledges and other members of the village élites, and even a few gentry and clergy. The interweaving of social and political grievances can be observed in a petition of 1378 from the men of Bawdsey, a coastal village that had been given the task of contributing to the royal navy by building a *balinger*, along with Hadleigh, Ipswich and Sudbury. These were all market towns, the latter two being boroughs, and the men of Bawdsey resented their inclusion in such wealthy company. They objected that the combination of the four places was not customary; they emphasized that they were serfs by blood of the Earl of Suffolk, and complained that they lacked the 'liberties and franchises whereby they might become rich'.³² The views that they expressed – hostility to serfdom, resentment of the privileges of boroughs, and annoyance at royal fiscal demands – were all to emerge in the demands and actions of the 1381 rebels, and it is not surprising to find that Bawdsey was involved in the rising.³³

A final factor in explaining the outlook of the 1381 rebels must be their upbringing in a popular culture containing elements hostile towards established authority. A hint is provided by a clerk writing a court roll of the Bury manor of Chevington in 1380 who identified a brewer by a nickname, 'John called "Littlejohn"'.³⁴ The obvious explanation is that the Robin Hood stories were known in Suffolk within a few years of the first direct reference to songs about Robin Hood in the B text of Langland's *Piers Plowman*. Modern commentators disagree as to the social significance of the legends. Langland certainly thought that they were disreputable, but did they express lower-class antagonisms towards those in authority?³⁵ It is likely that their meaning varied, depending on the audience and the time and place at which they were told. Certainly in 1380 at Chevington, which was no doubt full of rumours about the collusion between the monks of Bury and Sir John Cavendish, the *Gest of Robyn Hode* with its story of the outlaws defeating an alliance between a grasping abbot and a corrupt judge would have had a very specific relevance.³⁶

Later in the Middle Ages the Robin Hood legend became associated with the popular festivities called 'summer games', in which social rôles were reversed and 'lords' and 'ladies' were elected. It is usually thought that these rituals helped to release social tensions and to make real-life inequalities more acceptable. That such occasions could have the opposite effect is shown by an incident at Polstead in 1363, when John Atte Forth was amerced 40d. (an unusually large sum) because he 'entered the lord's close and together with others played in the lord's hall a game called a *somergamen*'.³⁷ Perhaps the players overstepped the accepted limits; perhaps the lord had lost patience with the traditional customs. Either or both would have been characteristic tendencies in the harsh social climate of the late 14th century. Customs of the type recorded in Polstead are directly relevant to the 1381 revolt because the first outbreaks in Essex and Kent took place in Whit week, 1–8 June, the normal time for summer games. Court leet sessions were also held in that week.³⁸ The rebellion spread to Suffolk in the following week, one of the most active days being 13 June, which was also the Feast of Corpus Christi when parish guilds often held their annual processions. Such guilds were especially common in Suffolk, and at least three of the eight parishes which produced rebels in our small sample had them.³⁹ Neither the summer games nor the processions of the parish guilds were in themselves rebellious, but they did express the sociability and solidarity of rural communities. They also caused large assemblies of people to gather in a holiday spirit, which we know from later disturbances could, in the right circumstances, become channelled into actions against authority.⁴⁰

To sum up, then, the revolt of 1381 becomes more easily explicable if its many-stranded origins are accepted. First, the essential precondition lay in the tensions between lords and their subordinates, so well documented at Mildenhall, but evident at a petty level in any series of manorial court records. These tensions were more acute in Suffolk because of its heterogeneous society and dynamic economy whereby seignorial restrictions seemed all the more irksome to self-confident and potentially independent peasants and artisans. The late 14th-century changes held out the promise of improvement, without seriously diminishing the powers of lords. At the same time the state played a more prominent rôle in the lives of ordinary people. There had always been a belief (however naïve) in the impartiality of the law, hence Roger Hervy's case against his lord; now the labour laws exposed the bias of the courts, and encouraged belief in the corruption of the justices. The new wave of taxation that began in 1371 and culminated in the poll-tax seemed to prove the social bias and venal mismanagement of those in government. When the moment of uprising came, the local communities under their natural leaders could draw on traditions of organisation intended for more legitimate purposes, and a sub-culture that could be hostile to those wielding power.

APPENDIX

BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS OF SOME SUFFOLK REBELS OF 1381

Note: Various qualifications should be made about these biographies. The identification of rebels by name depends on the existence of juries making presentments, or the accused obtaining pardons. Jurors may have accused their enemies maliciously, or people may have taken advantage of pardons as an insurance against malicious accusation.

The reconstruction of the lives of relatively obscure medieval men is notoriously hazardous. In particular sons and fathers with the same names can be confused. Every effort has been made to avoid errors of identification, but the fragmentary nature of the records means that uncertainties will always remain.

The sources for the biographies are given in brackets at the end of each entry.

(i) *Robert Brightwold of South Elmham*

In 1356 Juliana Brightwold died and her holding of a garden and three roods of land was inherited by Robert Brightwold, Juliana's great nephew, on payment of a relief of 1½d. The lack of more direct heirs, and the presumed death of Robert's father and grandfather by the date of the inheritance may well have been due to the 1349 plague epidemic. Robert would have been quite young when he acquired this land, perhaps in his twenties. In 1364 and 1368 he came before the courts of his lord, the Bishop of Norwich, in routine cases – for blocking a water-course, as the victim of an 'unjust' raising of the hue and cry; and in litigation with another tenant. From 1372 Robert served regularly in positions of responsibility in the administration of the manorial courts and courts leet of South Elmham, as juror and chief pledge. We may assume that he had acquired a substantial holding of land, for in 1380 he was employing a servant (the victim of an assault). Some degree of wealth was perhaps a necessary qualification to be one of the South Elmham chief pledges, since they were fined collectively 40s. each year, 'for concealment'.

He obtained a pardon in May 1382, but his participation does not seem to have affected his position in the administration of the courts of his lord, Bishop Henry Despencer, who had played a major part in the suppression of the rising. In September and October of 1381 Brightwold served as juror, affeerer and chief pledge, and was still acting in the latter office in 1385 and 1388.

(S.R.O.I., HA12/C2/14–19; P.R.O., C67/29.)

(ii) *John Broun of South Elmham*

John Broun makes his first appearance in the records of South Elmham in 1373, when he failed to attend a court, showing that he was already a tenant. He was then impleaded for trespass by John, the parson of the parish of St James. Also in 1373 he was the victim of a 'hamsoken' (house breaking), and a 'rescue' (recovery of impounded or

distrainted goods). In 1380 he was involved with Margery Wodecock in pleas of debt and trespass, evidently arising out of some earlier dispute with her dead husband, William Wodecock. This litigation was still continuing in 1382. In the early 1380s a Margery Broun, perhaps John's wife, appears among those brewing ale for sale and on one occasion also selling bread. Like Robert Brightwold, he obtained a pardon in 1382, and seems to have continued to live in South Elmham for some years after the revolt; he is mentioned in the court rolls in 1386. (S.R.O.I., HA 12/C2/14-19; P.R.O., C67/29.)

(iii) *William Draper and Thomas Draper of South Elmham*

William Draper, the son of another William Draper, is likely to have been born in the 1330s. In 1358 he was involved, together with his father, in a dispute over a holding called Erl's: they were accused of causing damage worth 40d. This may well have been the beginning of a dispute with the Erl family, though the earliest feuding is not known until the early 1370s. By 1372 William had a mature son, Thomas, and in that and the following year they were both involved in litigation over trespass with Henry Erl, and are mentioned in presentments of incidents of assault and '*hamsoken*' against other members of the Erl family. The fierceness of the conflict may be judged by the severity of the amercements taken in the court leet, 2s. from William and 1s. 3d. from Thomas in one session. The Drapers' position in the dispute may well have been aided by William becoming chief pledge in 1372, an office that he occupied regularly until 1388.

That William had resources is suggested by his appointment as chief pledge (see (i) above). In 1385 he was sharing with two other tenants a customary 30-acre holding called Wolsy's, and in 1386 he acquired a total of 25½ acres of land in seven parcels at a total rent of 20s., which would place him among the wealthiest Elmham peasants.

William Draper's tendency to be quarrelsome continued in later life. In 1388 he was amerced 18d. for '*hamsoken*' on the parson of St James, and for assaulting the parson's servant seriously enough to draw blood. Some of his aggression was also directed against his lord. His lopping of the lord's wood in 1368 was a routine infringement of the rules; more unusual was the action of William's son Thomas in 1373 of 'making an unjust road' through the lord's new park. By 1385 William evidently owed a substantial amount of money to the lord, probably in unpaid rents, and the lord's officials took an ox and three cows from him in distraint, but William broke the pound and took the animals back. Both William and Thomas were pardoned after the 1381 revolt. (S.R.O.I., HA 12/C2/14-19; P.R.O., C67/29.)

(iv) *John Cole of Felixstowe*

In 1363 a John Cole and a William Cole were among many customary tenants of Felixstowe amerced for failing to perform winter works for their lord the Prior of Felixstowe. Other information on the Cole family before 1381 is lacking because of the destruction of the records of both Felixstowe and the parent manor of Walton by the rebels. John Cole junior was evidently a leading figure in this incident, since in May 1384 he was said to have come to an agreement to pay an amercement of 8s. 'in open court', 'for all forfeitures, damages, or trespasses . . . within the village of Walton in the time when the commons [*populares*] rose against the King and the magnates', which had involved burning 'the muniments of the said cell'. John Cole was a serf by blood [*nativus de sanguine*]. John Cole and his wife Joan are recorded in the 'first court after the burning of the books' in October 1381 as having acquired from another tenant a rood and a perch of servile land for a fine of 1s., and John Cole, son of William Cole, serf, some time before 1384 bought illicitly 30 perches of free land by charter, the seizure of which was ordered in line with the convention that serfs could not hold free land without permission.

John Cole did not accept the settlement of May 1384. In November 1385 he was amerced a total of 6s. 8d. for trespassing against another serf of the manor, John Smyth, and assaulting him on his own holding; Cole left the manor without licence and was described as a 'rebel'. He was ordered to be arrested 'by his body and by his chattels'. William Cole remained on the manor at this time.

(S.R.O.I., HA 119: 50/3/17; HA 119: 50/3/80.)

(v) *Thomas Gardiner of Little Barton*

The many appearances of Thomas Gardiner in the court rolls of Little Barton between 1377 and 1385 show him pursuing normal agricultural activities and in so doing (along with many others) infringing some of the rules – ploughing so as to encroach on the common; allowing his animals (sheep and horses) to stray on the lord's pasture and crops; mowing rushes in the marsh in the season prohibited by a by-law; driving his cart over the lord's arable. The frequency with which he committed such offences, and particularly the revelation in 1380 that he had kept as many as 30 sheep out of the lord's fold, suggests that Gardiner was a peasant of above-average prosperity. He occupied a number of positions of responsibility, as juror in the 'general courts' and as chief pledge at the court leet. He also acted as a personal pledge.

His conventional round of activities as an official was interrupted in 1380. At a general court held in February of that year he refused to serve as a juror: 'he did not come when summoned twice, three times and four times to swear the oath with the other jurors'. In the following July he was back on duty, serving on the jury and as chief

pledge, but there were hints of trouble at that court, with the affeerers failing to attend, and the jurors being fined 3s. 4d. for concealing the waste done to a customary holding by felling trees. Gardiner's involvement in the 1381 revolt, for which he obtained a pardon, is reflected in his absence from the jury at the court session held in September 1381, and in October he defaulted from suit of court and again failed to join the jury even after four summonses. He seems to have been absent from the jury in 1382, but acted as chief pledge, and still filled that office in 1385.

(S.R.O.B., E7/24/1.3; P.R.O., C67/29.)

(vi) *Edmund Gerneys of Little Barton*

A presumed relative of Edmund, John Gerneys, had been involved in 1357 with a number of prominent local people, including Sir John de Shardelowe and the parson of Barton church, in resisting an attempt by Elizabeth de Burgh, Lady of Clare and a powerful magnate, to make distraint for customs and services owed to her. Edmund himself (who was pardoned for his part in the 1381 revolt) is revealed in the court proceedings of 1377–85 as a man of some substance who had a flock of 80 sheep in 1379, and horses and cattle which were occasionally found to have trespassed on the lord's land.

(C.P.R. 1354–58, 655; S.R.O.B., E7/24/1.3; P.R.O., C67/29.)

(vii) *John Haras of Herringwell*

In January 1371 John Haras served as a juror in a general court held at Herringwell. He was a customary tenant, since he was presented for making waste on his holding. In a court held six months later there is a reference to a younger John Haras, the son of Matthew Haras, who raised a hue 'unjustly'. John Haras rebelled on 14 June 1381 and attacked the nearby Hospitallers' manor of Chippenham (Cambs.). He obtained a pardon in 1383.

(B.L., Add. Charter 54072; Réville 1898, 241.)

(viii) *William Metefeld, senior and junior of Brandon*

William Metefeld senior was a leading free tenant of Brandon who appears regularly in the court rolls of the period 1365–89. He held a demesne meadow of 19½ acres on lease in the 1370s and early 1380s. The elder Metefeld was a seller of bread and ale, especially active in this trade from 1377 to 1383. He also served as chief pledge between 1369 and 1382. He was pardoned after the revolt. William Metefeld junior first appears in 1369, when he drew blood from Alice Godhewe. In 1378 he was involved together with his father in a plea of trespass, but a year earlier he had evidently established his independence as a brewer, paying a fine of 2s. for breaking the assize of ale. He led a band of rebels in 1381 in south-west Norfolk, extorting money, stealing, 'assuming to themselves the royal power', and attacking the Duke of Lancaster's manor of Methwold. He does not appear in the Brandon court rolls after the revolt, and when William Metefeld senior died in 1394 his land came into the hands of two feoffees, suggesting that his son was already dead.

(S.R.O.B., J 529/1–2; P.R.O., SC6 1304/23–36; Powell 1896, 28; Réville 1898, 87, 90.)

(ix) *John Philip of Brandon*

John Philip was appointed warrener of the Bishopric of Ely's manor of Brandon on 15 April 1368, with wages of £4 0s. 8d. *per annum*. In the same year he was called a granger. In 1369 a thief broke into his chamber and took his keys in order to steal corn and 'utensils' from the lord of the manor. By 1374 he had been promoted to bailiff, and as he seems to have retained his position of warrener, his annual wages must have totalled £7 1s. 4d. His considerable income was augmented from land-holdings. In 1369–70 he was renting 7 acres of the demesne and other lands for a total of 8s. 8d. He added the leasehold of two other customary holdings in 1371, so that in 1371–72 he was paying rents totalling 23s. 8d. – the area of land must have been in excess of 20 acres. In 1374 he did fealty as a free tenant to the new bishop of Ely, Thomas Arundel, and he took more land on lease, some on 10-year terms. The court roll of that year records that he also acquired land with a rental of 52s. 8d., but this does not appear on the accounts of the manor. Like any land-holder he was involved in the usual manorial offences, trespassing with sheep and pigs, and being ordered (in 1381) to repair buildings on his customary holdings. He must have married before or soon after his first appearance in the records, since he had a 12-year-old son in 1384. He served as affeerer in 1370, and later in life as chief pledge. In 1381, when he was still acting as bailiff, he joined the band of rebels led by William Metefeld junior (see (viii) above). He reappears as a Brandon tenant after the revolt; in 1390–92 he acted as chief pledge, and in the last year also as affeerer. In 1383 he was involved in debt litigation in the court of neighbouring Lakenheath. He died at some time between November 1392 and September 1393; at the latter date Christiana Philip and Thomas her son took over his lease on 4 acres of land.

(S.R.O.B., J 529/1–2; P.R.O., SC6 1304/23–36; Réville 1898, 87; C.U.L., EDC/7/15/II/2.)

(x) *Adam Rogge of Aldham*

John Rogge, a serf (*nativus*) of Aldham, died in 1359 leaving his widow Matilda with his villein holding as her free

bench; it was a substantial tenement of a messuage and 8 war acres. Matilda's children were already grown up. Her daughter Elena married in 1359, and Adam first appears in the records a year later, when he 'unjustly and against the peace raised the hue on Matilda his mother', a very unusual presentment indicating a serious family quarrel. In 1365 Adam was again in trouble, beating Thomas Elenesfenne so that he raised the hue. In 1371 Adam was involved in litigation over debt with another Aldham man, and in the same year was amerced 1s. for allowing cows belonging to four different people to stray on to the demesne; the most likely explanation of this last incident would be that he was employed as a common herdsman. The records cease here, but it is likely that Adam succeeded to his father's holding; he would also have inherited his servile status. By 1381 he had become a figure of some importance, bailiff of the manor of his lord, Robert de Vere, Earl of Oxford. On 14 June 1381 he attacked the house of William Gerard of 'Watesfield' (? Whatfield) and on the next day went to Roger Usshefeld's house and stole goods worth 100 marks.
(S.R.O.I., HA 68: 484/135; Powell 1896, 21; Réville 1898, 81.)

(xi) *Thomas Sampson of Kersey*

A John Sampson was active in the Kersey area in the second quarter of the 14th century. By 1364 Thomas was involved in agriculture on a large scale, judging from a complaint in that year that he was pasturing 180 sheep on the common pasture of Polstead, and a report to Polstead manor court that a serf had gone to live with him, presumably as a servant. An indication of his relatively high status in the locality is his appearance as the first witness to a deed conveying property in Hadleigh in 1369. By the time of the revolt he must be counted as a member of the lesser gentry, with land in at least three villis – Kersey, Harkstead and Friston, and goods worth £65 12s. 8d., including 161 acres under crops, 72 horses and cattle, and an eighth share in a ship at Harwich. In 1380 he was employing two servants who were accused before the King's Bench of taking excessive wages; the fact that he acted as their pledge might suggest that he sympathised with them.

In 1379 and March 1381 he served as collector of poll-taxes in Suffolk. The list of collectors, like the witness list of a deed of 1379, show Sampson well down in the order of precedence, below knights like John Shardelowe or Richard Waldegrave.

In the 1381 revolt Sampson led rebels in the south-east of the county, proclaiming rebellion at Ipswich on 15 June, and on the next day going to Melton, after which he moved north as far as Bramfield. He was captured and condemned to death, but in spite of an initial exclusion from pardon, was pardoned in 1383. The Sampson family rose to become lords of the manor of Sampson Hall, and a later Thomas was knighted and served as knight of the shire.

(Hervey 1906, 157; *Calendar of Ancient Deeds*, I, 540; B.L., Add. Roll 27683, 27685; *C.C.R.*, 1377–81, 329; 1381–85, 121; Powell 1896, 22, 23, 127, 143–45; Réville 1898, 79, 80; P.R.O., KB 27/479; *C.P.R.*, 1381–85, 226; *C.F.R.*, 1377–83, ix, 145, 237; Copinger 1905–11, III, 181–82; Wedgwood 1936, 739.)

(xii) *Margaret Wrighte of Lakenheath*

One of the relatively few known women rebels, Margaret Wrighte twice appears among those amerced for breaking the assize of ale in 1379. She was presumably a relative of the various members of the Wrighte family mentioned in the court rolls of Lakenheath, for example in 1360–67 a John, Nicholas and Walter le Wrighte are all mentioned. In 1381 she was accused with other Lakenheath people, including Katherine Gamen, of involvement in the death of Sir John Cavendish, Chief Justice of the King's Bench. Margaret Wrighte's name is absent from the court rolls of October 1381 and does not re-appear.

(C.U.L., EDC/7/15/II/2; Réville 1898, 69.)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to the British Academy for a grant to carry out research on the background to the 1381 revolt. I also wish to thank Professor A.L. Brown of Glasgow University for help with the names of rebels from the public records.

NOTES

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1 Dobson 1982, 20. | 4 Scarfe 1972, 149–91. |
| 2 Miller and Hatcher 1978, 139–64; Maddicott 1975, <i>passim</i> . | 5 Powell 1896, 123. |
| 3 Bridbury 1973, 577–92; Hatcher 1977, 31–35; Hilton 1969, 32–35. | 6 Duddridge 1984, 13–39, based on Hervey 1906. |
| | 7 Douglas 1927, <i>passim</i> ; Copinger 1905–11, <i>passim</i> . |
| | 8 S.R.O.I., HA 91/1; HD 32: 293/390; V5/18/1.3. |

- 9 Smith 1974, *passim*; Hilton 1973, 171; the figures for holding size have been calculated from the records of 32 manors in the county.
- 10 Powell 1896, 9–25, 126–31; Réville 1898, 53–83, 121–28.
- 11 MacCulloch 1979, 36–59.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 45.
- 13 Bodl., Suffolk Rolls no. 21.
- 14 Hervey 1925, 321–24; C.U.L., Add. MS. 4220, ff. 121r.–121v.; *Year Books* (1672), 455; Bodl., Suffolk Rolls no. 21. Cf. similar cases in Hilton 1949, 117–36.
- 15 Bodl., Suffolk Rolls no. 21; Arnold 1892, 349, 352.
- 16 C.U.L. Add. MS. 4220, ff. 133v.–136v.; *C.P.R.*, 1340–43, 316–17.
- 17 C.U.L., Add. MS. 4220, f. 145v.
- 18 Nichols 1929–30, 300–07.
- 19 Powell 1896, 139; Riley 1863–64, II, 2; Palmer and Saunders 1926, 31.
- 20 S.R.O.I., HA 119: 50/3/80; S.R.O.B., E3/15.3/1.18; P.R.O., SC2 203/89; S.R.O.B., E18/151/1.
- 21 S.R.O.B., E3/15.3/1.15; S.R.O.I., V5/18/1.3.
- 22 Copinger 1905–11, II, 302.
- 23 S.R.O.I., HD 32: 293/390.
- 24 S.R.O.I., HA 91/1.
- 25 P.C., Framlingham court rolls, B.
- 26 S.R.O.B., J 529/1.
- 27 S.R.O.I., HA 12/C10/2.
- 28 P.R.O., KB 29/32; KB 27/475.
- 29 Fryde 1981, 10–11.
- 30 *C.P.R.*, 1370–74, 100–01.
- 31 C.U.L., EDC/7/15/II/2.
- 32 C.I.M., IV, 38.
- 33 Réville 1898, 122.
- 34 S.R.O.B., E3/15.3/1.19.
- 35 Hilton 1976, 221–72; Dobson and Taylor 1976, 17–36; Holt 1982, 109–58.
- 36 Maddicott 1978, 63–64, 85.
- 37 B.L., Add. Roll 27685; Phythian-Adams 1975, 23, 26–27; Wiles 1981, 1–30.
- 38 Aston and Hilton 1984, 14.
- 39 Westlake 1919, 225, 229; S.R.O.B., J 529/2.
- 40 Bushaway 1982, 190–202.

REFERENCES

Printed works

- Arnold, T., 1892. *Memorials of St Edmund's Abbey* (Rolls Ser., II). London.
- Aston, T.H. and Hilton, R.H., 1984. *The English Rising of 1381*. Cambridge.
- Bridbury, A.R., 1973. 'The Black Death', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., xxvi.
- Bushaway, B., 1982. *By Rite: Custom, Ceremony and the Community in England*. London.
- Copinger, W.A., 1905–11. *The Manors of Suffolk* (7 vols.). London.
- Dobson, R.B., 1982. 'Remembering the Peasants' Revolt, 1381–1981', in Liddell, W.H. and Wood, R.G.E. (eds), *Essex and the Great Revolt of 1381*. Chelmsford.
- Dobson, R.B. and Taylor, J. (eds), 1976. *Rymes of Robyn Hood*. London.
- Douglas, D.C., 1927. *The Social Structure of Medieval East Anglia*. Oxford.
- Duddridge, M., 1984. 'Towns in Suffolk and the Urban Crisis of the Later Middle Ages' (unpublished B.A. dissertation, University of Birmingham).
- Fryde, E.B., 1981. *The Great Revolt of 1381* (Historical Association pamphlet no. 100). London.
- Hatcher, M.J., 1977. *Plague, Population and the English Economy, 1348–1530*. London.
- Hervey, F. (ed.), 1925. *The Pinchbeck Register*. Brighton.
- Hervey, S.H.A. (ed.), 1906. *Suffolk in 1327, being a Subsidy Return* (Suffolk Green Books, IX). Woodbridge.
- Hilton, R.H., 1949. 'Peasant Movements in England before 1381', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., II.
- Hilton, R.H., 1969. *The Decline of Serfdom in Medieval England*. London.
- Hilton, R.H., 1973. *Bond Men Made Free: Medieval Peasant Movements and the English Rising of 1381*. London.
- Hilton, R.H., 1976. *Peasants, Knights and Heretics*. Cambridge.
- Holt, J.C., 1982. *Robin Hood*. London.
- MacCulloch, D.N.J., 1979. 'Kett's Rebellion in Context', *Past and Present*, no. 84.

- Maddicott, J.R., 1975. *The English Peasantry and the Demands of the Crown* (Past and Present Supplements, no. 1). Oxford.
- Maddicott, J.R., 1978. *Law and Lordship: Royal Justices as Retainers in Thirteenth- and Fourteenth-Century England* (Past and Present Supplements, no. 4). Oxford.
- Miller, E. and Hatcher, M.J., 1978. *Medieval England: Rural Society and Economic Change 1086-1348*. London.
- Nichols, J.F., 1924-30. 'An Early Fourteenth-Century Petition from the Tenants of Bocking to their Manorial Lord', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, II.
- Palmer, W.M. and Saunders, H.W., 1926. *Documents Relating to Cambridgeshire Villages*. Cambridge.
- Phythian-Adams, C., 1975. *Local History and Folklore*. London.
- Powell, E., 1896. *The Rising in East Anglia in 1381*. Cambridge.
- Réville, A., 1898. *Le Soulèvement des Travailleurs d'Angleterre en 1381* (ed. Petit-Dutaillis, C.). Paris.
- Riley, H.T., 1863-64. *T. Walsingham, Historia Anglicana* (Rolls Ser.). London.
- Scarfe, N., 1972. *The Suffolk Landscape*. London.
- Smith, R.M., 1974. 'English Peasant Life-Cycles and Socio-Economic Networks: a Quantitative Geographical Case Study' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge).
- Wedgwood, J.C., 1936. *History of Parliament, 1439-1509: Biographies*. London.
- Westlake, H.F., 1919. *The Parish Gilds of Medieval England*. London.
- Wiles, D., 1981. *The Early Plays of Robin Hood*. Cambridge.

Primary sources: abbreviations

- C.C.R. *Calendar of Close Rolls.*
 C.F.R. *Calendar of Fine Rolls.*
 C.P.R. *Calendar of Patent Rolls.*
 C.I.M. *Calendar of Inquisitions Miscellaneous.*

Abbreviations for MSS

- B.L. British Library.
 Bodl. Bodleian Library, Oxford.
 C.U.L. Cambridge University Library.
 P.C. Pembroke College, Cambridge.
 P.R.O. Public Record Office.
 S.R.O.B. Suffolk Record Office, Bury St Edmunds Branch.
 S.R.O.I. Suffolk Record Office, Ipswich Branch.