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THE PEASANTS' REVOLT OF 1381 AND THE WRITTEN WORD

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There are three things of such a sort that they produce merciless destruction when they get the upper hand. One is a flood of water, another is a raging fire and the third is the lesser people, the common multitude; for they will not be stopped by either reason or by discipline.

John Gower¹

They drew in all the people from the villages they were near and they passed by like a tornado, leveling and gutting the houses...So those wicked men went raging about in wild frenzy...If their plans had succeeded they would have destroyed all the nobility of England.

Jean Froissart²

Gower and Froissart were characterizing events which took place in England in the summer of 1381, events termed by history, the Peasants' Revolt. The label, however, does not adequately represent the reality it hopes to describe. Peasants were by no means the only perpetrators of the civil disturbances of 1381, only a portion of England was involved, the circumstances cannot easily be confined to one year, and further, the event was not clearly a revolt. Many historians have preferred to substitute the less virulent term 'uprising.'³ André Réville minimized the incident even further by describing events in Norfolk as "an immense pillage."⁴ As Charles Oman stated, "The great revolt...does not mark the end, any more than it marks the beginning, of the struggle between the landholder and the peasant."⁵ Yet to dismiss the Peasants' Revolt as little more than a series of local and individualized riots throughout parts of England is to ignore the simultaneity, magnitude and shared demands that, to

some degree, characterized the regional rebellions.

In part, current debate on the Peasants' Revolt concerns the issues of uniformity and consensus. To what extent was there an organized, centrally orchestrated movement of one class of Englishmen and women against another? Was there a shared set of grievances and a consciousness of goals among those who rose in arms? The range of interpretations on these questions is vast. William Stubbs viewed the rising as "portentous;" the villeins, although falling short of their goals, had "struck a blow at villeinage."⁶ More recently historians such as M. McKisack, M.M. Postan and R.B. Dobson have concluded that the uprising was undirected and ultimately unimportant.⁷ For Postan it was a "passing episode in the social history of the late Middle Ages,"⁸ and for Dobson a "historically unnecessary catastrophe."⁹ R.H. Hilton, in *Bond Men Made Free*, identified an analytical shift, starting in the 1980s, in the way these questions are regarded.¹⁰ He credits the peasants with self-conscious "strivings [for] the abolition of serfdom and the achievement of free status" and views the revolt as both important and catalytic of social change.¹¹

In my view the Peasants' Revolt was neither a coordinated strike at the state nor was it an embodiment of the mass desire for a radical reversion of the status quo. Rather in the uprising I see an attempt by the commons (meaning common men and women)¹² to manipulate traditional law and custom in an effort to improve their standing within the existing framework of English social, economic, and political systems. By their endeavor to gain control of the written word, the 'peasants' hoped literally to re-write their status and re-style (or regain) their prerogatives within the system, not to overthrow or replace it.

Analysis of the Peasants' Revolt is difficult because of the nature of the evidence. On the one hand we have chronicled reports such as those by Thomas Walsingham, Henry Knighton, Jean Froissart and the author of the *Anonimale Chronicle*, which provide a cogent narrative and emphatic explanation of events but which must be used with caution because they are biased and narrowly focused. On the other hand we have a bewildering welter of court records and local documents which fall into no clear pattern. Both types of sources were produced by writers unsympathetic to the insurgents and unlikely to understand or fairly represent their motives. We can only guess at the attitudes and aims of the rebels based on records kept by those landowners and royal officials who were affronted by the insurrectionists.

The Utopian and chiliastic aspirations of 'the leaders' like Wat Tyler and John Ball received attention in the chronicles and have since

informed scholarly discussion of the revolt; yet at most we can say that only a minority held the extreme views of the rebel front-runners, and at the least, the evidence for the fanaticism of even the ring-leaders is specious. Although it is not entirely clear what the Peasants' Revolt was, it was not a coherent, radical attempt by the people to topple the social, religious,¹³ political or economic order of England.

Unquestionably there were factions among the peasant rebels which, according to the sources, espoused grandiose plans for the eradication of villeinage and establishment of a bipartite social/political arrangement consisting of king and commons.¹⁴ The *Anonimale Chronicle* records Wat Tyler at Smithfield saying to King Richard II:

There should be no law except for the law of Winchester and...henceforward there should be no outlawry...and...no lord should have lordship in future but it should be divided among all men, except for the king's own lordship...There should be no more villeins in England and no serfdom, all men should be free and of one condition.¹⁵

This radical rhetoric is difficult to evaluate because it is not clear how it would have been understood by the people for whom it was supposedly the clarion cry of battle. What did words like serfdom and freedom mean to a crowd of peasants and townsmen in 1381? Tyler seemed to have envisioned a leveling of social classes rather than a simple rescision of onerous feudal and royal dues. Jack Straw and John Ball, two of the key figures of the movement, conceived of a society free even of monarchy—a society economically and socially egalitarian.¹⁶ Yet many of the participants in the revolt, particularly in the cities, were not servile at all and would not have benefited from John Ball's 'classless society,' or the charters of manumission which Wat Tyler wrested from Richard and by which the crowds were eventually placated. In fact, any attempt to implement Richard's promise at Mile End "that all our subjects should be free to buy and sell in English cities, boroughs and market towns" would have ruined the towns' corporate revenues and trading privileges, so was unlikely to have been the aim of the urban factions in the uprising.¹⁷ The judgment of fourteenth-century historians that the fundamental demand of the rebels was an eradication of serfdom does not give us a full understanding of the motives behind the movement.

A variety of factors was involved in the decision of various districts to rise. The *Statute of Laborers* passed in 1351 placed a burden on both rural and town workers whose earnings were kept at an artificially low level.¹⁸ Servile farmers were chagrined by lords rescinding the agreements by which the villeins had, during the years before the Black

Death, commuted their customary days of labor on the *demesne* to a money payment.¹⁹ Charter evidence reveals concern for such things as heriot payments, the merchet demanded when a daughter was married, taxes on the sale of cows or horses, mill rights, and restrictions on the use of parks and warrens.²⁰ On the Westminster Abbey estates tension arose because some tenants, who had contracted favorable tenurial arrangements after the disruption caused by the Black Death, lived side by side with peasants living under older, harsher terms.²¹ At St. Albans, among the most pressing desires of the peasants was the right to use hand mills.²²

In St. Albans, Dunstable, Bury St. Edmunds, Beverley, York, Scarborough and Lynn, insurrection was propagated by townsmen and was not primarily about manorial grievances.²³ Often civil disorder occurred when factions within a town rose against an obnoxious oligarchy. This was the case in Winchester where malcontents countered the mayor and aldermen.²⁴ Foreigners, especially Flemings and Tuscans, who competed commercially with local burghers were invariably targeted in the cities. Wealthy London merchants turned on each other over guild rivalry.²⁵ In Canterbury, the confusion caused by the arrival of a band of peasant insurgents provided the occasion for settling many old grudges within the town.²⁶ When the prior of Dunstable had been coerced into issuing a new charter, a schism took place among the ranks of the rebels because the burgesses insisted on a clause prohibiting the sale of meat and fish in Dunstable by anyone but themselves, while the peasants sought an open town market.²⁷ In some areas disorder erupted when towns with very liberal charters, such as Norwich and Yarmouth in Norfolk, were in close proximity to boroughs with more restrictive arrangements, such as St. Albans.²⁸

At St. Albans the great revolt essentially amounted to a continuation of an old feud between the abbot and townfolk. The abbatial overlord of St. Albans had failed to liberalize his feudal hold on the lucrative market town by granting the sort of charters that most towns by then possessed. When, during the course of the revolt, charters were wrung out of the abbot, these were the terms: (a) right of pasturage on the waste (b) leave to hunt and fish in woods and ponds (c) abolition of the seigniorial monopoly on mills, and (d) concessions for municipal freedoms and the right to elected magistrates.²⁹ These demands were made when the commons were well in control. In other words, the most extreme aims of the rebels of St. Albans were emphatically dissimilar to those voiced by Wat Tyler on the field of Smithfield and bruited about London in June of 1381. When the rebels' charter of St. Albans was revoked, the peasant

leader, William Grindcobbe, said that the abortive document had given the peasants a "short breath of freedom"³⁰—a modest concept of freedom! This again raises the question, what did 'freedom' mean to the peasants of the Peasants' Revolt?

In Norfolk and Suffolk the main fury of the insurrection began after Tyler's death, which indicates that the focus of these rebels was on domination of their own districts and not inexorably tied to the Kentishman's scheme of 'king and commons.' Among the insurgents in Norfolk and Suffolk were priests and members of the governing class who were, in some cases, chosen by the rebels as their leaders.³¹ In parts of Norfolk the commons seemed to have been motivated by an inclination towards egregious violence. By and large, they did not make demands of their overlords and, of 153 felonies committed, in only two cases was a landlord the target.³² In Cambridge the townsmen had grievances against the university and the monastery of Barnwell.³³ When the attack on Barnwell was successful, the villeins of the nearby abbey of Ramsey refused to pay their dues, but that was the extent of the subversion of the feudal order in Ramsey.³⁴ In outlying areas of the north and west the rebellion did not coalesce, although in a few districts like Leicestershire and Northamptonshire and around Chester and Worcester traditional dues were withheld.³⁵

These examples of the primacy of regional interests demonstrate that the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 should not be understood as a uniform, nationally coordinated strike at the social or political structure of fourteenth century England.³⁶ The uprising lacked a cohesive or ecumenical sense of class consciousness.

There is, however, at least one important consistency which emerges from the evidence: the rebels were convinced of the power of the written word. By the term 'written word' I am referring to registers, rolls, rosters, schedules, tax records, censuses, customals and other similar documents recording payments due and contractual obligations. The prevailing demand voiced in all the area uprisings and apparent in both the literary and archival sources was for adjustment of juridical and tenurial records. Because of the rebels' pertinacious insistence that deleterious documents be destroyed and replaced by more advantageous ones, the revolt begins to look more like an affirmation of the system than a desire to abolish it. For the most part, in spite of the abashed, horrified, and affronted tone of the chroniclers, the actions of the majority of the rebels were directed toward the accomplishment of aims which were local, specific and conservative in nature. The grievances laid out do not

expose an inexorable antagonism between the ruling classes and the insurgents, who, it appears, merely wanted the system to work more in their favor. Charters were not simply sought out and destroyed, they were sought out and replaced. Every effort was made to render the new charters legal—they were written, witnessed and sealed. The rebels sought to accommodate their needs within the intricate, time-honored fabric of English law and custom.

There is some evidence that well before the revolt of 1381 elements among the peasantry sought, with some degree of sophistication, to better their lot by working within a traditional legal framework, appealing to the 'good old law' and maneuvering through the bureaucratic process of writs and courts to make their claims good. Between 1300 and 1330 the tenants of Bocking Hall in Essex presented a petition in court against their steward in a remarkably skilled, articulate, lawyerly form. They sought to mitigate the encroachment by John le Doo upon what they considered to be their customary rights.³⁷

During the Great Rumor of 1377, combinations of peasants raised constitutional points against their lords by reverting to ancient custom, a technique often employed by barons in their struggles against the king.³⁸ This Great Rumor involved at least forty villages in Wiltshire, Hampshire and Surrey. It was passed round that *Domesday Book* could provide evidence that, by ancient custom, many of the manors worked by the villeins of these shires were part of the "ancient *demesne* of the crown."³⁹ To rent land on such a manor brought many advantages to a tenant.⁴⁰ Groups of peasants, sometimes with the help of hired lawyers, secured writs, called *certiorari*, which entitled them to acquire letters patent of exemplification of extracts from *Domesday Book*. With these letters in hand, peasants, in several cases, withheld rents and services from their lords.⁴¹ Although the claim that liberties might be verified by reference to the *Domesday Book* was fatuous, Edward III accepted the argument and, in the case of Crondall, relieved the manorial tenants of certain services on the grounds that they were tenants of the ancient *demesne* of the crown of England.⁴²

Accounts from 1381 reveal a continuing commitment on the part of the rebellious commons to legitimizing their claims by means of written documents. The third poll tax of 1381 and the subsequent measures implemented to collect that tax have been recognized by both contemporaries and historians as catalytic to the uprising.⁴³ Says an unknown author of an English poem on the rising of 1381, "Tax has tenet us alle."⁴⁴ In January and February of 1381 a survey was made to determine eligi-

bility for the tax. The results of the survey indicate that the peasants were not registering their true numbers. Compared to the poll tax records of 1377, the 1381 inquest shows a decline in adult population from 1,355,201 to 896,481.⁴⁵ This refusal to appear on the records demonstrates a sort of reverence for the written word; the commons seemed to assume that if they eluded the records they eluded the tax. When it was clear to the authorities that wide-scale tax evasion was taking place, commissioners were sent out to some districts to enforce payment of the impost. There is a positive correlation between the areas to which the commissioners were sent and the areas in which the rebellion raged most fiercely.⁴⁶

The peasant rebels who attacked manor houses were generally not intent on savaging nobles, but rather on destroying records. When men were killed, they were often connected, at least in the popular mind, to the hated poll tax. This was true of both the treasurer Robert Hales and Archbishop Simon Sudbury. The men of Kent drew up a list of traitors. On that list was John Legge, the king's sergeant who was thought to have suggested that poll tax commissioners be dispatched. Sir Robert Belknap, chief justice of the common bench, was sent from London to Brentwood in June to open a commission of trailbaston concerning those who rioted against the poll tax commissioners. Belknap was seized, his papers were destroyed; he then was allowed to escape.⁴⁷ In Norfolk, at Yarmouth, the houses of Hugh Fastolf, collector of the poll tax, and William Ellis, Yarmouth representative of the 1377 parliament which instigated the first poll tax, were sacked in a search for tax records.⁴⁸ Also at Cambridgeshire, houses of royal poll tax officials, such as Blachpayne, were searched and sacked.⁴⁹

The impetus for seizing and destroying records may have begun with a desire to eradicate poll tax lists, but the movement to expunge unfavorable written documents grew beyond this one unpopular levy. In region after region manorial registers evincing feudal dues and the names of the servile were targeted, seized and burned, and new documents were written to replace them. It is testimony to the commons' belief in the efficacy of a written record that they thought that if the words were changed, so too would be their status.

Kentishmen and women seized and burned a great number of documents from the homes of Thomas Shardelow of Dartford, coroner of Kent, and Elias Raynor of Strood.⁵⁰ Quantities of court rolls were burned in Kent and Essex, and on June 20, the sheriff of Kent was directed to take matters in hand as rebels were still "hanging together and

charter-burning."⁵¹

When the peasants arrived in London and destroyed the Savoy, stealing was forbidden as a matter of strict policy. Wat Tyler punished, by death, the purloiner of a silver goblet.⁵² The rebel leaders held firm that they were not common thieves but "lovers of truth and justice" with a more elevated mission.⁵³ In other words, the commons' wreckage was not random but specifically directed against repressive documents. The Temple, which had become a headquarters for lawyers, was attacked and part of the library ransacked for "it was their cursed parchments which were the ruin of honest men."⁵⁴ The rebels burst into the Temple, opened chests, and destroyed books. At the Inns, quantities of charters, muniments, and records were systematically eliminated.⁵⁵ A riotous band appeared at Guildhall demanding that a book called *Jubilee* be burned.⁵⁶ The author of the *Anonimale Chronicle*⁵⁷ and Thomas Walsingham⁵⁸ both noted that it was largely the property of lawyers, royal officials, and unpopular landlords that was targeted by even the most extreme rebel elements in London.

For ten miles around the capital, in Northern Surrey, Middlesex, and Hertfordshire, peasants emulated the London insurgents by burning local manor rolls. In Hertfordshire the houses of two justices were broken open and the rolls burned.⁵⁹ The disorder spread into Suffolk where the burning of manor rolls and plundering of the homes of justices, escheators, tax-collectors and other officials continued.⁶⁰ In much of Norfolk the rising had less direction than in other parts of England, although there were two cases of destruction of court rolls.⁶¹ Court records reveal that in Somerset a contest between the townspeople and the most important religious house in their borough, the Augustinian Hospital of St. John, erupted into violence and charter-burning.⁶²

The goal of the rebels in most regions was not restricted to the elimination of repressive legal documents; they sought to gain new written arrangements which would be more advantageous to them. So great was the faith in the recorded word that it was assumed a written document would provide protection regardless of how it was obtained. When King Richard acquiesced to Wat Tyler's demands for charters of freedom and amnesty, the greater part of the credulous rebel force disbanded with their documents triumphantly in hand.⁶³ Tyler and a small group of the more dedicated, or more fanatical, or more pragmatic, whatever the case may be, stayed behind. According to the Knighton chronicle, the chief of the villeins made further demands: that the game laws be abolished and that there be "no law save the law of Winchester."⁶⁴ Tyler's hope that he

would benefit from reliance on this 'law of Winchester' was as ephemeral as the villeins' claims of liberties based on the *Domesday Book*. But it is noteworthy in each case that the claims of 'old law,' as written, are manipulated as legitimizing principles.⁶⁵

Thorold Rogers argued that in many areas of England the attempts by landlords to rescind the agreements by which the villeins had, during the years before the Black Death, commuted their customary days of labor on the manorial *demesne* for a money payment created antagonism resulting in some of the regional uprisings. In many districts where the peasantry gained temporary control, lords were forced to adjust charters to the effect that work days be commuted to money payment at the rate of 4d an acre *per annum*.⁶⁶ The priors of Redbourne and Dunstable were coerced into drawing up charters emancipating servile tenants.⁶⁷ In St. Albans, Dunstable, Bury St. Edmunds and Lynn, townsmen clamored for new charters or additional clauses to existing charters.⁶⁸ As far away as York in the town of Beverley, the urban *mediocres* put on white hoods and forced the two oligarchs to sign bonds for large sums.⁶⁹ There were also urban riots and demands for improved contracts in York and Scarborough.⁷⁰

At St. Albans an old legend persisted that the monastery was concealing a charter from King Offa which the monks had stolen. In 1271, 1314, and 1326 minor skirmishes occurred, and in each instance the peasants demanded that the ancient document be brought to light and honored. During the 1381 rising a coterie from St. Albans was at Mile End and received a charter of manumission from the king's clerk. Returning with the charter, the villeins of the manor sought to erase all vestiges of seigniorial authority. They drained the fish-pond, broke hedges, and killed game. The leaders, after holding mock trials of those in the abbot's prison, acquitted them. The abbot was also tried and charters were seized and burned in the market-place. The abbot was compelled to draw up and authenticate with his seal new agreements on behalf of the townsmen. Then, under duress, he drew up a revised charter for each village.⁷¹

At Bury, in the sixty years prior to 1381, five attempts had been made to acquire a better charter. The local priest, John Wraw, was invited by the peasants and burghers to lead them. He had been involved in sacking the London residence of Richard Lyons and had returned to Bury on June 13. Wraw set up mock trials of the prior and chief justice, and demanded charters of liberties for the town. These were drawn up by the sub-prior and sealed. Bury experienced a good deal of the kind of vio-

lence which makes for sensational reading. The prior and justice were executed and their heads carried on sticks and banged together in a ghoul-ish charade of whispering and kissing. However, these horrific deeds were committed by a small group surrounding Wraw. The majority of the peasants and townsmen were primarily interested in new charters but, lacking Wraw's audacity, used him as a frontman.⁷²

Eastern Norfolk emerges from the archival evidence as a center of rebellion. It is here that we hear of the mysterious group called the *magna societas*.⁷³ A certain Geoffrey Litster was elected chief and called King of the Commons. One of the first decrees enacted by this king was that the deeds and court rolls of Carrow be seized and brought back to Norwich so that Litster could see them burn. Litster oversaw the trials of felons and traitors. He set up a modest treasury. He also effectively controlled petty theft and concentrated on charter burning. Opulent abbeys such as St. Benet-at-Holme, Binham and Bromholm were ripe for plunder, but nothing in these establishments was molested except documents. When King Litster heard that Tyler was dead, he sent an embassy to King Richard in London requesting a charter of manumission and amnesty such as Essex and Hertfordshire had received. A small group was dispatched by Litster to Yarmouth. The existing Yarmouth charter stipulated that the town had control of harbor dues and a monopoly on marketing within seven miles. This detested charter was taken and torn in half—one part to be returned to Litster in Norwich and one to be sent to John Wraw "as representative of Suffolk." The newly styled peasant-class oligarchy of Yarmouth established custom-house officers from their own ranks who would levy harbor dues.⁷⁴

In Cambridge, John Greyston of Bottisham, hearing news of Tyler's triumphal entry into the capital, rode through local villages declaring that the king had given him a warrant to raise an armed force to destroy traitors. He actually had an old chancery document which he claimed was his mandate. Also in Cambridge was recorded the typical burning of landowners' charters and documents. Animosity against the university community was vented during the uprising. Rebels entered the university church of St. Mary's and seized great chests of archives which were burned in the market. Substitute documents were quickly prepared. One of them specified that the university would surrender all privileges given under royal donations. In the future all members of the university guilds were to plead in borough courts only. A group of harassed masters sealed the compact on June 16. The men of Cambridge then turned on the prior of Barnwell with whom they had a quarrel regarding the right

of free pasturage in a particular meadow. The commons obliterated the enclosures around the controversial meadow and obligated the prior to sign an agreement by which he would forego any recrimination against the rebels.⁷⁵

By the autumn of 1381 the Peasants' Revolt (at least the London-centered uprising) was over, Wat Tyler was dead, Jack Straw executed, and the newly issued charters of manumission revoked. King Richard was reported to have proclaimed to the rebels, "villeins you are and villeins you will remain."⁷⁶ Yet in a few areas, such as Maidstone, popular resentment was still so strong in September that support for the formerly detested John of Gaunt began to be voiced because it was said that Gaunt had been liberal in granting exemptions from servile dues to his tenants in the northern counties.⁷⁷

For some years after the abortive revolts the terms of the forced charters, which had been surrendered by the now-criminous peasants, were held up as ideals. So palpable was the memory of the defunct charters that the abbot of St. Albans accused the commons of having made copies of the illegal documents. The 4d *per annum* rate arrived at by the rebellious peasants in 1381 continued to be widely deemed the fair rent for land. This figure reappears regularly in subsequent demands of the villeins where a strike or an agricultural union was afoot.⁷⁸

R.B. Dobson has rightly commented that the Peasants' Revolt is less important for what it achieved than for what it reveals about England six hundred years ago. Factors like the Black Death and the Hundred Years' War made the fourteenth century cataclysmic and the revolt was certainly, in part, a response to the upheaval of the period. But as much as there was disjuncture in this century, there was also continuity. It is the continuity which I wish to stress.

The vast majority of the demands made in 1381 were not radical; they were traditional. It is true that the methods used by the insurgents were not legal and the fact that there were numerous occurrences of vandalism, brutality, murder and theft should not be obscured; yet the methods of the barons in their continuing uprisings against their overlord, the king, were not legal either, yet the noble class rebellions are not generally considered revolutionary. Though the means were criminal, the commons opted for improved conditions within the legal, constitutional framework of the land. They sought to wrest better charters and increased liberties from a governing class whose power to grant them those charters and liberties was not widely challenged. The reverence for written documents is deep-seated and recurring in the story of the Peasants'

Revolt. There is an irony in the fact that this reverence often expressed itself in the destruction of documents. But such was the power imputed to the written word that the rebels felt that the words on a piece of parchment could either liberate or enslave them.

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NOTES

1. John Gower, *Mirour de l'omme*, ed. in vol. I of G.C. Macaulay, *The Complete Works of John Gower* (Oxford, 1899-1902), lines 26482-26506.
2. Jean Froissart, *Chronicles*, ed. and trans. Geoffrey Brereton (New York, 1968), 214-15 and 218.
3. *The English Rising of 1381*, eds. R.H. Hilton and T.H. Aston (Cambridge, 1984), 1-8; and *The Peasants' Rising and the Lollards*, eds. Edgar Powell and G.M. Trevelyan.
4. A. Réville and C. Petit-Dutaillis, *Le soulèvement des travailleurs d'Angleterre en 1381* (Paris, 1898), 85.
5. Oman, *Great Revolt*, 156; R.B. Dobson, ed., *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381* (London, 1983), 98; *Rot. Parl.*, III 21-1 in Dobson 76-78; and R.H. Hilton, *The Decline of Serfdom in Medieval England* (London, 1969), 26-31.
6. William Stubbs, *Constitutional History of England*, 1891, II, 471.
7. M. McKisack, *The Fourteenth Century* (Oxford, 1959), 422; M.M. Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society* (London, 1971), 154; and Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, *passim*.
8. Postan, *Medieval Economy and Society*, 154.
9. Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 27-8.
10. *English Rising of 1381*, 1-8; and R. Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free: Medieval Peasant Movements and the English Rising of 1381* (London, 1973), 235.
11. Hilton makes a convincing argument that the chroniclers often implicated men or organizations in the revolt even when no evidence of involvement existed, simply to discredit those they found odious. For example Walsingham ascertained that John Ball held the doctrines of Wycliffe because Walsingham, an orthodox Benedictine, opposed Wycliffe's views. Also, in his confession, Jack Straw, (as recorded by Walsingham and the monk of Evesham), asserted that the

rebels planned to rid England of all secular and regular religious orders, save the Franciscans. Hilton doubts the veracity of this confession because at the time the Franciscans were the object of great popular opprobrium: *Bond Men Made Free*, 227-28. See also *Peasants' Rising and the Lollards*, viii-x.

12. Referring to the rebels of the Peasants' Revolt is difficult because the term 'peasants' does not describe all members of the group who took up arms in 1381. The term 'commons' is closer to the truth, although from place to place, especially in the cities, there were participants of the revolt who could rightly be placed among the gentry: Charles Oman, *The Great Revolt of 1381* (Oxford, 1906), 16. The difficulty in finding a common term by which to refer to the group of rebels is exacerbated by the fact that nomenclature designating status was fluid in the fourteenth century and terms had varying connotations among writers: J.A. Tuck, "Nobles, Commons and the Great Revolt of 1381," in *The English Rising of 1381: Past and Present Society Conference* (London, 1981), 2.

13. For instance, churches were, by and large, not attacked: Oman, *Great Revolt*, 19, 39-41, and 64.

14. *Ibid.*, 74; and *Anonimale Chronicle*, 140-50 in Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 164-65.

15. Walsingham, *Historia Anglicana*, II 21 in Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, xxxii.

16. John Ball preached Franciscan evangelical poverty: Oman, *Great Revolt*, 42 and 52. Jack Straw, in his confession, laid out a plan of complete social equality: Oman, 81-82; and Walsingham, *Historia Anglicana*, II 8-13; Cf. *Chronicon Angliae*, 308-12 in Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 364-69 and 373-76.

17. *Statues of Realm*, I 311-13; 25 Edward III, Stat. 2, cc. 1-7 in Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 63-68. Although the statute was not always enforced, Bertha Putnam, in *The Enforcement of the Statue of Labourers*, 1349-1359, made a strong case that prosecutions under the terms of the statute were undertaken fairly consistently: Dobson, 69.

18. Oman, *Great Revolt*, 5-8.

19. *Ibid.*, 11-12.

20. Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, xli and B. Harvey, *Westminster Abbey and Its Estates in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1977), 244-67.

21. R.J. Faith, "'The Great Rumour' of 1377 and Peasant Ideology," *English Rising of 1381*, 27.

22. *Rot. Parl.*, III, 96-97; *York Memorandum Book*, ed. M. Sellers (Surtees Society, 1912-15), II 69-70; *Coram Rege Roll*, Easter 9 Richard II [KB. 27/500], Rex, membs. 12, 12v; and *Ancient Petitions* (SC.8) no. 11205; printed by C.T. Flower, *The Beverley Town Riots*, *Trans. Royal Hist. Soc.*, new series, XIX (1905) 94-95; all in Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 284-87 and 289-96; A.F. Butcher, "English Urban Society and the Revolt of 1381," *English Rising of 1381*, 1-31; and Oman, *Great Revolt*, 13.

23. Oman, *Great Revolt*, 14, 98 and 145 and Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 268 and 284.

24. Oman, *Great Revolt*, 18, 47 and 118.
 25. *Ibid.*, 40 and Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, xxv.
 26. Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, xxxi.
 27. Oman, *Great Revolt*, 100-1.
 28. *Ibid.*, 92-95.
 29. Walsingham, *Historia Anglicana*, I 467-73; II 27. Cf. *Chronicon Angliae*, 299-301 in Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*.
 30. Oman, *Great Revolt*, 99-106.
 31. *Ibid.*, 111-12.
 32. *Ibid.*, 125.
 33. *Ibid.*, 128.
 34. *Ibid.*, 140-42 and *Peasants' Rising and the Lollards*, 14-16, transcribed from *Chester Indictment Roll* (Chester 25), no. 8, memb. 57; and *Documents Illustrating the Activities of the General and Provincial Chapters of the English Black Monks*, ed. W.A. Pantin (*Camden Third Series*, 1931-7), III 204-5 in Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 299-300.

35. There was a degree of organization to some aspects of the uprisings in 1381, although the nature and scope of that centralization is still undetermined. We have references to a Great Society, wandering peasants who were commissioned to publicize the events in London, village 'conventicles,' and emissaries riding through the country to rouse armed forces against a commission of trailbaston. Also, in the north and west, planned uprisings fizzled out when the news of Tyler's death arrived: Oman, *Great Revolt*, 12-12, 33, and 138. As far away from the epicenter as Scarborough, the rebels were insisting on an oath to 'king and commons': *Coram Rege Roll*, Easter 9 Richard II (KB. 27/500), Rex. membs. 12, 12v in Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 291. Hilton provides a thorough discussion of the *magna societas* in *Bond Men Man Free*, 214-21.

36. 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.

Oman, *Great Revolt*, 10-11 and Fritz Kern, "The Lack of Legislative Power," in *The Middle Ages Volume II: Readings in Medieval History*, ed. Brian Tierney (New York, 1983), 247-49.

38. Faith, "The Great Rumour," 6.

39. *Ibid.*, 7. If a man held land on the "ancient *demesne*" he was not obliged to attend the hundred and county courts, to pay geld, toll or contribute to the murdrum fine. He had his own legal forms which he could use in the manorial court or before visiting royal justices: the "little writ of right close." Also, the rents and services of the 'villeins sokeman' were fixed and could not be increased.

40. *Rot. Parl.*, III 21-2 in Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 76-78.

41. Faith, "The Great Rumour," 14.

42. Oman, *Great Revolt*, 183-85; Maurice Keen, *England in the Late Middle Ages* (London, 1973), 272-73; Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, xxxv-xxxvi and *Anoni-*

malle Chronicle, 133-40; *Chronicon Henrici Knighton*, II 129-32; and *Rot. Parl.*, III 88-90, in Dobson, 115, 123-31, and 135-37.

43. T. Wright., ed., *Political Poems and Songs*, 2 vols. (*Roll Series*, 18159-61) in Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 359.

44. Oman, *Great Revolt*, 60.

45. Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 119.

46. Oman, *Great Revolt*, 33

47. *Ibid.*, 118.

48. *Ibid.*, 124 and 128.

49. *Ibid.*, 38

50. *Ibid.*, 41.

51. *Ibid.*, 57

52. *Chronicon Henrici Knighton*, II 132-8 in Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 184.

53. *Ibid.*, 58.

54. *Ibid.*, 59.

55. *Ibid.*, 71.

56. *Anonimalle Chronicle, 1333 to 1381*, ed. V. H. Galbraith (Manchester, 1927) in Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 155-68.

57. Walsingham, *Historia Anglicana*, I 456-67; Cf. *Chronicon Angliae*, 288-99 in Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 168-81.

58. Oman, *Great Revolt*, 91.

59. *Ibid.*, 108-9.

60. *Ibid.*, 114-15.

61. *Patent Roll*, 6 Richard II, part 3 (C. 66/315) memb. 12 *Rot. Parl.*, III 105-6 in Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 280-84.

62. *Ibid.*, 108-9.

63. *Ibid.*, 74. This is probably a reference to the *Statute of Winchester of Edward I*.

64. *Ibid.*, 5-6 and 10.

65. See M. T. Clancy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307* (London, 1980) and *idem*, "Remembering the Past and the Gold Old Law," *History LV* (1980): 165-76.

66. *Ibid.*, 94-95.

67. *Ibid.*, 13.

68. *Ibid.*, 145-46 and *Ancient Petitions* (SC.8) no. 11205; printed by Flower, "Beverley Town Riots," 94-5 in Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 295-96.

69. *Coram Rege Roll*, Easter 9 Richard II (KB. Z7/500), Rex membs. 12, 12v in Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 190-94.

70. Oman, *Great Revolt*, 92-93; Walsingham, *Historia Anglicana*, I 467-73; II 27. Cf. *Chronicon Angliae*, 299-301 and *Chronicon Henrici Knighton*, II 141-3 in Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 26979.

71. Oman, *Great Revolt*, 108-9 and Walsingham, *Historia Anglicana*, II 1-4; Cf. *Chronicon Angliae*, 301-4 in Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 243-48.

72. *Ancient Indictments* (KKK. 9 166/1) in E. Powell, *The Rising in East Anglia in 1381* (Cambridge, 1896) in Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 245-56.

73. Oman, *Great Revolt*, 116-17 and Walsingham, *Historia Anglicana*, II 5-8; Cf. *Chronicon Angliae*, 304-8 in Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 256-61.

74. Oman, *Great Revolt*, 124 and 125-28 and *Rot. Parl.*, III 108 in Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 239-40.

75. *Chronicon Angliae* 316 in Oman, *Great Revolt*, 84.

76. *Ibid.*, 149 and *Coram Rege Roll*, Michaelmas 5 Richard II (KB. 27/482), Rex, memb. I in Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 323-24.

77. Oman, *Great Revolt*, 155.

78. Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, xlv.