

Feudal Chestfield and The Peasants Revolt 1381

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How extraordinary if we could transport ourselves back to a local historical event. If this were possible which one would the reader choose? In the Chestfield context how about seeing the first train from London to Herne Bay passing through Chestfield in 1862 on the London, Chatham, and Dover Railway; or the opening of the then Swalecliffe Halt Railway Station on the 6th July 1930 that gave Chestfield residents a convenient boarding point to London.

For golf enthusiasts how about local entrepreneur George Reeves attending the opening of the Shrub Hill Golf Club along with top golf professional and Ryder Cup member Mr Abe Mitchell (Henry Abraham Mitchell) on 10 April 1923.

We can be certain about the timing of these relatively recent history events because reliable means of recording and retaining information exists in the form of newspaper reports, photographs, personal accounts, and other documentation.

Alternatively, where great historical events are more remote in time, such as the 'Peasants Revolt of 1381', then the historian must rely on partial information and draw on circumstantial evidence such as that found in legal documents, including wills and tax records, and for physical evidence, such as architecture and objects recovered during archaeological excavations. Historians take as much evidence as they can find and try to construct a likely scenario with it. We can never know everything precisely about the distant past and so there is always some intelligent surmising in every piece of history writing. But as historians we keep trying to narrow the gap by finding more and more evidence and improving its interpretation over time.

The Peasants Revolt has a key place in English history sitting as it does alongside such monumental events as The Battle of Hastings 1066, The Sealing of Magna Carta 1215, The Black Death 1346 (and onwards), The Wars of the Roses 1455, The Gunpowder Plot 1605 and the Act of Settlement 1705 and many others in more recent times.

Further back in time we know that great national events took place at certain points in history, but we may be less clear about the involvement of local people. In the case of the so named Peasants Revolt of 1381 we know that much of Kent, including our part of east Kent, was in uproar for many months. Therefore, a strong inference may be made that people of Chestfield and adjoining residents were at least aware of 'peasant' discontent or may even have taken part in one of England's bloodiest confrontations. Further, as part of our historical telling of feudal Kent, I will take the liberty as author of placing a Chestfield family, within the discontented group that actively sought to violently challenge the then

feudal hierarchy. For the purposes of our supposition, and to bring the events of 1381 to life, we will name the male as William and his wife, Matilda. William and Matilda have a relatively small number of children for the period, Walter and Margaret. We must remember however that many children did not survive for very long after birth.

Our story about the Peasants Revolt can be loosely traced back to the Battle of Hastings when, in October 1066, the Norman-French army of William, the Duke of Normandy, defeated an English army commanded by Anglo-Saxon King Harold Godwinson. Subsequently, King William claimed all the land in the country and to manage these gains, and as a reward to his supporters, he gave large areas of land to his Noblemen, the Clergy, Lords, and Barons. This was their reward for raising money that enabled William to mount his invasion and after victory, for retaining armed forces to fight on his behalf. In turn these landowners distributed some of their land to Knights, who would also raise armies to fight for the King when needed. In Chestfield's case we know that William passed control of a great deal of land around Canterbury to his half-brother Bishop Odo of Bayeux who was also later, Earl of Kent. Odo acquired other vast estates and exercised considerable authority across the whole country, frequently acting as Regent in William's absence. Odo, it is claimed, was of dubious character as in 1076 he was tried and convicted of defrauding the Crown and the Dioceses of Canterbury. As if this was not sufficient, he was again disgraced and imprisoned for having planned a military expedition to Italy in 1082 and his estates were consequently taken back, and his titles withdrawn. Following Odo's demise ownership of Chestfield passed to St Augustine's Abbey.

In the early thirteenth century ownership again changed when Chestfield was separated from Swalecliffe and sold to the Earl of Gloucester. This kind of division was assisted by a change whereby the land holder gave services to the Lord in monetary tythes instead of the traditional armed assistance. This happened in 1242 when William de Chestvyl bought what is called a 'knights service' to the Earl of Gloucester (Richard de Clare 1222 – 1262) by paying an annual fee rather than going into battle for him.

By 1300 Chestfield was established and relatively prosperous for the times as indicated by the number of shared tythe barns. We know that Balsar Farm gained its name from Thomas and Richard Balser who are recorded as holding it in 1332.

We know that Noblemen became wealthy from the feudal system from rent raised from peasants who they let farm on their land and also from the return of agricultural produce.

Peasants were the largest and lowest group in medieval society, making up over 90% of the population. Most peasants were 'villeins' and they were at the bottom of the system. However, some peasants were freemen having more rights than villeins with the ability to own land. Our Chestfield residents, William and Matilda, owed their existence to the Lord of the Manor but were very much subservient to him, working the land for a subsistence existence, whilst contributing unpaid work on the Lord's lands. In practice, the feudal system meant that most of England's population, apart from the King, was a tenant. Barons or Lords who were given land directly from the King were known as tenants-in-chief. Peasants had very few rights and little power or influence of their own, however as a collective group they had the potential to threaten the power of the King through insurrection which ultimately culminated in the Peasants Revolt of 1381.

In challenging the feudal system between May and August 1381 the Peasants Revolt swept through much of England, particularly in the South and London, and importantly was instigated in Kent. Its immediate cause was sparked by the imposition of three poll taxes on the working poor against a background of oppressive laws designed to keep most ordinary people tied to the land and kept poor. William and his family were even more impoverished when these harsh taxes were enforced. More broadly however the rebellion was against a background where most working people in England saw this as a period of corrupt and incompetent government and lack of any social justice and limited freedom.

Before the revolt in 1381 the Parliament, held between January and March 1377, levied a poll tax to finance the war against France at the request of John of Gaunt who, since King Edward III (1327-1377) was mortally ill, was the de facto head of government at the time. This tax covered almost 60% of the population and was levied twice more, in 1379 and 1381.



A portrait of John of Gaunt by Sir Edward Hoby in 1593, thought to be modelled on Gaunt's tomb effigy.

Each time the taxation basis changed it was slightly different. In 1377, every lay person over the age of 14 years who was not a beggar had to pay a groat (4d) to the Crown. By 1379 that had been graded by social class, with the lower age limit changed to 16, and lowered to 15 two years later. The levy of 1381 operated under a combination of both flat rate and graduated assessments. The minimum amount payable was set at 4d, however tax collectors had to account for a 12d a head mean assessment. Payments were therefore variable; the poorest would theoretically pay the lowest rate, with the deficit being met by a higher payment from those able to afford it. Hence the 1381 tax has been credited as the tipping point and final straw that ignited the revolt of that year. This was certainly the case for William in Chestfield who, although not wishing to rebel, felt that he needed to protest against the feudal system, knowing all the time that the consequences of his actions, although perhaps justified, could be severe to him and his family.

The dominant view of landowners at the time of the rebellion can be judged by quoting John Gower, a famous Kentish landowner, who had written in Latin in 1378 about the 'lesser people (i.e., working people or peasants) calling them rustica and villani from which English translations over the years has provided us with terms such as yokel, rustic, serf, villein, churl, bondsman and significantly 'peasant'.

Although the rising is commonly called the 'Peasants' revolt the word has been used as broad shorthand that in no way conveys the reality of the working class at the time. Thus 'Peasant' would unfairly suggest a vision of all workers being dirty, ill-educated and living from hand to mouth in a state of human misery and degradation. However, further investigation gives us perhaps a better understanding of working people and a deeper insight to those who lived in, or near to, Chestfield and its surrounds. In the late fourteenth century and particularly in the South East there existed a flourishing market economy. The working people were not simply self-sustaining tenant farmers as some had jobs and trades, including carters, ploughmen, shepherds and swineherds, servants, carpenters, masons, roofers, thatchers, shoemakers, goldsmiths, tanners, brewers, and plasterers. Although we know that Chestfield was only lightly populated at this time we can still imagine a thriving local community in the surrounding area containing some of the trades described, whilst the majority were enforced workers on the land. Both groups, however, were ultimately constrained within the feudal system and ultimately accountable to the noble classes.

Evidence suggests that rural people in the fourteenth century, such as William, Matilda and their children, were more likely to live in small villages of two-roomed thatched houses with perhaps a village green and a church. Around the village would be a few large fields with strips rented by families from the local Lord who would personally own and have set aside a large portion of the land for himself. As part of the feudal system the Lord would demand a certain number of free or compulsory paid labour days from his tenants each year. This system had existed from the time of the Norman Conquest where large numbers of common people of England paid their rent for small plots of land in the form of compulsory labour for a Lord. This was the situation from which William and Matilda eked out a frugal subsistence.

Available information suggests that Medieval peasants' homes were simple wooden huts. They had wooden frames filled in with wattle and daub (strips of wood woven together and covered in a 'plaster' of animal hair and clay). However, in some parts of the country huts were made of stone. Peasant huts were either whitewashed or painted in bright colours. The poorest people would have lived in one-room huts. Slightly better-off peasants lived in huts with one or two rooms. There were no panes of glass in the windows only wooden shutters, which were closed at night. The floors were of hard earth sometimes covered in straw for warmth.



An impression of William and Matilda's 'Cruck House' – having a curved timber frame to support the roof

In the middle of William and Matilda's hut was a fire used for cooking and heating. There was no chimney. Any furniture they possessed was very basic, as items such as chairs were very expensive and beyond the means of most people. Instead, they used benches or stools, along with a simple wooden table and a chest for storing clothes and other valuables. Tools and their pottery vessels were hung on hooks. They slept on straw without pillows. Food was cooked on a cauldron suspended over the fire and the family ate from wooden bowls. Candles were expensive so the family usually used rushes dipped in animal fat. At night in summer and all day in winter they shared their hut with their cow and goat, whose body heat helped to keep the hut warm.

Their diet was simple and monotonous. For them, meat was a luxury. If they were fortunate, they might occasionally have had a rabbit or pork. They also ate lots of coarse dark bread and cheese. They generally would have only had one cooked meal a day which might have been mixed grain with hot water, to which were added vegetables and, if available, meat or fish to make a kind of stew called pottage. In the Autumn the family gathered fruit and nuts for winter. In normal years they had an adequate diet but there was always the risk that if crops failed or animals died they might starve.

Lordships existed everywhere even if the exact system of tenure varied, but essentially the lord would demand a certain number of days of free, or compulsory paid labour, from his tenants every year. This work varied from ploughing, harvesting, thrashing the grain, mowing hay, and cutting and collecting wood. There was little freedom from these chores and a runaway serf would face whipping or mutilation. By the end of the fourteenth century, for the more fortunate, some serfs had been set free and their labour dues replaced by cash rents, and they might have acquired free legal status and might even be employing other people and able to protect their property in law. Some peasants might also own a few cows, goats, and sheep providing milk and cheese. Chickens and a few pigs might also have

been kept. In the Autumn they let their pigs roam in the woods to eat acorns and beechnuts. This may have been the case with William in Chestfield since we know that trees were plentiful and conversely the land was poor for growing crops. Generally, they did not have enough food to keep many animals throughout the winter and so livestock was frequently slaughtered in the Autumn and the meat was salted to preserve it for later consumption.



An impression of a Peasant at work ploughing

But for all the various types of peasant tenure the bondage of feudalism remained intact and so legal, judicial, and economic mastery was maintained with the property, rights, and entitlements of the Lord of the Manor being maintained. It is no wonder that peasant resentment simmered and all that was required was a touchpaper to light the fuse of revolt.

Additionally, the position of the peasant was made clear by Jean Froissart, a French speaking medieval author, when he wrote in 1395:

'It is the custom in England, as with other countries, for the nobility to have great power over the common people, who are serfs. This means that they are bound by law and custom to plough the field of their masters, harvest the corn, gather it into barns, and thresh and winnow the grain; they must also mow and carry home the hay, cut and collect wood, and perform all manner of tasks of this kind.'

A major contributory factor leading to the revolt and which affected the whole population since around 1350 was the Black Death, believed to have been brought from Continental Europe through ports in the South and SouthWest. For the next 50 years approximately half of the English population was wiped out. Again, we ask the extent that people of

Chestfield and the surrounding area were affected - either directly by deaths or indirectly by the sheer fear that such a plague would have caused. One effect of the plague and high death rate was that the reduction in the population meant that plague survivors could demand higher wages or press for less rigid tenures. The government's response through Edward III in 1349 was to impose a 'Statute of Labourers' that established a rigorous system of wage and price controls, setting out maximum daily pay rates for most professions at the same rates as existed pre-plague. These included rates for farmers, saddlers, tailors, fishmongers, butchers, brewers, and other labourers and artisans. Fines and punishments for breaking the law were severe.

However, this law quickly became unworkable, but did not prevent Lords from attempting to enforce it as wage demands rose and rents crashed in the absence of tenants to work the land. Prosecutions under the Labour Laws rose in the King's Courts so that by the 1370's over 70% of cases heard were to enforce the law. Similarly, in private manor courts the local Lord enthusiastically prosecuted cases to force labourers to perform as much labour service as possible. Consequently, what was being aggravated was a general feeling of discontent, social discord and simmering resistance to the existing feudal system.

Although the demands being made by were largely uncoordinated, they were largely centred on:

- the total abolition of serfdom
- a repeal of the labour laws limiting wage increases brought in after the Black Death
- free fishing and hunting rights for all
- more peasant participation in local government
- the Crown to be the only authority in the Counties, not local Lords
- the redistribution of the Church's riches, especially of the great Abbeys

The rebellion's focal point came in London in mid-June 1381 when thousands led by Wat Tyler marched from Canterbury to join a mob drawn from the Capital to challenge the Monarch, Richard II (1377-1399), and the system of government. We can only speculate if William left Chestfield to form part of the mob that marched to London. If so, how had word reached William of the forthcoming event, what discussions had taken place with

Matilda about taking part and the possible consequences, bearing in mind that peasants were tied to the land, under the strong direction of their Lord.

Although similar uprisings were also occurring in London, Essex and East Anglia let us concentrate on developments in Kent and imagine that William had joined in the revolt. There was no threat of immediate army intervention since the nearest significant military force, led by Gaunt, was based on the Scottish border to deal with any insurgency from the Scots. Initially the revolt in Kent was led by an Essex man, Abel Ker, who at the time was based in Dartford when on 5 June 1381 the mob struck at Rochester Castle. Without much of a struggle the castle's guard simply gave up and surrendered to the mob and opened the castle jail, freeing the prisoners, and taking as hostage the Castle's keeper, Sir John Newton. A splinter group of rebels then marched on Maidstone, commanding the main road, and so cutting off any royal loyalists coming from London to deal with the rebellion. Although Wat Tyler is better known as a leading rebel of the Peasants Revolt another strong character, John Ball a former priest, emerged as a significant player in the events that followed. Ball was being held as a prisoner at Maidstone since he had already incurred the wrath of the government and the church because of his preaching across the region against inequality, Church corruption and the self-serving use of royal positions and power.

It was during this period that Ball's radical thinking first emerged. He believed that it was fundamentally wrong that some people in England were extremely rich, while the majority were very poor. His sermons criticizing the feudal system and the way the Church taxed people caused his local bishop to dismiss him in 1366, and he became a travelling preacher, giving sermons to anyone who would listen. Periods of imprisonment followed as Ball repeated his tirades against authority: "WHY ARE THOSE WHOM WE CALL LORDS, MASTERS OVER US?.....AT THE BEGINNING WE WERE ALL CREATED EQUAL."



Richard II of England reigned as King from 1377 to 1399 CE. The son of the late Edward the Black Prince (1330-1376 CE)

Tyler and Ball together were a dangerous combination to which rebels clustered.

On the weekend of 8th and 9th June 1381 the rebels made their way to Canterbury. So, let us imagine that news of the rebellion had reached the people of Chestfield and surrounding area - and that local people, perhaps just one or two, had chosen to join the mob that was then marauding its way from village to village to Canterbury causing mayhem along the way. The mob's main aim appeared to be the identification of Royal officials, servants of Gaunt, other administrators, including the Sheriff of Kent, William Septvantz, and violently vent their anger upon them. It was certainly a dangerous time to be a high ranking official.



In this 1470 illustration, the radical priest John Ball galvanizes the rebels

When the thousands of rebels from all parts of East Kent reached Canterbury events took an even more serious turn. Led by Tyler the rebels took part in high mass with the monks and required them to elect one of their number as Archbishop since the current Archbishop, Sudbury, was declared an enemy of the people and should be beheaded. The rebels then summoned the Mayor, Bailiffs, and leading citizens of the town to take oaths of faith to 'King Richard and the true commons'. The rebels demanded to know the whereabouts of traitors in the town and were given three names. These unfortunates were dragged from their homes and beheaded in the street. Canterbury was consumed with further vicious acts of this kind for the next few weeks with Tyler's rural army joining with artisans of the city and servants in continuing the chaos. All around principal citizens suffered ruin, violence, or death, including William Medmenham an owner of vast properties who had his house vandalised, John Tebbe a former bailiff and MP, and John Tece a manorial official and another former bailiff were both murdered.

Archbishop Sudbury was eventually found by the London mob sheltering in the chapel of the White Tower in the Tower of London at the climax of the revolt on 14th June 1381. His captors were not in a merciful mood, and he was dragged away and his head removed, it is said, by eight clumsy blows before being impaled on London Bridge.



The execution of Simon Sudbury by rebels in 1381 from Jean Froissart Chronicles C1470

Just as in Rochester Canterbury Castle was also stormed and prisoners released to add to the swelling number of rebels. William Septvantz, mentioned earlier, was seized, and made to hand over all legal records of the Crown and County as well as all Royal writs. The papers were made into a great public bonfire. Picture then the scene, perhaps observed at close quarter by William our Chestfield resident or as part of the mob, with blood running in the streets, the air filled with fragments of burning parchment, hot melted wax falling from the sky, and ash polluting the air from bonfires and the charred splinters of burning houses. After a lifetime of servitude and powerlessness it was easy to see how the rioters, including our Chestfield residents were caught up in the headiness of destroying and plundering those people and institutions they believed were the cause of their grievances.

And then suddenly news reached Tyler and Ball that King Richard wished to meet with the rebels at Blackheath at the outskirts of London itself to listen to their concerns and perhaps to negotiate.

Meanwhile the original mob originating in Dartford had again advanced on Rochester where the surrounding area remained chaotic with fires and riots spreading across the countryside. Houses had also been destroyed in the

then small market town of Sittingbourne and in Faversham a lime works was destroyed.

As Tyler, Ball and the Canterbury rioters made their way to London they merged with the 'Dartford' mob and so a vast army of thousands of commoners made their way to London to gather on the heath ('le Blakheth') and be joined by artisans from London and a collection of other dissidents gathered along the route. The scene was thus set for one of the greatest showdowns in English history.

On 15th June Richard met the rebels at Smithfield with Wat Tyler heading a mob of 20,000. It is said that as soon as Tyler saw Richard, he rode up to him and was seen to be threatening or disrespectful to the King. At this point the mayor of London, fearing for the King's life, stabbed Tyler in the throat, a wound from which he subsequently died. Over the next few days, the King made half-hearted concessions to the rebels which he soon withdrew on the grounds that the pledges had been forced from him with the threat of violence.



A 15th century CE medieval manuscript illustration showing Richard II of England (reigned 1377-1399) meeting the rebels of the 1381 CE Peasants' Revolt in London

A contemporary chronicler records the King as saying 'You wretches are detestable on land and sea. You seek equality with the lords, but you are unworthy to live. Give this message to your fellows; rustics you are, and rustics you will always be. You will remain in bondage, not as before, but incomparably harsher. For as long as we live, we will strive to suppress you, and your misery will be an example to posterity'.

There is an excellent account of the revolt taken from contemporary records as reported in Archaeologia Cantiana Vol. 3 1860 pages 62-97. The account is based on records in the Public Record Office contained in a bundle of

twenty-four pieces, entitled " Presentationes de Malefactoribus qui surrexerunt contra Dominum 1 Regem, 4 et 5 Ric. II:

'In the first Parliament of Richard II in 1378 an Act was passed (1 Ric. II. C. 6) which showing that 'confederacies of the villeins against their lords were not uncommon, and that the object of these confederacies was the very proper one of obtaining relief from burdensome feudal customs, which made the great body of the people, in fact if not in name, mere bondmen'.

Of course, such risings against the government were strictly prohibited and so insurgents who had raised a cry that 'no tenant should do service or custom to the Lords' were heading for a confrontation, leading to dire consequences for them.

Back in Kent sufficient evidence exists to show that the County remained in uproar from one end to the other, from Romney Marsh to Thanet, and from Dartford to Whitstable, well before the actual direct origin of the rebellion. Equally, there is sufficient evidence from the same contemporary documents that the commotions did not totally subside with the death of Wat Tyler, though, no doubt, the insurgents who had reached London began to return home on the fall of their leader. It is reported that violence occurred as late as August 5, 1381, up to which date a body of insurgents, under one Henry Aleyn, had, in the vicinity of Canterbury, been particularly destructive. It was charged that, beside killing one John Tyece, they had 'extorted considerable sums of money from various persons, had seized on lands and cut down hedges had threatened the life of the Vicar of Waltham, and had burnt the Archbishop's Custumal (written customs) at Petham'.

Subsequent retribution on those taking part in the rebellion was swift and brutal, following written charges laid against those who could be identified. Charges were prepared, such as that below, for individuals based on the Hundred in which they resided, and perhaps in the case of Whitstable even included a resident of Chestfield. For example:

'Hundreds of Whitstable

The Jurors say, that John Thachham, Eichard Derby, of Wynchepe, Abel de Erhethe with other unknown malefactors, made insurrection against the peace of our Lord the King, on Monday next after the feast of Holy Trinity (10th June, 1381), in the fourth year of the reign of the King that now is, and feloniously broke open the castle of our Lord the King, in CANTERBURY, and took away divers felons and other prisoners that were therein, against their will; and took there WILLIAM SEPTVANTZ, the Sheriff of Kent, and dragged him away with them, and compelled him to deliver to them the books and writs of our Lord the King, which, being delivered to them, they immediately burnt, to the prejudice of our Lord the King, and his Crown.

Name of the Chief [capital],
WILLIAM PRESTON, sworn.

Names of the Constable
THOMAS SPRYNGET,
JOHN ATTE CHERCHE’.

But here this part of our story ends and continues in written form elsewhere, for example, 'Summer of Blood' by Dan Jones - William Collins Press 2009, gives an excellent account of the Peasants Revolt.

The unsuccessful rebellion has also in retrospect been called 'the Peasants Revolt' suggesting that the rebels came from the lowest class. However, court records of the time show that participants came from a wide and general cross-section including, bailiffs, constables, and jurors, indicating a general dissatisfaction with the mechanisms set up to collect the poll tax and the corruption of justice processes by the local Lords.

A wider perspective suggests that the falling population and labour scarcity following the Black Death led to the conversions of ancient land tenures to contractual leaseholds, which further whetted the appetite for further reforms. Also, falling rent levels encouraged freefolk to enter the land market, so breaking the old link between personal and tenurial status and so fatally challenging serfdom.

Also, despite the collapse in population, prices of foodstuffs soared and then remained high during the third quarter of the fourteenth century, causing the real wages of the mass of the populace to fall below their pre-plague level. A succession of earlier plague crises in the 1360s had created unprecedented disruption, volatility, and uncertainty. Also, the weather was extreme, livestock epidemics struck repeatedly, and the plague returned in 1369.

And so mounting class conflict was a prominent and continuing feature of English society after the 1350's provoking in 1381, some would claim, a legitimate revolt against serfdom. Finally, the revolt can be viewed as an extreme measure against the introduction of new and unfair taxation, and the creation of gentry justices of the peace in enforcing the new labour and price-setting legislation. The inherent deep social divisions were exacerbated, and anger was widespread at the arbitrariness of justice among disparate groups which eventually exploded in the 1381 revolt.

Finally, we return to our mythical Chestfield peasants, William and Matilda, who may have participated in the rebellion. Did they take part in the violent incidents in Canterbury or Rochester, and were they killed or injured? Did they later journey to Blackheath to address the King? In retrospect were they justified in taking part and in expressing their discontent in such a violent manner?

Times were different and we may not agree with the barbaric methods exercised to show discontent, but it is hard not to argue that a case existed for the reform of the feudal structures.

In the aftermath of the revolt, feudalism did not end, but it did at least pave the way for its decline. In the decades that followed, there were fewer people bonded to their Lords in serfdom and landowners were constantly fearful of their workers rising against them. This in turn led to somewhat fairer treatment of the working classes and their wages were less regulated having previously been capped in the aftermath of the Black Death.