THE BATTLE OF BILLERICAY

The **Battle of Billericay** took place on 28 June 1381 when the boy King Richard II's soldiers defeated the Essex rebels adjacent to a wood north-east of Billericay, part of the Peasants' Revolt. This is likely to have been Norsey Wood which maps of 1593 show to cover the same extent as in the early 20th century.

Richard II (6 January 1367 – c. 14 February 1400), also known as Richard of Bordeaux, was King of England from 1377 until he was deposed on 30 September 1399. Richard, a son of Edward the Black Prince, was born in Bordeaux during the reign of his grandfather, Edward III. His father was Prince of Aquitaine. Richard was the younger brother of Edward of Angoulême, upon whose death Richard, at three years of age, became second in line to the throne after his father. Upon the death of Richard's father prior to the death of Edward III, Richard, by primogeniture, became the heir apparent to the throne. With Edward III's death the following year, Richard succeeded to the throne at the age of ten.

During Richard's first years as king, government was in the hands of a series of councils. Most of the aristocracy preferred this to a regency led by the king's uncle, John of Gaunt, yet Gaunt remained highly influential. At the onset of Richard's accession, and then for much of his reign, England faced various problems, which included the ongoing war against France (which was not going well for the English), border conflicts with Scotland, and economic difficulties related to the Black Death. A major challenge of the reign was the Peasants' Revolt in 1381, and the young king played a central part in the successful suppression of this crisis.

Peasants' Revolt

In May 1381, Thomas Bampton, the Tax Commissioner for the Essex area, reported to the king that the people of Fobbing were refusing to pay their poll tax. It was decided to send a Chief Justice and a few soldiers to the village. It was thought that if a few of the ringleaders were executed the rest of the village would be frightened into paying the tax. However, when Chief Justice Sir Robert Belknap arrived, he was attacked by the villagers. Belknap was forced to sign a document promising not to take any further part in the collection of the poll tax. According to the *Anonimalle Chronicle of St Mary's*: "The Commons rose against him and came before him to tell him... he was maliciously proposing to undo them... Accordingly they made him swear on the Bible that never again would he hold such sessions nor act as Justice in such inquests... And Sir Robert travelled home as quickly as possible."

After releasing the Chief Justice, some of the villagers looted and set fire to the home of John Sewale, the Sheriff of Essex. Tax collectors were executed and their heads were put on poles and paraded around the neighbouring villages. The people responsible sent out messages to the villages of Essex and Kent asking for their support in the fight against the poll tax. Many peasants decided that it was time to support the ideas proposed by John Ball and his followers. It was not long before Wat Tyler, a former soldier in the Hundred Years War, emerged as the leader of the peasants. Tyler's first decision was to march to Maidstone to free John Ball from prison. "John Ball had been set free and was safe among the commons of Kent, and he was bursting to pour out the passionate words which had been bottled up for three months, words which were exactly what his audience wanted to hear."

It has been subsequently written that it was very important for the peasants to be led by a religious figure: "For some twenty years he had wandered the country as a kind of Christian agitator, denouncing the rich and their exploitation of the poor, calling for social justice and freeman and a society based on fraternity and the equality of all people." John Ball was needed as their leader because alone of the rebels, he had access to the word of God. "John Ball quickly assumed his place as the theoretician of the rising and its spiritual father. Whatever the masses thought of the temporal Church, they all considered themselves to be good Catholics."

On 5th June there was a Peasants' Revolt at Dartford and two days later Rochester Castle was taken. The peasants arrived in Canterbury on 10th June. Here they took over the archbishop's palace, destroyed legal documents and released prisoners from the town's prison. More and more peasants decided to take action.

Manor houses were broken into and documents were destroyed. These records included the villeins' names, the rent they paid and the services they carried out. What had originally started as a protest against the poll tax now became an attempt to destroy the feudal system.

The peasants decided to go to London to see Richard II. As the king was only fourteen-years-old, they blamed his advisers for the poll tax. The peasants hoped that once the king knew about their problems, he would do something to solve them. The rebels reached the outskirts of the city on 12 June. It has been estimated that approximately 30,000 peasants had marched to London. At Blackheath, John Ball gave one of his famous sermons on the need for "freedom and equality".

On 12 June, bands of peasants gathered at Blackheath near London under the leaders Wat Tyler, John Ball, and Jack Straw. John of Gaunt's Savoy Palace was burnt down. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Simon Sudbury, who was also Lord Chancellor, and the king's Lord High Treasurer, Robert Hales, were both killed by the rebels, who were demanding the complete abolition of serfdom. The king, sheltered within the Tower of London with his councillors, agreed that the Crown did not have the forces to disperse the rebels and that the only feasible option was to negotiate.

Wat Tyler also spoke to the rebels. He told them: "Remember, we come not as thieves and robbers. We come seeking social justice." Henry Knighton records: "The rebels returned to the New Temple which belonged to the prior of Clerkenwell... and tore up with their axes all the church books, charters and records discovered in the chests and burnt them... One of the criminals chose a fine piece of silver and hid it in his lap; when his fellows saw him carrying it, they threw him, together with his prize, into the fire, saying they were lovers of truth and justice, not robbers and thieves."

Richard II gave orders for the peasants to be locked out of London. However, some Londoners who sympathised with the peasants arranged for the city gates to be left open. Jean Froissart claims that some 40,000 to 50,000 citizens, about half of the city's inhabitants, were ready to welcome the "True Commons". When the rebels entered the city, the king and his advisers withdrew to the Tower of London. Many poor people living in London decided to join the rebellion. Together they began to destroy the property of the king's senior officials. They also freed the inmates of Marshalsea Prison.

Part of the English Army was at sea bound for Portugal whereas the rest were with John of Gaunt in Scotland. Thomas Walsingham tells us that the king was being protected in the Tower by "six hundred warlike men instructed in arms, brave men, and most experienced, and six hundred archers". Walsingham adds that they "all had so lost heart that you would have thought them more like dead men than living; the memory of their former vigour and glory was extinguished". Walsingham points out that they did not want to fight and suggests they may have been on the side of the peasants.

John Ball sent a message to Richard II stating that the rising was not against his authority as the people only wished only to deliver him and his kingdom from traitors. Ball also asked the king to meet with him at Blackheath. Archbishop Simon Sudbury and Robert Hales, the treasurer, both objects of the people's hatred, warned against meeting the "shoeless ruffians", whereas others, such as William de Montagu, the Earl of Salisbury, urged that the king played for time by pretending that he desired a negotiated agreement.

Wat Tyler

It was the third time in four years that such a tax had been applied. This crippling tax meant that everyone over the age of 15 had to pay one shilling. Perhaps not a great deal of money to a Lord or a Bishop, but a significant amount to the average farm labourer! And if they could not pay in cash, they could pay in kind, such as seeds, tools etc. All of which could be vital to the survival of a farmer and his family for the coming year.

Things appear to have come to a head when in May 1381 a tax collector arrived in the Essex village of Fobbing to find out why the people there had not paid their poll tax. The villagers appear to have taken exception to his enquiries and promptly threw him out. The following month, the 15-year-old King Richard II sent in his soldiers to re-establish law and order. But the villagers of Fobbing meted out the same unceremonious treatment to them.

Joined by other villagers from all corners of the southeast of England, the peasants decided to march on London in order to plead their case for a better deal before their young king. Not that the peasants blamed Richard for their problems, their anger was aimed instead at his advisors – Simon Sudbury, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster, whom they believed to be corrupt.

In what appears to have been a well organised and coordinated popular uprising, the peasants set off for London on the 2nd June in a sort of pincer movement. The villagers from the north of the Thames, primarily from Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk, converged on London via Chelmsford. Those from the south of the Thames, comprising mainly of Kentish folk, first attacked Rochester Castle and then Sudbury's Canterbury, before setting off for Blackheath on the outskirts of London. More than 60,000 people are reported to have been involved in the revolt, and not all of them were peasants: soldiers and tradesmen as well as some disillusioned churchmen, including one Peasant leader known as 'the mad priest of Kent', John Ball.

Richard II agreed to meet the rebels outside the town walls at Mile End on 14th June, 1381. Most of his soldiers remained behind. Charles Oman, the author of *The Great Revolt of 1381* (1906), pointed the "ride to Mile End was perilous: at any moment the crowd might have broken loose, and the King and all his party might have perished... nevertheless, though surrounded all the way by a noisy and boisterous multitude, Richard and his party ultimately reached Mile End".

Whilst this meeting was taking place however, some of the rebels marched on the Tower of London and murdered Simon Sudbury, the Archbishop of Canterbury and Robert Hales, the Treasurer – their heads were cut off on Tower Hill. With his armies spread throughout France, Scotland and Wales, King Richard II spent the night in hiding, fearing for his life.

The killing of Archbishop Simon Sudbury and Robert Hales from Jean Froissart, *Chronicles* (c. 1395)

The next day Richard met Wat Tyler and his hardcore of Kentish rebels again, this time at Smithfield, just outside of the city's walls. It is thought that this was the idea of the Lord Mayor of London, Sir William Walworth, who wanted the rebels out of his city, perhaps fearing the damage that they could cause within its cramped medieval streets lined with tinder dry wooden houses.

When the king met the rebels at 8.00 a.m. he asked them what they wanted. Wat Tyler explained the demands of the rebels. This includes the end of all feudal services, the freedom to buy and sell all goods, and a free pardon for all offences committed during the rebellion. Tyler also asked for a rent limit of 4d per acre and an end to feudal fines through the manor courts. Finally, he asked that no "man should be compelled to work except by employment under a regularly reviewed contract".

The King immediately granted these demands. Wat Tyler also claimed that the king's officers in charge of the poll tax were guilty of corruption and should be executed. The king replied that all people found guilty of corruption would be punished by law. The king agreed to these proposals and 30 clerks were instructed to write out charters giving peasants their freedom. After receiving their charters the vast majority of peasants went home.

G. R. Kesteven, the author of *The Peasants' Revolt* (1965), has pointed out that the king and his officials had no intention of carrying out the promises made at this meeting, they "were merely using those promises to disperse the rebels". However, Wat Tyler and John Ball were not convinced by the word given by the king and along with 30,000 of the rebels stayed in London.

It was agreed that another meeting should take place between Richard II and the leaders of the rebels at Smithfield on 15th June, 1381. William Walworth rode "over to the rebels and summoned Wat Tyler to meet the king, and mounted on a little pony, accompanied by only one attendant bearing the rebel banner, he obeyed". When he joined the king he put forward another list of demands that included: the removal of

the lordship system, the distribution of the wealth of the church to the poor, a reduction in the number of bishops, and a guarantee that in future there would be no more villeins.

Richard II said he would do what he could. Wat Tyler was not satisfied by this reply. He called for a drink of water to rinse out his mouth. This was seen as extremely rude behaviour, especially as Tyler had not removed his hood when talking to the king.

One of Richard's party shouted out that Tyler was "the greatest thief and robber in Kent". The author of the *Anonimalle Chronicle of St Mary's* claims: "For these words Wat wanted to strike the valet with his dagger, and would have killed him in the king's presence; but because he tried to do so, the Mayor of London, William of Walworth... arrested him... Wat stabbed the mayor with his dagger in the body in great anger. But, as it pleased God, the mayor was wearing armour and took no harm.. he struck back at the said Wat, giving him a deep cut in the neck, and then a great blow on the head. And during the scuffle a valet of the king's household drew his sword, and ran Wat two or three times through the body... Wat was carried by a group of the commons to the hospital for the poor near St Bartholomew's, and put to bed. The mayor went there and found him, and had him carried out to the middle of Smithfield, in the presence of his companions, and had him beheaded."

By end of the summer of 1381, just a few weeks after it had started, the peasants' revolt was over. Richard did not, or could not due to his limited power in Parliament, keep any of his promises. He also claimed that as these promises were made under threat, they were therefore not valid in law. The remaining rebels were dealt with by force.

The death of Wat Tyler from Jean Froissart, *Chronicles* (c. 1395)

The poll tax was withdrawn and the peasants were forced back into their old way of life – under the control of the lord of the manor, bishop or archbishop. The ruling classes however did not have it all their own way. The Black Death had caused such a shortage of labour that over the next 100 years many peasants found that when they asked for more money the lords had to give in. Forced eventually to perhaps recognise the peasants' power of 'supply and demand'!

The peasants raised their weapons and for a moment it looked as though there was going to be fighting between the king's soldiers and the peasants. However, Richard rode over to them and said: "Will you shoot your king? I will be your chief and captain, you shall have from me that which you seek " He then spoke to them for some time and eventually they agreed to go back to their villages and the Peasants' Revolt was over.

An army, led by Thomas of Woodstock, John of Gaunt's younger brother, was sent into Essex to crush the rebels. A battle between the peasants and the King's army took place near the village of Billericay on 28th June. The king's army was experienced and well-armed and the peasants were easily defeated. It is believed that over 500 peasants were killed during the battle. The remaining rebels fled to Colchester, where they tried in vain to persuade the towns-people to support them. They then fled to Huntingdon but the towns people there chased them off to Ramsey Abbey where twenty-five were slain.

King Richard with a large army began visiting the villages that had taken part in the rebellion. At each village, the people were told that no harm would come to them if they named the people in the village who had encouraged them to join the rebellion. Those people named as ringleaders were then executed. Apparently the king stated: "Serfs you are and serfs you will remain." A. L. Morton, the author of *A People's History of England* (1938) has pointed out: "The promises made by the king were repudiated and the common people of England learnt, not for the last time, how unwise it was to trust to the good faith of their rulers."

John Ball

John Ball was born in St Albans in about 1340. Twenty years later he was working as a priest in York. He eventually became the priest of St James' Church in Colchester. Ball believed it was wrong that some people in England were very rich while others were very poor. Ball's church sermons criticising the feudal system upset his bishop and in 1366 he was removed from his post as the priest of the church.

Ball now had no fixed job or home and he became a travelling priest and gave sermons, whenever he found "a few people ready to listen, by the roadside, on a village green or in a market place, he would pour forth fiery words against the evils of the day and particularly the sins of the rich." Ball was "a preacher, a poet, a maverick thinker and a natural rabble-rouser" and the authorities saw him as "being an incessant, heretical nuisance, preaching in churchyards and in public places across the region, railing against inequality, the corruption of the established Church and the tyrannies of the powerful against the powerless."

John Ball was highly critical of the way the church taxed people and urged them not to pay their tithes. He also believed that the Bible should be published in English. It is claimed that Ball was influenced by the 14th century preacher, John Wycliffe. For example, Thomas Walsingham a Benedictine monk at St Albans Abbey, stated that Ball "taught the people that tithes ought not be paid" and that he was preaching the "wicked doctrines of the disloyal John Wycliffe." Some historians have disputed this claim because no evidence that Ball and his followers "showed any signs of Wycliffite tendencies". However, Bishop William Courtenay is understood to have said that Ball told him that he was a disciple of Wycliffe.

Wandering Preacher

While preaching in Norfolk, Henry le Despenser, the Bishop of Norwich, ordered the imprisonment of John Ball. After he was released he began touring Essex and Kent. During this time he became known as the "mad priest of Kent". He was released but it was not long before he was once again back in prison. Jean Froissart pointed out: "John Ball had several times been confined in the Archbishop of Canterbury's prison for his absurd speeches... It would have been better had he locked him up for the rest of his life, or even had him executed."

Ball preached that "things would not go well with England until everything was held in common". At these meetings he argued: "Are we not all descended from the same parents, Adam and Eve? So what can they show us, what reasons give, why they should be more the masters than ourselves?" It is in Ball's words that we find the early concept of the equality of all men and women, "as opposed to the rigid class divisions, privileges and injustice of feudalism; equality as justified by scripture and expressed as fraternity, that was to continue as a basic ideal of the English radical tradition."

John Ball also complained about laws that were passed telling people what to wear and what to eat. He especially objected to a law that forbad peasants from sending their children to school or to go into the Church to become priests. He also objected to "the law, which also stopped the children of serfs going into the towns to become apprentices... this was done in order to maintain the supply of agricultural labour."

Bernard Fleetwood-Walker, *John Ball* (1938)

Ball argued that the feudal system was immoral: "Why are those whom we call lords, masters over us? How have they deserved it? By what right do they keep us enslaved? We are all descended from our first parents, Adam and Eve; how then can they say that they are better than us... At the beginning we were all created

equal. If God willed that there should be serfs, he would have said so at the beginning of the world. We are formed in Christ's likeness, and they treat us like animals... They are dressed in velvet and furs, while we wear only cloth. They have wine, and spices and good bread, while we have rye bread and water. They have fine houses and manors, and we have to brave the wind and rain as we toil in the fields. It is by the sweat of our brows that they maintain their high state. We are called serfs, and we are beaten if we do not perform our task."

The king's officials were instructed to look out for John Ball. He was eventually caught in Coventry. He was taken to St Albans to stand trial. "He denied nothing, he freely admitted all the charges without regrets or apologies. He was proud to stand before them and testify to his revolutionary faith." He was sentenced to death, but William Courtenay, the Bishop of London, granted a two-day stay of execution in the hope that he could persuade Ball to repent of his treason and so save his soul. John Ball refused and he was hanged, drawn and quartered on 15th July, 1381.

Jack Straw

Jack Straw (probably the same person as *John Rakestraw* or *Rackstraw*) was one of the three leaders (together with John Ball and Wat Tyler) of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, a major event in the history of England. It has been suggested that Jack Straw may have been a preacher. Some have argued that the name was in fact a pseudonym for Wat Tyler or one of the other peasants' leaders; all of them appear to have used pseudonyms, adding to the confusion.

Several chroniclers, including Henry Knighton, mention Straw, though Knighton erroneously confuses him with Tyler. Thomas Walsingham stated that Straw was a priest and was the second-in-command of the rebels from Bury St Edmunds and Mildenhall. This story is most likely a result of confusion with a John Wrawe, an unbeneficed priest who was formerly the vicar of Ringsfield near Beccles in Suffolk, and who seems to have led the Suffolk insurgency. Walsingham also states that Straw and his followers murdered both notable local figures in Bury and, after reaching the capital, several of its Flemish residents, an accusation also made by Froissart. However, according to information in the church of St Mary in Great Baddow, in Essex, England, Jack Straw led an ill-fated crowd from the churchyard there to the risings, and he is elsewhere referred to as the leader of the men from Essex (as opposed to Tyler, who led the rebels from Kent).

Straw is generally supposed to have been executed in 1381 along with the other main figures of the Revolt. Froissart states that after Tyler's death at Smithfield, Straw (along with John Ball) was found "in an old house hidden, thinking to have stolen away", and beheaded. Walsingham gives a lengthy (and most likely invented) 'confession' in which Straw states that the insurgents' plans were to kill the king, "all landowners, bishops, monks, canons, and rectors of churches", set up their own laws, and set fire to London.

The later chronicles of Raphael Holinshed and John Stow, in addition to detailing the 'confession', repeat a story, originating in the 15th-century account of Richard Fox, that Jack Straw, alias John Tyler, was provoked into his actions by an assault perpetrated on his daughter by a tax collector.

Statute of Labourers Act.

John Ball also complained about government legislation that attempted to control wage levels. Historians estimate that between 30% and 50% of the English population died from the Black Death. The chronicler, Henry Knighton, wrote: "Many villages and hamlets were depopulated, and there were no houses left in them, all who lived in them being dead... there was such a shortage of servants for all sorts of labour as it was believed had never been before". This dramatic loss in population led to great changes taking place. Fields were left unsown and unreaped.

Those who had not died of the plague were in danger of dying from starvation. Food shortages also resulted in much higher prices. Knighton tells us that "necessaries became so dear that what had been previously worth 1d was now worth 4d or 5d". Peasants who had purchased their freedom before the Black Death, began to demand higher wages. Some landowners, desperately short of labour, often agreed to these wage demands. The landowners were worried that if they refused, their workers would run away and find an employer who was willing to pay these higher wages. Eventually landowners began to complain to Edward III about having to pay this extra money. The landowners were also worried about the peasants roaming the country searching for better job opportunities. In 1351, Parliament decided to pass the Statute of Labourers Act. This law made it illegal for employers to pay wages above the level offered in 1346.

The new law set out the maximum daily rates of pay for almost every profession imaginable. Farmers, saddlers, tailors, fishmongers, butchers, brewers, bakers and every other labourer and artisan in England were prevented from charging more than pre-plague prices for their goods or work. The also had to work wherever and whenever they were instructed. "Punishments were tough - three days' imprisonment in the stocks for first offenders, fines (300 per cent of the offending mark-up for shopkeepers who hiked their prices) and imprisonment for the obstinate."

Employers, who were desperately short of workers tended to ignore the law. This was especially true of those employers living in towns. Some freemen who had skills in great demand, such as carpenters and masons, began to leave their villages. Serfs became angry when they heard of the wages that people were earning in towns. Some serfs even ran away to towns in an effort to obtain higher wages. Large numbers of serfs went to London. Most of these serfs could only find unskilled manual work. By 1360 over 40,000 people were living in the city. Further outbreaks of the Black Death in 1361 and 1369 increased the labour shortage.

If the serfs were caught they were taken back to their village and punished. It was difficult for the lords of the manor to punish them too harshly. Execution, imprisonment and mutilation only made the labour shortage worse, therefore the courts were more likely to punish the serfs by a fine. Sometimes runaway serfs were branded on the forehead. The rest of the serfs' tithing group were also fined for not stopping him or her from running away.

The Poll Tax

King Edward III was also having problems fighting what became known as the Hundred Years War. He achieved early victories at Crécy and Poitiers, but by 1370 the French won a succession of battles and were able to raid and loot towns on the south coast. Fighting the war was very expensive and in February 1377 the government introduced a poll-tax where four pence was to be taken from every man and woman over the age of fourteen. "This was a huge shock: taxation had never before been universal, and four pence was the equivalent of three days' labour to simple farmhands at the rates set in the Statute of Labourers".

King Edward died soon afterwards. His ten-year-old grandson, Richard II, was crowned in July 1377. John of Gaunt, Richard's uncle, took over much of the responsibility of government. He was closely associated with the new Poll Tax and this made him very unpopular with the people. They were very angry as they considered the tax unfair as the poor had to pay the same tax as the wealthy. Despite this, the collectors of the tax seem not to have had to face more than an occasional, local disturbance.

In 1379 Richard II called a parliament to raise money to pay for the continuing war against the French. After much debate it was decided to impose another poll tax. This time it was to be a graduated tax, which meant that the richer you were, the more tax you paid. For example, the Duke of Lancaster and the Archbishop of Canterbury had to pay £6.13s.4d., the Bishop of London, 80 shillings, wealthy merchants, 20 shillings, but peasants were only charged 4d.

The proceeds of this tax were quickly spent on the war or absorbed by corruption. In 1380, Simon Sudbury, the Archbishop of Canterbury, had suggested a new poll tax of three groats (one shilling) per head over the age of fifteen. "There was a maximum payment of twenty shillings from men whose families and households numbered more than twenty, thus ensuring that the rich payed less than the poor. A shilling was a considerable sum for a working man, almost a week's wages. A family might include old persons past work and other dependents, and the head of the family became liable for one shilling on each of their 'polls'. This was basically a tax on the labouring classes."

The rebels wanted revenge on all those involved in the levying of taxes or the administrating the legal system. Roger Leggett, one of the most important government lawyers was also killed. "They attacked not only the lawyers themselves - attorneys, pleaders, clerks of the courts - but others closely associated with

the judicial processes... The hostility to lawyers and to legal records was not of course peculiar to the Londoners. The widespread destruction of manorial court records is well-known" during the rebellion.

The rebels also attacked foreign workers living in London. "The commons made proclamation that everyone who could lay hands on Flemings or any other strangers of other nations might cut off their heads". It has been claimed that "some 150 or 160 unhappy foreigners were murdered in various places - thirty-five Flemings in one batch were dragged out of the church of St. Martin in the Vintry, and beheaded on the same block... The Lombard's also suffered, and their houses yielded much valuable plunder."

Thomas of Woodstock, 1st Duke of Gloucester, 1st Earl of Buckingham, 1st Earl of Essex, KG (7 January 1355 – 8 or 9 September 1397)

He was the fourteenth and youngest child of King Edward III of England and Philippa of Hainault. He was the youngest of the five sons of Edward III who survived to adulthood. Thomas was born at Woodstock Palace in Oxfordshire after two short-lived brothers, one of whom had also been baptised Thomas. He married Eleanor de Bohun by 1376, was given Pleshey Castle in Essex, and was appointed Constable of the Realm. The younger sister of Woodstock's wife, Mary de Bohun, was subsequently married to Henry of Bolingbroke, Earl of Derby, who later became King Henry IV of England.

In 1377, at the age of 22, Woodstock was knighted and created Earl of Buckingham. In 1385 he received the title Duke of Aumale and at about the same time was created Duke of Gloucester. Thomas of Woodstock was in command of a large campaign in northern France that followed the Breton War of Succession of 1343–64.

The earlier conflict was marked by the efforts of John IV, Duke of Brittany to secure control of the Duchy of Brittany against his rival Charles of Blois. John was supported in this struggle by the armies of the kingdom of England, whereas Charles was supported by the kingdom of France.

At the head of an English army, John prevailed after Charles was killed in battle in 1364, but the French continued to undermine his position, and he was later forced into exile in England. He returned to Brittany in 1379, supported by Breton barons who feared the annexation of Brittany by France.

An English army was sent under Woodstock to support his position. Due to concerns about the safety of a longer shipping route to Brittany itself, the army was ferried instead to the English continental stronghold of Calais in July 1380.

As Woodstock marched his 5,200 men east of Paris, they were confronted by the army of Philip the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, at Troyes, but the French had learned from the Battle of Crécy in 1346 and the Battle of Poitiers in 1356 not to offer a pitched battle to the English. Eventually, the two armies simply marched away.

French defensive operations were then thrown into disarray by the death of King Charles V of France on 16 September 1380. Woodstock's chevauchée continued westwards largely unopposed, and in November 1380 he laid siege to Nantes and its vital bridge over the Loire towards Aquitaine. However, he found himself unable to form an effective stranglehold, and urgent plans were put in place for Sir Thomas Felton to bring 2,000 reinforcements from England. By January, though, it had become apparent that the duke of Brittany was reconciled to the new French king Charles VI and, with the alliance collapsing and dysentery ravaging his men, Woodstock abandoned the siege.

Murder of Thomas of Woodstock

Thomas of Woodstock was the leader of the Lords Appellant, a group of powerful nobles whose ambition to wrest power from Thomas's nephew, King Richard II of England, culminated in a successful rebellion in 1388 that significantly weakened the king's power. Richard II managed to dispose of the Lords Appellant in 1397, and Thomas was imprisoned in Calais to await trial for treason.

Dispute with King Richard II

During that time he was murdered, probably by a group of men led by Thomas de Mowbray, 1st Duke of Norfolk, and the knight Sir Nicholas Colfox, presumably on behalf of Richard II. This caused an outcry among the nobility of England that is considered by many to have added to Richard's unpopularity.

Thomas Percy, 1st Earl of Worcester

Thomas Percy, 1st Earl of Worcester, KG (1343 – 23 July 1403) was an English medieval nobleman best known for leading the rebellion with his nephew Henry Percy, known as 'Harry Hotspur', and his elder brother. He was the younger son of Henry de Percy, 3rd Baron Percy and Mary, daughter of Henry, 3rd Earl of Lancaster, who descended from Henry III of England

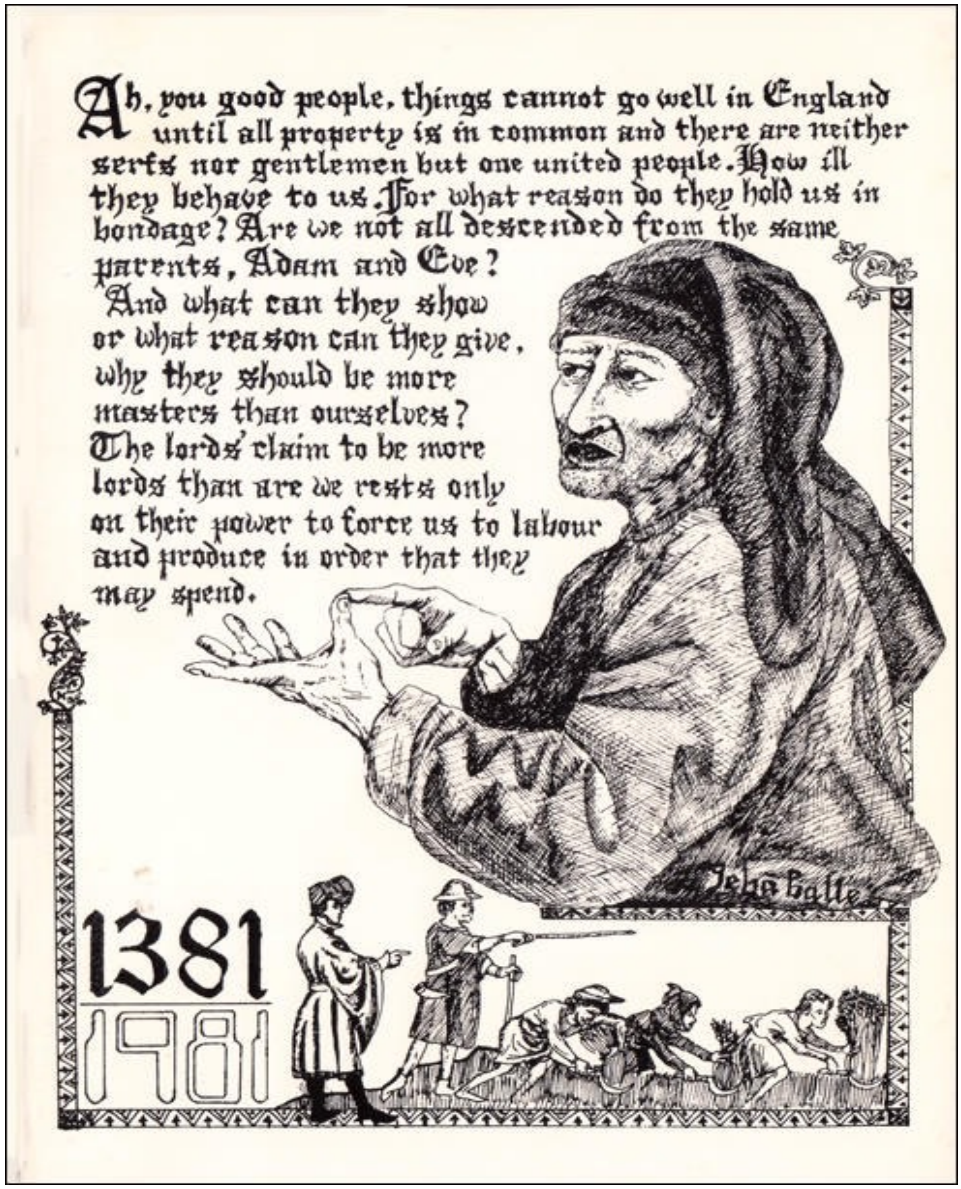
Worcester built Wressle Castle, Yorkshire in the 1390s.

Worcester fought against England's traditional enemy France in the Hundred Years' War, and then served in various important governing posts in English-controlled France, as Ambassador, Seneschal. He was appointed Admiral of the North from 26 Jan 1384–22 February 1385. He was created Earl of Worcester in 1397 by King Richard II.

Along with his brother and nephew, he took part in Henry IV's deposition of Richard II, and later, in turn, in their own subsequent rebellion against King Henry IV. He was captured at the Battle of Shrewsbury and publicly beheaded in Shrewsbury two days later, on 23 July 1403. He was buried in St. Peters, Shrewsbury, Shropshire. His head was displayed in London on London Bridge.

The King's forces were led by Thomas of Woodstock, the Earl of Buckingham and Sir Thomas Percy. It is thought that 500 Essex men were killed and buried at Great Burstead churchyard and 800 horses were captured.

The details comprising this overview have been summarised from a piece written for the Norsey Wood Society newsletter by Billericay historian Julian Whybra. His ultimate sources were the Westminster Chronicle attributed to Robert of Reading and the Historia Anglican by Thomas Walsingham.



Modern portrait of John Ball by David Simkin (1981)

Basildon Borough Heritage Society
December 2021 – Updated December 2024.