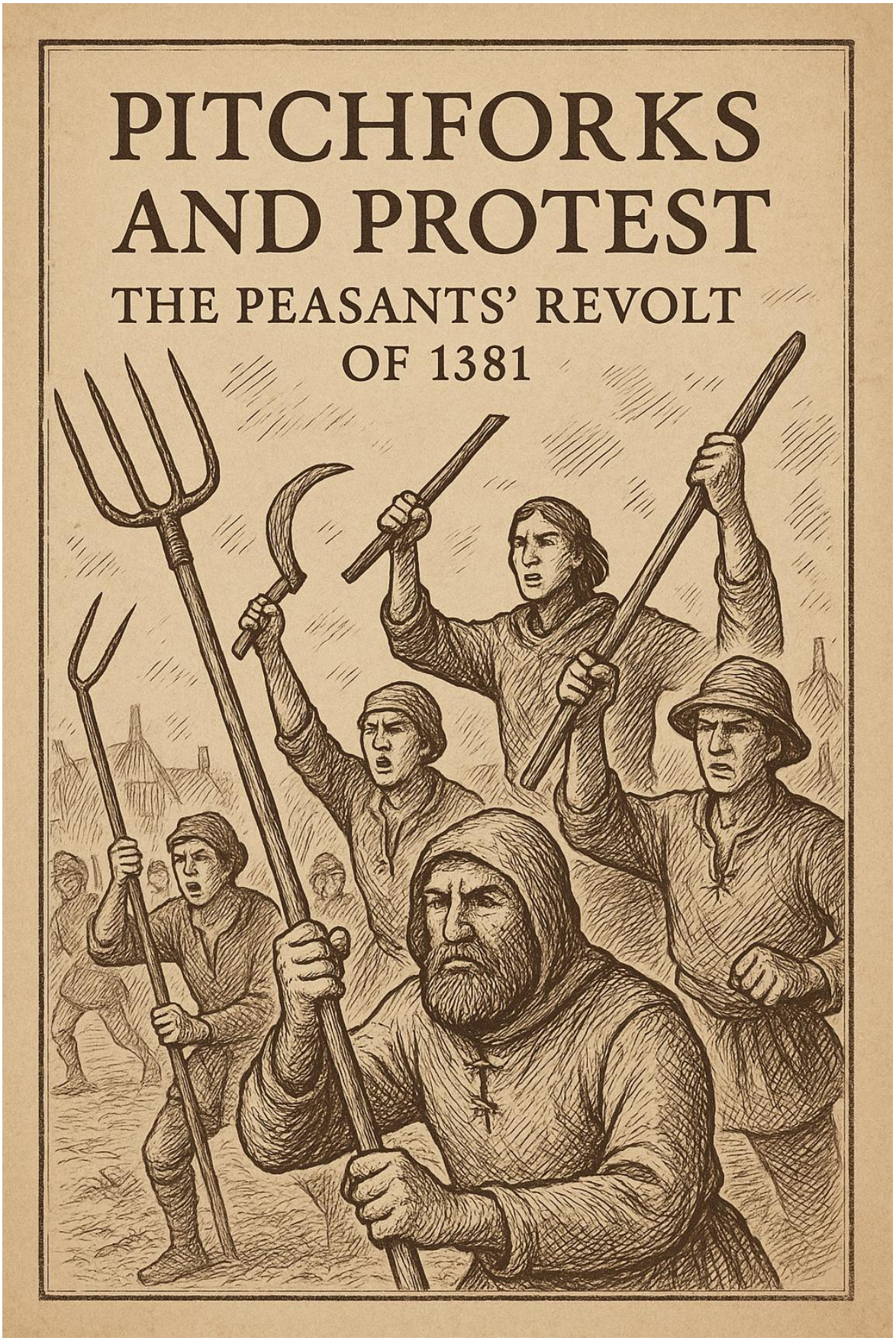

By Sarah Smith

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Life Before the Pitchforks: A Comedy of Medieval Errors

Picture England in the mid to late 1300s, a land of rolling green hills, sheep everywhere, and a whole lot of fed-up peasants!

Life was already tough for your average villager: backbreaking labour, bad weather and no Wi-Fi, but then came the chaos…

1. The Black Death (1348-1350):

Like an uninvited party guest who wrecks the place and leaves a mess, the plague shows up and wipes out half the population in one fell swoop. On the plus side, this meant fewer mouths to feed. On the downside, it also meant fewer workers, so peasants suddenly realised that their labour was kind of valuable.

2. The Labour Shortage:

With so many gaps in the workforce, peasants started asking for better pay and working conditions. The upper classes said "Nope!" and immediately started passing laws to freeze wages – clearly nothing says "thank you for surviving the plague" like a good old fashioned pay cut.

3. The Hundred Years War (still going, thanks for asking):

England was still locked in a never-ending tiff with France, which meant that King Richard II's government needed money – lots and lots of money, and who better to squeeze for this extra cash than the peasants?

Enter: The Poll Tax (yay) – a flat rate which everyone had to pay, even if your life savings amounted to a single turnip.

4. Serfdom and Sadness:

Serfdom was basically the medieval version of a really bad job with no benefits, no days off and no chance of quitting.

Imagine you're born in a village, and – congratulations! – you're automatically hired as a serf. That's fancy medieval speak for *peasant with zero chill and fewer rights*. You worked the land owned by a lord (think of him as an extremely rich, very entitled landlord), and in return you got… well permission to keep breathing and maybe a turnip or two.

But seriously did they get paid? The short answer is no, not really, they did not receive a salary or wages like we do today. Instead of cash, they were *paid* in the form of being allowed to live on the land, grow some food for themselves, and not be kicked out by the lord. In return they had to work a chunk of the week on the lord's land, fix stuff, pay taxes (often this would be in the form of crops or chickens), and occasionally get dragged into war or ditch-digging projects.

Serfs weren't slaves, technically – they couldn't be bought or sold, but they *were* tied to the land. So, if the lord sold his estate, you went along with it like unwanted furniture.

Essentially it was like being stuck in the world's longest unpaid internship… forever – working for free, getting yelled at and dreaming of escape. All they wanted was a little bit of freedom, some land to call their own, and maybe a pint.

So, by 1381 the country was a powder keg of plague survivors, overtaxed villagers, and angry farmhands with nothing to lose – so when the king's collectors came knocking demanding more cash, the pitchforks came out.

Pitchforks Up! The Peasants' Revolt Begins

The whole thing really kicked off on 30 May 1381, when a royal official named John Bampton (Justice of the Peace) rolled into town to sniff out some unpaid taxes. He set up shop in Brentwood, Essex like he owned the place and summoned folks from nearby villages—Fobbing, Corringham, and Stanford-le-Hope—basically to ask, "Hey, where's the money?"

Thomas Baker, who represented Fobbing, wasn't having it. When grilled, he straight-up said his village had coughed up enough cash and they weren't handing over a single penny more. Bampton, not thrilled with the sass, tried to have him arrested. Bad move. Things got punchy really fast.

Word of the scuffle spread like medieval wildfire, and before you knew it, the whole region was up in arms—even folks over in Kent joined the party.

Enter Wat Tyler, a charismatic rebel leader with a fantastic name and zero patience for injustice. He ended up in charge, mostly because he seemed to have a working brain and had a knack for shouting inspiring things. Picture him as a medieval mix between a union leader and that one guy in the pub who convinces everyone to storm the kebab shop at 2am. Tagging along was John Ball, a radical priest who liked to stir things up with spicy sermons. Basically, a medieval hype man.

Inspired by these sermons and led by Wat, a large number of Kentish rebels decided to march to London to confront the upper classes.

Not to be outdone, the Essex rebels joined in too, having already kicked things off with a tax collector scuffle in Brentwood, they realised "hey, this is kind of fun" and stomped towards London yelling "no more taxes!"

Farmers, blacksmiths, brewers, and people who just hated mornings all came along for the ride and the result was thousands of peasants rolling into London armed with weapons – which included sticks, battle axes and old swords and bows – demanding lower taxes, more freedom and most importantly wanting to give the ruling classes a proper earful.

The rebels reached Blackheath, just south-east of the capital on 12 June and were met with representatives of the royal government who tried to persuade them to go home – unsuccessfully.

Meanwhile, King Richard II, who was only 14 at the time, was holed up in The Tower of London, hiding under his mother's skirts and no doubt reconsidering his career path. Fair dues to him though, when it became clear that this problem wasn't just going to go away, he did agree to ride down and meet the rebels at Mile End on 14 June.

It is uncertain who actually spoke for the rebels at Mile End, but the demands were put across, with the King promising reforms and freedom for serfs. The crowd went wild; it looked like revolution might win the day.

But meanwhile, while Richard was playing diplomat, some rebels had stormed the Tower of London, killing Simon Sudbury, Lord Chancellor and Robert Hales, Lord High Treasurer, whom they found inside. They were about to execute the future Henry IV but were interrupted by one of the royal guards – imagine how differently that could have turned out!

Naturally this didn't go down well, the King, now thoroughly cheesed off, returned to one of his royal houses in Blackfriars where he appointed the military commander Richard FitzAlan (Earl of Arundel) to replace the late Sudbury as Chancellor and together they made plans to regain an advantage over the rebels.

The Final Stand (Spoiler: Not a Good Day for Wat)

The final stand of the Peasants' Revolt took place at Smithfield, just outside the walls of London on 15 June 1381 – and it was a bit of a dramatic finale.

Back then Smithfield was an open field used for markets, fairs, and the occasional execution. It was the chosen spot for the second meeting between the rebel leader Wat Tyler and King Richard II, who was playing it cool under a lot of pressure.

The meeting started awkwardly. Wat Tyler was expecting to negotiate and his demands were bold:

- The end of serfdom
- Free land
- The abolition of feudal labour services
- Full pardons for the rebels
- And, essentially, social revolution.

But Wat showed up in full swagger mode – accounts say he was insolent, refused to dismount his horse, and even asked for a drink of water mid-meeting. Depending on whose *highly biased* medieval account you are reading, things came to a head when Wat allegedly insulted the king's party or reached for a weapon.

The Lord Mayor of London, Sir William Walworth, decided he'd had enough of Tyler's attitude, so he stabbed him with the help of a royal squire. Wat tried to escape but collapsed and was later beheaded.

The king then pulled a sneaky one. He rode forward and declared "I am your captain now!" and the rebels, leaderless and somewhat confused didn't attack, they just went home… well not all of them…

The Battle of Billericay: The Great Essex Throwdown of 1381

A significant rebel group – probably a few hundred to a few thousand strong – retreated to Billericay in Essex, a major hotspot of rebellion, possibly to make a last stand or simply seek safety in numbers.

Some were probably hoping to carry on with the fight, others were waiting for royal promises to be fulfilled (not going to happen).

The crown wasn't feeling particularly patient after all the drama and orders were given to hunt down the remaining rebels. A force of royal troops, possibly including knights and trained soldiers, was dispatched.

Meanwhile, the rebels were hiding out in Norsey Wood, a thick forest with good cover and decent ambush potential. But these guys were not a seasoned army, the group mainly consisted of farm labourers and local artisans with makeshift weapons. So, when the royal forces caught up with them on 28 June, they didn't stand much of a chance.

Fighting was brutal and fast; many rebels were cut down in the wood and survivors were captured or fled.

Following the battle, the rebel leaders (those that hadn't been killed) were executed or imprisoned and more arrests and punishments were dished out across the south-east.

So, after all the hype, the revolt was crushed, but it terrified the nobility and planted the seeds of future change. While nothing happened overnight, the idea that peasants could rise up – and almost succeed – stuck around.

Why the Peasants' Revolt Still Matters (Even if it Flopped a Bit)

Okay so the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 didn't exactly end with a glorious workers' utopia. Wat Tyler got stabbed, the King went back on his promises, and serfdom wasn't abolished right away. BUT – this wasn't all for nothing. Here's why it still matters:

1. The Peasants Got Ideas:

For the first time, the ordinary people (basically the ones who did all the actual *work*) demanded better treatment. The idea that the social order wasn't set in stone – that it could be challenged – was a big deal. Like a medieval mic drop.

2. The Nobles Got Nervous:

In short, the revolts scared the living daylights out of the ruling classes. They realised that pushing people too far could lead to rebellion. Suddenly the idea of cracking down on the poor didn't seem like such a good one. It didn't lead to instant reformation, but it planted a seed.

3. Serfdom Eventually Died Out:

The revolt didn't kill off serfdom immediately, but it gave it a serious knock to the knees. Over the next hundred years or so, the system faded. Wages slowly rose, and peasants gained more freedom. The idea that they weren't 'property' started to take root.

4. It showed What Collective Action Could Do:

It was a medieval reminder that when enough people get fed up, they can shake the system – pitchforks and all. Even if they didn't win, they made history just by showing up!

So, while the revolt might not have ended with happy peasants skipping through fields of freedom, it did mark a turning point. The days of unquestioned feudal power were numbered – and it all started with tax, a preacher, and a man named Wat.

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