



St. John Historical Society

THE
ORDER OF ST JOHN
&
THE PEASANTS' REVOLT OF 1381

A Lecture given to the Society
by
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INTRODUCTION

by

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The St. John Historical Society was founded at an inaugural meeting of some seventy interested members of the Order, and others, held at St. John's Gate, Clerkenwell, on Thursday 9th April 1981, when Professor Lionel Butler, the Librarian of the Order, gave enthusiastic support to the project, and took a leading part in the formation of the Society.

A month later, on the 19th May 1981, at St. John's Gate, following the formal business of the Society's first regular meeting, Dr. Butler gave his immensely interesting lecture "The Order of St. John and the Peasants' Revolt of 1381", to a large and appreciative audience.

Sadly he died suddenly in November 1981, and so in his memory as a personal friend, as well as to mark the first anniversary of the founding of the Society, I have requested, and been granted, the privilege of presenting his lecture as the first published Transaction of the Society, and have donated a sufficient number of copies for distribution to the current membership, with my best wishes for the future success of the Society.

In the preparation of this publication my particular thanks are due to Miss Pamela Willis, Curator of the Order's Museum and Library, for transcribing and editing the work from the original tape recording, which she has done so admirably without losing the character of the lecture.

C.N.P.

May 1982

Six hundred years ago, in May and June 1381, rebels who were peasants and lower middle class townsmen, suddenly seized control of London and most of the south and east of England. They took the ruling class completely by surprise and rendered them temporarily unnerved and powerless. These rebels were surprised by their own success and they failed to handle it effectively : the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 collapsed as swiftly as it blew up. Nevertheless, it astonished Christian Europe. The great city of London and the powerful English monarchy had never before, and have never since, been seized into the hands of a popular revolutionary rebellion. The leaders of 1381, Walter Tyler, John Ball, Jack Straw and Thomas Farringdon were very different from an aristocratic revolutionary like Simon de Montfort, or a very snobbish country gentleman like the great Oliver Cromwell. At the centre of this storm were the Order of St. John of Jerusalem and its Prior, Sir Robert Hales. How they came to be there and with what result is my theme.

Thomas Farringdon, who came up to the King of England, Richard II, aged fifteen, seated on his horse on Tower Hill, seized the King's bridle roughly and said "Justice for me against the traitor Prior of the Knights of St. John, Robert Hales". Who was Robert Hales ? In many ways he was typical of the sort of man who became a military conventual Knight of St. John in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. He belonged, not to the high nobility (very few of the English Knights of St. John did), but to what we call the country gentry - the class who provided the Knights of the Shire in Parliament - the Sir Roger de Coverleys of their day - people who had power in their counties because they formed an intermarried, interlocked grouping of families - people who were on the very fringe of the nobility as it was seen in those days. These were not the peerage of the Realm, but those who bore arms, armorial shields and titled honours of which the lowest was simply "Sir".

The Hales family were interesting in another way. Most of the influential and successful English Knights of St. John in the three hundred years of the Order's history in Britain before Henry VIII dissolved it at the Reformation, came from the north of England. North westerners like the Hales, men from Cheshire, Lancashire, Cumberland and Westmorland were really very prominent. As for instance, John Langstrother who, a century later, was the only other Prior of the Knights of St. John in England to suffer the fate of Robert Hales. I should explain that the biographies of these people are very difficult to assemble. We can find a few facts about what they did or what they proposed to do and we can trace the bare outlines of a career. What they looked like, what their characters were, their motives in life, are very hard to determine. We are very lucky if we can track down a personal letter from an English Knight of St. John at this period although there are one or two, and we can occasionally find a portrait.

By looking at what Robert Hales achieved; what was thought about him, what he was asked to do, what was done to him, we will eventually have some kind of portrait of him. We can say that he was probably born about 1325 in Cheshire, and so was a man in his late fifties - that splendid era of a man's life - when the Peasants' Revolt happened. He was made a novice in the Order of St. John when he was about sixteen and after a very brief training in the Priory of England, the headquarters in Clerkenwell, he was sent as a young professed Conventual Knight who had taken his vows of religion on the eight-pointed cross, properly called the Cross of Profession, to Rhodes which was the headquarters of the Order of St. John and also the focus of its crusading activities against Islam in the Eastern Mediterranean. Rhodes was the place where Hales spent most of his career.

In the fourteenth century, the Crusaders, the great military Order of St. John included, had lost every foothold they had in the Holy Land, in Syria and Palestine, but were still fighting crusading actions, aggressive and defensive, against the Muslim powers of Egypt and the Turks. They were fighting these wars from a chain of islands and strongholds in the Aegean and in Greece, Crete, Cyprus, Rhodes, Samos, Lesbos and fortresses on the Greek mainland. The island of Rhodes was at the very heart of these conflicts. The Knights of St. John there were an international Order, financed by money, foodstuffs, armour, all kinds of supplies and men sent to them from their estates in Catholic Christian Europe. Rhodes was a fertile island, well supplied from the West, a thorn in the side of militant Islam, a place which was at times very luxurious to

live in, at other times very dangerous to be caught in.

Robert Hales by joining the English Knights of St. John and the other Knights of St. John from many European nations on Rhodes, had to accustom himself to being, not only a warrior on land, a custodian of castles, a land fighter but also a warrior by sea. I do not think he ever became a "Sea Dog", but to be a naval commander and to be able to run a crew and to command a flotilla certainly fell to his lot.

What were the English Knights in those days? What kind of role did they play? We can find statistics and produce a sort of pattern. England was, for its size, a rich component of the Order. Probably it had about one eighth of the Order's wealth. If you had gone to Rhodes in Hales' time, you would have found about four hundred Conventual Knights of St. John, of whom a little under 10% (perhaps 40) would have been Englishmen, including a few Scots, Irish and Welsh Knights. If you were to assemble all the British Knights of St. John, wherever they might be found, in one place, you would have perhaps about a hundred Knights, fifty Chaplains or Priests, and a few dozen Sergeants, who were the third grade of the Order. There were always more Knights of St. John back at home than out in Rhodes. They came and went between their own countries and the conventual island of Rhodes on a very sophisticated shuttle system - periods of service in the East, in the "Jaws of the Turks", as they would put it - periods of looking after the Order's properties and interests in the West. This operation rested on a very large force of estate labourers at home, mercenary soldiers abroad, and professional navigators, sailors and so forth. We must think of the Knights of St. John as a ruling class of their own enterprise, the little sovereign state of Rhodes, and their own international Order which was subordinate only in the long run to the Pope.

Hales very early in his career was promoted to the office of Turcopilier. This exotic title was always given to an Englishman in the Holy Land and in Rhodes and later in Malta. The name was derived from an original custom whereby the Turcopilier commanded squadrons of mercenary, Muslim, Turkish cavalry who fought against their own kind. The office transformed itself in Rhodes, and in other islands which the Knights held in Greece, to the office of Commander of the whole system of coastal defence. The Turcopilier was responsible for guarding castles, keeping up the beacon signalling systems, commanding soldiers and Knights and organising the Greek population in coast guard duties. Also as the Turcopilier, Hales was a bailiff of the Convent of Rhodes. As such he was a full member of the Council which was the permanent executive governing body meeting under the Grand Master more or less weekly. He presided over the assembly of the English Knights at Rhodes, which met frequently in their fraternity house, or Auberge, which you can still see in Rhodes city. There the purely internal affairs of the English Knights (or Tongue) were decided; there the English Knights got their allowances of clothing and foodstuffs and cash; there they got their instructions on the hospitality they must give to visiting brethren and pilgrims.

The Grand Master appointed Hales to his first Commandery in 1350 when he became Commander of Slebech in Wales, and Sandford in Oxfordshire, a good lucrative promotion. This meant that he had a handsome share of the revenues of two estates of the Order of St. John back in his homeland. The estates were run for him by other Knights under his control and a proportion of the revenues had to be paid every year into the Order's coffers. By 1358 when he was about 33 years of age, he was rising very high in the Order because the splendid titles of Bailiff of Egle (Egle being a place in Lincolnshire) and Commander of Beverley were conferred on Hales. He was now the second Englishman in the Order of St. John and was being groomed for even higher roles.

Hales became famous in Europe in the year 1365, in what was the last, in a way one of the most successful, and I fear, in a way one of the most disgraceful, episodes of the Crusades. It was the attack on Alexandria in 1365. Egypt at this time was unlike the Egypt we know today. It was a rich, powerful, military kingdom, one of the wealthiest states bordering on the Mediterranean. It was a stronghold of Islam; the Egyptians held Mecca, Medina, most of Arabia and virtually the whole of their own course of the Nile. They had the great international seaport of Alexandria, and a very famous army, mostly recruited from Turkish sources, and they were ruled by a very powerful dynasty known as the Mamluks. The Egyptians were terrifying to Christians in the 14th century. In 1365 it was decided that there should be a Crusade against Egypt based on

the old crusading theory that control of the Nile delta and the Sinai peninsula meant control of the holy places in Palestine. These were also ruled by the Egyptians as they held Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Nazareth. The Armada which was assembled under the urging of Pope Urban V, came together at the island of Rhodes. It was commanded by Peter, King of Christian Cyprus. Most of the ships were from the Venetian Republic. There were flotillas from Genoa and from Naples. The Knights of St. John, having now provided the harbours which were the base for the attack, also provided a very important force.

The Knights were never a great sea power; they could not put a fleet to sea but they could raise a flotilla and skilful personnel. They put into this crusading fleet four great galleys of war, one hundred conventual military Knights, under vows of religion, several hundred archers and a few artillery men. This force was under two Captains - at sea it was under the Prior of the Castilian Knights, but once on land it was captained by Robert Hales, the Turcopilier. He was accompanied by his great friend and fellow Knight, Sir Miles Stapleton, and by a freelance Crusader, who having wandered out to the near East hoping to get to the Holy Places, had joined this expedition, one Humphrey Bohun, Earl of Hereford, he of the white swan, the badge of retainer of that famous family.

When the Armada reached Alexandria it had an astonishing victory. Great as they were on land, the Mamluks had neglected their naval defences and Alexandria made no serious resistance to a landing by this fleet. Such as there was, was dealt with by a very clever out-flanking movement which was carried out by Robert Hales, who chose Englishmen to act as the spearhead of the attack, and caught the Egyptian defence in a pincer trap thus allowing the crusaders to come ashore. Hales led the way to the taking of the city of Alexandria by breaking through the Customs Gate, which was the turning point of the attack on the city where, incidentally, one Scottish Knight (I wish I knew his name) was killed. And so Alexandria fell.

Egypt was a very great military kingdom whose stronghold was really Cairo, but to get the "front door" of Alexandria, was not really to get control of the whole household. There were many reasons why the expedition did not proceed into the interior of Egypt. I would like to quote a true story, based on a newsletter which came back; it should hold our interest as historians of the Order of St. John. The reason why Peter, King of Cyprus, the leader of the Crusade, Hales and the other Crusaders did not attempt the conquest of Egypt was that they learned that the resistance would be much too strong. Up in York at this time, in St. Mary's Abbey (the ruins of which can still be seen today) there was a very enterprising monk whose name we shall never know - he is known as "the Anonymous". He kept a history of his own time, in French, and he embodied into his chronicle a letter - which had come back to him from one of the English Knights of St. John - about what happened after the fall of Alexandria. A scouting party of members of the Order of St. John and other Christian troops set out southwards from Alexandria through the Nile delta. They were encountered by a cavalry force sent from the Egyptian Army. During the lengthy encounter, one of the Egyptian cavalry dashed forward on his horse at a terrific gallop, made a sign of peace and addressed them in English. They seized him and he told them "I am a Knight of St. John, I was captured by the Egyptians, I agreed to serve them in warfare and in fact they believe I have become a Muslim - my advice to you is not to press on to Cairo because you will be cut to ribbons". (I have slightly modernised the story line.)

Hales took part in the next decision of the Crusaders - they decided they would hold Alexandria for a week, sack it and then abandon it. The story of the sack of Alexandria, which was regarded by the Christian West of those days as a great victory, is rather appalling. There was priceless loot from this very rich City, in gold and silver, brass and carpets, silks, brocades and spices. All the beasts, horses, donkeys and camels when they had done their work were slain on the harbour by the Crusaders so that the Egyptians when they returned could not use them. It was a terrible sack of the city which, after all, had many Christians and Greek Christians living in it.

The Crusaders dispersed to spread around Europe the story of a famous Christian victory. One which you may remember is actually celebrated in the first lines of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. A famous victory even if a modern mind might

say it was, like the cows in Cold Comfort Farm, somewhat Aimless, Graceless, Pointless and Feckless, but it made the reputation of Robert Hales. I refer to Thomas Walsingham, chronicler of St. Albans Abbey, who was a very well informed writer and he said "Many Englishmen were there at Alexandria with Sir Robert Hales and the King of Cyprus and they brought back to England cloth of gold, silks and splendid exotic jewels". By 1370 Hales' career had reached a very high peak; he was one of the leading members of the Order in Rhodes. He had been at the forefront of a great crusading victory and many other smaller expeditions which had added lustre to his name. He was not going to be elected Grand Master - as the English Knights did not really have enough votes - but he got the next best thing. He was elected by the Order's Council to be Prior of England when Prior John Paveley died in 1371.

When he returned to England as Prior, in 1371, Hales was a man with international, military, naval and administrative experience and clearly a very tough man. It was not surprising that he was fairly quickly pressed to spend part of his time serving the English Crown by giving part of his year to the service of the English monarch. He was made Admiral of the English western fleet. In the 14th century England was a naval power, a fact which is very easily forgotten by people who think that Henry VIII and Drake began it all. England was fighting a complex war on the Continent for the conquest of France. The problem for the Commanders of the Fleet was to hold the ports which the English had captured - Calais, Brest, La Rochelle, Bordeaux and Bayonne - and this gave them a great naval commitment. They also had a naval problem: the French had ports of their own and were demonstrating their vigour at raids on the south coast of England.

So Robert Hales was not only an administrative hero, but was also an active organiser of fleets and naval expeditions. He may have sailed on some, but the records do not give us that information. He did not achieve great successes - the 1370's were a rather dreary disappointing time; a time of setbacks and frustrations for the English in the war with France which they had begun in 1337 - "The Hundred Years War". But Hales during this time had plenty of opportunity to run the Order of St. John in England and its properties, and also to do something which no doubt he enjoyed most of all. He had the Commandery of Highbury (just outside London), one of the great Hospitaller estates, and there he completely rebuilt the manor house as his own country abode outside the City. He had been in the middle East and he probably brought back to England many eastern tapestries, Greek sculptures, fine furnishings, jewels and so forth. This house, rebuilt by him, had a very short life; all we really know about it is that another chronicler, the rather sour Canon called John Milton, from Leicester, says "He constructed afresh the manor house of Highbury and made it as elegant as the alternative Paradise, as good as the Garden of Eden" (quasi alterum Paradisum delicate construxerat) - it is a very tantalising sentence. We have one other remark about this man who obviously was a very common figure in English society. He was a Knight "incrimis magnanimous atque strenuous" - he was among the most magnanimous and energetic of Knights but he does not please the community (non placet communitate) as we shall see.

Well, all through the 1370's we know, because some of the accounts of the Order of St. John at Rhodes have survived from that decade (they do not all survive), Hales was doing his stuff and steadily pumping out to Rhodes, English tribute - the responsions or taxes which had to be paid by the Commanderies of England to the Convent of Rhodes in the near East. This was not only English wool cloth, corn, armour, weapons, but also money, silver bullion, and letters of credit. It did not always please the English government - this draining away by the Knights of St. John of exchange from the country. However we can move rapidly to Hales' last fling in the near East.

In the year 1377 there was a scheme for a new attack on Islam, an attack on the Turks in southern Greece. Hales, following instructions from Rhodes, collected together a force of 38 English Knights, each of them accompanied by a Sergeant-at-Arms of the Order, and they travelled to Marseilles. There they met the newly elected Grand Master of the Order, Juan Fernandez d'Heredia, a Spaniard. Before they attacked the Turks, they were invited to escort the Pope (Gregory XI) on a journey from Avignon to Rome, where it was proposed to recreate the Papal residence. We see our English Prior turning up in Marseilles with a very remarkable contingent of English Knights, joining the Grand Master, getting ready for a war against the Turks, but on the way taking the

Pope from Avignon where he had been residing. Hales, with the Prior of St. Gilles, who was the senior Prior over all the Priors of the Order, and the new Grand Master, escorted Gregory into Rome in 1377, then sailed eastwards and joined a Venetian expedition against the Turks in Greece. Whereupon the Grand Master got himself captured by the Turks at Corinth. Hales had to sail to Rhodes to arrange to ransom the Grand Master from the Turks with cash.

In 1380, we do not quite know why, he went back to England, and was invited to become the King's Treasurer. The English government was approaching a crisis in that year. The King was a boy of fourteen, unmarried and with no heir of his body to the Throne. He was well looked after by a wise Queen Mother, Queen Joan. There was a wide-spread view in the country, which historians regard as totally baseless, that the King's uncle, John, Duke of Lancaster, (John of Gaunt), the richest subject of the Crown, was scheming to poison the boy, or somehow remove him and take the Throne himself. The point is, however, that John of Gaunt, who was the Regent of England, was very unpopular, and consequently the suspicion that he wished to seize the Throne was rife. John of Gaunt and his ministers were unpopular because they were handling the war with France badly - losing sea ports, losing battles at sea, losing on land and piling taxes on to the community. The days when Edward III and the Black Prince had really sewn up the French armies on the continent were over, the government was now in defeat, more and more anxious to raise money, less and less popular. The hard edge of its demands on taxation took the form of a Poll Tax, invented in 1337 as a flat rate tax on every adult in the country. It hit the poor harder than the rich - four pence a head was quite a lot to a farm labourer, nothing at all to a London merchant.

The Poll Tax became the object of intense hostility. It was a time of unrest in the towns, especially in the sea ports, a time of chauvinism, of hostility to the many Flemings from the low countries who were working as weavers in England, a time of unrest on the land. Recent legislation had made it difficult to move about from job to job on the land, had pegged wages back, and had made many of the peasants immobile at a time when there was a shortage of labour because of the ravages of the Black Death and landlords wanted to hire labour. There was an increasing attempt to try and pin down that portion of the rural classes who were cottars or villeins, to pin them down to the land where they worked by making them pay the customary dues which were the proof of villein status - the merchets you paid when your daughter got married, the heriot that was paid over your grave when you were buried. These were marks that you were a villein and not a free peasant, and they were payable to the lord of your manor. If the lord of your manor was also an ecclesiastic, then he got the priests' merchets and heriots. On the lands of very conservative, not particularly enterprising land owners, like Canterbury Cathedral, Waltham Abbey, and the Order of St. John, there was undoubtedly oppression of the peasants by the enforcement of these ancient payments.

There were all sorts of reasons in fact why landlordship was chafing the peasantry but one thing is very important to say: it was said by a very canny French observer at the time, John Froissart. He said the reason why the English peasants rebelled in 1381 was the great ease and plenty that they were enjoying. In other words, they were doing well, they had a lot to lose, they were frightened and suspicious of the government and of their landlords - and there may be a good deal of truth in that. Now, the Order of St. John was one of those great land-owning corporations with a big stake in the south east - in Kent, the Commanderies of Peckham, Sutton at Hone and Swingfield; in Essex, Temple Crossing, Little Maplestead; near London rich properties like Highbury. It is, therefore, not surprising to find that the part of the Peasants' Revolt which started in the immediate home counties, closely involved the Knights of St. John.

When Hales was appointed Treasurer, his job was to see to the raising of a new Poll Tax of a shilling a head, which had been agreed on by Parliament in the Autumn of 1380, but which was bitterly resented. It was a great tactical mistake on the part of the government. Hales was brought in to oversee its collection. The previous Treasurer, Thomas Brantingham, Bishop of Exeter, had resigned, almost certainly from fear of having to carry out the operation. The government was epitomised now by three people - the Regent, John of Gaunt (Duke of Lancaster), the Chancellor (who we can think of as Prime Minister, and who was also the Archbishop of Canterbury) Simon Sudbury,

and the Prior of St. John, Sir Robert Hales. Hales was the man who organised the collection of the Poll Tax and it was a very difficult job indeed. One way in which the populace tried to cheat the government was by hiding away all the unmarried female dependants ("sisters and the cousins and the aunts"), and it does look as though that - without the rough and very harsh measures which were undertaken - the government might have been deprived of a third of its revenue. Hales' collectors were ruthless, rather brutal, and hostility began to display itself.

Almost simultaneously, hostility broke out into violence in two centres in Essex and in Kent. We do not know whether there was a connection in advance between these two. These risings went forward with tremendous speed and success. In Kent, it began at Isleworth where the men of that manor seized Lesnes Abbey, forced the Abbot to swear to help them, took Rochester Castle and Maidstone, and chose a leader called Walter Tyler. He was probably a discharged non-commissioned officer soldier from the Hundred Years War; a man with a great gift of oratory and a tremendous power of discipline, so that he controlled his forces and would not let them go in for looting or casual murder. A man later infamous for rinsing out his mouth and spitting out the dirty water in the presence of the King when he met him. He was also a man of ruthlessness, but undoubtedly a leader. Wat Tyler achieved two things which made it clear that the peasants were committed to a revolt. He led them to Canterbury where they sacked the Archbishop's palace and secured for them the great orator, a priest called John Ball. In John Ball's speeches to the rebellious peasants of Kent, he told them "Beware of guile in borough" [*he meant beware of townsmen*] "stand together in God's name, to do his work and chastise well Hob the Robber and look that you shake him to rob heaven no more". Hob the Robber was Sir Robert Hales.

When the men of Essex rose within 24 hours of the men of Kent, they were incited by some London butchers - part of the part of the retail traders and small craftsmen. These with their very numerous lesser guilds, were banded together in London municipal politics against the merchants, the bankers and the wholesalers. When the Essex rising against the Poll Tax had started a man came from London, and we are told that he immediately became their Captain, and that he led them to London himself. His name was Thomas Farringdon and he came from a famous family of goldsmiths, though he belonged to an illegitimate branch of it. He was quite well off but he was disgruntled; he had been involved in law suits which he had lost. He had been evicted from land in Essex.

It is not surprising that when Colchester had been captured, another of Hales' Commandery manors - Temple Crossing in Essex - was burnt and looted; its stock and crops carted away or destroyed. Above all, the manorial records were burnt - all the evidence of villenage and villein service. The Deputy Admiral, Edmund de la Mare, not a Knight of St. John, but an associate of Hales, also had his Essex properties sacked. The rebels, having made it clear that they had their knives into Sudbury and Hales, began to march on London from both directions. I ought to point out that at this time risings were going on all over the south east of England and parts of the north of England but we shall confine ourselves to London.

The rebels displayed the banners of St. George, and, as I have said, their spokesmen made it very clear to King Richard that "No King called John would they have" they said, thinking of John of Gaunt. They occupied Blackheath, Southwark, Mile End and Clerkenwell Fields. Think of London - a fortified city, long and narrow on the north bank of the Thames. Only the river lay between the men of Kent in Southwark and the City of London; London, within its walls, was a strong City, and on its eastern flank the great fortress of the Tower of London was quite impregnable to a peasant army even though armed with bows and swords. The Tower had a small professional garrison and the City of London had remarkably effective trained bands under the aegis of the Lord Mayor, the Aldermen and the Guilds. But London was not a town of war, it was not politically united, it had never been besieged or involved in real war since the Norman conquest. It was much more a civilian place than Paris, Barcelona, Milan or Rome. It was surrounded by its suburbs which were totally unprotected.

If we think of the Priory of St. John in Clerkenwell, there, at that time, were probably half a dozen Conventual Knights, perhaps six Sergeants and a number of lay servants. Enough people, perhaps to defend the Gatehouse for a day if they

dared, not enough to make a fortress of St. John's Priory. Many of the great men of the Realm were missing - the Duke of Lancaster on the Scottish border, the Earl of Cambridge on campaign in Portugal. Others began to panic, the Archbishop of Canterbury resigned the Great Seal. Indeed, Robert Hales was virtually in charge of the English government!

In the Tower of London there was gathered for protection the Court and the Royal Family, the King, the Queen Mother, younger members of the Royal entourage (like Henry Bolingbroke, the King's half brothers, the Earl of Oxford, and two senior noblemen - Salisbury and Warwick), who, I fear, lost their nerve. What had the King got to defend himself with? Six hundred armed English mercenaries, commanded by one of the most experienced of the Black Prince's Captains (Sir Robert Knowles), along with Sir Nigel Goring and Sir Hugh Calverly. If the Tower was defended by these six hundred men there was little doubt that the rebels would be unable to storm it. The Lord Mayor of London, William Walworth, was a man of realism and he raised the drawbridge in the middle of London Bridge so that it could not be crossed. He then sent a group of Aldermen to make sure that the drawbridge was not lowered. These men - Adam Carlisle, John Walsh, John Bull and Walter Sidney - were told to instruct the rebels to go away and they did so. The rebels, in fact, had no chance of getting into London or into the Tower unless they were let in. If the defence had been properly secured there was time for the nobility of England to realise what was going on and to begin to bring professional armed men into the struggle. It did not work that way.

First of all the King, with Hales and Sudbury and his counsellors, sailed down to Greenwich in five barges, and the King thought he would land and parley with the rebels there. He was persuaded not to go ashore by Sir Robert Hales, but to return to the Tower. It is a curious story - it looks as though the government was losing the initiative. Then a terrible thing happened: the Aldermen on London Bridge lowered the drawbridge. This is one of the great mysteries of 1381. These four Aldermen, whose careers are very well mapped, deliberately decided they would lower the drawbridge so that the rebels could come across the river not only to London City, but also into the suburbs and join the men of Essex who had come down from the north. It may have been to do with bitter London politics; it may have been a kind of calculation that if they were not let in they would break in eventually and it would then be worse than expected. At all events the rebels now had London and it is worthwhile noticing what they did.

If you follow the sort of convictions of a rather straightforward Marxian interpretation of history, you will expect London - great bourgeois centre of wealth and power - to be destroyed; it was not. The targets were selective - they were carefully chosen by the rebels and they made it clear why they were chosen. The Savoy Palace, which was the great luxury town house of the Duke of Lancaster, was burnt to the ground. No loot was taken from it, the rebels even going to the length of throwing back into the flames one of their number who tried to get away with a silver dish. There is a comic story that they thought some barrels of gunpowder they found were gold dust, and they poured those onto the flames too. Then it was the turn of all the houses along the Strand and Fleet Street, many of which belonged to the Order of St. John. They were picked out because they were Hospitaller properties. There was also the Temple. It must be emphasised that Temple Church and the great Temple Priory around it, the old headquarters of the Knights of the Temple, was the property of the Knights of St. John and it was then leased to lawyers who were building up the Inns of Court within it. The Church with its library was a very important part of the Hospitaller presence in England. The whole of the Temple was burnt down. The rebels could not be expected to like lawyers anyway, and Walsingham said of the lawyers that all with the agility of rats or evil spirits fled.

What else did the rebels do? They let out the prisoners from the marshalcy of the King's Bench, they burnt the prisons down, they burnt down Lambeth Palace (the Archbishop's town house), and they set upon Clerkenwell Priory. And it was Farringdon himself who led the attack on these buildings - the burning down of the Church, the Hospital, all the Conventual buildings, arranging the murder of the Flemings who had fled there for sanctuary, and razing the Priory of St. John to the ground. The Prior's "earthly paradise" in Highbury had a very short life, as it too was destroyed by the rebels - by Jack Straw and his followers who set out there the following morning.

The government and the King were in the Tower, so was the Prior of the Order of St. John. What should they do? There was a disagreement: the Lord Mayor of London and Hales thought the thing to do was to muster the professional soldiers and simply attack the rebels in the sure and certain hope that the professionals would win. The Earl of Salisbury advised the King to negotiate and said "We cannot defeat these people, but we might persuade them to go away", and that is what King Richard tried to do. He took out of the Tower of London a small group of followers and went with them to confront the rebels at Mile End. It was on the way there that Farringdon stopped him, seized his bridle and demanded vengeance on the Prior of St. John for taking away his (Farringdon's) properties. The King said that he would have justice, no doubt innocuous enough, and the King then went on to Mile End for the first of his two historic conferences with the rebels.

It was during that conference that Farringdon with some other of the rebels slipped back to the Tower and were able to persuade the soldiers within to let them cross the drawbridge. It is interesting that the English professional troops, without Knowles there to command them, did not resist; they let the rebels in, they let the rebels stroke their beards with their dirty hands, we are told, and they allowed the way to lie open to the chapel of the Tower. There the Queen Mother had taken refuge, and there the Archbishop and Hales were also in refuge. We do not know anything about what was in the mind of the Prior of St. John - he had no troops of his own - probably he realised there was no chance of successful resistance. The Archbishop said three masses, the Penitential Psalm, and the Litany; they confessed each other, and they finally got to "All Saints pray for us" when the rebels came in, took them outside, dragged them to Tower Hill and beheaded them both, using a log as the block and taking several strokes of the axe for the execution in each case. John of Gaunt's doctor, William Appleton, and the chief financial adviser on the Poll Tax, John Legg, were also beheaded and their heads put on the gate of London Bridge.

And so Robert Hales, who had been in Rhodes, Corinth, Rome and Alexandria, who knew France, Italy and the Mediterranean, who had been a very strenuous servant of the English monarchy, lost his life in a humiliating and brutal way. He had been the instrument of a highly unimaginative and depressing fiscal policy. We may feel, however, he got rather more than he deserved. But no written word of his has come down to tell us about it.

Within twenty four hours the Peasants' Revolt, to all intents and purposes was over. Robert Knowles actually rallied his English professional forces. A very small number of them dispersed the rebels at Clerkenwell Fields. Elsewhere in England it began to be realised that the way to deal with an armed rural population rioting was simply to turn the professional archers and men at arms on them. Men who were of their own country, men perhaps of a slightly better social class than they, sure of their pay and ready to obey orders. The whole thing collapsed even more quickly than it had begun.

There is a mystery over what happened to Farringdon. He had spent the last night of the rebellion drawing up lists of people who were to be executed as traitors - of course Hales and Sudbury were at the top of this list. But he was arrested within twenty four hours of that event, pillaging houses, and yet he and the Aldermen who let the drawbridge down, Ball and the others who were tried, were never found guilty of anything and were eventually let out of prison. We find them prospering in the 1380's, two of them in Parliament; Thomas Farringdon ending his life as quite a prosperous country squire. The Peasants' Revolt which they effected was crushed all over England. Perhaps it had one or two fruitful results - there were no more Poll Taxes and villein services were less insisted on. The government had a terrible fright but survived.

What about the Order of St. John? It had lost property and gardens in the south east of England, destruction of buildings, destruction of furnishings and stock, and lost prestige. John Redington, the next Prior, rebuilt Clerkenwell Priory in the next two decades, replacing the old round nave of the Church with a rectangular nave of different dimensions, so that by 1399 a new King of England, Henry IV, waiting for his Coronation, chose Clerkenwell as his residence for a fortnight. When the Emperor

of Constantinople, Manuel II, came to western Europe, appealing for help against the Turks, where should he lodge but in Clerkenwell Priory as the guest of honour of the King of England and Walter Grendon, Prior of St. John. All the same I think that the story of 1381 does raise a very interesting question. The Knights of St. John were accepted in England, they were financed, they made recruits here, they made their name in the crusading field of warfare. But how popular were they after all? In 1381, not very, I am afraid, but they survived.



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