



S.A.L.H.S

website: www.salhs.org.uk

Stanstead Abbotts Local History Society

Issue 9

Editor—Terry Collins

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The Peasants Revolt and the Black Death

Our speaker for October was SALHS Chairman, Ian White whose topic was the Peasants Revolt of 1381 this was the first rising in English history. From Cornwall to Yorkshire but mainly in the South East and East Anglia, ordinary people faced charges of treason and the death penalty to rise against the King. Why did it happen, how did it happen?

In the 14th Century there were three orders of society, first the King and the Nobles, down to Manor level. They owned the land, fought the wars, passed laws and ruled the country. Secondly, the Church, ruled from Rome, was outside civil jurisdiction and owned vast amounts of land, had their own prisons and militia and ruled peoples spiritual lives.

Finally, ordinary people, peasants (free men} who worked the land, and serfs who were little more than

slaves tied to their lords in every way. They could not own land, marry without his lords permission or even leave his lords land. and often in winter they starved. Being an agricultural society the main social unit of the time was the Manor. This usually consisted of the Manor House, one or more villages, and up to several thousand acres of land, broken up into pasture, forest, meadow and cultivated fields, which were then divided into strips, 1/3 for the lord and less for the Church with the remainder for peasants and serfs. Villages consisted of 10-60 thatched rough huts with dirt floors, little or no furniture and often shared with livestock. Control over local people came from the Manorial Courts where officials such as the Reeve, who acted as an overseer, were appointed. At the same time the Church came under attack from within from the likes of John Wy-

cliffe, (c1320-1384) a philosopher and preacher, he said that the pope should have no part in worldly matters, that the bible should be available to everyone in their own language and that all men were brothers. Others like John Ball, the so-called “foolish priest of Kent, called for all men to “cast off the yoke of bondage” These problems came at a particularly bad time for the country as a whole as there had been severe floods, crops had failed in two years, 1346 and 1347, the 100 Years War with France had begun, most of the country was crippled with heavy taxes and poor government. Then in 1349 at Melcombe (Weymouth) two ships landed with a deadly cargo, plague. Within the next 18 months 40-50% of the population were dead, with the young and the old being the most vulnerable. ‘A chronicler at the time wrote, many buildings fell into total ruin, there was such a lack of workers, animals and livestock roamed the country, as a result essential foodstuffs rose in price by 5 times’ What was left was a smaller population of younger and fitter men and women. The Black Death had reduced the population by 47%. The availability of workers had been reduced by 27%. This catastrophe led to a period of rapid Economic and Social change. Workers demanded, and got, higher wages to work the land, workers followed multiple occupations, forbid

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den under the previous regime, becoming weavers, spinners, retailers, etc. People moved around the country where they had previously been confined to their villages. The serfs owned property and were allowed to leave it to their children. They were permitted to buy and sell land, some owned livestock.

Despite the great economic progress made in the 30 years following the plague most people still had no political or legal rights living in a system favouring the Establishment, who responded by passing laws trying to impose wage and price freezes. Any wrongdoers were punished, and the populace were punished still further by increased taxation, inflicted by John of Gaunt, to raise money for the continuing war against France. In May 1381 yet another (poll) tax was announced and this proved to be the final straw for many of the population.

On 30th May the villagers of Fobbing, led by John Baker, a small village just north of the Thames in Essex, attacked the Kings Commissioners and drove them away. Similar events happened across Essex, Kent and other Home Counties including Hertfordshire.

England's first revolution had begun.

Although known as the Peasants Revolt, many of the rebels were men who held responsible positions including jurors, farmers, tailors, Reeves and town merchants. There were even one or two knights, these were not the men depicted in Chronicles of the time.

For the following two weeks in June the rebels had remarkable success in their efforts, their 'dash for freedom' took them into London. On 3rd June rebels in Kent under their leader Abel Kerr, crossed the Thames and joined with the Essex men at Rainham. On

6th June men from Essex attacked the sheriff while in Kent, Rochester castle was captured, a sign of the rebels growing strength. The following day Kentish rebels entered Maidstone, and it was here that Wat Tyler emerged as the leader. On the 8th they entered Dartford and two manor houses were destroyed, and on the 9th there was a ceremonial burning of court records. The 10th June saw the rebels in Essex the Sheriff was captured, the escheator was killed, and the hospital at Cressing was sacked. On the same day in Kent the rebels stormed the castle at Canterbury and captured the Sheriff.

The next day Chelmsford was captured and the manor house destroyed. The prison at Bishop Stortford was attacked and in Kent the prison at Maidstone was destroyed. On the 12th June the Essex rebels had reached Mile End, while those from Kent were at Blackheath, en route



attacking Lambeth Palace and Marshalsea prison. The day after the Hospital of St John was destroyed, London bridge was opened to the rebels and John of Gaunt's palace was attacked along with the Fleet prison. 105 villages in Essex, 118 Kent, 35 in Hertfordshire and 72 in Suffolk were involved. Between 10th and 12th June the Essex men had travelled 70 miles, while those from Kent 80 miles. Over 4000 men had taken part. Locally a rising had begun in West Hertfordshire, where the people of St

Albans forced the Abbey to sign a charter allowing them to own land, use rivers and woods and break the Abbey's monopoly on milling. On 13/14th June some of the St Albans rebels joined those from Barnet and marched on London. Villages all over West Hertfordshire joined in and forced the same concessions from the Abbey. In East Hertfordshire men from Thaxted in Essex sacked the Bishop of London's prison at Bishop Stortford and joined Ware rebels and attacked Hertford Castle.

Local disputes also flared up between Ware and Hertford using the rising to try and settle old grievances. The towns had long been in dispute over the use of the River Lea crossing. Severe rioting followed, other rebels came from Hoddesdon and Standon and disturbances took place at Cheshunt and Waltham.

The Archbishop of Westminster's property at Amwell was attacked and the Court rolls destroyed. The King agreed to meet the men from Essex, and did so at Mile End where he agreed to a charter granting freedom from bondage thus ending serfdom. Copies of the charter were carried back to towns and villages, the Essex revolt was over.

On June 15th the King met the Kentish rebels at Blackheath.

Their demands were more radical than those of Essex including abolition of Lords and disposing of the goods of the Church. During this debate, mayhem broke out, during which the mayor of London killed Wat Tyler (see picture) and the Kentish revolt collapsed.

The aftermath led to many rebels being slaughtered, more imprisoned and the Kings promises, and those of St Albans Abbey were rescinded. After questions, Bob Hunt thanked Ian for an enthralling, enjoyable and informative evening.

The Buntingford Line

Our January speaker, Stephen Ruff, spoke to an audience of 71 people (our highest yet) on the subject of the Buntingford Line, fondly remembered by many of those attending.

The line was considered to be a branch from the Hertford line, construction began in 1859 and the 13 mile stretch of railway finally opened on 3rd July 1863. To begin with passenger numbers improved but by the 1920's they were starting to decrease, and goods traffic had slowed to just one a day. Passenger trains continued to run but by 1960 only rush hour trains were running and in 1963 when the Beeching proposals recommended the closure there were only 2000 passengers per week. Steam trains had been replaced by diesel in 1958 and the last train ran on 16th November 1964, although goods trains ran until the following year.

From St Margarets the line served stations at Mardock for Wareside, Widford for Hunsdon, Standon, Braughing, Westmill and finally Buntingford. At St Margarets the line used a separate platform and passengers changed there for London bound trains. When all the passengers were off and then the engine pushed the 3 or 4 car-



Buntingford Line under steam

riages onto the main line, then when uncoupled, drove to the front, pushed the coaches back into the station and waited for the next down train on the main line. The station had its own large water tower for trains on the Buntingford line which can be seen in old pictures of St Margarets station.

The line ran parallel to the main line for about 3/4 of a mile and then turned right, going under Holycross Road Mardock via Waters Place Farm where it sometimes stopped to let passengers off. The line was originally meant to go via Ware but permission could not be got from a local landowner for a station to be built. At Mardock there was a 58foot high signal pole so that drivers could see it from a distance.

The stop after Mardock was Widford, also used by the inhabitants of Hunsdon about 1 1/2 miles away. During the war this was quite a busy little station with personnel from Hunsdon airfield using it. It had its own sidings with a coal depot. In July 1949 a lorry coming from the coal yard was hit by the train coming from Mardock, the driver was killed but the passenger was thrown clear.

After leaving Widford the line continued towards Much Hadham after it had crossed the river Ash over six bridges.

After closure the tracks were lifted in 1966 and used as scrap by steel companies. By 1972 there was little left of the track but evidence of its being still exists in several places. Widford bridge was removed in 1975.

Stephen stopped his talk at this point but will be back next year to continue the journey along the line to Buntingford.

There were numerous questions from the attentive audience coupled with memories from some of those present, such as the drivers trapping rabbits at the trackside, and the booking office clerk who used to use the Jolly Fisherman between passengers arriving at the station.

Stephen was warmly thanked by SALHS chairman Ian White for his interesting and amusing evening and we look forward to his return visit.



Mardock Station

NOTE

Check out our website it is always being updated with new material. Our previous newsletters will also be gradually added.
www.sahls.org.uk

SALHS Christmas Party

December 13th was the night of the 2013 SALHS Christmas party which 56 members attended. The hall was garlanded with lights and there were two Christmas trees in evidence. The tables were almost groaning under the weight of the food that members had prepared and generously brought along, and together with the drinks provided there was plenty to keep the inner man (and woman) satisfied.

Just as last year Brian Johnson and Terry Collins had a photographic competition, 20 pictures of places in the village taken from unusual angles or close up, to try and identify. This years winner were the Coppin family.

During the evening here was some excellent music provided by SALHS secretary, Lynne Heraud and her singing partner Pat Turner, traditional Christmas songs and one or two with a more 'adult' theme, but very funny. Hopefully this can be a future Christmas feature.

The evenings events had got under way with a short clip from the

1954 film 'The Belles of St Trinians' part of which was filmed at Easneye. Those of us who have been there will have recognized the house, the grounds and the road leading out past the lodge.

Bob Hunt and one or two members spoke to us about the High Street and the changes in the shops during the past 50 or so years, from about 30 or more to those we have today. To think that at one time there were two bakeries and three greengrocers, how things have changed.

Between all these activates there was a lot of time for socializing

After a very moving poem read to us by Imogen White, Ian White gave a short illustrated PowerPoint presentation looking at the origins of some of our best known Christmas traditions . For instance Yule logs stem from the pagan festival of Yule around December 21st, when druids kept a log burning for 12 days during the winter solstice. Robins on Christmas cards derive from Victorian postmen who wore red tunics. Carols were banned in Church in Medieval times, so they took the meaning of caroling, dancing in a circle, into the streets. Hence carol singers going from door to door. (Visit the SALHS website and you will find the complete presentation)

The raffle raised the princely sum of £87 and the whole evening was thoroughly enjoyed by all those who attended

Data Protection Act

In accordance with the above act we have to advise that the Society holds information on computer in respect of each member. This information is used for routine membership purposes only and remains confidential.

Forthcoming Events

Friday February 14th Sources for Family and Local History by Dr. Kate Thompson

Friday March 14th Building Restoration by John Lloyd

Friday April 11th Folk Cures and Remedies by Tom Doig

Unless stated otherwise all meetings are at the Parish Hall at 7.30pm
Members Free. Non Members £2 Tea, Coffee and biscuits included

Notes from the Past Part 5

This months note from William Clift's notebook is dated Feb 5th 1914 and reads, ' Ball condemned to death for Mrs Bradfield's murder, Eltoft 4 years.'

This relates to the murder of Mrs Christina Bradfield at her shop in Old Hall Street, Liverpool where she was bludgeoned to death on 10th December 1913. A witness saw two men wheeling a cart along the street near the shop with a large sack on it, the sack was found days later in the river blocking a lock gate. It contained the body of Mrs Bradfield, who had been battered around the head by a heavy blunt instrument.

Two weeks later George Ball a 22 year old tarpaulin packer was accused of the crime. His story was that a man had entered the shop and threatened Mrs Bradfield and himself with a gun and hit her over the head. His accomplice was Samuel Eltoft aged 18 a co-worker at the shop. They were tried at Liverpool Assizes and Ball was found guilty of murder and Eltoft of being an accessory. Being only 18 years old Eltoft was sentenced to just four years imprisonment while Ball was executed on 26th February 1914 in Liverpool.

The SALHS Committee May 2013

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