

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE AND THE PEASANTS' REVOLT OF 1381

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Buckinghamshire has often been portrayed as a county that was generally unaffected by the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. However, the successful prosecution eight years later of individuals involved in a disturbance in Gayhurst in July 1381 suggests that unrest, at least in the north of the county, may have been more prevalent than has frequently been assumed.

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1381, large parts of England were convulsed by a popular uprising on an unprecedented scale. The disturbances began in Essex and North Kent at the end of May in response to government attempts to investigate evasion of the Poll Tax. Within days, these disturbances had spread to neighbouring counties and amounted to a full-scale revolt. Bands of insurgents descended on London where a mass uprising threatened the royal authority of Richard II. While the violent uprising in the capital was relatively short-lived, serious disturbances continued across many parts of the country throughout the rest of the summer. These frequently involved assaults upon senior local figures, often including beheadings, attacks upon properties and the burning of official records. The causes of the revolt and the objectives of the insurgents have been long-debated amongst historians and doubt has been cast on the term 'Peasants' Revolt' to describe events that involved people from towns as well as the countryside, and from many varied socio-economic backgrounds. In most areas, the revolt had largely run its course or been suppressed within a few weeks, although disturbances on a smaller scale were recorded in subsequent years.¹

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE DURING THE PEASANTS' REVOLT

Buckinghamshire has largely appeared as a footnote in studies of the revolt, doubtless because there is no evidence of unrest on the scale seen in Essex, Kent and East Anglia in particular. In his ground-breaking study of the revolt, *Bond Men*

Made Free, Rodney Hilton noted only that 'there were village disturbances in Buckinghamshire,' while Barrie Dobson recorded just two instances of unrest in the county involving an attack upon Ashridge on the Buckinghamshire/Hertfordshire border by insurgents from Berkhamsted and the withdrawal of services by the tenants of the royal manor of Langley in the south-east corner of the county. While a Parliamentary commission to pursue the rebels of 1381 was approved for Buckinghamshire, as it was for many other counties, it does not appear to have been undertaken. Historians of the county have also largely skipped over this period. There is no reference to the uprising in Kim Taylor-Moore's recent study of medieval Buckinghamshire, while Lesley Boatwright stated that the county 'had not really participated in the Peasants' Revolt'.²

Historians' appreciation of the uprising has been greatly enhanced by an increasing focus on studying the contemporary administrative and judicial records, including those of individual manors, special commissions established by the Government in the wake of the revolt and the private prosecutions undertaken by some of its victims. These have helped not only to construct a detailed understanding of the series of events that constituted the revolt but also to help identify alleged participants and victims.³ The latter is currently the subject of an ambitious project being undertaken by a team of academics from Reading, Glasgow, Oxford and Southampton Universities that has, to date, identified over 4,200 alleged participants in the uprising (<https://1381.online/>).

In the context specifically of Buckinghamshire, there are extant records of a visit by the justices of the King's Bench to High Wycombe in the Mich-

aelmas term of 1389, eight years after the Peasants' Revolt. These are contained in a publication of late fourteenth century inquests and indictments that was edited by Lesley Boatwright and published by the Buckinghamshire Record Society in 1994. They include the details of a case that the grand jury presented to the justices in High Wycombe concerning an event in the north of the county in the summer of 1381 that appears to date to have missed the attention of historians of the revolt.

GAYHURST, JULY 1381

Specifically, it was alleged that on Friday 5 July, William Godeknavé attacked James Hamslope at Gayhurst. The attack was so severe that Hamslope's life 'was despaired of' and consequently Godeknavé was seized by the village constables, John Godefrey and John Hore, who put him in the stocks 'until he should find security for his good conduct towards the said James and the king's people.' On the following Sunday, a certain John Haversham lead a group of villagers from the nearby community of Stantonbury to Gayhurst where they released Godeknavé from the stocks and 'beat, wounded and ill-treated' Amisia, the wife of the constable John Godefrey when she raised the hue and cry against them.⁴

The disturbance was therefore a short-lived affair and did not have some of the constituent elements associated with unrest in other towns and villages, such as the beheading of those in authority, extortion, the destruction of property and the burning of manorial records.⁵ It did however have a number of similarities with outbreaks of violence in other counties in the summer of 1381 that have been seen by historians as forming part of the more general unrest associated with the uprising. Firstly, it would appear that the villagers led by Haversham were well-organised, armed and intent on committing violence. The indictment describes him as leading a 'band' that came to Gayhurst 'in warlike fashion with various arms, namely swords, shield and a pole-axe'. While there is no mention of the villagers raising a banner that would have been viewed as a treasonable action, the language used in the presentment is similar to that used to describe the events of the uprising elsewhere. Their actions in releasing Godeknavé from the stocks are also similar to the many reported examples from elsewhere of insurgents breaking into gaols and

releasing prisoners and were judged to be an assault on authority as the participants were described in the indictment as behaving 'in contempt of the king'.⁶ While the violence meted out to Amisia Godefrey was not fatal, it is similar to other cases of assault at the time upon village constables or, in some cases, their wives who were attacked because of animosity towards their husbands.⁷

There are therefore only a limited number of similarities between the incident at Gayhurst and the events elsewhere that were more clearly integral to the 1381 uprising. However, the description of the events at Gayhurst is quite different to that of other violent crimes committed in the county in the summer of 1381 that were also later presented to the justices of the King's Bench and that were more redolent of general lawlessness than an assault upon authority. For example, at the end of August, a group of seven men, including individuals from Staffordshire and Lincolnshire, broke at night into the rectory at Bledlow, murdered a servant of the parson and stole church ornaments, horses and gold and silver to the value of 70s.⁸

The motivations of Haversham and his band are not clear, nor is the origin of the dispute between Godeknavé and Hamslope. The original culprit William Godeknavé appears to have evaded arrest and prosecution as he did not appear at court and was ultimately outlawed in September 1390.⁹ The authorities seem to have been assiduous in securing the prosecution of John Haversham. Having failed to appear at court in January 1390, his attendance was sought on three further occasions in 1391 although each time he did not appear. He finally came to the court at Westminster in February 1392 and pleaded not guilty. However, at his trial in Easter 1392, he changed his plea to guilty and was fined 20s.¹⁰ The two constables, John Godefrey and John Hore, appear to have continued to play a leading role in their local community. Godefrey served as a juror in a coroner's inquest in 1383 and again in 1389, when Hore sat on the same jury. In addition, Hore served as a pledge in 1390 and 1391.¹¹ Neither the original victim James Hamslope nor Godefrey's wife Amicia make any further appearance in extant local records and the lack of other contemporary sources makes it difficult to examine the circumstances of the event in any greater detail. It is interesting to note that, in May 1382, Hamslope received a pardon relating to involvement in the general uprising of the previous

year. Seeking and obtaining a pardon was not, however, in itself an indication of an individual's involvement in the revolt. It seems that some people secured pardons as a form of insurance against the risk of malicious indictment regardless of whether or not they had been participants in the uprising.¹²

UNREST NEAR GAYHURST

While further details about the disturbance at Gayhurst are sketchy, it is possible to view it as part of a pattern of unrest that transcended county boundaries. Gayhurst and Stantonbury are close to the borders of Bedfordshire and Northamptonshire, both of which experienced disturbances during the summer of 1381. In Bedfordshire, the unrest seems to have been concentrated in particular around Dunstable and Luton, approximately 25 miles away from Gayhurst. In Northamptonshire, an attempted uprising was orchestrated by William Napton in Northampton, just 13 miles from Gayhurst while John Semper travelled across the county to generate unrest. Additionally, the relative proximity of both villages to the main highway of Watling Street would have facilitated the spread of news about the uprising more generally. It is therefore reasonable to view the events in Gayhurst in July 1381 as part of a more general pattern of disturbances that occurred outside London, were characterised by specific local and personal disputes and that amounted to 'copycats' of the unrest that had recently taken place in the capital and elsewhere.¹³

The disturbance at Gayhurst in the summer of 1381 should also be seen in the context of local unrest and resistance to authority that both preceded and followed the Peasants' Revolt. The manor court rolls of nearby Fenny Stratford and Eaton, for example, provide evidence of tenants refusing to undertake customary service in the years both immediately before and after 1381, while the local historian Frank Markham has speculated that residents of Whaddon may have left the manor to join the uprising. Additionally, Boatwright has suggested that the unusual decision for the King's Bench to visit High Wycombe in November 1389 may have been prompted by concerns about the levels of lawlessness in the preceding years in the Newport Hundreds area of Buckinghamshire, of which Gayhurst was part.¹⁴

DESCRIPTION OF THE UNREST

While most of the cases that were presented to the King's Bench justices in 1389 concerned recent events, that involving the disturbance at Gayhurst was over eight years old. This suggests a determination, perhaps on the part of the local constables, to ensure that the case was heard and that Godeknave and Haversham were brought to justice. It would appear that jurors were asked specifically to focus on offences against constables so this might explain why this particular incident surfaced at this time in the judicial records. It also opens up the possibility that the details of the case, presented so long after the uprising of 1381, were influenced by the judicial response to the revolt rather than being an accurate description of the events at the time. There is evidence to suggest, for example, that the presentments to commissions established after the 1381 uprising used formulaic terminology, some of which is echoed in the Gayhurst case. Additionally, there is evidence that, in the wake of the uprising, justices and jurors across the country, including in other cases in Buckinghamshire, deployed language to describe events as insurrections, revolts or treasons that would previously have been treated less seriously. While Godeknave and Haversham were pursued only for trespass offences, this does not rule out the possibility that certain language was deliberately deployed in the presentment to the King's Bench justices that, given the timing of the events at Gayhurst, was intended to create an association with the more violent and threatening events of the 1381 uprising.¹⁵

CONCLUSION

Even if the presentment to justices had been embellished in this way, it remains the case that the events at Gayhurst in July 1381 were deemed sufficiently serious to justify a presentment to the justices eight years later and subsequent dogged pursuit of the culprits that resulted, at least in one case, in the imposition of a sizeable financial penalty. On balance, there is a case for adding the events at Gayhurst to the small number of examples of disturbances in Buckinghamshire in the summer of 1381 that, taken together, suggest that the county was perhaps more troubled by the uprising than has often been portrayed.

NOTES

1. The best general accounts of the uprising remain Hilton R. 2003 *Bond Men Made Free: Medieval Peasant Movements and the English Rising of 1381* and Dobson B. 1983 *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*.
2. Hilton, 142; Dobson, 43; Taylor-Moore K. 2010 'Medieval Buckinghamshire AD 1066–c.1540' in Farley M. (ed.) *An Illustrated History of Early Buckinghamshire*; Boatwright L. (ed.) 1994 *Inquests and Indictments from Late Fourteenth Century Buckinghamshire*, xvii; Prescott A. 1984 *Judicial Records of the Rising of 1381* (Unpublished PhD Thesis, Bedford College, London), 65.
3. Prescott's unpublished thesis is particularly valuable in demonstrating the value of a range of judicial records to an understanding of the revolt. Dyer C. 1982 'The Causes of the Revolt in Rural Essex' in Liddell W.H. and Wood R.G. (eds.) *Essex and The Great Revolt of 1381* and Eiden H. 1998 'Joint Action Against "Bad" Lordship: The Peasants' Revolt in Essex and Norfolk', *History* **83**, 5–30 are both excellent examples of the value of manorial records to researching the revolt.
4. Boatwright, 160; National Archives KB 9/5, m.21.
5. Prescott, *inter alia* 9, 15, 17, 31–3, 37, 38, 48, 68–9, 95, 100, 102, 105–9, 113–4, 116–8, 127, 132, 135–6, 138–9, 143–5, 148–9, 153–5, 157, 159–60, 164–5, 168, 172–4, 178, 181.
6. Prescott, 21–2, 33, 65, 101, 111, 145, 153, 303, 339. The breaking of stocks specifically is frequently mentioned in the prosecutions of rebels, for example those in West Kent, National Archives KB 9/43, mm. 3, 5, 8.
7. Prescott, 31, 118, 170; Federico S. 2001 'The Imaginary Society: Women in 1381', *Journal of British Studies* **40**, 169–73.
8. Boatwright, 96–97.
9. Boatwright, 160, 191, 194, 199.
10. Boatwright, 160, 191, 192, 222, 224, 227, 228, 232.
11. Boatwright, 54, 115, 199, 222, 223.
12. National Archives C 67/29, m.11; Eiden, 8–9; Lacey H. 2008 "'Grace for the rebels": the role of the royal pardon in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381', *Journal of Medieval History* **34**, 47–54. There are no known extant contemporary records concerning Gayhurst manor. The National Archives hold court roll records for Stantonbury manor only for the period from 1422 to 1432–4. <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/c/F241340> online search 22 July 2020.
13. Prescott, 2–3, 7–8, 16–17, 68, 219, 261, 280, 338, 344, 347, 349, 370, 375; Hindle P. 2012 *Medieval Roads and Tracks*, 6, 20, 25; Miller E. & Hatcher J. 1995 *Medieval England: Towns, Commerce and Crafts 1086–1348*, 12.
14. Bradbrook W. 1920–6 'Manor Court Rolls of Fenny Stratford and Etone (Bletchley)', *Recs Bucks* **11**, 305–306; Markham F. 1973 *A History of Milton Keynes and District Volume 1 – to 1830*, 83, 84, 97; Boatwright, xvii–xviii.
15. Prescott, 21–22, 105–107; Eiden H. 1999 'Norfolk, 1382: A Sequel to the Peasants' Revolt', *English Historical Review* **114**, 370; National Archives JUST 3/164 m. 1v.