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John Wrawe and the Suffolk Uprising (1381)

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Introduction

John Wrawe (d. 1382) was a chaplain and rebel leader in the English uprising of 1381, otherwise known as the Peasants' Revolt. He was primarily active in the uprising in Suffolk, and his reputation was widespread in the region. Wrawe undertook the dirty work of implementing the millenarian tendencies in the revolt and the rebels' aims of a new (or revived) social order. Wrawe shared common assumptions of the biblically inspired myth of just kingship and believed he was acting in the name of King Richard II. This understanding was part of the rebel understanding of an alternative hierarchy under the king alongside a sole spiritual leader of the realm. It looks like this hierarchy was replicated at the county level, at least in East Anglia. Echoing biblical messianism, Wrawe was said to have taken on the priestly 'crown' of Suffolk while his associate bore the kingly 'crown.' At Bury St Edmunds the uprising invoked ancient authority (in this case, King Cnut) to bolster rebels' claims to new (or revived) liberties. Wrawe and the rebels also timed their entry into the town on the day of Corpus Christi, the popular festival celebrating the Eucharist and the body of Christ. Corpus Christi had further theological relevance for the rebels with its themes of sacrifice, community, and freedom, including freedom from bondage.

1381 Uprising

In the summer of 1381, England saw unprecedented violent uprisings from peasants, serfs, artisans, village elites, townsfolk, local officials, lower clergy, and others against the lords, landowners, ecclesiastical leaders, and royal advisors. The uprisings took different forms but, broadly speaking, were generated by hostility towards aggressive taxation, prevention of social mobility, and exploitation of labour, alongside various grudges and vendettas (for this context, see here). Decades earlier, the Black Death (1348/49) had wiped out possibly close to half the population. This meant significant changes in agriculture, land, tenancy agreements, and food supplies and prices. The shortage of labour meant workers could demand improvements in conditions and payment. With serfdom already in long-term decline, the aftermath of the Black Death brought new opportunities. Parliament pushed back, including attempts to cap wages and restrict mobility, most infamously through the Statute of Labourers of 1351. This fed into growing resentments and hostilities that came to the fore in 1381.

East Anglia witnessed some of the most extensive violence in the 1381 uprising. The chronicler Thomas Walsingham put it in apocalyptic terms:

> *God sent the wrath of his indignation into parts of Suffolk and Norfolk, his indignation and wrath, the harbingers of distress, through the agency of bad angels, certain men more dangerous than the rebels from Essex, themselves angels of Satan, to influence people who were living in peace, people who were harmless, to engage in disturbances like those already described, and to turn the hearts of serfs against their masters. (Walsingham, Chronica maiora 481)*

As mention of serfs turning on their masters suggests, there were material and ideological interests underpinning the violence that were typical of the uprisings elsewhere. As with the St Albans uprising, there was a dispute over the power of the monastery in Bury. In Suffolk generally, there were attacks on individuals associated with socioeconomic injustices and aggressive implementation of taxation, and they regularly involved burning manorial court rolls. Frustrations over social aspiration caused by both local lordship and national taxation gave the uprising a degree of coherency beyond local communities (Eiden 2008, 427–38). As Christopher Dyer put it, this was an uprising driven by and associated with an assertive peasant elite (among others) in Suffolk, committing acts of "selective destruction" to "establish a new social order" (Dyer 1994, 224–25, 229).

Lower clergy featured prominently in the uprising and could articulate discontents in biblical, theological, and millenarian language. By far the most prominent example is the popular priest John Ball, whose teachings give us insight into the millenarian tendencies among rebels and hopes for the transformation to a golden age (for the CDAMM entry on Ball, see here). In Suffolk, Wrawe was both the most prominent representative from the lower clergy and the most prominent leader in the regional uprising, with his reputation stretching beyond the county. Walsingham described Wrawe as a "treacherous commoner" and an "infamous priest" who thrived as a rebel leader (Walsingham, *Chronica maiora* 481, 483; see also, e.g., *Anonimalle Chronicle* 151; TNA KB 27/483 rex mm. 19-19d; TNA JUST 1/103 m. 11d; TNA KB 145/3/5/1 (m); TNA KB 145/3/6/1 m. 4; TNA KB 9/166/1 m. 9).

John Wrawe

Who Was Wrawe?

Beyond his emergence as a rebel chaplain in 1381, we know little about Wrawe's background. There is even some confusion about the identity of Wrawe, or rather there may be more than one insurgent by the same name in Suffolk. "John Wrawe of Sudbury" is typically associated with the leader of rebels active around Sudbury, Mildenhall, and the economically, politically, and administratively powerful monastery at Bury St Edmunds (TNA KB 27/484 rex mm. 26-26d; TNA KB 27/486 rex mm. 8-8d; TNA KB 27/486 rex m. 10). However, the list of those excluded from pardons for their roles in the East Anglian uprisings starts with "John Wrawe, chaplain," later followed by "John Wrawe, late parson of the church in Ringsfield," near Beccles (*Parliamentary Rolls* 2005, 111). John Wrawe of Ringsfield was associated with the violence around the nearby Beccles and Mettingham Castle in the northeast of the county.

Were there two John Wrawes, or did both these John Wrawes refer to the same person? Both options are possible. On the one hand, the violent activities in the northeast of the county are not mentioned in Wrawe of Sudbury's confession, which is a curious omission if we are dealing with the same person. On the other hand, we might raise suspicions about there being two prominent and strikingly similar figures active in Suffolk simultaneously. The problem, then, may have arisen through confusion over the same person associated with both Sudbury and Ringsfield.

Juliet Barker observed that the name John Wrawe is not found as a parson of Ringsfield, speculating that Wrawe may have lost his church or experienced an ecclesiastical demotion due to the influence of the monastery in Bury, which controlled Beccles (but not Ringsfield). If so, she added, "we might have a reason for Wrawe's actions in Bury St Edmunds" (Barker 2014, loc 3059; for further discussion, including the movements of Wrawe, see, e.g., Prescott 1984, 157; Eiden 2008, 430–31; Chick 2018, 216–17; Schoon 2024, 465–66). A related possibility is that the name "John Wrawe" was used by the parson of Ringsfield in homage to the different chaplain of Sudbury, a phenomenon that may be attested elsewhere with reference to Wrawe's reputation (see below).

Wrawe's War

The chroniclers only discuss a singular figure in the uprising. Walsingham claimed that Wrawe had been in London under the instruction of the most prominent leader of the uprising in the southeast and London—Wat Tyler. This is either a mistake or an attempt to tie Wrawe in with Tyler and discredit both, as the chronology does not match; Tyler was not in London at the time of the alleged meeting (Walsingham, *Chronica maiora* 481 with n541; Réville 1898, 60–62; Dobson 1983, 244n2).

The account of Wrawe's activities is clearer from 12 June 1381 onward. Wrawe and followers from Essex, Hertford, Suffolk, and Norfolk were active around the Essex-Suffolk border, where they summoned men from nearby Sudbury. They moved on to Overhall manor, belonging to the disliked Richard Lyons (a target of the revolt in London where he was killed), causing much destruction.

On 13 June, the rebel band arrived in Cavendish and acquired the keys for the parish church, taking stashed-away valuables. The valuables belonged to the target of rebel ire, the unpopular Sir John Cavendish, Chief Justice of the King's Bench who was involved in the Statute of Labourers and its implementation (Powell 1896, 13; Dyer 1994, 224, 231; Eiden 2008, 427–28; Dunn 2004, 153–54; Barker 2014, loc 9618). As Herbert Eiden argued, the rebels may have seen the plunder of Cavendish's estate and the redistribution of the spoils as legitimately distributing riches "acquired by an official who gravely misused his position" (Eiden 2008, 428).

Wrawe's band then moved on to Melford Green where they treated themselves to a "pipe of red wine" (around 105 gallons/477 litres) in a tavern, using the accumulated resources as a pledge before Wrawe (so he claimed) later paid the tab from his own money (TNA KB 27/484 rex mm. 26-26d; for the size of a pipe, see Eiden 2008, 428; Barker 2014, loc 4431). On the evening of the feast of Corpus Christi, the band continued to Bury St Edmunds. Wrawe raised a cry summoning the men of the town to the South Gate, threatening death for those who opposed (see also TNA KB 145/3/5/1 (m)).

On 14 June, Wrawe and others attacked and looted buildings belonging to the prior of the monastery, Sir John Cambridge. In another move typical of the uprising, Wrawe was said to have "commanded the prison

in the town of Bury St Edmunds to be opened and the inmates released" (TNA KB 145/3/5/1 (m)). We also see how Wrawe's name and reputation could provoke fear. On the same day, Wrawe's associate, Geoffrey Parfey (vicar of All Saints Church Sudbury) and others, including Parfey's chaplain, headed to Thetford across the Norfolk border. There, they extorted payment from the mayor and leading burgesses using the threat of Wrawe coming to destroy the town. Meanwhile, the knight Thomas Cornuerd extorted money from John Rokwode of Stanfield, using the threat of Wrawe and his band (allegedly without Wrawe's blessing). Cornuerd was said to have given a cut to Wrawe while being allowed to retain a share "for his labour" (TNA KB 27/484 rex mm. 26-26d).

Wrawe's band were able to deal personally with two chief targets: John Cavendish and John Cambridge. They had ransacked Cavendish's houses in Bury St Edmunds (TNA KB 145/3/5/1 (m)). Cavendish was captured and beheaded by rebels apparently associated with Wrawe's band, who placed his head on the pillory in the town's market square. According to one indictment, Cavendish would have escaped by boat had he not been thwarted by Katerina Gamen of Lakenheath, who freed the boat into the river before Cavendish could get to it (TNA KB 9/166/1 m. 2). Around Lakenheath in the preceding decade, Cavendish had been a commissioner sent by the crown to deal with assaults on officials following disputes over tax collection and punishments. His deeds were evidently remembered by the locals (Dyer 1994, 231; Barker 2014, loc 1780).

John Cambridge, the prior of the monastery, had fled Bury St Edmunds but was captured and beheaded by Wrawe's rebels after his guide betrayed him. These rebels took their prisoner to Mildenhall—where there had been historic hostilities towards the monastery and its dominance (Dyer 1994, 225–28)—and met with a large group of rebels (perhaps Wrawe's band). At Mildenhall Heath, the prior was sentenced to death by beheading. With his body stripped, the prior was left unburied for five days in an open field.

The perpetrators, with Wrawe and his followers, headed back to Bury triumphantly. The prior's head was placed high on the end of a lance for the Bury townsfolk to see. The rebels then reenacted the friendship between the prior and John Cavendish by bringing their heads together, "first as if they were whispering to each other, then as though kissing," before placing the heads on the pillory (Walsingham, *Chronica maiora* 483). As happened elsewhere in the uprising, playful, carnivalesque imagery and performance were carried out somewhat literally and with deadly consequences. Eiden further suggests that burning manorial archives "shows a significant resemblance to traditional midsummer bonfires," adding that such activities in 1381 were now "more harmful in intent and effect" as "annual rituals were transformed into acts of liberation and autonomy" (Eiden 2008, 436).

Dealings with John Cambridge brought Wrawe's band into a monastery-versus-town dispute, with some parallels to what happened at St Albans, though more violent. There was a history of bitter disputes with the Bury monastery (including an uprising in 1327), though there were more immediate controversies which had an impact on events of 1381. After the death of the abbot in December 1378, the candidate elected by the monks was poised to take over. However, Edward Brounfeld claimed he should have the role through the papal backing necessary for the position. Meanwhile, the prior John Cambridge, an opponent of Brounfeld, took on the role in the interim. In the politicking, conflicts, and hostilities that inevitably ensued, Brounfeld's cause harnessed popular hostilities towards the monastery. Brounfeld was tried and imprisoned, and town leaders were punished, yet the tensions between the monastery and townsfolk were only temporarily contained. Brounfeld remained the popular choice among the townsfolk, and Robert Westbrom, a close associate of Wrawe, was a supporter (Walsingham, *Chronica maiora* 501;

Close Rolls 1895, 81, 420; *Patent Rolls* 1897, 13–14).

After the execution of the prior, the rebels entered the cloisters, looking for selected targets, and captured Sir John Lakenheath, the keeper of the barony, a role which involved sorting payment collections and thus made him a natural choice (Oman 1906, 107; Dunn 2004, 154). He was duly beheaded, and his head likewise placed on the pillory. The rebels told the now-gathered monks that once they had lorded it over the burgesses of Bury, but now things would be shown to have changed in the presence of the people. An ancient legal precedent was sought: the charters of liberties granted by King Cnut (c. 990–1035 CE), the founder of the monastery. The monks brought out various materials that might help or potentially incriminate the rebels. Valuables were also handed over to the rebels and were to be returned to the monks on condition that the appropriate candidate (Brounfeld) be appointed abbot who would confirm the charters of liberty for the townsfolk.

The jurors of Bury later conveniently said, "on their oath that John Wrawe chaplain entered the town of Bury on 14 June 1381 against the peace of the king in the absence of the people of Bury" (TNA KB 145/3/5/1 (m)). This statement stretches credulity if taken at face value given the popularity and activities Wrawe and his band commanded in and around Bury coupled with the common hostilities towards the monastery. Indeed, after the uprising, Bury was not pardoned (unlike other towns), and leading townsfolk were later fined (*Close Rolls* 1920, 190; *Parliament Rolls* 2005, 103, 118). It was not until 23 June that the authorities took back control of Bury. The Earl of Suffolk, leading 500 men, arrived in the area after being sent by the king, with pleas and punishments soon to follow (Powell 1896, 25; Gottfried 1982, 235; Chick 2016, 44).

Meanwhile, in the preceding week, Wrawe of Ringsfield church was rampaging in northeast Suffolk (TNA KB 9/166/1 m. 39). Wrawe, the "cleric," was also active around Beccles, where he had an authority that complements what we know of Wrawe of Sudbury. His followers dragged Geoffrey Southgate (who was under the king's protection) before the authoritative Wrawe. Southgate was then beheaded by Edmund Barbour (TNA KB 9/166/1 m. 37). Wrawe's band were also involved in the attack on Mettingham Castle, resulting in a haul of riches for the rebels, though charters and legal documents were (as ever) a target of the rebels (TNA KB 9/166/1 m. 45).

The game was soon up for Wrawe (of Sudbury, at least), and an example was made of him. By 10 July, he was confessing criminal and traitorous activities before the sheriffs and coroner of London, possibly under torture. He was sent to the Tower, and in May 1382, Wrawe was sentenced to death (Walsingham, *Chronica maiora* 609). As *Anonimalle Chronicle* 151 put it, "their chieftain" was led to London, where he would be "drawn, disembowelled, hanged and beheaded."

Wrawe may not have had the illustrious reception history of Wat Tyler or John Ball, but his name did not entirely disappear from memory. It turns up in 1395 in a pardon for a fine that had been owed by the marshal of Marshalsea and his heir for the "escape of five prisoners committed to the said Robert's custody," one of whom was "John Raude *alias* Wrawe, of Sudbury" (*Patent Rolls* 1905, 643). Barker raises the possibility that Wrawe's death sentence was not carried out (Baker 2014, loc 5281). Alternatively, Wrawe's name was used as a typical bandit alias as it and he continued to carry credibility in the aftermath of the 1381 uprising, a possibility we have already seen in the East Anglian revolt. If so, this would further testify to his evident popularity and reputation across and around the region.

Wrawe’s Theology

Violent Theologian

Wrawe seems to have had no reservations about using violence or engaging in extortion. Unlike other leaders with comparable backgrounds (e.g., John Ball, William Grindecobbe), Wrawe is consistently presented in the chronicle and legal record as revelling in plunder for plunder’s sake rather than having a thought-out millenarian or sociopolitical agenda. However, we cannot easily disassociate him from such an agenda. The role of intimidation, violence, and extortion was common enough in the revolt and an integral feature of the denunciations of those deemed to have been exploiters (Justice 1994, 64–65). Even hostile sources noted that Wrawe and his sizeable following attacked familiar targets such as the homes and estates of “magnates and lawyers” (Walsingham, *Chronica maiora* 481, 483).

While we do not get obvious biblical interpretation and allusions with Wrawe, we cannot overlook the basic point that Wrawe was a clergyman nor that there was a sizable number of lower clergy involved in the revolt generally. A rebel of his profession knew that his attacks on hated landowners and powerful figures could be understood in biblical and theological terms. As with Grindecobbe and Ball, Wrawe’s popular appeal likely involved the implicit hope of a transformed society, a hope partially buried beneath hostile sources or ones concerned with official legal procedure and therefore uninterested in his theological motivations. Wrawe should be seen as a blunt instrument of the revolt, violently implementing the wider aims of social transformation (cf. Eiden 2008).

Kings and Priests of the Commons

There are other indications that Wrawe had ideological connections with the wider revolt. According to one indictment, Wrawe was said to have acted “in the name of the present King Richard” and claimed that “every man should come with him to commit robberies under pain of forfeiture of their life and members” (TNA KB 145/3/5/1 (m)). If we get behind the superficial framing of Wrawe’s deeds as acts of criminality, invoking the king in the 1381 uprising was typically done to challenge exploitation and authorise an alternative social order. The 1381 uprising seems to have worked with the common assumption that the king stood above all and was trusted to do good (cf. Lacey 2008), while close advisors and local lords were the problem. In broad terms, the myth of just kingship was possiblytied in with expectations at the enthronement of a monarch and assumptions underpinning inherited prophecies of an expected Christian leader dispensing justice (Cohn 1970, 32–35; Shoemaker 2015; Crossley 2022, 23–30). That Wrawe, like other comparable leaders, was remembered for acting in the name of the king implies that he assumed as normative general views of sacred or just kingship.

Mimicking the official system of the crown and its accompanying hierarchy, rebels (at least those associated with the southeast and London) saw the king accompanied at the top by Ball as the bishop. Beneath this, it seems that Tyler was understood to have an elevated position in this alternative hierarchy. We may have justified suspicion of the accuracy of Walsingham’s account of Wrawe meeting Tyler, but the story at least conveys the wider belief in Tyler’s popular leadership, his significance as a focal point for different counties, and his role as a conduit to the king. Walsingham also has an intriguing line in his account of an alleged confession by another major leader, the mysterious Jack Straw. According to Walsingham, Straw admitted that “we would have appointed Wat Tyler as king in Kent, and separate kings

in other counties" (Walsingham, *Chronica maiora* 498–499). There are difficulties using the alleged confession but this idea tallies with rebel claims about local or regional leadership.

For example, paralleling the presentation of Ball's preeminent position as spiritual leader of the realm in relation to the king, Wrawe was said to have taken on the priestly 'crown' alongside the kingly 'crown' of the second "most notorious rebel" of the Suffolk uprising, Robert Westbrom. Because Wrawe was a priest, Walsingham claimed, "he refused to put one crown upon another" and so left the other to Westbrom (Walsingham, *Chronica maiora* 591, 501). This relationship, then, copied or mimicked at county level the notions of rulership at national level while echoing biblical notions of distinct traditions of kingly and priestly messiahship. Walsingham gives another East Anglian example: Geoffrey Li(t)ster as the King of the Commons in Norfolk. If Walsingham is to be believed, this dyer-cum-king even made knights act as his bodyguards and cut up and taste his food before kneeling before their new king when he ate (Walsingham, *Chronica maiora* 490–491, 500–510).

In East Anglia, Wrawe held a degree of authority over his followers that complemented such elevated language, even if his prominence is sometimes overstated (so Chick 2016, 2018). As Alastair Dunn put it, that Cornuerd the knight had to hand over a significant amount of his plunder to Wrawe "suggests that Wrawe was able to command a degree of obedience from among his followers, even those who were undoubtedly his social superiors" (Dunn 2004, 153). Presumably, Wrawe would not have been able to raise the cry on pain of death at Bury St Edmunds at festival time without popular support and if he lacked sufficient authority. Wrawe's *name* carried authority and fear in the region, including Norfolk. For instance, rebels forced the town charter from the burgesses of Great Yarmouth, tore it in half, and sent one part to a number of Suffolk rebels, including to "John Wrawe, chaplain" (TNA KB 9/166/1 m. 83, 84, 86). In Wickmere, rebels plundered the rectory "by the order and warrant" of Wrawe (TNA KB 9/166/1 m. 46). Correspondence was also sent from Sudbury "on behalf of John Wrawe" to East Dereham in Norfolk concerning the restoration of a free tenement (TNA KB 9/166/1 m. 46; TNA KB 9/166/1 m. 58).

Wrawe carried sufficient authority around Sudbury and the Essex-Suffolk border to muster support quickly and gain entrance into the parish church at Cavendish, presumably reflecting Wrawe's parish influence and connections (Chick 2018, 217). Yet his sphere of influence, or at least having a name that carried fear or respect, was still wider, as he was said to have followers from and connections with surrounding counties. We also have the example of the church networks playing their role in the case of "John Michel, chaplain, [who] went out of the Isle of Ely into the company of John Wraw, chaplain and ringleader of the rebels, and became one of his deputies, and returned to the aforesaid Isle of Ely, and was there for three days at the time of the disturbance and rumour" (TNA JUST 1/103 m. 11d).

Other Connections

Other similarities between Suffolk and the wider revolt include ideas relating to new laws and charters in England grounded in ancient (or relatively ancient) authority, a view typical of aspirations at the time (Faith 1984). This ancient authority might be biblical (as in the case of Adam and Eve for John Ball) or founding documents or charters from England's past, as we see in the Bury uprising with reference to the time of Cnut.

As with rebels timing their entry into London, Wrawe's entry into Bury occurred at the festival of Corpus Christi (13 June). As Margaret Aston showed, the eucharistic context meant that the festival also involved

interpretation of biblical stories of liberation and the Exodus: as the Israelites had been freed from slavery, so the crucifixion would provide liberation for all (Aston 1994). And in terms of the uprising, salvation now emphatically had connotations of liberation for those under the bondage of masters, lords, and senior clergy. If we can only speculate about how Wrawe assessed the significance of the festive themes of sacrifice, community, and freedom, it remains that they were readily available interpretative options (cf. Eiden 2008, 436–37; on Corpus Christi and Bury, see Chick 2016, 40–41).

Sources

Primary Sources

Judicial documents from The National Archives (TNA) are now accessible on the AHRC-funded "The People of 1381 Online Database," available at www.1381.online, and through the work of Adrian Bell, Anne Curry, Helen Lacey, Andrew Prescott, Herbert Eiden, and Helen Killick.

Crucial among these sources is the confession of Wrawe (of Sudbury, at least). Before the sheriffs and coroner of London, Wrawe confessed to criminal and traitorous activities and gave testimony against some of his associates in the revolt (TNA KB 27/484 rex mm. 26-26d; TNA KB 27/486 rex mm. 8-8d; TNA KB 27/486 rex m. 10). While the confession is helpful in pinpointing locations and chronology of the events in the Suffolk uprising, it is difficult to know the extent to which we can be sure about the details of the confession given the possibility that information was given up under torture and/or an attempt by Wrawe to save himself. As R. B. Dobson pointed out, that several of the accused were acquitted and pardoned is further reason the testimony is "somewhat suspect" (Dobson 1983, 248).

Other published primary sources include *Close Rolls* 1895; *Patent Rolls* 1897; *Patent Rolls* 1905; Close Rolls 1920; and *Parliamentary Rolls* 2005.

The narrative account of the Suffolk uprising comes from Walsingham, *Chronica maiora*, 480–88, 501, 609, and John Gosford (a monk at Bury St Edmunds) available in Powell 1896, 138–43. A summary of Wrawe and the East Anglian revolt is presented in the *Anonimalle Chronicle* 150–151 (Galbraith 1970). English translations of key texts are collected in Dobson 1983.

Scholarship

For general discussion of Wrawe and the Suffolk uprising, see, e.g., Powell 1896, 9–25; Oman 1906; Gottfried 1982, 232–35; Prescott 1984; Dyer 1994, 221–39; Dunn 2004, 151–59; Eiden 2008; Barker 2014, loc 4381–4535; Chick 2016; Chick 2018.

Wrawe once received bad press among influential historians for whom he was typically seen as a vicious, unscrupulous, unthinking, even cowardly, gangster or bandit (e.g., Réville 1898, 77; Oman 1906, 103–4; Dobson 1983, 243, 249). More recent scholarship has challenged the thuggish interpretation of Wrawe and his supporters, emphasising the ideological similarities between Wrawe's actions and the wider revolt and stressing the significance of his targets. See, e.g., Dyer 1994, 221–39; Eiden 2008; Baker 2014, loc 4511–4535. Joe Chick (2016, 2018) has also challenged the idea that Wrawe was the most dominant leader

in Suffolk (and beyond).

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