The Hospitallers and the 'Peasants' Revolt' revisited


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Abstract

On the evening of Thursday 13 June 1381 a large armed band broke into the Hospitallers’ priory at Clerkenwell and set it and the many houses around it on fire, beheaded several people and plundered documents, goods and money from the house. The leader of this band was one Thomas Farndon or Farringdon of London, who had been one of the leaders of the rebels. After sacking Clerkenwell priory, Farndon and other rebels spent the night drawing up a ‘black list’ of those in the government that they wanted dead. On Friday 14 June Jack Straw and other rebels, including some of those who had attacked Clerkenwell, burned down Highbury Manor, the property of the prior of the Hospital in England, and looted it. Farndon and his associates then went to the Tower of London, where they seized the chancellor Archbishop Simon Sudbury of Canterbury (the chancellor of England), the treasurer Robert Hales prior of the Hospital in England (treasurer of England), John Cavendish the chief justiciar and other leading royal officials, marched them out to Tower Hill and beheaded them. This article examines why Robert Hales and the Hospitallers became the target of the angry ‘peasants’ in 1381. It concludes that the Hospital as a religious order and a landowner, alongside other religious orders and landowners, and because of its role as a sort of government financial office. Hales, however, was thoroughly hated; and this article examines why this was so.

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Medieval England experienced few revolts but the most serious was the Peasants’ Revolt which took place in June 1381. A violent system of punishments for offenders was usually enough to put off peasants from causing trouble. The Archbishop of Canterbury and the King’s Treasurer were killed. The king, Richard II, was only 14 at the time but despite his youth, he agreed to meet the peasants at a place called Mile End. What were the peasants angry about and why had they come to London? After the Black Death, many manors were left short of workers. The Peasants’ Revolt, also known as the Great Revolt, was a popular uprising in England in June 1381 CE. Beginning in the south-east and spreading to London and elsewhere, the rebellion’s leaders, who included Wat Tyler, did not want to remove King Richard II of England (r. 1377-1399 CE) but they did want massive social changes which included a removal of the poll tax, an end to the cap on labour wages, redistribution of the Church’s wealth and, the total abolition of serfdom. The revolt, which lasted only four weeks, was put down by Richard, first by negotiation and then through ruthless persuasion. The Peasants Revolt saw several deaths and posed a serious risk to the young King Richard II. Unrest over rights, taxation and the relationship between lords, the church and the people had been growing since the Black Death. The immediate cause, its spark, was a Poll Tax Riot in Fobbing, Kent. The revolt is now widespread. John Ball and the Church. The Kent rebels besiege Maidstone Castle, which surrenders. John Ball is freed, and Rochester Castle surrenders also.