

A COLCHESTER REBEL

A SHORT STUDY OF

JOHN BALL

SOMETIME PAROCHIAL CHAPLAIN AT
ST. JAMES'S CHURCH, COLCHESTER,
AND LEADER OF THE PEASANTS'
REVOLT OF 1381.

BY

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(VICAR OF EDWARDSTONE AND RECTOR OF GROTON,
SUFFOLK, 1940-1971)

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Since retiring to Colchester some ten years ago, I found myself becoming more and more interested in studying the life and work of this lowly priest, a parochial chaplain at St. James's Church in the town, who became, for a short time, a national figure. I offer this small study to the memory of a dedicated man, centuries ahead of his time, who had a vision of what England might become, and who died bravely on July 15th, 1381, for what he sincerely believed.

Published in connection with the Six Hundredth Anniversary of the Peasants' Revolt, and of his death.

Brian Bird

Colchester - 1981.



John Ball, leader of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, was, for the greater part of his life, connected with Colchester and district. He was the son of William and Joan Ball, of Peldon, a remote marshland village some seven miles from Colchester, on the Essex coast, opposite Mersea Island.

We first find him mentioned in the Colchester Court Rolls of 30th January, 1352, when, on coming of age in 1350, he had acknowledged the tenancy of a tenement between East and West Stockwell Streets in Colchester. This tenancy he made over to his widowed mother, Joan, for life. Six months later, on July 23rd, 1352, at the same Court, she granted this tenement, (now described in more detail as being in St. Martin's Parish, Colchester), to a certain Thomas of Nayland.

TRAINING IN YORK

John, in the meantime, had proceeded to St. Mary's Abbey in York, to train as a priest. There was, at this period, a two-way traffic between Colchester and York, particularly in ecclesiastical affairs. As far back as 1096, Stephen, Abbot of St. Mary's Abbey, York, had sent thirteen of his Benedictine monks down to Colchester to establish the newly-built St. John's Abbey there.

RETURN TO COLCHESTER

Soon after his ordination as a priest, John Ball returned to Colchester. In one of his allegorical letters, he described himself as "Sometime Saint Mary Priest of York and now of

Colchester." The ecclesiastical position he held in Colchester was that of parochial chaplain at St. James', East Hill, of which church the rector was, strangely enough, a priest bearing the same name as himself, possibly a relative. Parochial chaplains, in mediaeval times, occupied a status which, in the Church of today, would be that of assistant curate. They have been described as the clerical proletariat of the Middle Ages.

MENTIONS IN COURT ROLLS

In the Court Rolls of May 11th, 1377, we learn that John Ball and a fellow chaplain, John Proude, were living in East Street, Colchester. They brought a case against their landlord, William Crabbe, whom they accused of entering their house and, by force, removing certain of their goods in lieu of rent unpaid.

Then, on August 9th of the same year, the Rolls record that John Ball was assaulted by two brothers, Andrew and John Danel, who pleaded that they acted in self-defence.

It soon becomes clear that John Ball was not an ordinary, inoffensive curate, but a man involved in the society in which he lived. It is recorded that, for many years before he became a parochial chaplain at St. James's Church, he was active in the neighbourhood of Colchester, to the annoyance of the ecclesiastical authorities.

BALL'S PREACHING

The reason for Ball's clash with authority is not hard to find. For what he was preaching was nothing more or less than the social implications of Christianity. He wished to see a Christian democracy established, with all social inequalities redressed.

He took as his sole text, the popular jingle of the period, "When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?"

It was in the town of Colchester that John Ball did most of his work and preaching for social justice. His curacy at St. James's Church did not last long, and he was forced to preach where he could. He fought back against his detractors, preaching in churchyards to the people coming out of Church whenever possible. In the spring of 1381, Archbishop Simon of Sudbury complained bitterly that Ball had slunk back again into his Diocese, and was still preaching his perfidious doctrines.

EXCOMMUNICATIONS

THE DICTIONARY OF NATIONAL BIOGRAPHY gives the information that John Ball was probably over forty years of age when he became so conspicuous in history. It states that he was certainly living in Essex in the year 1366 when the Dean of Bocking was ordered to cite him to appear before the Archbishop of Canterbury, and to forbid persons to attend his preaching. Ten years later, there was an order for his arrest as an excommunicate priest, addressed to some of the clergy in the neighbourhood of Colchester. His first recorded excommunication was, however, in 1364, by Simon of Sudbury, Bishop of London, and subsequently the Archbishop of Canterbury who was killed in the Revolt of 1381.

CHRONICLERS' VIEWS

For his championship of the people, and his criticism of the Church, John Ball earned the opprobrium of all the monastic chroniclers of the day. The writer of the *ANONIMALLE CHRONICLE* refers to him as "a chaplain of evil disposition". Thomas Walsingham sums up Ball's sermons as "these and many other ravings", and Henry Knighton mentions that he "disturbed many with his own doctrines". Froissart is often quoted as referring to Ball as "a foolish priest in the county of Kent" as, when the Revolt broke out at the end of May 1381, Ball was confined in the Archbishop of Canterbury's gaol at Maidstone, from which he was subsequently released.

WORK WITH WAT TYLER

Ball was, undoubtedly, the inspiration behind the Peasants' Revolt. His sympathy, his understanding, and his enthusiasm, provided the driving force which was easily communicated to the people. But he needed organisational support, and this was provided by a fellow citizen of Colchester names Wat Tyler.

Wat Tyler had seen service in France with Richard Lyons, Sergeant-at-Arms to Edward III, and was working in Colchester at his trade as a tiler.

Here again, confusion about similar names occurs. There was a John Tyler of Dartford, in Kent, whose slaying of a tax collector in defence of his daughter's honour, sparked off the Revolt in that area, and he is often mistaken for the Colchester Wat Tyler.



Death of Wat Tyler

Mansell Collection



But, established historians emphasize that Wat was a Colchester man. Professor Rodney Hilton has written that "Tyler, too, came from Colchester, the home of John Ball". Similarly, Lindsay and Groves report that Tyler lived in Colchester, must have heard Ball speak, and was possibly converted by him. And American historian, Dr. George Kriehn, who has written what is perhaps the most detailed study of the English Peasants' Revolt, states emphatically that the Maidstone jury indictments distinctly inform us that Wat Tyler was from Colchester.

Tyler was a powerful speaker, an able negotiator and a good military strategist. He showed wisdom and ability as a leader, and exercised restraint on the side of discipline. His famous order to the rebels has come down through history - "Remember, we come not as thieves and robbers: We come seeking social justice!"

Of course, the monks had no good word to say for Wat. One monkish writer describes him as "a crafty fellow of an excellent wit, but lacking grace." Walsingham says he was "a cunning man endowed with much sense if he had decided to apply his intelligence to good purpose."

PLANS FOR THE GREAT SOCIETY

These two men, the chaplain and the tiler, were working together for some years in Colchester, making plans for the forthcoming Revolt. Their relationship was ideal. John Ball was the heart, and Wat Tyler the head, of the insurrection. They had a clear idea of what they were striving for. They wished to set up a new order of things, founded on social equality, and, in order to achieve this,

they created an organisation, an underground movement among the people, which they built up throughout Eastern England. It was known as MAGNA SOCIETAS. - "The Great Society."

There is ample evidence that such a society did exist. There are references in the records to men who rode round the country, with messages from the Great Society, and, after the collapse of the Revolt, men, on trial for their lives, claimed, in defence, that they were acting as agents of the Society. Perhaps the most convincing piece of evidence that such an organisation did exist lies in the fact that the Revolt spread so rapidly throughout the countryside. This could only have happened as a result of careful planning.

JOHN BALL'S LETTERS

As a stimulus to the Revolt, John Ball sent several letters to his followers, giving advice and counsel. These six rhyming epistles owe their preservation to the chance that two monkish chroniclers decided to insert copies in their narratives of the Great Revolt.

These letters not only call for an armed rising of the people, but reveal the mind of a mature political thinker. They do show that Ball received a marked influence from William Langland, whose VISION OF PIERS PLOWMAN, one of the finest allegorical poems in the English language, was written a few years before the Revolt broke out. The following give the content of some of Ball's letters:-

am ammes ammes cajezes confiantur
 et mactabunt Abie compulsum dnti
 rathes delide am fuisse eos fcauto
 est mstra his ad pnia mlla iwenm
 sa et pcedant na hno fore fatnent
 et ut sua dntina phyes miferet ad
 le blabhem vbi ducenta amia homi
 cum fueje simit conje gtra hnu
 amos seimonem est cyntis Deum
 deumous iohes dalle

Whan adam dalt and ene span
 Who was yame agentil
 man continuing q; seimon
 mcepti; mtebatu; pe; uba psonan qd
 ppe rthmte; Sumpar mjosnce; a
 pba;e ad mnta omnes pajes cteatod
 A natm; seimane p mstant opprestiond
 neqm homi mtebatu; conty eoi voftu
 ntem qua si deo plamisset gnus heaste
 vniq; in pncipio mlti confituerunt
 seimns quis vns fatinus finset si con
 siderant igni iam tempus a deo su
 am eis in quo deposito seimans nro
 dume possent si vellent liberate du
 concipit gaudyo duq;e moinir ur eant
 vni conditi er qnoze boni pceduntias
 exolentis agnum siliu; et exmpans ar
 sefctans nora gannna que fudez
 solent apphete er ut in ptesent fite
 je festinatit. Quinis miores regni
 dominos orisendo. Dende mtdros nra
 aq;os et mltosque pnti; pnuenas
 pofpemo gnosm; ficut mppostum
 adran nonnos tollent de teja sua
 sic dema; p pascu didinet pntem
 et decurrant in fumu; si sublati
 mltisq;us erit mty eos gna. h. f. l.
 ras: eadem hobilitad; pny; figmna
 sumis q; pntas. Et sum; hoc et ubi
 ja gha delipneura pte drcatit comme
 vulgns am tanto fauore pofequitur
 ut declinant cum q;chicistayn fity
 ad et regni caucstiyu; solum enim dig
 i q; pntas hmoze q;chicistayn qui tu
 mptas qat; com et regni pofpore
 fuisse et veyo serapitand; vbiatq; paf
 fer in angia; mpediend; miferat
 mntoribus cotu; in q; fteys gnamu;
 han; eugnatit; plenam ad hancidm
 eos in mtepra pntem que ex post mte
 ra est in mnta; amuisam; hifpoueant
 mo mbarone pnta; am; tenor; est d
 ia iohis dalle msta; ad; Ca; rye
 johan; Schay; Com; tyme; seipite; vny
 prof; of; 2011; and; host; of; calche; rye
 vntes; Wel; johan; nameles; j; johan; pe
 wntle; and; johan; cithre; and; bidey
 wnt; vnt; per; hoc; Way; of; gyle; m
 dynght; and; pntes; to; gide; je; m; go
 des; name; and; bidey; wntes; p; m; m; a;

go to his West and escape Wel hobbe
 ye jobbe; and take; for; job; johan;
 johan; man; and; alle; his; and; fante;
 and; no; mo; and; lobe; fchape; ion; to; on
 genes; and; no; mo; job; ye; anille; bay
 y; gromde; sival; sival; sival; ye; keng;
 bone; of; henene; sehal; pare; for; ad; be
 War; or; ye; de; Wo; knower; zony; flens;
 ho; ion; for; hant; y; noll; j; foch; ho
 and; so; Wel; and; benje; and; flet; some
 and; seley; wos; and; hold; zony; per; nne
 and; so; bidey; johan; t; waman; and;
 alle; his; fclides; J; hanc; hanc; ptem
 johes; dalle; confessis; est; scriptis; et
 communis; hant; fisse; et; pny; sua; fa
 tebim; et; fact; pntes; que; ut; dymna
 hant; suspens; et; decollans; apud
 san; albam; jels; july; pntem; jete
 et; cady; eius; gngym; jnatu;
 regu; amant; miffim; est; pntes; de
 hys; que; gesta; sunt; apud; san; albam
 vntes; hntes

Debentis typham iustitiam
 ad nos orob; apud san; albam
 connotay; fact; d; d; d; d; d;
 mde; omnia; ad; mntand; et; pntem
 malefator; et; pntes; jete; m; hntes;
 vntem; q; mnta; de; vnta; p; d; d; d;
 nulla; ralon; fape; mlti; mntate; mste
 posse; amrtos; fideles; et; obfegmnes
 jete; fore; semp; q; fuisse; J; vntes; an
 tem; iustitiam; and; tenide; ista
 jessons; ut; qat; v; d; d; d; et; mo
 fuisse; mtehgente; pntem; m; pntes
 et; mntos; essent; vbi; mnta; d; d;
 ex; pre; jete; quando; mntem; aggesti
 m; olim; regu; mntem; et; pntem; pntem
 labant; in; hoc; vntem; et; p; d; d; d;
 et; vntem; conpntes; si; mntes
 conpntes; et; mntes; mntem;
 regu; mntem; su; alid; mnta; d; d;
 nem; jete; eos; mntes; pntem; and;
 pntem; qntem; pntem; qntem; mntem
 fatores; si; de; pntem; fuisse; p; d; d; d;
 gressi; sunt; mntem; de; mnta; qntem;
 vestig; fente; et; pntem; ad; lo
 am; qntem; de; pntem; mntem;
 et; pntem; de; mnta; mntem; qntem;
 jontem; in; qntem; et; nota; pntem; et
 malefata; mntem; mntem; an; gntem;
 mntem; d; d; d; pntem; mntem; fite
 ja; p; bonos; vntes; et; fideles; pntem;
 gntem; mntem; pntem; er; vos; pntem
 mntem; nos; omnes; d; d; d; vntem;
 et; ut; excedere; d; d; d; mntem;
 pntem; cum; in; pntem; mntem;
 et; nota; et; fact; pntem; quos; vos
 mntes; mntem; vntem; agntem; pntem
 gntem; vobis; excedere; et; pntem; vntem

"John Ball greets you all, and wants you to
 understand that he has now rung the bell for you:
 With right and might, with will and skill, may God
 hurry you forward in everything you have planned
 together. In the name of the Holy Trinity make
 a good end to what you are now beginning."

"John Ball, priest of St. Mary's, greets all
 men and bids them to stand together manfully in the
 truth. Maintain the truth, and the truth will maintain
 you. God give you aid, for now is the time".

"John Ball, sometime St. Mary priest of York,
 and now of Colchester, greets well John the Miller,
 John Trueman and John Nameless, and bids them beware
 of guile and cunning in their future dealings in the
 towns. Urge Piers Plowman to chastise Hobbe the Robber
 (Sir Robert Hales, the hated Treasurer) and his band.
 But remember to stand together in God's name, and look
 to it that you shape yourselves to unity. Know well
 who is your true friend and who is your foe. Do well,
 and even better, and in all your doings, avoid falling
 into sin. Above all, in the end seek peace, and hang
 on to it. All men will be with you in this."

BALL IN PRISON.

When the Revolt broke out, on May 30th, 1381,
 John Ball was already incarcerated in the Archbishop's
 prison at Maidstone in Kent, having been arrested a
 month previously on a charge of seditious preaching.
 He was released on June 7th by some of the Essex men
 marching on London, under Wat Tyler, who had crossed
 the Thames for the purpose of freeing their leader.
 With the men of Kent, John moved towards London.
 This force reached Blackheath on the eve of the
 Festival of Corpus Christi, and here they rested. The
 following morning, June 13th, at the request of the
 men, John Ball celebrated Mass, and preached before
 an assembly of fifty thousand determined rebels.

John Ball's letter to the Essex Peasants, beginning at the foot of the first column.

British Museum MS Royal 13.E.ix, fol. 287r.

SERMON AT BLACKHEATH

This famous sermon has been recorded for posterity as, fortunately, two monkish chroniclers, Walsingham and Knighton, included it in their histories. The gist of the reports of these two hostile critics is given here:

"My good friends, matters do not go well in this England of ours, nor will they, until all things are held in common, and there are no villeins or gentlemen, but that we may be all united together. By what right are they whom we call lords greater folk than us? We are all come from one father and mother, Adam and Eve. How then can these lords prove that they are better than us except by making us gain for them, by our toil, that which they spend on their pride? They are clothed in velvet and are warm in their furs, and we are dressed in poor cloth. They have wines and spices and good bread; we have oat cakes and straw, and water to drink. They dwell in fine houses, and we have the pain and travail, and the rain and wind in the fields. Yet, my friends, it is due to us, to our toil, to the labour of our hands, that these men keep and maintain their estates."

John went on to tell them that all men were created equal by nature, and that servitude of man was introduced by the unjust dealings of the wicked, and was contrary to God's will. For, if God had intended some to be serfs and others lords, he would have made a distinction from the beginning. Englishmen now had an opportunity given them, if they chose to take it, of casting off the yoke they had borne for so long and of winning the freedom they had always desired. Therefore, he concluded, they should take good courage and behave like the wise husbandman of Scripture, who gathered the wheat into his barn, but uprooted and burned the tares that half-choked the good grain.

HAPPENINGS IN COLCHESTER.

The main events of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 have been described in most history books of our country, and it is not necessary to repeat them here. As far as Colchester is concerned, it is recorded that a higher proportion of men from that town, than from any other, joined the rebel ranks. The Court Records report that during the Revolt both the Town Hall and St. John's Abbey were stormed and, in each case, Court Rolls and Muniments were destroyed.

JOHN BALL IN LONDON

John Ball was in London throughout the fateful last days of this first-ever mass rising of the English people. Although Froissart names Ball, Tyler and Jack Straw as being present at the killing of the Archbishop and Treasurer, in the Tower, it is doubtful if such leaders would have left the main force of rebels at Mile End at this important juncture. But John Ball was certainly with the rebels at the tragic events of the Smithfield confrontation when Wat Tyler was enticed away from his men, surrounded and slain. This really ended the Revolt. The peasant army dispersed, after promises given by King Richard II, which he subsequently repudiated. John Ball fled to Coventry, where he remained in hiding.

COLCHESTER HANGINGS

King Richard entered Colchester on July 2nd at the head of an army of retribution. An Assize was set up under Sir Robert Tresilian, Chief Justice of Essex. So many men were sentenced to hanging by this severe judge that there was a shortage of gibbets and carpenters to make them. Consequently, chronicler Walsingham reported that nineteen men might be seen hanging from one beam.

EXECUTION OF JOHN BALL

John Ball was arrested at Coventry on July 13th, removed to St. Albans, and arraigned before Judge Tresilian at his Assize there. He faced his accusers fearlessly and admitted taking part in the Revolt. He was sentenced to death, and was hung, drawn and quartered on July 15th, 1381, in the presence of King Richard and his ministers. The four portions of his body were sent to the four corners of the country as an example to anyone else who might have similar ideas about democracy.

REBEL BEFORE HIS TIME.

Thus died one of England's long-forgotten heroes, a Colchester priest who was indeed a rebel before his time. For the ideas John Ball put forward are perhaps taken for granted in our modern, democratic age.

In one of his letters, John Ball wrote "At the even, men heareth the day". In those Dark Ages, in the evening of English life, when the lights seemed to be dimming everywhere, there were men who heard the day, who had the vision of the England of the future, where men and women could live, happy and free.

This late fourteenth century period has been described by G.M. Trevelyan as a time when "the ideas of the modern world were forming in the greatest minds of the day". One such mind was undoubtedly that of a parochial chaplain named John Ball who saw clearly, as he went about preaching in Britain's oldest recorded town, the shape of the better things that were to come.



*St. Gregory's Church, Sudbury,
Suffolk: the head of Archbishop
Simon*

