

# The 1381 Rising in Bury St Edmunds: The Role of Leaders and the Community in Shaping the Rebellion

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Leadership is a central theme in popular perceptions of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. The image of the rebel leader Wat Tyler face-to-face with King Richard II at Smithfield, which appears in Louis of Gruuthuse's manuscript of Froissart's chronicle, forms one of the most iconic images of the uprising (see Figure 1). Other rebels have been described as county leaders. One such individual is John Wrawe, a chaplain from Sudbury in the south of Suffolk, often referred to as "the Suffolk leader".<sup>1</sup> The secondary literature attributes actions across the county, and in some cases beyond, to the leadership of John Wrawe.<sup>2</sup> The historian Rodney Hilton used figures such as Wrawe to form an organisational model of a revolt which, whilst not centrally organised, was led through a county framework with significant levels of communication between groups of rebels.<sup>3</sup> Whilst placing leaders at the centre of his arguments, Hilton's model does not attribute a great degree of individual agency to them. Under his interpretation of the rising, leaders act within a wider organisational framework in which local risings were part of a wider class struggle.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the prominence of rebel leaders in popular narratives of the revolt, the importance of communities also emerges throughout the secondary literature. A number of historians have explored how long-term grievances were formed through the impact of the Black Death of 1349 on the social and economic conditions of local communities. The death of about half of the population meant that labour was in short supply, potentially providing the peasantry with a basis to negotiate more favourable terms with their landlords.<sup>5</sup> Many

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<sup>1</sup> Rodney Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free: Medieval Peasant Movements and the English Rising of 1381* (London: Routledge, 1973), p. 208; Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1994), p. 64; Herbert Eiden, 'Joint Action against 'Bad' Lordship: The Peasants' Revolt in Essex and Norfolk', *History*, 83.269, (1998), p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> Edgar Powell, *The Rising in East Anglia in 1381: With an Appendix Containing the Suffolk Poll Tax Lists for that Year* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1896), pp. 36, 41 & 48; Alastair Dunn, *The Great Rising of 1381: The Peasant's Revolt and England's Failed Revolution* (Stroud: Tempus Pub Limited, 2002), pp. 122 & 126; Hilton, *Bond Men*, pp. 219-220.

<sup>3</sup> Hilton, *Bond Men*, pp. 219-220.

<sup>4</sup> Hilton, *Bond Men*, p. 220.

<sup>5</sup> Dunn, *The Great Rising*, p. 23.

lords, however, sought ways to enforce traditional feudal relations, creating tensions in many communities.<sup>6</sup> A case study by Miriam Müller explores the reactionary measures of the Bishop of Ely in the Suffolk manor of Brandon after the plague and the collective resistance of his tenants in response. In it, she argues that the failure of the peasants' peaceful action to gain concessions from their lord drove them to participate in the 1381 rising.<sup>7</sup>

This article explores the relative role of leaders and communities within Bury St Edmunds, a town in western Suffolk under the lordship of the Abbey of St Edmunds. The rising in Bury began on 13 June with the arrival of Wrawe's company and accounts of the rising in the town tend to attribute key actions to his leadership.<sup>8</sup> This article, however, will argue that Wrawe's role as a leader has been overstated. Instead, the Bury rising saw a community taking advantage of the country's turmoil to pursue long-standing local grievances. Leadership was important, but came from prominent individuals within the local community rather than from the outsider Wrawe.



Fig. 1: *The Death of Wat Tyler*

<sup>6</sup> Richard H. Britnell, 'Feudal Reaction after the Black Death in the Palatinate of Durham', *Past & Present*, 128, (1990), 28-47 (p. 28); Mark Bailey, *Medieval Suffolk: An Economic and Social History, 1200-1500* (London: Hambledon Press, 2007), p. 202.

<sup>7</sup> Miriam Müller, 'Conflict and Revolt: The Bishop of Ely and his Peasants at the Manor of Brandon in Suffolk, c. 1300-1381', *Rural History*, 23.1, (2012), 1-19 (pp. 6 & 15).

<sup>8</sup> Robert S. Gottfried, *Bury St Edmunds and the Urban Crisis: 1290-1539* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp. 233-234; Juliet Barker, *1381: The Year of the Peasants' Revolt* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 299; Hilton, *Bond Men*, p. 141; Dunn, *The Great Rising*, pp. 124-125.

## Sources for the Suffolk Rising

Traditional accounts of the Bury rising draw heavily on Walsingham's chronicle, a narrative which focuses on Wrawe rather than the communities he visited.<sup>9</sup> This is due to the exceptional detail he gives of the events, which has, perhaps, been mistaken for an exceptional level of knowledge. Walsingham was a monk of St Albans, but may have had some local knowledge of East Anglia as a result of the Abbey's dependent house of Wymondham in Norfolk, of which he was the prior in later years.<sup>10</sup> St Albans also had cultural links with the Abbey of St Edmunds, often appearing on the same route for royal processions, and Walsingham may have gained his information on the rising from a contact in Bury.<sup>11</sup> His knowledge was not, however, first-hand and his account includes inaccuracies, attributing an incorrect start date to the rising and an incorrect location to one of the murders and describing a highly doubtful meeting between Tyler and Wrawe.<sup>12</sup>

Although cited far less often, there is another account of the Bury rising written by John Gosford, almoner of the Abbey of St Edmunds.<sup>13</sup> Unlike Walsingham, Gosford lived in Bury and was most likely an eye-witness to some of the events he recounts. It may be the lack of a compelling narrative with an iconic rebel leader that has caused his version to receive less attention. This feature itself is an interesting difference between Walsingham's and Gosford's accounts. In stark contrast to the St Albans monk's emphasis on Wrawe, Gosford does not name any rebels individually, nor are any of his unnamed rebels recognisably identifiable as Wrawe. With reference to a number of other sources, this article will explore the contrasting version of events in these two chronicles.

Three key non-chronicle sources will be used to compare the accounts. Firstly, the testimony of John Wrawe himself, in which he attempted to save himself by giving evidence against other rebels.<sup>14</sup> Unsurprisingly, he attributes a far smaller role to himself than many other sources. In light of Gosford's evidence, however, his version should not be dismissed entirely. Secondly, a sample of indictments against other individuals survives from a commission that heard cases against rebels in Suffolk and Norfolk, led

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<sup>9</sup> For a translation of the relevant section of Walsingham's chronicle, see Thomas Walsingham, *The Chronica Maiora of Thomas Walsingham, 1376-1422*, ed. by James G. Clark, trans. by David Preest (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005), pp. 142-144.

<sup>10</sup> Mark Freeman, *St Albans: A History* (Lancaster: Carnegie Publishing, 2008), p. 52.

<sup>11</sup> James G. Clark, *A Monastic Renaissance at St. Albans: Thomas Walsingham and his Circle, c. 1350-1440* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 40.

<sup>12</sup> Walsingham claims Wrawe's actions began on 15 June rather than 12 June, as the legal evidence suggests. See Richard Barrie Dobson (ed.), *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Springer, 1983), p. 244, n. 1. Walsingham claims that Sir John Cavendish was murdered in Bury rather than Lakenheath, as stated in the indictment evidence. See Walsingham, *The Chronica Maiora*, p. 142. Walsingham's supposed meeting in London between Tyler and Wrawe takes place on a date before Tyler had actually reached the capital. See Andrew J. Prescott, 'Judicial Records of the Rising of 1381' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of London, 1984), p. 127.

<sup>13</sup> For the relevant sections of Gosford's text, see Powell, *The Rising in East Anglia*, pp. 138-143.

<sup>14</sup> Dobson (ed.), *The Peasants' Revolt*, pp. 248-254.

by William de Ufford, the earl of Suffolk.<sup>15</sup> Thirdly, in the autumn of 1381 parliament

Table 1: Suffolk individuals excluded from the general pardon.	
Name	Region
William Benington	Sudbury and Essex
Geoffrey Parfay	
Thomas Underwood	
John Wrawe	
John Clak	
Geoffrey Denham	Bury
Thomas Halesworth	
Robert Sad	
John Talmage	
Robert Westbrom	
Thomas Yoxford	
Edmund Barbour	
John Batisford	East Suffolk
Robert Prior	
Thomas Sampson	
John Wrawe <sup>16</sup>	
Jacob Bedyngfeld	
... Botemor <sup>17</sup>	Unknown
John Carter	
John le Dene	

<sup>15</sup> The National Archives, KB 9/166/1, fol. 43, at <<http://aalt.law.uh.edu/AALT7/KB9>> [last accessed on 17 April 2016]. Some of these pleas are available transcribed but untranslated in Powell, *The Rising in East Anglia*, pp. 126-131. Two indictments are translated in Dobson (ed.), *The Peasants' Revolt*, pp. 255-256.

<sup>16</sup> The name John Wrawe appears twice in this list and some historians have treated them as one person. There is strong evidence, however, that they were two separate individuals. See Chick, 'Reassessing the 1381 Rising', pp. 17-18.

<sup>17</sup> No forename given in *PROME*.

produced a list for each county of key rebels to be excluded from a general pardon which it had issued.<sup>18</sup> Table 1 gives the list for Suffolk, categorised by the rebel's region of origin. A historian's first reaction would be that it provides a list of those considered key players by the authorities. Andrew Prescott, however, places little value on the exclusion list, noting that it includes both prominent rebels, who were later executed, and individuals who simply had had unfounded allegations directed their way.<sup>19</sup> He bases such a position on the fact that a number of the rebels were later acquitted or pardoned. In the case of the Suffolk rebels, it has been argued that pardons were achieved through social status rather than innocence, so this list remains a useful source.<sup>20</sup>

The sources pose two major challenges. The first is the lack of evidence, with many names appearing just once throughout the sources. The second is the authorship of the sources. Chronicles were mostly written by monks, parliamentary and judicial records by the governing and legal class. These were the very sections of society that the rebels were confronting. It is thus difficult to capture the voices of the rebels themselves as they are not expressed directly. This article will explore the backgrounds of a number of prominent rebels and, drawing on all the sources we have for each individual, it considers the context of their actions in 1381 to suggest their likely motives.

### **The instigation of rebellion in Bury**

When Wrawe entered Bury on 13 June 1381 he had already established his position as the leader of a company of rebels. This company had assembled in Liston, a village in Essex close to the Suffolk border, on 12 June. The following day they crossed the border and proceeded to Cavendish and Melford Green, helping themselves to goods, before travelling to the monastic town of Bury St Edmunds. In his own testimony, Wrawe does not deny playing a leading role in these early actions, which were characterised by looting.<sup>21</sup>

Bury was not, however, just another community targeted by his rebels. It was a far larger settlement than those which he had previously visited. It was also a community with a long and well recorded history of discontent against its lord, the Abbey of St Edmunds. The Bury townsmen had fought against the Abbey for self-government for over a century, leading rebellions in 1264 and 1327.<sup>22</sup> A settlement of 1332 had reinforced the Abbey's power, so these tensions were never fully settled.<sup>23</sup> In 1379 there was an abbatial vacancy in Bury and the majority of monks elected John of Timworth to be the new abbot. A separate faction of monks, however, managed to secure a papal nomination for Edmund

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<sup>18</sup> Christopher Given-Wilson (ed.), *The Parliament Rolls of Medieval England* [henceforth *PROME*], 1377-1384 (Leicester: Scholarly Digital Editions, 2005), p. 111. CD-ROM version.

<sup>19</sup> Prescott, 'Judicial Records', pp. 357-359.

<sup>20</sup> Joe Chick, 'Reassessing the 1381 Rising in West Suffolk: Coordinated Revolt or Localised Events?' (unpublished MRes dissertation, University of Reading, 2016), pp. 42-44 & 58-60.

<sup>21</sup> Chick, 'Reassessing the 1381 Rising', pp. 11-12.

<sup>22</sup> H.W.C. Davis, 'The Commune of Bury St. Edmunds, 1264', *The English Historical Review*, 24.94, (1909), pp. 313-314; Gottfried, *Bury St Edmunds*, pp. 222-223.

<sup>23</sup> Gottfried, *Bury St Edmunds*, p. 231.

Broomfield, an individual with close connections to a number of townsmen.<sup>24</sup> This dispute became an opportunity for the townsmen to push their self-government agenda once again, with Broomfield promising concessions, and the issue had not been fully settled at the time of the 1381 revolt. It is evident from Gosford's record that the town's revolt was closely linked to this dispute. His account of the rebellion makes five mentions of the 'papal nominee' (*provisor*).<sup>25</sup> Secondary works since the nineteenth century have mentioned this context but have not drawn a direct link between the abbatial election dispute and the rebel actions of 1381.<sup>26</sup>

Much of the secondary literature passes over the issue of the instigation of the town's revolt. Two works that do comment on this process present Wrawe as having arrived and single-handedly organised the townsmen into action.<sup>27</sup> Alastair Dunn implies a degree of helplessness on the part of the townsmen, claiming that they "sent for John Wrawe".<sup>28</sup> In his testimony, the chaplain admits to raising the hue and cry and threatening anyone who did not join him with execution, but does not specify if there were other instigators nor comments on how the townsmen responded.<sup>29</sup> In their efforts to deny responsibility, one Bury jury even went as far as to claim that Wrawe arrived "in the absence of the people of the said town of Bury".<sup>30</sup> This claim instinctively sounds "preposterous", to borrow the words of Prescott.<sup>31</sup> It is worth, however, considering the context of the timing of Wrawe's arrival, which was during Corpus Christi.

Corpus Christi was a major festival across medieval England and had assumed a particular prominence in Bury, where one of the largest guilds was that of Corpus Christi.<sup>32</sup> Town records reveal that the celebrations took the form of a procession, a pageant and games.<sup>33</sup> Could these activities have drawn much of the population out of the town? The same records do not specify the location of the activities, but if they assumed a similar form in Bury as elsewhere the town would have been far from deserted. It was normal for the procession to occur in the main thoroughfare of a town and for the celebrations to attract people from the surrounding countryside.<sup>34</sup> Bury's streets would, in fact, have been exceptionally full upon Wrawe's arrival. It is possible that the Bury jury meant the population was in the centre rather than at the gates when he entered, yet this also seems

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<sup>24</sup> Gottfried, *Bury St Edmunds*, pp. 232-233.

<sup>25</sup> This term refers to an ecclesiastical candidate appointed directly by the pope, a practice which Edward III attempted to prevent through the Statute of Provisors of 1350-51. See William M. Ormrod, *Edward III* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), pp. 367-368.

<sup>26</sup> Powell, *The Rising in East Anglia*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>27</sup> Barker, *1381*, p. 299; Gottfried, *Bury St Edmunds*, p. 233.

<sup>28</sup> Dunn, *The Great Rising*, pp. 123-124.

<sup>29</sup> Dobson (ed.), *The Peasants' Revolt*, p. 250.

<sup>30</sup> Andrew J. Prescott, 'Writing about Rebellion: Using the Records of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381', *History Workshop Journal*, 45, (1998), p. 25, n. 103.

<sup>31</sup> Prescott, 'Judicial Records', p. 12.

<sup>32</sup> Gail McMurray Gibson, 'Bury St. Edmunds, Lydgate, and the N-Town Cycle', *Speculum*, 56.1, (1981), 56-90 (p. 63); Gottfried, *Bury St Edmunds*, p. 188.

<sup>33</sup> Gottfried, *Bury St Edmunds*, p. 103; Gibson, 'Bury St. Edmunds', p. 60.

<sup>34</sup> Mervyn James, 'Ritual, Drama and Social Body in the Late Medieval English Town', *Past & Present*, 98, (1983), pp. 5 & 12-13.

improbable. Public order problems often occurred during the celebrations, so the town officials would have been particularly vigilant at this time about those entering Bury.<sup>35</sup>

The notion that Wrawe single-handedly initiated action raises practical questions. He had now left the small villages of his early acts and arrived in the principal town of the region. It seems unlikely that Wrawe's company could have coerced a population of about 3,500, inflated with Corpus Christi celebrations, into action.<sup>36</sup> The threats he describes in his testimony were most likely directed towards those immediately present upon his arrival rather than the whole populace of the town. Although Gosford does not discuss how the town's rising began, the indictment evidence supports a more reduced role for Wrawe. In one surviving indictment, George Donnesby of Lincolnshire also confesses to inciting rebellion in Bury.<sup>37</sup> Although Wrawe and Donnesby were outsiders, some townsmen almost certainly instigated action too. Corpus Christi celebrations typically involved members of the social elite, such as aldermen and other officials.<sup>38</sup> With many townsmen on the streets and officials present, it would have been difficult for two outsiders to instigate a rebellion without some degree of involvement from the townsmen. Corpus Christi celebrations encouraged community spirit and the combination of this and Wrawe's arrival would have been a powerful stimulus for rebellion.<sup>39</sup>

### **The emergence of community leaders**

Wrawe does not deny exercising a form of leadership over the subsequent days. In his testimony, he admits to organising the robbery of the house of Sir John Cavendish (the chief justice of the King's Bench) and to stealing the horse of John Cambridge (the prior of the Abbey of St Edmunds).<sup>40</sup> Like his earlier ones, these acts were characterised by looting. They were, however, far from being the most serious crimes committed during these days. Four men were murdered at this time: Sir John Cavendish on 14 June in Lakenheath; John Cambridge on 15 June in Mildenhall; the monk John Lakenheath on 15 June in Bury; and a man simply described as a 'worthy person of the neighbourhood' (*valentem de patria*) on 16 June in Bury.<sup>41</sup>

In his testimony Wrawe admits to being present at the murders of Cambridge and Lakenheath and, in the latter case, he says his rebel company gave "help and advice".<sup>42</sup> Unlike the earlier events of the rising, though, he specifically names the individuals who he claims led the acts. The other two murders go unmentioned in his testimony, implying that he claimed not to have been involved in any way at all. In this respect, Wrawe's version differs greatly from the secondary literature, which tends to describe all of the

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<sup>35</sup> James, 'Ritual, Drama and Social Body', p. 28.

<sup>36</sup> For a population estimate, see Norman Maclaren Trenholme, *The English Monastic Boroughs: A Study in Medieval History* (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1927), p. 89, n. 77.

<sup>37</sup> Dobson (ed.), *The Peasants' Revolt*, pp. 255-256.

<sup>38</sup> James, 'Ritual, Drama and Social Body', p. 5.

<sup>39</sup> James, 'Ritual, Drama and Social Body', pp. 6-7.

<sup>40</sup> Dobson (ed.), *The Peasants' Revolt*, pp. 250-251.

<sup>41</sup> Powell, *The Rising in East Anglia*, pp. 13, 18-19, 126-127 & 142.

<sup>42</sup> Dobson (ed.), *The Peasants' Revolt*, p. 250.

first three murders as being orchestrated by Wrawe himself.<sup>43</sup> The death of the unidentified “worthy person” has only been considered worthy of one mention in a single work of secondary literature.<sup>44</sup>

Most historians assume that Wrawe’s testimony is merely the words of a man keen to disassociate himself from the most serious crimes of the rising. Further cause for doubt arises from the verdict of jury from Lackford hundred which found Wrawe and fellow Sudbury vicar Geoffrey Parfay guilty of the murder of the prior.<sup>45</sup> The sudden emergence of murder after two days of looting, however, is a curious change in the character of the rebellion. Another possibility is that this change was the result of a leadership role being assumed by the individuals named by Wrawe.

Wrawe claims that the prior was murdered by a rebel company under the leadership of three Bury townsmen: Thomas Halesworth, Robert Westbrom and Geoffrey Denham. Two of these men, Halesworth and Denham, were servants of the prior. Many other sources, however, indicate some truth in Wrawe’s version of events. The three individuals he names had appeared on parliament’s exclusion list. It is possible, as Prescott suggests, that they were only included as a result of spurious allegations in the aftermath of the revolt. Yet five years after the rebellion Halesworth was still referred to as a “principal insurgent” in the patent roll entry that granted him a pardon.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, Gosford, whilst not naming individual rebels, describes the murder as being carried out by the town community rather than an outside leader, writing of a company “encouraged by the people of Bury” (*instigata per homines de Bury*).<sup>47</sup>

There is no obvious motive for Wrawe targeting the prior but one is readily identifiable for Halesworth and Westbrom. Halesworth was a townsman of high status, having held the post of alderman (the head of the guild) in 1379.<sup>48</sup> In the same year, Halesworth and Westbrom had been key individuals backing Broomfield in the abbatial election dispute, with Halesworth even claiming to be his cousin.<sup>49</sup> There is no definite evidence to confirm this, but Gosford describes one unnamed leading rebel as ‘the brother of the papal nominee, a certain rich man of the town’ (*frater vero provisoris, quidam dives de villa*).<sup>50</sup> The abbatial dispute brought Halesworth and Westbrom into direct conflict with the prior, who was a leading figure amongst the Abbey officials on the other side of the dispute.<sup>51</sup> The events in Bury in 1381 indicate the townsmen acting opportunistically to continue their existing dispute with the Abbey and the prior was an obstacle in this dispute.

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<sup>43</sup> Gottfried, *Bury St Edmunds*, pp. 233-234; Hilton, *Bond Men*, p. 141; Dunn, *The Great Rising*, pp. 124-125.

<sup>44</sup> Charles W.C. Oman, *The Great Revolt of 1381* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906), p. 107.

<sup>45</sup> Prescott, ‘Judicial Records’, p. 108.

<sup>46</sup> *Calendar of the Patent Rolls* [henceforth *CPR*], 1385-1389 (London: Public Record Office, 1895-1900), p. 244, at <<http://sdr.lib.uiowa.edu/patentrolls>> [last accessed on 8 March 2016].

<sup>47</sup> Powell, *The Rising in East Anglia*, p. 139.

<sup>48</sup> Barker, *1381*, p. 298.

<sup>49</sup> *CPR*, 1381-1385, pp. 13-14; Gottfried, *Bury St Edmunds*, p. 233.

<sup>50</sup> Powell, *The Rising in East Anglia*, p. 142.

<sup>51</sup> Barker, *1381*, pp. 297-298.



The Sudbury chaplain's involvement in the death of the monk Lakenheath is more ambiguous. Wrawe accused Thomas Langham, another Bury townsman, of carrying out the act with the "help and advice" of Wrawe and his rebels.<sup>52</sup> It is difficult to deduce from government and legal sources whether Wrawe or Langham led the act. Unlike the prior's murderers, Langham was not excluded from the general pardon and we lack any background information to attribute a clear motive to him. The chronicle evidence, though, is clear in supporting Wrawe's version. Gosford's evidence, however, again portrays the murder as being led by the town community rather than outsiders. He says "certain people of the town... encouraged the evildoers of the neighbourhood that they should seize, hold and kill him" (*quidam igitur de villa... procurabant malificos de patria ut eum caperent tenerent et occiderent*). Even Walsingham, who blames Wrawe for most of the actions, says the murder took place "at the instigation of townspeople".<sup>53</sup>

The murder of the "worthy person of the neighbourhood" goes almost unmentioned in the secondary literature of the revolt. This is probably due to the scarcity of mentions in the primary sources, receiving just one cursory mention from Gosford. The lack of evidence is, in itself, significant. In his testimony, Wrawe does not give a "reworked" version of this murder as he does with those of Cambridge and Lakenheath.<sup>54</sup> The chaplain was clearly attempting to distance himself from all of the most serious accusations put to him by the authorities. The fact that this murder went unmentioned suggests he had not been accused of involvement.

The death of Cavendish was the first murder of the Suffolk rising, but it was also the one with the weakest link to the Bury rebels. The episode took place in Lakenheath, sixteen miles north of Bury, and the only link to the town was the rebels' subsequent journey in which they took the victim's head to be placed upon the town pillory.<sup>55</sup> This link to Bury, where Wrawe's company had arrived a day earlier, has frequently led to Cavendish's murder being misleadingly recounted amongst the Sudbury chaplain's actions.<sup>56</sup> Walsingham suggests the act was carried out by Wrawe's company, but his vague account of this event is contradicted by two sources of legal evidence. Another man, John Poter, was beheaded for the murder, and in his indictment he, unlike other rebels, makes no claim to have acted on Wrawe's orders.<sup>57</sup> As with the murder of the "worthy person", Wrawe does not give an alternative version of Cavendish's murder, suggesting the authorities did not consider Wrawe culpable.

Far from demonstrating the scope of Wrawe's leadership, the murder of Cavendish is another example of how the revolt was shaped by local grievances within a community. The location of his death is significant, as it points to a motive based on a local grievance. The people of Lakenheath had revolted against royal officials in 1371 over the collection of a parish tax. Four commissioners had been sent to handle this rising, one of whom was

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<sup>52</sup> Dobson (ed.), *The Peasants' Revolt*, p. 250.

<sup>53</sup> Powell, *The Rising in East Anglia*, p. 141; Walsingham, *The Chronica Maiora*, p. 143.

<sup>54</sup> Dobson (ed.), *The Peasants' Revolt*, pp. 249-254.

<sup>55</sup> This action with his head is described by both Gosford and Walsingham. See Powell, *The Rising in East Anglia*, p. 141; Walsingham, *The Chronica Maiora*, p. 142.

<sup>56</sup> Gottfried, *Bury St Edmunds*, pp. 233-234; Hilton, *Bond Men*, p. 141.

<sup>57</sup> Powell, *The Rising in East Anglia*, pp. 126-127.

Cavendish.<sup>58</sup> When he returned to Lakenheath in 1381 it was for the final time. His death was an example of a community expressing its anger at the enforcement of tax collection and at the interference of royal justice in the community. The fact that Poter's indictment makes no mention of receiving orders suggests that it was not only the grievance but also the organisation which was community-based. This gives the murder a similar form to those of the Bury rebels. The evidence from the murders raises serious problems with the portrait of a revolt in which a single county leader, in the form of Wrawe, orchestrated all the major acts of rebellion in Suffolk.

Further evidence of the particular importance of the community in Bury is the way in which the town was punished after the revolt. In addition to producing the list of individuals, which included a number of Bury townsmen, parliament named six towns to be excluded from the pardon, one of which was Bury.<sup>59</sup> The list was reiterated later in 1381, but this time Bury was the only town excluded from the pardon.<sup>60</sup> The following year, the government imposed a fine of 2,000 marks upon the residents of the town.<sup>61</sup> Even after Wrawe had been executed, parliament was pursuing a particularly severe punishment for Bury. This suggests they felt that leadership had come from within the town. It is also interesting that they selected a collective punishment rather than relying on trials against individuals. Their approach would have left the guild authorities responsible for organising a commission to levy and collect the fine.<sup>62</sup> The punishment was directed primarily at the town elite, further evidence of the murders being carried out by a community under the leadership of high status townsmen.

Despite the absence of central leadership coordinating these rebel groups, they interacted and cooperated nonetheless. In her study of the Brandon rebels, Müller observes how separate rebel groups would join together for particular actions, before going their separate ways again. She describes an attack on a property at Langford on 16 June that saw two rebel groups cooperate, bringing together people from sixteen different settlements, only to split into two groups again the following day.<sup>63</sup> A similar dynamic existed in the Bury rising. Poter's rebel group brought their victim's head to the pillory in Bury and the townsmen who murdered the prior in Mildenhall also brought his head to place alongside Cavendish's.<sup>64</sup> These murders were carried out in different settlements under different leaders, but the rebels coordinated their ensuing act of humiliation. This interaction between groups goes some way towards explaining how Cavendish's murder came to be mistakenly attributed to Wrawe's company despite a clear indictment to the contrary.

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<sup>58</sup> Christopher Dyer, 'The Rising of 1381 in Suffolk: Its Origins and Participants', *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History*, 36, (1988), p. 280.

<sup>59</sup> *PROME, 1377-1384*, p. 103.

<sup>60</sup> *PROME, 1377-1384*, p. 118.

<sup>61</sup> *Calendar of the Close Rolls, 1381-1385* (London: Public Record Office, 1914-1920), p. 190, at <<http://www.archive.org/stream/calendarofclos02grea#page/n5/mode/2up>> [last accessed on 3 November 2015].

<sup>62</sup> Gottfried, *Bury St Edmunds*, p. 235.

<sup>63</sup> Müller, 'Conflict and Revolt', p. 13.

<sup>64</sup> Powell, *The Rising in East Anglia*, pp. 140-141; Walsingham, *The Chronica Maiora*, pp. 142-143.

### **Wrawe's role in the Bury rising**

This study has explored the two contrasting accounts of the Bury rising that appear in the chronicle evidence. Walsingham presents a narrative in which events are driven by a single rebel leader. Gosford describes key acts being carried out by groups from within the town's own community rather than being led by an outside individual. It has been argued that the latter, although less commonly used in the secondary literature, is a closer representation of the events in Bury. Although Wrawe and Donnesby, both outsiders, played a role in instigating rebellion in the town, so too did the community-focused celebrations of Corpus Christi. This study's exploration of the motivations behind the acts of murder, both in Bury and Lakenheath, shows how they were carried out by communities driven by local grievances.

It is apparent, nonetheless, that individuals played an important role in organising these acts. Leadership, rather than being derived from a county figure, came in the form of a number of local community leaders such as the Bury townsmen Halesworth, Westbrom and Denham. These figures organised their community to continue its historic dispute with the Abbey. Despite an awareness of the context of Bury's abbatial election dispute, existing secondary literature has not recognised the prominence of these town leaders. These figures have often been placed in a subordinate role to Wrawe. Dunn's claim that the townsmen 'sent for Wrawe' implies a degree of helplessness and Hilton, whilst acknowledging Westbrom as a significant individual, describes him as Wrawe's "lieutenant".<sup>65</sup>

The conclusions of this article have more general implications for the scope of individual agency to shape history. These leaders do not appear to have acted within a wider organisational framework, as Hilton's interpretation suggests. Rather, the Bury rising indicates the scope for rebel leaders, and the communities from which they came, to shape the events of 1381 for themselves. Once rebellion reached Bury and Lakenheath, the rebel acts became more politically-motivated. This signalled a fundamental change in nature from the earlier looting by Wrawe's company, a change which appears to have occurred as the result of Wrawe's leadership being eclipsed by that of other leaders. This article also raises important points regarding the nature of chronicle evidence. Accounts such as Walsingham's make use of a single protagonist in order to tell a compelling narrative, but it must be recognised that, in doing so, they often understate the role of a wide range of individuals and communities in shaping history.

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<sup>65</sup> Hilton, *Bond Men*, p. 220.

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### Figures

Fig. 1: 'The Death of Wat Tyler', British Library Board, Royal MS 18 E I, fol. 175r, at <[http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=royal\\_ms\\_18\\_e\\_i](http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=royal_ms_18_e_i)> [last accessed on 16 July 2016].

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