

A Translation
OF
THOMAS OF WALSINGHAM'S
ACCOUNT OF LITTESTER'S REBELLION
IN 1381,

With an Explanatory Reference to preceding and subsequent Events.

READ AT A MEETING OF THE NORFOLK AND NORWICH ARCHÆOLOGICAL SOCIETY.

BY THE REV. RICHARD HART.

Most of you are doubtless familiar with the outline of that most deeply interesting page in the history of our county,—Lister's Rebellion, as given by Blomefield; but the narrative of an actual contemporary, who was moreover a Norfolk man, has of course far higher claims upon your attention.

The rising of the people in the early part of Richard the Second's reign; the many outrages by which they paralysed the energies of the law; the barbarous murder of Archbishop Courtenay; the temporary lull of the insurrection which followed upon the death of its leader, Wat Tyler, who was courageously struck to the earth by William Walworth, Mayor of London; and the subsequent outbreak under Jack Straw, are the necessary preliminaries of the passage which I am going to translate. Walsingham begins by telling us that—

“A great multitude having been collected under John Littester, a dyer of Norwich, began to act as others had done in all parts of the country, omitting none of the [atrocities] which the commons had perpetrated elsewhere, but going even *further*, for they plundered wherever they

went, and no place was safe. And forasmuch as their own authority appeared to be no adequate sanction for what they did, they resolved to secure by force the co-operation of the Earl of Suffolk, so that if the commons should be afterwards called to account for these excesses, they might allege that they did these things under the sanction of a great man and a peer. But the Earl, being forewarned of their approach, rose up hastily from supper at which he was then sitting, and, travelling circuitously in the disguise of the servant of Roger de Bois, and with a cloak bag at his back, safely reached St. Alban's, where the King then was. Being thus frustrated in their great object, the commons took by surprise various illustrious knights, whom they compelled to swear, on pain of instant death, that they would comply with their wishes, and accompany them as they went through the country. Among these were the Lord Scales, William de Morlee, John de Brewes, Stephen de Hales, and Robert de Salle; but the last-mentioned soon lost his life, for, being unable to dissemble like the rest, he openly condemned their atrocities, for which reason he was knocked on the head by a countryman;—and thus expired a knight who in the open field of battle would have terrified a thousand such. The others seeing that they must either temporise or die, determined to praise or blame, according to the voice of the multitude. Wherefore, having thus conciliated the favour of that scoundrel John Littester, who called himself *King* of the Commons, they were admitted to the office of first tasting whatever he ate or drank, and of serving him upon their knees as he sat at table. Stephen de Hales, being an honourable knight, was appointed his carver and taster, and to the others he assigned various offices. And now the commons began to weary of their undertaking, and, many days having elapsed, determined to send two of these knights, William de Morlee and John de Brewes, accompanied by three of the commonalty in whom they reposed confidence, to the King, either in

London or wherever he might then be, to solicit from him an amnesty and full pardon; and, to secure this advantage, they delivered to them a large sum of money which they had extorted from the citizens of Norwich, to save their town from murder, fire, and pillage.

“These knights therefore, with their companions, hastened to fulfil their commission, but, when they arrived at Ickingham, which is not far from Newmarket, they were suddenly encountered by Henry Le Spencer, Bishop of Norwich, a man skilled in war and armed *cap-à-pie*. For he had heard the report of this insurrection while he was sojourning at his manor of Burleigh, adjacent to the royal castle of Ockham near Stamford, for which reason he determined to come down to Norfolk and enquire how far it was true. He had then in his suite not more than eight lances and a very few archers, but, as soon as he beheld the knights and their companions, he commanded them on their allegiance to tell him whether there were among them any traitors against the King. These knights, long habituated to fear the common people, at first evaded the question, but the Bishop exhorted them to act boldly, and at last they told him that two of the greatest ringleaders of the insurrection were there, and that a third had gone to buy their dinner; explaining to him at the same time the cause of their journey. On this, the Bishop instantly caused the heads of these two rebels to be struck off, and went in person to look after the third. Having caused their heads to be fixed up at Newmarket, the Bishop with his soldiers went rapidly towards Norfolk and to North Walsham, where the commons had determined to await the King’s answer to their supplications and the return of their messengers. As he travelled through the country his forces continually increased; for many knights and country gentlemen, hitherto paralysed with a fear of the commons, when they saw the Bishop turned into a soldier—for he wore a helmet and a coat of mail, and carried a sword

in his hand—followed him at once. The Bishop, therefore, when he arrived at the place already mentioned with his forces, found that the rustics had, in true military style, surrounded their encampment with a deep fosse, over which they had placed tables and windows, and doors, and pales, as an additional defence; and in the rear he saw their waggons and carts, for they little thought of a flight. Immediately this warlike Bishop, being enraged at the audacity of these scoundrels, caused the trumpets to be sounded, and seizing a lance in his right hand, set spurs to his horse and rushed forward with such an impetuous bravery, that he reached the summit of the embankment before the arrows of his followers, and the archers became useless, for it was at once a contest hand to hand. This martial prelate therefore, grinding his teeth like a wild boar, and sparing neither himself nor his enemies, wherever he saw his troops in danger instantly directed all his energies to that point, stabbing one, knocking down another, and wounding a third; nor did he relax his exertions till all his soldiers had cleared the fosse and were ready for the conflict. Then followed a fierce contest on both sides, but at length the people gave way, and, as their carts and waggons hindered their flight in that direction, tried to scramble through the neighbouring woods, but the Bishop, like an experienced general, effectually frustrated their object, and, having captured the principal ringleaders, including John Littester their king, gained a complete victory.

“The Bishop therefore took with him the said John, the idol of Norfolk, that he might be drawn, and hung and beheaded; and, having received his confession and granted him absolution according to his office, he himself accompanied him to his execution, thus shewing to his vanquished foe the greatest humanity and kindness, for he even supported his head as he was dragged to the gibbet. Nor did the Bishop pause till he had detected and brought to justice

malefactors throughout the whole county ; and thus did the laudable probity and admirable courage of this warlike pontiff not only re-establish peace throughout that district, but proved eminently beneficial to the whole kingdom."

Some time after this, in 1382, some disaffected persons entered into a conspiracy :—To attend St. Faith's fair in disguise, and compel the assembled multitude, on pain of instant death, to swear obedience to their commands, after which they calculated that they would be in a position to seize upon the abbey of St. Bennet at Holme, which, from its natural advantages, would have been a very eligible fortification ; but this conspiracy was happily nipped in the bud, and the ringleaders suffered an ignominious death.

These rebels aimed at nothing less than a total *subversion* of the government in church and state. The misguided men eagerly sought for and destroyed all the ancient charters and records of the realm that they could lay their hands on, so that we antiquaries have no very particular reason to revere their memory. If a counsel learned in the law fell into their clutches, they forthwith made him taste the law's last penalty. If a man could even *read* he was in jeopardy ; but it fared much worse with him if he was caught with an ink-bottle at his side in *flagrante delictu* of scholarship. The words of Walsingham are these : "Periculosum erat agnosci pro clerico, sed multum periculosius si ad latus alicujus *atramentarium* inventum fuisset." Now I cannot help thinking that these very words, or a translation of them, must have been in Shakspeare's mind when he wrote the Second Part of Henry VI., with a quotation from which I shall close this hastily written paper. It alludes to Jack Cade's rebellion in that reign.

ACT IV. SCENE 2. *Enter a Clerk.*

Weaver. The clerk of Chatham, he can *write* and *read* and cast *account*.

Cade. Oh ! monstrous !

Weaver. We took him setting boys copies.

Cade. Here's a villain!

Weaver. He has a book in his pocket with red letters in it.

Cade. Nay, then he's a *conjurer*.

Dick. Nay, he can make obligations and write court hand.

Cade. I'm sorry for't! the man's a *proper* man for mine honour! Unless I find him guilty he shall not die. Come hither, Sirrah, I must *examine* thee. What is thy name?

Clerk. Emanuel.

Dick. They use to write it on the top of letters! 'Twill go hard with you.

Cade. Let me alone! Dost thou use to *write* thy name, or hast thou a *mark* to thyself, like an honest plain-dealing man?

Clerk. Sir, I thank God that I have been so well brought up that I can *write* my name.

All. He hath confessed! away with him! he is a villain and a traitor!

Cade. Away with him, I say! hang him *with his pen and ink-horn about his neck!*

[*Exeunt with Clerk.*]

And accordingly this *clerk* was hung *without benefit of clergy*.