

John Peper of Linton

I was born in the village of Linton, which is near Cambridge and on the river Granta. There is lots of good farmland here and also a market, and the fair would come too! Our church would have been in good repair, having been built in 1308 and dedicated to St Mary. Historians don't know much about my early life, including when exactly I was born, but my world would have completely changed when the Black Death arrived in Cambridgeshire in 1349 when I was young. Forty to 60% of the population died, so many people had to be buried in pits and often would not have had the religious burial that they deserved. I must have lost people in this pestilence.

I am a survivor, however, and perhaps the drop in population meant that I was able to use my ambition and drive to work for a better life. It's unclear whether I inherited my land or whether I was able to buy it in the years after the Black Death, when land was cheaper and more available due to the population dropping. Either way, as an adult, I owned 5s worth of land in Linton, as well as property in the nearby village of Fowlmere. Perhaps the property in Fowlmere was more effort than it was worth... from 1367, I was involved in a series of complex cases about trespass [where people have the right to go on to land or not]. My friend John Norhampton and I weren't going to let this go, however, and we had enough money to pay a lawyer to fight our case for us. It was quite common at this time for neighbours to sue each other over squabbles like this.

I then decided to try my hand in the army. I sold my land in 1380 and joined the retinue [group of soldiers] of William Windsor and became a 'man-at-arms'. This meant that I fought wearing armour and a range of weapons, such as a sword or a lance. I went to go to fight in what is now called the Hundred Years' War against France. I went to Brittany in France and it was a disaster! Our lord, Thomas of Woodstock, who was supposed to be leading us to victory, instead just didn't seem to want to turn up and wasted so much of the money he was given in 1380 by the Good Parliament to pay for this campaign. If Edward III was still king, we would have been well managed and gone to victory, like we did at Crecy in 1346 and Poitiers in 1356. Now the French King Charles VI had refused to meet us in battle and we lost. Meanwhile, we heard from home that people were taxed beyond their means and the money wasn't even helping us.

I travelled back to England and then it took another week to return to Linton. Having heard more about the injustices that people had faced, such as the poll tax, I joined a group of Cambridgeshire rebels led by John Hanchach. A great protest meeting was held in Bocking in Essex on 2 June 1381. I took the lead and raided across southern Cambridgeshire, attacking more traitors. We burnt the houses of Thomas Hasleden, as he helped John of Gaunt, and the manors of the Hospitallers [a religious order], as their prior, Robert Hales, was the Treasurer and is to blame for this mess. We tried to encourage people to rise up! On 15 June 1381, we arrived in Cambridge and attacked the property of the traitors John Blankpayn and Roger Harleston, but they too escaped the justice of the Commons. We left Cambridge the next day, as the townspeople were attacking the traitors at the University and Barnwell Priory, and, arriving at the house of William Bateman at Harlton, we burnt it down to the ground and all the records that were held within.

Then our luck began to turn. Hanchach was caught and executed. I managed to escape but my name appeared right at the top of the list of leading rebels from Cambridgeshire who were not allowed to

be pardoned for what we did. I knew that the rebellion was up and I was in trouble. I managed to get a special pardon after the Bishop of Ely. Normally a pardon was 18s 4d [a day's wages for a labourer were only 1d and 3d for a master] but by the autumn of 1381 it had reached as high as 30s. It was incredibly expensive, taking my case directly to London and having to pay a clerk for parchment. It was worth it, however, to know that I was protected in the future from punishment – I was only doing what I thought was right.