

John Reed of Rougham

I was a man on the make! My family in the thirteenth century were villeins, but they worked themselves up, and by the time I was born, my family were among the leading landowners in Rougham in Norfolk. In 1349, my family was able to buy up lots of land that was for sale due to the high death rates during the Black Death. I wanted to make even more of myself, though. I made an advantageous marriage to the heiress Alice de Rougham, meaning that I became Lord of the Manor of Rougham. I was an active lord, buying up houses and land and making sure that people paid their dues to me. I was a tax collector. I also saw how much money could be made through having sheep for their wool, and so used this to help increase my wealth. In the poll tax of 1379, I paid 10 shillings, which shows how rich I was. I was involved in a number of projects, and people owed me money for things, too. One thing I really wanted was to own all of the land in the west side of the village – some annoying villeins like Walter Aleyn, however, tried to hold out on me rather than letting me buy their land.

On 17 June 1381, something very shocking happened. Luckily I wasn't at home, but a large number of men came and ransacked my manor house! Some people say that this was the largest gathering of rebels in central and west Norfolk. The rebels came from as far away as Wymondham, Lakenheath, Feltwell and Creake, but also included all 47 of the local men. They were clearly targeting me. They removed lead from my roof, stole doors and windows, and they looted everything that they could find: a cart, a millstone, several horses, a saddle, 16 pigs, wheat, barley, malt and wool. I reckon the damage cost well over £50 – a small fortune!

I knew who many of these men were. Walter Aleyn, of course, and his friend John Munnyng – both I had fined regularly for brewing and selling ale without following the rules and trying to resell bread. Even Walter's widowed mother, Agnes Aleyn, got involved, as well as four other women! Agnes was another one I had fined for breaking the rules with regard to brewing ale. John Cable, a 'bokelerman' [this meant that he was a shield man, possibly an ex-soldier, who made a living by demonstrating martial arts], actually went from village to village encouraging people to rebel!

After the rising, I made sure that these people were brought to justice, and they all had to pay fines for the damage that they had done. I continued to grow my land and persuaded Walter Aleyn and Agnes Aleyn to swap their houses so that I could have all the land for my sheep. I continued to be a powerful local lord.