

John Spayne

I was a freeman in what today is called King's Lynn in Norfolk. I lived in the town and was an artisan, which means that I was skilled in a craft. In my case, I was a souter [which means a shoemaker] and a cordwainer [someone who worked with leather]. Traditionally, cordwainers used leather from a part of Spain called Cordoba. Indeed, I might have Spanish ancestors, as a hundred years before I was born, a John de Hispanya [which means 'from Spain'] was the Mayor of King's Lynn. Perhaps my name just changed over time to be 'Spayne'. If this was the case, however, it was a long time ago. I would have felt that I was definitely English, and my family may have lived in the area for many generations.

I had much more freedom than a serf did. I had no lord to whom to do duties, for example. However, that doesn't mean that everything was perfect. King's Lynn was controlled by the Church, who would have had taxes for selling things in the markets and would have ruled the town. There had been riots in the past, some of them quite serious! In 1377, Bishop Despenser was attacked by angry townsfolk and barely escaped with his life. Lots of traders like myself also disliked foreign merchants who came to the town. Perhaps we felt that they were taking away trade from the locals.

In the summer of 1381, I was accused of being a 'chief captain' in the Revolt. I always claimed that I was falsely accused, but listen to the story and see what you think...

While King's Lynn remained peaceful, the local area did not. A group of tradesmen, including tailors, weavers, glove-makers and bow-makers, travelled the local area between 17 and 22 June. They said that I led these tradesmen in forcing people to give us money by threatening violence. They also said that we killed any Flemings [people from modern-day Belgium] that we could find. The story goes that rebels stopped people and forced them to say 'bread and cheese': if they could pronounce it without an accent, they were safe. If not, they were killed. Ignoring the King's call for peace on 18 June, we captured local lords and stole cows and even murdered a Flemish man called Haukyn. It seems that particularly men who were thought to be bad lords were targets. For example, the Panton family in north Norfolk were attacked, and they were known to be violent and threatening to the local people. Some of the lords were 'fined' [forced to give up money, land or goods] for what they had done.

By November 1381, Parliament was in session and they were trying to downplay the threat posed by the Revolt. A general pardon was issued, but my name was on a list of people who were not to be pardoned. This was a dangerous position in which to be. However, if you could get three or four worthy men to say that you were innocent of the charges, you still had a chance. I managed to do this by getting Bishop Despenser to support my case. Historians find this interesting, as the Bishop fought the local rebels during the rebellion and was not known to forgive people! I say that I was innocent, of course, but some historians think that the Bishop just wanted to keep the peace in King's Lynn by this point.