

The Revolting Jack Cade

The origins of John (Jack) Cade are very obscure. It is widely believed that he was born in Ireland whereas some sources say it was Sussex, and between 1420 and 1430. He was certainly living in Sussex when he fled the country having committed a murder. In France he fought in The Hundred Years War (not all 100 years – just a bit of it). There has been some theory that he fought on the French side although this has never been proven and given that his Manifesto indicated loyalty to the king and state, this would seem to be an unlikely scenario. His complaint was against the corruption in high places. Another theory suggests that the allegation that he fought for the enemy was propaganda put out by his enemies (ie the people against whom he rebelled) in an attempt to further discredit him. It has to be asked how much more discredit he could accrue above leading a revolt against the State!

At some point he returned to England and settled in Kent. By this time he was using the surname of Aylmer and he married a lady of “good position”. One account that circulated at the time was that Cade was a doctor named John Alymere who was married to the daughter of a Surrey squire. Another account has him dabbling in the “dark arts” and who fled the country having murdered a pregnant woman.

When the men of Kent raised their rebellion in 1450 they were led by a man named Mortimer who most sources believe was Cade, although one source holds that Cade did not take command of the rebels until after a skirmish at Sevenoaks on 18th June (but see below). The name Mortimer was the maiden name of the mother of Richard, duke of York (father of Edward IV and Richard III). She was descended from Edward III’s second son, Lionel of Clarence (not to be confused with the chap with a penchant for diving head-first into barrels of wine). By early June, Cade had amassed a force of 5000, men many of whom were veterans of the French conflicts.

Some believed that his use of the name Mortimer was an indication that the revolt was a pre-arranged part of the Yorkist programme – perhaps sanctioned by York himself. Other stories held that the York/Mortimer involvement was a story put about by York’s enemies to discredit the Cade revolt by portraying him as a Yorkist agent – fake news in abundance even in those days. There is no evidence that York was implicated – he was exiled in Ireland at the time, where he was raising an army in preparation for his attempt on the throne. It is unlikely that he would have jeopardised this operation by any pre-emptive rebellion. It is more likely that Cade adopted the name as a propaganda ploy to give his cause some degree of legitimacy. To further confuse matter,s when York returned to England in September 1450 he based much of his plans for reform and policy change on Cade’s manifesto.

Whether Cade was the leader at the very start of the uprising, or joined the fun and games after Sevenoaks, what is not disputed is that he was the leader when the rebels left Blackheath for Southwark on 3rd July. Underestimating the strength of the rebels, the king sent a small force to put down the rebellion. This was led by Sir Humphrey Stafford and his cousin, Sir William Stafford. The force was ambushed at Sevenoaks on 18th June and the Staffords were killed. Cade took their livery and armour as his own.

On 28th June the bishop of Salisbury, William Ayscough, was murdered by a mob in Wiltshire. He was the king's personal confessor and so was one of the most powerful men in the country, which therefore also made him one of the most unpopular. Henry, afraid of a similar fate, decamped to Warwickshire.

Meanwhile, the rebels, having gained in confidence, set up their headquarters in the White Hart Inn in Southwark. From there the mob crossed the river and entered London, cutting the ropes on London Bridge to prevent any pursuit. Initially the citizens welcomed the rebels whose cause very much reflected their own grievances against the corruption, maladministration and abuse of power exercised by the king's closest advisers. The recent military losses in France had exacerbated their feelings of discontent. However, as is often the way with so-called "popular" uprisings, the rebels soon became an unruly mob and began looting and plundering the properties of those who were in favour of Cade's manifesto.

His avowed intention to listen to the complaints of the people and to restore order within all areas of national and local government earned him the nickname of "John Mend-all" or "John Amend-all" amongst his followers. Cade styled himself "Captain of Kent".

At the London Stone Cade struck the stone with his sword and in the traditional manner, declared himself Lord Mayor. Now within the city gates Cade began a series of "tribunals" to seek out those he accused of treason. The mob captured James Fiennes, Baron Saye & Sale, who was the Lord High Treasurer, and he was summarily beheaded. A similar fate was dealt to his son-in-law, Sir William Crowmer, Sheriff of Kent. Their heads were stuck on poles and paraded through London, stopping at stages along the way to arrange for the two severed heads to appear to kiss each other. The heads were then displayed on London Bridge.

The rebels returned to Southwark and on 5th July the citizens of London, who had by now largely withdrawn most of their support, prevented them from entering the city. A ferocious struggle took place on London Bridge and it has been estimated that at least 40 citizens and some 200 rebels were killed.

Cade met with the Chancellor, John Kemp, archbishop of York, and William Waynflete, bishop of Winchester, and peace terms were drawn up, the rebels all being pardoned. His aims were supported by a number of “people of status” and the list of those pardoned included 1 knight, 2 MP’s and 18 squires. However Cade reneged on the deal and having retained some of his supporters they broke into the prisons in Southwark. The released prisoners promptly joined his group and they all went on a spree of plundering.

They made a futile attempt to capture Queenborough Castle following which, what was now a totally undisciplined rabble of criminals, fell out over the distribution of their plunder. Cade’s pardon had been issued in the name of Mortimer but when it was revealed that this was not his real name, the pardon was revoked. On 10th July a proclamation against Cade was issued, and a reward offered for his capture, dead or alive. He escaped to Sussex and was apprehended at Heathfield on 12th July. There is a “Cade Street” in Heathfield and a monument stands close by, but the exact location of Cade’s arrest has been in dispute ever since the event occurred, so there is no evidence that the street name and monument are in the correct location.

He was captured by Alexander Iden and whilst attempting to escape Cade was severely injured. He died on the journey to London. After what was really a mock trial at Newgate, Cade was beheaded and quartered. His severed limbs were sent to various locations in Kent where it was felt that his support was strongest. (It is unclear whether the parcel delivery courier left the packages with recipients, or simply lobbed them over a nearby fence). Iden was later knighted and made Sheriff of Kent before marrying Elizabeth Fiennes, the widow of Sir William Crowmer.

The aims of the Cade Revolt should not be confused with those of the Peasant Revolt of 1381 led by Wat Tyler (another rebel from the Garden of England – must be something in the hops grown there). Cade’s cause was driven by men who we would be considered today as “middle class” – artisans, shopkeepers, etc – whose complaint was against corruption in high places. Wat Tyler’s “Peasant’s Revolt” was exactly that – an uprising against all who were in any position of authority over the lowest in the land, which of course meant everybody except the lowest in the land.

It is interesting to draw a parallel with modern times. Jack Cade led what could be described as a socialist campaign with one of its aims being more accountability for those in power. Until the General Election of 2019 the Opposition party in England was definitely “left of centre” and its leader was another man with the initials JC (Jeremy Corbyn). Just a thought in passing!

Jack Cade’s Manifesto

The Complaint of the Poor Commons of Kent

“the king should take about his noble person men of true blood from his royal realm, that is to say, the high and mighty prince, the Duke of York, exiled from our sovereign lord’s person by the suggestions of those false traitors the Duke of Suffolk and his affinity. He should also take about his person those mighty princes, the Duke of Exeter, the Duke of Buckingham and the Duke of Norfolk, together with the true earls and barons of his land. Then shall he be the richest king in Christendom.”

Mr Shakespeare’s take on the Revolt

My old bestest buddy, William Shakespeare, historian extraordinaire, had his version in *Henry VI Part 2*:

CADE Be brave, then; for your captain is brave, and vows reformation. There shall be in England seven halfpenny loaves sold for a penny: the three-hooped pot; shall have ten hoops and I will make it felony to drink small beer: all the realm shall be in common; and in Cheapside shall my palfrey go to grass: and when I am king, as king I will be,--

ALL God save your majesty!

CADE I thank you, good people: there shall be no money; all shall eat and drink on my score; and I will apparel them all in one livery, that they may agree like brothers and worship me their lord.

DICK The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers.

CADE Nay, that I mean to do. Is not this a lamentable thing, that of the skin of an innocent lamb should be made parchment? that parchment, being scribbled o'er, should undo a man? Some say the bee stings: but I say, 'tis the bee's wax; for I did but seal once to a thing, and I was never mine own man since. How now! who's there?

[Enter some, bringing forward the Clerk of Chatham]

SMITH The clerk of Chatham: he can write and read and cast accompt.

CADE O monstrous!

SMITH We took him setting of boys' copies.

CADE Here's a villain!

SMITH Has a book in his pocket with red letters in't.

CADE Nay, then, he is a conjurer.

DICK Nay, he can make obligations, and write court-hand.

CADE I am sorry for't: the man is a proper man, of mine honour; unless I find him guilty, he shall not die.

Come hither, sirrah, I must examine thee: what is thy name?

CLERK Emmanuel.

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, I have been so well brought up that I can write my name.

ALL He hath confessed: away with him! he's a villain and a traitor.

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

[Exit one with the Clerk]

Messenger My lord, a prize, a prize! here's the Lord Say, which sold the towns in France; he that made us pay one and twenty fifteens, and one shilling to the pound, the last subsidy.

[Enter BEVIS, with Lord SAY]

CADE Well, he shall be beheaded for it ten times. Ah, thou say, thou serge, nay, thou buckram lord! now art thou within point-blank of our jurisdiction regal. What canst thou answer to my majesty for giving up of Normandy unto Mounsieur Basimecu, the dauphin of France? Be it known unto thee by these presence, even the presence of Lord Mortimer, that I am the besom that must sweep the court clean of such filth as thou art. Thou hast most traitorously corrupted the youth of the realm in erecting a grammar school; and whereas, before, our forefathers had no other books but the score and the tally, thou hast caused printing to be used, and, contrary to the king, his crown and dignity, thou hast built a paper-mill. It will be proved to thy face that thou hast men about thee that usually talk of a noun and a verb, and such abominable words as no Christian ear can endure to hear. Thou hast appointed justices of peace, to call poor men before them about matters they were not able to answer. Moreover, thou hast put them in prison; and because they could not read, thou hast hanged them; when, indeed, only for that cause they have been most

worthy to live. Thou dost ride in a foot-cloth, dost thou not?

SAY What of that?

CADE Marry, thou oughtest not to let thy horse wear a cloak, when honest men than thou go in their hose and doublets.

DICK And work in their shirt too; as myself, for example, that am a butcher.

SAY You men of Kent,--

DICK What say you of Kent?

SAY Nothing but this; 'tis 'bona terra, mala gens.'

CADE Away with him, away with him! he speaks Latin.

SAY Hear me but speak, and bear me where you will.

Kent, in the Commentaries Caesar writ,
Is term'd the civil'st place of this isle:
Sweet is the country, because full of riches;
The people liberal, valiant, active, wealthy;
Which makes me hope you are not void of pity.
I sold not Maine, I lost not Normandy,
Yet, to recover them, would lose my life.
Justice with favour have I always done;
Prayers and tears have moved me, gifts could never.
When have I aught exacted at your hands,
But to maintain the king, the realm and you?
Large gifts have I bestow'd on learned clerks,
Because my book preferr'd me to the king,
And seeing ignorance is the curse of God,
Knowledge the wing wherewith we fly to heaven,
Unless you be possess'd with devilish spirits,
You cannot but forbear to murder me:
This tongue hath parley'd unto foreign kings
For your behoof,--

CADE Tut, when struck'st thou one blow in the field?

SAY Great men have reaching hands: oft have I struck
Those that I never saw and struck them dead.

BEVIS O monstrous coward! what, to come behind folks?

SAY These cheeks are pale for watching for your good.

CADE Give him a box o' the ear and that will make 'em red again.

SAY Long sitting to determine poor men's causes
Hath made me full of sickness and diseases.

CADE Ye shall have a hempen caudle, then, and the help of hatchet.

DICK Why dost thou quiver, man?

SAY The palsy, and not fear, provokes me.

CADE Nay, he nods at us, as who should say, I'll be even with you: I'll see if his head will stand steadier on a pole, or no. Take him away, and behead him.

SAY Tell me wherein have I offended most?
Have I affected wealth or honour? speak.
Are my chests fill'd up with extorted gold?
Is my apparel sumptuous to behold?
Whom have I injured, that ye seek my death?
These hands are free from guiltless bloodshedding,
This breast from harbouring foul deceitful thoughts.
O, let me live!

CADE [Aside] I feel remorse in myself with his words; but I'll bridle it: he shall die, an it be but for pleading so well for his life. Away with him! he has a familiar under his tongue; he speaks not o' God's name. Go, take him away, I say, and strike off his head presently; and then break into his son-in-law's house, Sir James Cromer, and strike off his head, and bring them both upon two poles hither.

ALL It shall be done.

SAY Ah, countrymen! if when you make your prayers,
God should be so obdurate as yourselves,
How would it fare with your departed souls?
And therefore yet relent, and save my life.

CADE Away with him! and do as I command ye.
[Exeunt some with Lord SAY]