

KNOLE HOUSE, JACK CADE AND THE ‘BATTLE OF SOLEFIELDS’

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The production of this paper was stimulated by the National Trust’s two repair and conservation projects at Knole House, Sevenoaks (2011-2019), allowing reconsideration of its development over the centuries.¹ The paper examines the significance of the ‘Battle of Solefields’ during the Cade rebellion of 1450 which took place very close to Knole Park, just across the major Rye-London road. It also considers the motivations for Archbishop Thomas Bourchier’s acquisition of the House in 1456 and its radical rebuilding, appreciating as he did its value in maintaining political control in this western part of the Kent where disaffection was prevalent.

The background to Jack Cade’s rebellion (like that of the Peasants’ Revolt in 1381) were the long-term repercussions of the Black Death of 1349 which led to significant changes to the population, economy and society of England. The military and political background in 1450 was also very significant. The Hundred Years’ War, and its heavy taxation requirements, was then in its final stages. The generosity of Henry VI towards his closest supporters was the dominant political issue of the time. A common thread was resentment at the oppressive lordship of men who had made many land acquisitions and much money out of these changes. A number of these men were resented, also, because they were royal favourites and, at the level of county government where most ordinary people encountered them, they had been appointed to offices such as sheriff or justice of the peace, and were corrupt in varying degrees.

Most prominent, and most resented, was James Fiennes. He was born c.1390 to gentry parents of Herstmonceux in Sussex, where his older brother built the castle.² As a young man, in 1415, James Fiennes served in the Agincourt campaign and in Henry V’s conquest of Normandy. By 1430 James Fiennes had established his main seat at the manor of Hever, near Tonbridge, and from 1433 he became justice of the peace, sheriff and MP for Kent. By 1440 Fiennes began a rapid rise in influence and wealth as a member of the inner circle surrounding the king, headed by William de la Pole, Duke of Suffolk. Fiennes received many royal favours in return, especially lands and profitable wardships, annuities and offices. In 1444 Fiennes received a life grant of the stewardship of some archiepiscopal lands by Archbishop John Stafford at Henry VI’s request: these lands were at Otford and South Malling, Sussex. Archbishop Stafford, who was also chancellor of England, made a pointed comment on his reasons. He told the prior of Canterbury that he

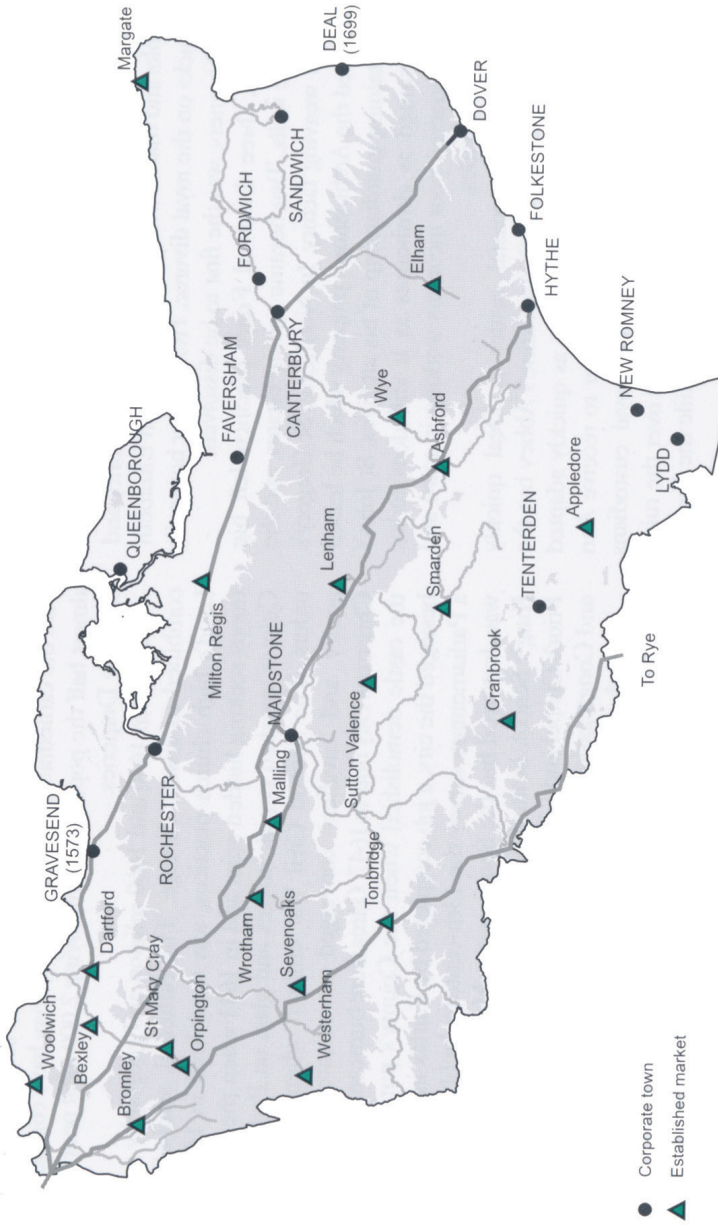


Fig. 1 The location of Sevenoaks and the main roads through medieval Kent, from *The Historical Atlas of Kent*, by kind permission.

had made this grant 'havyng consyderacion how the seid James stonyng aboute the Kyng as he dooth, may dayly proufyte our church and us'.³

Fiennes was knighted in 1444 and by 1446 he received manors in Kent, Surrey, Sussex and Warwickshire, including Knole which was acquired in the latter year probably by intimidation (ODNB James Fiennes).⁴ In 1447 he was created Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports and Constable of Dover Castle, which went with the wardenship. In the same year he was created Lord Saye and Sele (Seal, a market village from at least 1233, which lies just to the north of Knole).⁵ 1447 was a notable year politically, too: Fiennes was appointed chamberlain of the household which gave him control over access to the king. Towards what turned out to be the end of Fiennes' life, he built up two big blocks of land in Kent, one around Knole and Seal, and the other on Romney Marsh. This he did this by purchase and, as he admitted to his confessor, by intimidation.⁶ In 1449 Fiennes assumed the office of Lord Treasurer. By this time he was commonly regarded as 'that dastard of renown' for his part in the misgovernment of England, its bankruptcy and military humiliation.⁷

Medieval rebellions typically involved the build-up of resentments widely in society, and the exchange of ideas about tackling them, both by word of mouth and sometimes in writing. A revolt usually consisted of the gathering of small groups of people who joined with each other with an increasing determination to petition the king about the bad lordship being exercised over him by men who were supposed to be his just representatives. These small groups came together from both villages and towns and in due course a march on London to present petitions might follow. By the time the petitioners had neared London, gathering at a convenient meeting place such as Blackheath and the king had got word of it, he either went out in person to meet the 'rebels' or sent his forces to do so.

Not surprisingly the main routes which the rebel groups might take to and from London were important, and in the late Middle Ages the main roads from Kent (and Sussex) were limited to three (**Fig. 1**). These three routes were the old Roman road, Watling Street, which ran from Dover to Canterbury and onto London; secondly the 'fish route' from Rye through the Weald via Lamberhurst, Tonbridge, Sevenoaks, Chipstead, Orpington and onto London; and thirdly the route from the Cinque Ports of Hythe and New Romney via Ashford, Maidstone and London. The county 'was notorious for the speed with which news could travel from one end of the county to the other'.⁸ Roads were thus important to rebels and this is pointed up by the fact that armed bands from Sussex gathered at the important market village of Robertsbridge close to the London-Rye fish route and adjacent to the border with Kent.⁹ This road was the quickest route from the south coast to London until the sixteenth century.¹⁰ At Sevenoaks itself the very early road to Otford through the Darent Valley and on to Dartford left the fish route just to the north-west of Knole. Before 1300 Sevenoaks was also surrounded by a network of smaller roads, lanes and paths connecting the surrounding villages, hamlets and farms to the shambles and stalls of Sevenoaks market centre, including a bridle-way passing close to where Knole manor house was built before the mid-fifteenth century.¹¹

At the start of Cade's rebellion the complaints of the commons of Kent, in effect a manifesto addressed to the King, were set out in writing in (at least) three

versions.¹² They were largely the product of the county community of ‘40 shilling freeholders’, that is including ‘merchants, well-to-do artisans, and the up-and-coming yeomen who formed a group so characteristic of fifteenth-century Kentish society’.¹³ One version, perhaps the first, was entitled ‘The compleyntys & causes of the assemble on blake hethe [Blackheath]’.¹⁴ Its first concern was the rumour circulating in Kent that the county was to be destroyed by royal power and made into a wild forest (depopulated) in revenge for the murder of the Duke of Suffolk by the commons of Kent, an act they denied.¹⁵ They also complained about years of heavy taxation to fund the French war, the loss of Normandy and corruption, particularly that the court had been dominated by Suffolk and also James Fiennes, and misused their offices mightily, notably controlling access to the king unless bribes were paid.

Besides their complaints, the commons of Kent set out their demands for a response and remedy:

we will that all men know we blame not all the lords, nor all those that are about the king’s person, nor all gentlemen nor yeomen, nor all men of law, nor all bishops, nor all priests, but all such as may be found guilty by just and true inquiry and by the law. Where[fore] we move and pray that some true justice with certain true lords and knights may be sent into Kent for to inquire of all such traitors and bribers, and that ... his letters patent to all the people there ... openly be read and cried, that it is our sovereign lord’s will and prayer of all his people truly to inquire of every man’s government and of defaults that reign, neither for love, favour, dread, nor hate, and that due judgment shall be forthwith and thereupon.¹⁶

However a response and remedy did not happen promptly and in early June 1450 there was an armed uprising in Kent which was supported in Essex and other Home Counties, with rebels gathering on Blackheath. The rebels were yeoman farmers, prosperous villagers, townfolk and even lesser gentry, i.e. precisely those who suffered from corruption over land dealings, supported by well-armed men drawn from the county militia.

In response to the armed uprising Henry VI adjourned Parliament at Leicester, hurried back to London and marched on Blackheath. Cade’s followers dispersed, perhaps not wanting open warfare with the king, but were forced into a pitched battle at Solefields on the edge of Sevenoaks (see below). On 29 June the main force reassembled at Blackheath while more men from Sussex and Surrey and Essex gathered at Mile End, with Henry VI meanwhile having retreated to Kenilworth (Warks.). On 1 or 2 July the rebels entered the City over London Bridge.

On 4 July the rebels demanded that they themselves try the officials and Fiennes. He was beheaded with other officials and their heads mounted on spears on London Bridge. Fiennes’ naked body was dragged back to Southwark behind Cade’s horse and there was looting and violence. A truce was called and the archbishop of Canterbury, John Stafford, received the rebels’ petitions, and free pardons were offered.¹⁷ The rebels dispersed, satisfied, but on 10 July Jack Cade was declared a traitor. A few days later Cade was captured, and his body beheaded and quartered at Newgate and *his* head put on London Bridge. On 1 August Archbishop Stafford was appointed to a commission for Kent to resolve the underlying problems and causes of the rising. Although there were also attempts to respond to the demands

of the Cade rebels to rectify the extortions and malpractices under Lord Saye and Sele, unrest continued in both Kent and Sussex until 1452 and for a number of years thereafter.¹⁸

The battle of Solefields

A small group of royalists pursued the rebels down the road to Sevenoaks after they dispersed from their first gathering on Blackheath in early June to avoid open warfare with the king. The royalist pursuers were led by Sir Humphrey Stafford and his kinsman Sir William Stafford, and in a confrontation with the rebels near Solefields both Staffords were killed. Cade donned Sir Humphrey's armoured velvet jacket and his spurs and proceeded to ride about in them. This was a pivotal point in the rebellion: following it Cade's followers began to regroup, encouraged firstly by this victory over the Staffords, and secondly enraged by news of random violence inflicted on villagers of west Kent over the following few days by members of the king's entourage.¹⁹ The regrouping of Cade's followers led to the dramatic events of July in London. Without the foolhardy action of the Staffords, the rebellion as such might have petered out.

Archbishop Bouchier and Knole

Archbishop Bouchier played a key part in the politics of the later 1450s and this paper strongly argues that he appreciated from the ongoing unrest in Kent after Cade's rebellion that if its fundamental causes – war, taxation and corruption – were not fully dealt with, further risings might be expected. He became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1454, and Chancellor of England in 1455, buying the manor of Knole in 1456 from William Fiennes, son of the beheaded James, for 400 marks.²⁰ (The purchase agreement itself is examined in detail in the article on pp. 258-73). Little is known of the Fiennes' manorial building at Knole, which had a single central courtyard with an entrance gateway in its eastern perimeter wall with turrets at the northern and southern ends, all later concealed by the eastern range and chapel of the subsequent much larger and grander archiepiscopal house.

Bouchier rebuilt Fiennes' manor house anew between 1456 and 1468 and surrounded the deer park with pales,²¹ and probably also the bank which still survives alongside the London-Rye fish route. Building accounts, architectural features and heraldic devices demonstrate that Bouchier was responsible for the rebuilding of Knole on the foundations of Fiennes' home in 1456-59. He then greatly extended Knole in 1460-68 with Bouchier's tower (**Fig. 2**), the Great Hall, Stone Court, his chapel, private apartments, great chamber and a principal staircase.²² Gregory attributed the entrance gatehouse in the west front ('The Outer Wicket'), with its battlements and machicolations to 1470-74, and also the Stable Court and Barn, and Green Court with its two ranges and a now-lost curtain wall joining it to Stone Court.²³ Thus most of what is now seen at Knole derives from Bouchier's time, although Thomas Sackville made important changes and updates to the façade (west front) and interior, such as building the grand staircase, in 1603-08. In Bouchier's later days Knole became his favourite home, and he died there.²⁴

Meanwhile, many parts of the country, but especially Kent, continued to exper-



Fig. 2 Archbishop Bouchier's central tower at Knole, photographed from his gatehouse (S. Draper).

ience general lawlessness and minor insurrections. Bouchier clearly recognised the significance of Knole's location, close to a main route to London and the Weald where unrest was particularly prevalent. Indeed between the 1450s and 1480s Kent was at the centre of political events, and Thomas Bouchier, from a prominent Yorkist family, knew this very well. Unrest was recorded at Sevenoaks in the Knole building accounts of 1461-62 which had prevented the reeve from collecting the rents due there, the unrest presumably connected to the usurpation of Henry VI's throne by Edward, Duke of York.²⁵ The Kentish gentry had turned from the Lancastrians to support the Yorkists but the county remained unsettled under Edward IV and there were minor insurrections and popular unrest in 1467-68. Kent was in a state of 'political turmoil' and 'violent unrest' in autumn 1470 at the time of Henry VI's Readeption.²⁶

The advantageous location of Knole

Bouchier's ambitious development of Knole suggests that he preferred its site to that of his palace at nearby Otford. However it is hard to agree with Gregory that 'Knole acted as a secluded retreat away from main roads and passing traffic' in contrast to the archiepiscopal palace at Otford which 'stood in a village, beside the road from London to Canterbury', which was not the case.²⁷ Indeed Gregory himself noted that Knole was in a rather exposed location such that it might well have been damaged by Jack Cade and his rebels during their march through Kent.²⁸

Rather than being a secluded retreat, this paper argues that Bouchier, immersed in national politics and well understanding Kentish society, bought Knole in order to provide himself with an opportunity to exercise surveillance over the road from

the coast. Bouchier's tower of c.1460 and gatehouse of c.1470 could be used as a place of deterrence and defence, and in which soldiers might be gathered to attack any future rebels. Furthermore, the main track in and out of Knole led to its main gate on the Rye-London road. The entrance to Knole was thus immediately across the road from St Nicholas, the parish church of Sevenoaks which itself was adjacent to the road. The church was largely rebuilt in the fifteenth century, probably under Archbishop Bouchier, and including another very high tower (90 feet).²⁹ allowing further opportunity for surveillance of the road to London.

In the late Middle Ages men of power were very aware of the significance of sites with good views of strategic routes, and if they chose to build on them, they would erect buildings with defensive features such as moats, although that was not an option at Knole which is, indeed, on a knoll.³⁰ In the late Middle Ages early news of such attacks or of uprisings demanded that lords held sites with outlooks over routes and opportunities for communication by road. The Knole gatehouse is now open to the public, allowing a clear view of the Rye-London road from between the battlements, and so provides today's visitor a fine opportunity to reflect on this motive for Bouchier's building.

ENDNOTES

¹ N. Cohen, F. Parton et al., 2019, *Knole Revealed: Archaeology and Discovery at a Great County House* (National Trust), p. 16.

² For this and what follows, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (online) [ODNB] James Fiennes, first Baron Saye and Sele; ODNB Geoffrey de Say, second Lord Say (1304/5-1359).

³ J.B. Sheppard (ed.), 1889, *Litterae Cantuarienses: the Letter Books of the Monastery of Christ Church, Canterbury*, 3, Rolls Series 85, p. 182.

⁴ TNA Feet of Fines CP 25/1/115/319, number 648, 19 June 1446 and 6 October 1446, http://www.medievalgenealogy.org.uk/fines/abstracts/CP_25_1_115_319.shtml.

⁵ Seal lies on the major west-east road through Kent now represented by the A25, and there is a clear cigar-shaped medieval market area where the road runs through the village centre, *Calendar of Charter Rolls 1226-57*, p. 186; *Gazetteer of Markets and Fairs in England and Wales to 1516* <https://archives.history.ac.uk/gazetteer/gazweb2.html> [accessed 27.8.2020].

⁶ R. Virgoe, 1964, 'Ancient Indictments in King's Bench referring to Kent, 1450-1452', in *Documents Illustrative of Medieval Kentish Society* (ed. F. Du Boulay), Kent Records 18, pp. 232-33. Fiennes' confessor, Thomas Oldhall, testified in the early 1460s that Fiennes had taken the manor of Crowthorn in Romney Marsh forcibly, TNA C 1/27/419.

⁷ ODNB James Fiennes, citing R.H. Robbins (ed.) 1959, *Historical Poems of the XIVth and XVth centuries*.

⁸ I.M.W. Harvey, 1991, *Jack Cade's Rebellion of 1450*, Oxford, p. 16.

⁹ M. Mate, 1992, 'The Economic and Social Roots of Medieval Popular Rebellion: Sussex in 1450-1451', *The Economic History Review*, New Series, 45:4, 664.

¹⁰ D. Killingray and E. Purves (eds), *Sevenoaks: an Historical Dictionary*, Phillimore, Andover (2012), p. 160. The Hastings to London road joined the Rye route at Flimwell, G. Draper, 2019, 'The Development of Settlement and Routes through the Weald, c.1000-1500, with a Case-Study of a Secondary 'Pilgrim Route' in Sussex', *Medieval Settlement Research*, 34, 1-21.

¹¹ F. Du Boulay, 1974, 'The Assembling of an Estate: Knole in Sevenoaks c. 1275 to c. 1525', *Archaeologia Cantiana*, 89, 3, 6, 7. The use of the paths and bridle-way through Knole, although a private deer park, continued to be regarded by the Sevenoaks population as their vital customary right, D. Killingray, 1994, 'Rights, 'Riot' and Ritual: The Knole Park Access Dispute, Sevenoaks, Kent, 1883-5', *Rural History* 5, 1, 64-65.

¹² D. Grummitt, 2010, 'Kent and National Politics, 1399-1461', in *Later Medieval Kent, 1220-1540*, ed. S. Sweetinburgh (Boydell Press), pp. 246-47. Harvey gave and discussed the three versions, *Jack Cade's Rebellion* pp. 186-91; J. Gairdner (ed.), 1880, 'Historical Memoranda of John Stowe: On Cade's rebellion (1450)', in *Three Fifteenth-Century Chronicles with Historical Memoranda by John Stowe*, ed. James Gairdner (London), pp. 94-103, *British History Online* <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/camden-record-soc/vol28/pp94-103> [accessed 29 August 2020].

¹³ Harvey, *Jack Cade's Rebellion*, p. 104.

¹⁴ Harvey, *Jack Cade's Rebellion*, p. 186.

¹⁵ S. Sweetinburgh, 2004, 'Cade's Rebellion', in *An Historical Atlas of Kent*, eds. T. Lawson and D. Killingray (Phillimore), 61.

¹⁶ English modernised. The popular grievances were frequently quoted later by the Yorkists during the Wars of the Roses, for propaganda purpose, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Complaint_of_the_Poor_Commons_of_Kent [accessed 29.8.2020]

¹⁷ Sweetinburgh, 'Cade's Rebellion', p. 61.

¹⁸ Mate, 'Medieval Popular Rebellion', 674.

¹⁹ ODNB Jack Cade.

²⁰ Kent History and Library Centre, U1450/T4/17.

²¹ K. Taylor, 2003, 'The Development of the Park and Garden of Knole', *Archaeologia Cantiana* 123, 154; A. Gregory, 2010, 'Knole: an architectural and social history of the Archbishop of Canterbury's House, 1456-1538', unpubl. University of Sussex thesis, pp. 46, 71, 97.

²² Set out in detail in Gregory, 'Knole: an architectural and social history', pp. 22-81. Pales and the park gate were repaired in 1487, *ibid.*, p. 91. The building history is summarised in Cohen and Parton, *Knole Revealed*, pp. 12-15, 31, 37-8, 40-43, 94.

²³ Gregory described the gatehouse as having 'sham martial formidability', Gregory, 'Knole: an architectural and social history', p. 56.

²⁴ F. Du Boulay, 1950, 'A Note on the Rebuilding of Knole by Archbishop Bourghier', *Archaeologia Cantiana*, 63, 136.

²⁵ Du Boulay, 'Assembling of an Estate: Knole', 8.

²⁶ M. Mercer, 2010 'Kent and National Politics, 1461-1509', in in *Later Medieval Kent, 1220-1540*, ed. S. Sweetinburgh (Boydell), pp. 253-256.

²⁷ Gregory, 'Knole: an architectural and social history', p.118.

²⁸ Gregory, 'Knole: an architectural and social history', 19.

²⁹ D. Killingray, 1990, '*St Nicholas Parish Church Sevenoaks: a Brief History*' (Sevenoaks Parish Church), p. 3

³⁰ F. Meddens and G. Draper, 2014, 'Out on a Limb': insights into Grange, a small member of the Cinque Ports confederation', *Archaeologia Cantiana*, 135, 1-32. In the later fourteenth century there is the example of an extraordinarily wealthy lord mayor of London, John Philpot, who had been supporter and financier to King Richard III in his war with France in the 1370s and 80s. Philpot acquired the manor of Grange near Gillingham overlooking the place where the Medway joined the Thames and from where he would get news of any French or Spanish fleets approaching the City by river. He built a new large moated manor house, and as it happens, subsequently became one of the men who beheaded the rebels of the Peasants' Revolt in 1381.