

Battle of North Walsham – 1381

The Battle of North Walsham was fought in June of 1381 when a large group of rebellious local peasants were confronted by the heavily armed forces of Henry le Despenser, Bishop of Norwich, and was the last occurrence of any major resistance during the English Peasants' Revolt.

The Peasant's Revolt was a major rebellion that spread throughout medieval England in the summer of that year. A variety of causes have been suggested – the drop in population as a result of the Black Death led to a labour shortage but, instead of wages rising, laws were introduced controlling them. Life became harder for the peasants and more profitable for the wealthy. The attitude of many nobles, bishops and abbots, who were also landowners, also had a negative impact.

The revolt began in Essex and spread all over England following the introduction of a third poll tax. In London rebels managed to capture the Tower of London. King Richard agreed to meet the peasant's demands but, on meeting, their leader Wat Tyler, was killed and any such promises subsequently denied. Needless to say, this did not help matters.

During the summer of 1381, insurrection spread from the south-east into Norfolk. Across North-East Norfolk the rebels were led by Geoffrey Litster, a moderately wealthy dyer from the village of Felmingham. Their suppression was in the hands of the Bishop of Norwich, Henry le Despenser, an English nobleman who as a young man had been a soldier in Italy who obtained a reputation as the "Fighting Bishop."

There are no eyewitness accounts of the battle that was fought at North Walsham on 25 or 26 June 1381. The contemporary chronicle relates that there was a fierce engagement at North Walsham Heath, to the south of the town, in which "the warlike Bishop" led a successful attack on the rebels' entrenched position. Litster was also included the names of rebels from North Walsham who were killed, giving strong evidence that the rebels suffered a severe defeat. The local belief that the parish church at North Walsham was the scene of a bloodbath after the battle cannot be substantiated using historical documents. Many sources of information tell of a massacre in North Walsham - one account states: "The rebels ... fled in confusion back to the town, many seeking refuge in the church which, perhaps, they had helped to build. Bishop Le Spencer followed the rebels, and slew all who were captured, showing no respect for the sanctuary to which they had retreated."

Geoffrey Litster was captured and taken to North Walsham and "there drawn, hanged and quartered." According to one chronicle, "The traitor was sought and found; he was captured and beheaded; and, divided into four parts, he was sent through the country to Norwich, Yarmouth, and Lynn, and to the site of his mansion; that rebels and insurgents against the peace might learn by what end they will finish their career". Litster's widow Agnes was later pursued by the authorities and was made to settle his outstanding debts of 33 shillings and nine pence.

The battle was commemorated apparently by three medieval stone crosses though I can only find two, the third stated as being on private land. The easiest one to find is situated on Heath Road off Norwich Road near Toll Barn Vets where it was moved and used as a parish boundary marker.

Another (now a stump) was relocated by North Walsham Urban District Council in 1932 and can be found hidden near the water towers on Norwich Road.

A sculpture in the Memorial Park, carved in 1999 by Mark Goldsworthy from the trunk of a 120-year-old oak tree, commemorates the 1381 battle and where the Market Place meets Yarmouth Road the town sign contains a mosaic depicting the Peasants' Revolt.

And finally, not that I have seen it, an over-the-top re-enactment of the battle apparently appears in the second episode of "This Time with Alan Partridge."