

Edward III to Henry VI's deposition 1327–1461



Social, Political and Economic effects on Battle and eastern Sussex of the Hundred Years War, the Black Death, the Peasants Revolt and the Cade Rebellion

Edward III

The 14-year-old Edward III was crowned in Westminster Abbey on February 1st 1327. Following the deposition and murder of Edward II England was now run by Mortimer and Isabella, a situation which rapidly became intolerable.

Edward III had married Philippa of Hainault in 1328 and they had a son in 1330 who would become the Black Prince. Soon after this Edward III had Mortimer arrested and executed for Edward II's regicide. Isabella was kept in a degree of luxury excluded and out of the way until her death in 1358.

War with Scotland broke out between 1332 and ran until 1338, when a truce was made to avoid war with both Scotland and France on two fronts.

Before 1337 French raids were occurring along the coast but in 1337 the 'One Hundred Year War' broke out with France. Subsequent events during the years 1337-1453 left deep social and economic scars on eastern Sussex. The people of eastern Sussex were truly hard pressed in many ways during these difficult times and took part in major revolts. The way Battle Abbey related to the surrounding population and managed its estates also changed, moving from abbatial lordship to arm's length management. This paper will try to explain what happened and why.

The 'Hundred Years War' stretched from 1337 until 1453 and placed a disproportionately large economic, social and military burden on the hundreds of eastern Sussex. The dating of the long 116 years of conflict which brought misery to both England and France hinges on two events: In 1337 King Edward III of England responded to the loss of the Duchy of Aquitaine to France by challenging King Philip VI for the French crown. It finally ended in 1453 when England irrevocably lost Aquitaine to France, at the Battle of Castillon, east of Bordeaux.

Events during the early years of the war showed harbingers of the future. French raids on the coast between the Isle of Wight and the Thames became more intense. The Sussex coastal ports were particularly targeted. In 1339 The French partially burnt Hastings and further damaged Hastings castle which was already in a very poor state of repair. Arraying of troops for shipment to France additionally placed a heavy burden on the east Sussex littoral. Many peasants fled from land along the shorelines and estuaries, leaving land uncultivated.

Society became strained with murderous salvaging of wrecked ships, smuggling, piracy, constant threats and assaults, sheep and cattle theft and groups of thieving vagabonds.

But these events became greatly overshadowed by the outbreak of the Black Death in England, which took a major toll of the population. The Black Death visited between 1348–1351, but it did not go away completely. The Black Death reached Sussex via the Cinque Ports and rapidly spread. At Battle Abbey the numbers of monks decreased from 52 in 1347 to 34 in 1351-2 and the abbot was one of those who died from the Black Death. In the early 1300s the population of Battle has been estimated to have been around 2500, after the Black Death it had fallen to an estimated 1500. In Wartling 70 people died. The nearby villagers of Hooe fled, terror struck at the news that the Black Death might be approaching their village, but there was nowhere to hide. In England the Black Death was to kill 1.5 million people out of an estimated total of 4 million people between 1348 and 1350 (just over 1/3 of the population). As noted above, it was to assault England in fortunately less strenuous and diminishing waves another six times before 1400.

After the first violent phase of the Black Death the barons and royal court tried to stop the economically inevitable wage and price inflation by imposing 'The Statute of Labourers' in 1351. This was a law to stop the peasants taking advantage of the shortage of workers and demanding more money and even prohibiting their movement to other areas where things could be better. Peasants were forced to work for the same wages as before. In addition landowners could insist on labour being performed on their lands, instead of accepting rents from their tenants. Landowners could profit, whilst a peasants life could be very much harder. However the statute was almost impossible to enforce, and farm wages in England on average doubled between 1350 and 1450.

In Battle one result of the shortage of people and an excess of messuages and tithings was that the town shrank towards its High Street core and surviving wealthy people were able to accumulate properties at the expense of poorer single tenancy holders. Rentals were also lower. The welthy took over the more valuable empty messuages and as the abbey later created more tenancies and sold off messuages they too were taken by the same people and quite often this enabled individual dwellings to be enlarged or gardens were created. This situation continued into the 15th century. This is illustrated in the following table, which also shows the abbey withdrawing from direct land management.

	1305	1367	1433
Multiple Tenancies held by one person	93	159 (+71%)	196 (+110%)
Tenancies held by single holders	112	88 (-21%)	55 (-51%)
Tenancies held by the Abbey	20	22 (+10%)	12 (-40%)

% expressed as increases or decreases from the 1305 figures

The social and economic stresses and strains imposed on the much reduced population of south-east England by the man-made pestilence of feudal war and the natural pestilences of the *Yersinia Pestis* bacterium and other then untreatable infectious diseases would help to potentiate the Peasants Revolt, which had a major focus in Kent and eastern Sussex.

With respect to the war and the Peasants Revolt this paper will lean heavily on a paper by Searle and Burghart from 1972 and Searle's abbreviation of this in 'Lordship and Community'. The Peasants Revolt was focussed on south-eastern England and particularly Kent and eastern Sussex, where there was widespread support for the uprising, not just from the peasants but from many across a widening spectrum of society. There was also a failure of the feudal structures, and the crown and the barons failed to recognise the need to support the southern coasts and their hinterlands during periods when the French were raiding with near impunity.

From its outbreak until 1389 war was being fought almost continuously on a large scale. It became the dominant issue politically and economically, bleeding the country dry. There was a brief respite from war and raids after the Treaty of Bretigny in 1360, but from 1360 this broke down and from 1369 until towards the end of the 14th century the Abbots of Battle became warrior monks and the major military organisers and defenders of the east Sussex coast against many raids and the fear of invasion.

In 1337 the king commanded Battle's Abbot Alan de Retlyng, along with other local landowners, that they defend the coast of Sussex. This burden was placed on the abbey for a long time as there were many French raids during the Hundred Years War (1337–1453), and the abbots helped to organise local defences and to provide food and clothing for refugees fleeing the coastal towns and littoral. A royal licence to fortify the abbey was received just after the start of the war, and the building of the great gatehouse and the defensive walls that we still see today was begun during de Retlyng's abbacy.

June 9, 1338. - License to krenellate the manse of the Abbey of Battle - The king to all his bailiffs and liegemen, to whom, &c., greeting - Know that of our special grace we have granted and given licence on behalf of ourselves and heirs, as much us in us lies, to the beloved by us in Christ, the Abbot and Convent of Battle, that they may fortify with a wall of stone and lime, and krenellate the site of that Abbey, which is of the foundation of our progenitors, formerly Kings of England, and may hold that site so fortified and krenellated for themselves and successors for ever, without penalty or impediment, from ourselves, or our heirs, justiciaries, eschaetors, sheriffs, or others our bailiffs or officers whosoever. In witness whereof, &c. Witness the King at Lopham, on the 9th day of June. Pat. 12 Edw. III, p2, m.28.

Also in 1338 Abbot Alan was excused from finding men from the abbey's manor of Wye to guard the coastline because he had already sent all his available men to patrol the coast near Winchelsea.

We know from histories of Rye and (new) Winchelsea that the Cinque Ports were called on continuously from 1336 to provide and man ships, for sea-battle with French ships, to ferry

armies and to generally defend the coast. Even so in 1339 the French fleet after trying to attack the English at Sandwich and finding themselves unable to land there turned on Rye and burnt much down, in spite of new walls, before being chased off to Boulogne, which was then duly burnt by the English who also hanged 12 of the French ships' captains. In 1350 in spite of the ravages of the Black Death the Cinque Ports fleets led by King Edward III and the Black Prince fought and managed to defeat a French fleet in Rye Bay at the Battle of Winchelsea.

The nominal pause in the Hundred Years War came to an end in 1355 and the English army crossed the Channel and moved deeply into France. The Black Prince also led his army out of English held Aquitaine towards central France. The French responded and the armies met at the Battle of Poitiers, won by the English who also captured King John II of France, who was taken to England for ransom. The direct interest to eastern Sussex in this is that he was held at a variety of locations which included a brief stay at 'King John's Lodge', formerly known as 'Shortridges', in Etchingham.

During all this in 1358 the Blackfriars of Winchelsea moved to their final site, near St Giles church (near where the present A259 enters Winchelsea from Hastings), but little else is known of their history after this.

French hit and run raids continued But the French seriously visited Rye again in 1360, just before the brief peace settled by the Treaty of Bretigny (which included a huge ransom for King John II), and landed and spoiled the town, as they did Winchelsea. The Abbot of Battle, by then Robert de Bello – as Alan de Retlyng had died of the Black Death in 1350 along with 17 of his 50 monks – did chase off the French from Winchelsea at this time, but not before significant damage and deaths had occurred. Edward I's new town of Winchelsea had already suffered significant loss of population after the Black Death and in 1358 94 properties were recorded as abandoned and 90 in ruins, a total of 184. By 1363 this figure had risen to 409 (*Homan – quoted by Pratt*).

A call was made in 1360 for men of distant counties to be sent for to help defend the south-eastern coasts, but few responded – only if the royal government or their own counties would pay for their time would they even consider helping. England might be a realm, but it was not yet a community. After 1369 and the breakdown of the Treaty of Bretigny the coast remained basically undefended, most of the realm's revenues being spent on the land wars in France, with little national support for coastal defence. The raids by the French increased in frequency and levels of destruction. The only defence was by local men, who were at the same time expected to raise much of the money for local defence, man the ships to defend the coasts, and could also be conscripted for overseas battles. The hundreds in these localities just could not individually support this and received little help from elsewhere.

The 'navy' had a permanent core of some 15 royal ships berthed at Winchelsea, with in addition some cogs, galleys and barges. In times of need it was supplemented by 'ship service' from other Cinque Ports, Yarmouth, Bristol and Southampton – essentially fishing

and merchant ships which did not come anywhere near being a true fighting fleet to defend the shores. It was mainly a transport fleet for men and supplies to get the king and barons across the Channel for their rapacious uncoordinated plundering expeditions to France, when they usually ignored Normandy from which many attacks were made on the English coast, instead plundering through the easier inland territories of Champagne and Anjou en route to Brittany.

In 1372 the French allied with the Castillians who then joined in the attacks on the coasts with their galleys with which they could carry out lightning raids into ports and destroy berthed English ships.

Richard II

1377 Edward III died and his grandson Richard II, a son of the Black Prince, became king at the age of 10. During his minority the country was ruled by a council led by his uncle, John of Gaunt. Five days after his accession the French/Castillians captured Rye again and held it for a while, freely ravaging the surrounding countryside. On this occasion Abbot Hamo de Offyngton of Battle rallied some defence and fortified Winchelsea, seeing off the French. Unfortunately the French, after killing 66 inhabitants of Rye, kidnapping three burgesses for ransom and setting fire to the town once more, promptly sailed down the coast to Hastings and pillaged there, burning the town and St Clements Church. This possibly pre-Conquest church had already suffered at the hands of the sea and in 1286 had been rebuilt inland, now it needed rebuilding again.

Rather perversely the mayor of Rye and the king's Bailiff acting on orders from the new regency hanged and quartered those inhabitants deemed most responsible for the 1377 loss of Rye, no doubt *'pour encourager les autres'* – it was an example of savage feudal injustice. But some funds were made available to rebuild the walls and to build two new 32-oar warships to help defend the town. The next year the men of Rye and Winchelsea raided the French coast, recovered some of the loot from Rye, took hostages and burnt the towns of St Pierre-en-Porte and Veulettes. The French not to be outdone came back in 1380 and severely damaged Winchelsea once again. By 1384 this town was partially deserted and desolated with those who could have moved inland, the wealthier taking tenancies in Battle for example.

Rye, Winchelsea and Hastings only slowly recovered from these events. Many families had lost their men, livelihoods, dwellings and some their children, many other townsfolk had fled inland but appear to have received precious little help from the hundreds further inland or from central authorities. In addition many people had now totally abandoned the lands towards the coasts as they were too frightened to stay and local farming and food production dropped.

After Edward III's death in 1377 and into the 1380s Richard II's government under John of Gaunt was so ineffective that the French raided all along the southern coasts virtually at will. Rumour has it that as the keeper of Pevensey Castle Gaunt had arrogantly refused to

garrison it for five years after he took possession of the castle in 1372, asserting that he was wealthy enough to rebuild it if a French attack destroyed it! As an illustration it shows the callous attitude of the regency to the defence of the local population and the coast..... But in 1377 when the country started running out of money to fund its war John of Gaunt imposed a new tax, the Poll (head) Tax, to cover the cost of the war. This was to be paid by the peasants, as well as the landowners.

Although this was meant to be a "one-off" event, it was so 'successful' that it was repeated three more times. The first tax was 4d from every person aged 14 or over, then it was raised to 4d for the peasants and more for the rich, and finally in 1380, it was raised to 12d per head. The barons liked the idea of the peasants helping to pay taxes, especially if the barons acted as tax collectors, with some of the money siphoned off into their pockets. It was much harder on the peasants, who could ill afford to pay, especially as the tax was collected in cash and not in farm produce. By 1380, many were hiding from the collectors, and avoiding payment. Royal commissioners were sent out as enforcers.

The Peasants Revolt of 1381 followed. Sir Richard Waldegrave blamed the outbreak on the extravagance of the court, the burden of taxation, a weak executive and the cynically accepted inadequate defence of the coasts. Certainly this explains the numbers of men from Kent and eastern Sussex who took part. Much has been written about the revolt after which the peasants were crushed, and many executed. But it marked the start of the breakdown of the outdated feudal system, the theory of which did not conform to the new reality of needing to have a united country which would respond positively to threats to its individual parts. Parliament gave up trying to control the wages the landowners paid their peasants and the hated poll tax was never raised again until someone was foolish enough to try it again in 1989. The peasants became treated with a bit more respect and many became freemen. This raised land productivity as the free worked harder than serfs.

Battle Abbey remained a centre of some support to the dispossessed and desperate peasants of coast and hinterland. Previously in 1368–73 and now again in 1380–4 the almoner of Battle purchased extra food to distribute among the large numbers of poor who came to the abbey. In this context as a major landowner the abbey did much more to help the people than other religious houses and most of the landed gentry of Kent and eastern Sussex. But even so it was forced to change the way it managed its lands towards the end of the period mainly due to loss of manpower from the dual pestilences of war and disease. It created more tenancies and the governance of the town became managed at arm's length from the Abbey.

Hamo of Offyngton died suddenly whilst administering mass in 1382. The notice of his death in the Westminster Chronicle stated that 'beneath his monkish habit he was a soldier of mark and a stout defender of home, neighbours, and coast against the attacks of pirates'. He left a hauberk and crossbow in his will. Six more abbots would be elected before the end of the 100 Years' war in 1453. They were:

John Crane, elected 1383.

John Lydbury, elected 1398, died 1404.

William Merssh, monk of Battle, Prior of St. Nicholas, Exeter, elected 1405, died 1417.

Thomas de Ludlowe (Ludlow, Shropshire), elected 1417, resigned 1434–5. *It was in this abbot's time that a new Sword of Battle Abbey was made. His initials 't l' can be seen on each side of the coat of arms embossed on its hilt. He may have become Abbot of Shrewsbury d.1459.*

William Waller, elected 1435, died 1437.

Richard Dertmouth, elected 1437, last mentioned in 1461. *Richard Dertmouth, the abbey and all its servants were pardoned in 1450 for supporting the Cade Rebellion.*

Sir Edward Dallingridge of Bodiam, a long term career soldier had played a prominent role in Sussex, representing the county Sussex in parliament on a number of occasions since 1379. In 1385 Richard II granted him a license to crenelate his manor house. The motivation for the construction of Bodiam Castle was probably a desire to create a symbol of his authority, to promote his social standing, and to capitalise on the fears caused by threat of invasion from France. The castle was never to be tested.

.In 1386 the French made preparations to invade England. Their fleet was assembled at Sluys in Flanders where Dutch mercenaries were hired for the fighting. In his chronicle, Froissart reports that the French were so confident of their preparations that they considered the English already crushed. The council of King Richard II prepared for the invasion by raising an army of ten thousand men at arms and thousands of archers.

Commissioners of Array (including Sir Edward Dallingridge) were appointed to raise militias in all the coastal counties (again!). The English plan was to allow the French to march inland for 3 or 4 days and then destroy the French supply ships. The French would be confronted in battle when their provisions ran low. Of course it might have been better have built a navy to intercept the fleet at sea and not allow the French the chance to occupy the ports and remove any English naval threat and thus gain the ability to re-supply their troops!

The French invasion fleet set out, but England's long-time friend 'Bad weather in the Channel' dispersed the fleet. A number of French ships were driven onto the English coast where they were captured. The survivors of the French fleet returned to Sluys. Another invasion could not be attempted as it was too late in the year and bad weather would continue to be a key factor.

Henry IV

There was a degree of peace between 1389–1415, including the last ten years of Richard II's rule which in itself increasingly broke down. He was eventually deposed and succeeded in 1399 by his cousin Henry IV, but piracy and raiding remained rife on both sides of the Channel coast.

Just before he died in 1413 Henry IV licenced the Priory of Hastings, which had been severely damaged by the sea, to move to Warbleton onto land given by John Pelham.

Henry V

Henry V became king in 1413 and resumed the conflict with France in 1415 with initial success at Harfleur, then Agincourt and afterwards which led to the Treaty of Troyes. This was an agreement that King Henry V of England and his heirs would inherit the throne of France upon the death of King Charles VI of France.

During 1416 Henry V dissolved all the residual alien priories in England. This included confiscation of the Abbey of Fécamp's manor of Brede, which was eventually passed to the new Syon Monastery in Middlesex, founded by Henry V in the previous year.

The breakdown of the 1420 Treaty of Troyes had begun the final stage of the Hundred Years' War and the "wars of the Treaty of Troyes" for control of the crown of France. The English had paid heavily. Henry V died in 1422.

Henry VI

A regency council ran England until Henry VI was considered old enough to rule in 1437. In 1445, he married Margaret of Anjou.

Henry was unfortunately too trusting and pious. After 1429 under Henry VI's council, country had seen a series of severe defeats in France. The royal treasury had been drained, even after the imposition of a huge tax burden which affected all. On top of this corrupt tax officials also took advantage of an inefficient system to fill their own pockets.

At Hurstmonceux in 1441 a descendant of the Monceux family, Sir Roger Fiennes, who was with Henry V at the Battle of Agincourt (1415) later became Treasurer of the Household of Henry VI, was given permission from the king to construct a crenelated castle on the site of Herstmonceux manor house. It was not a defensive structure, but a palatial residence in a castle style.

Further east Pratt records a tale of a possible burning of both Rye and Winchelsea in about 1448 towards the end of the Hundred Year War. These events amongst many others, 'unprotected and unavenged' 'put an end to all respect for the government which had fallen to pieces'. Somehow ships were once again mustered at Winchelsea to transport troops in the following year, although it appears that only two years further on not enough ships or skilled sailors were available.

Cade's Rebellion in 1450 was an uprising against the policies of Henry VI. Although led by property owners, most participants were peasants from Kent and eastern Sussex. It has been seen as another key moment in the growing political consciousness of the country as a whole, as unlike the Peasant Revolt of 1381, Cade's rebellion was not instigated by the peasantry, although the poorest in society were caught up in it. The protesters objected to forced labour, corrupt courts, land seizures by the nobility and heavy taxation, directly

linked to the crass royal management of the 100 years' war which had dragged on interminably. Afterwards Cade himself was inevitably hunted down, caught near Heathfield and mortally wounded. He mercifully died whilst being taken to London, but his corpse was still hung, drawn and quartered, before his head was placed on a pole by London Bridge.

It is notable that Robertsbridge Abbey did not support Cade and that its fair had been the subject of an attack by Cade's supporters in 1449. This suggests that this abbey was not very supportive of its community at that time. Battle's Abbot Richard Dertmouth and his abbey did support the Cade Rebellion as did Lewes Priory, and afterwards received a Royal pardon, as did many others. The number of pardons was very high as to have meted out capital retribution to the large numbers involved across the whole spectrum of society would have damaged the country irrevocably and significantly reduced royal income. The latter was probably the more important factor with the royal council.

In 1447, Hastings College had lost its privileged position as a royal free chapel, Henry VI in that year granting that the collegiate church of Hastings, with its deanery and prebends, which he had given with the castle to Sir Thomas Hoo, should be exempt from visitation by the king or any other person except the bishop of Chichester and his official. This arrangement was confirmed, in 1460, by an agreement between Sir William Hastings, then lord of the honour of Hastings, and the bishop, by which the college was declared to be entirely subject to the jurisdiction of the bishop.

Although the Battle of Castillon of 1453 is considered the final battle of the Hundred Years' War, a formal peace was not declared for yet another 20 years. England had been defeated and English landowners now complained bitterly about the financial losses resulting from the loss of their French holdings, but this problem was not to worry Battle Abbey, which had no French connections.

The concept of lordship over the surrounding area by the abbey had withered during the long period of war. The number of monks was shrinking and the glories of the past fading. More and more lay people ran the abbot's council and determined rentals etc. and the inquest jurors became a ruling clique, a small and self-perpetuating group of Battle oligarchic families. This included the Boys family who may be very distantly related to the author of this paper.

England was not a contented country and to make matters worse in 1453, the hapless king had a mental breakdown and Richard, Duke of York, was made protector. The king recovered in 1455, but civil war broke out between the Yorkist and Lancastrian factions, it was the start of the Wars of the Roses. Margaret, Henry's queen, with the Earl of Somerset took charge of the Lancastrian cause.

Edward IV

In 1460, the Duke of York, Henry's former protector was killed at the Battle of Wakefield but his son Edward took up the fight, defeating the Lancastrians at Towton in 1461 and crowning himself Edward IV.

In 1460 the Cinque Ports appear to have supported the Yorkists against Henry and helped capture the royal fleet and its leaders at Sandwich. Shortly afterwards supporting the Lancastrians they helped bombard London. Maybe by then they were prepared to supply their services to the highest bidder! Apart from these episodes eastern Sussex seems to have been mainly a by-stander to the conflicts between Yorkists and Lancastrians, certainly Searle records nothing untoward with respect to Battle Abbey. Pevensey played no part and the castle there was falling into greater disrepair.

The next period from 1461-1538 would see the last decades of monastic Battle.

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These events were covered by the reigns of no less than five kings: Edward III (1327-1377), Richard II (who succeeded aged 10, d.1400 having been deposed 1399), Henry IV (d.1413) Henry V (d.1422) and finally Henry VI who acceded age 9 months, usurped 1461, although he briefly ruled again in 1470-1, after which he was imprisoned in the Tower of London and died shortly afterwards).

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