

KETT'S REBELLION

Norfolk

July – August 1549



Published by the Friends of Kett's Heights

Norwich in the 1540s was the second most important city in England after London. Sheep farming and cloth manufacture had created wealth and prosperity across Norfolk. However, sheep needed a great deal of land for grazing, and many landed gentry and wealthy farmers took to enclosing common land for their sole use. Common land had previously been used by everyone in the community, for livestock grazing and food crop growing, and land enclosures had a terrible impact on ordinary people's lives. These enclosures were taking place not only in Norfolk but across the whole of England.

It was a desperate situation, and there were uprisings across southern England in protest. In Norfolk, Robert and William Kett, wealthy yeoman farmers from Wymondham, listened to what people in their local community had to say about the enclosures, and they felt sympathy for the cause.

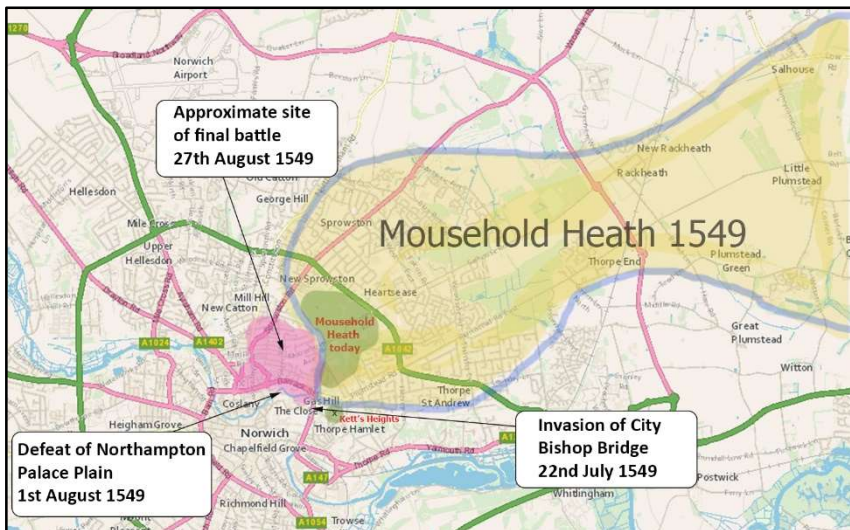
The Kett brothers led a people's rebellion to Norwich.

12th July 1549

Kett's army camped to the east of the city on Mousehold Heath. There were so many rebels that the camp was larger than Norwich itself. In Tudor times, Mousehold Heath was continuous open countryside, almost treeless, which stretched from Norwich to the edge of the Broads.

14th July 1549

Kett kept order in the camp by establishing a council. This council was situated at what was called the Oak of Reformation. The oak is believed to have been near the top of what is now the Rosary Cemetery, near the modern water tower on Telegraph Lane East. Kett's council issued warrants for the rebels to obtain provisions and arms. Making sure there was enough food for everyone on Mousehold Heath was an immense task. Across the course of the rebellion, Kett's warrants obtained over 20,000 sheep and 3,000 cattle, and deer were also captured from parks in the local area. In addition, the rebellion's many supporters (for example, from North Elmham) sent provisions such as beer, bread, fish and onions to Mousehold Heath to help feed the rebels.



15th July 1549

At first, there was a relative truce between the rebels on Mousehold Heath and the population in Norwich.

To take forward their cause, Robert Kett and his followers set out a list of twenty-nine requests. This list was sent to Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset, who was at that time the Lord Protector of England for the eleven-year-old King Edward VI.

Some of the key demands were:

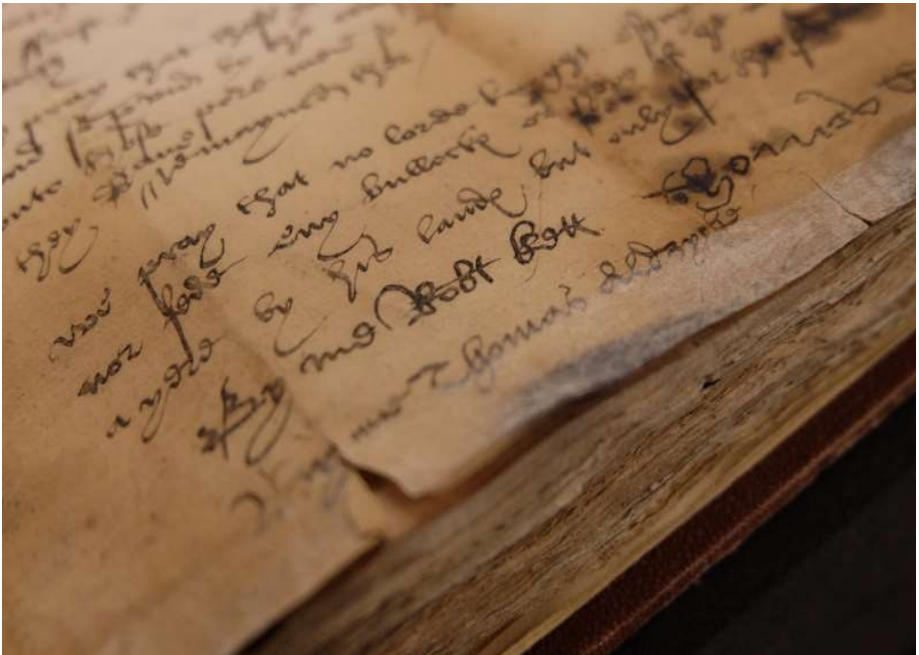
- The enclosure of common land should be forbidden.
- All bond men (men who were tied to serving the gentry) should be free.
- Anyone should be allowed to fish or travel by river for free. Fishermen should be able to keep the profits from selling large fish.
- Inflation should be kept down, with rents kept at the same rate as during Henry VIII's reign (1509-1547).



- Weights and measures for goods (such as food items) should be consistent across Britain.
- Parishioners should have priests who carry out their duties in an acceptable way.
- Poor children should be taught to read and write.

The manuscript of Kett's demands has been preserved in the British Library – you can find it at this web location:

<https://blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2016/11/ketts-demands-being-in-rebellion-1549.html>



9th July 1549

Kett established his headquarters in St Michael's Chapel on what is now known as Kett's Heights. It was at the south part of Mousehold Heath, on land previously owned by St Leonard's Priory. As you can see for yourselves, Kett's Heights provides a spectacular view over Norwich. This would have given Kett a considerable strategic advantage when planning his siege of Norwich.



St Michael's Chapel was built in the late 11th century by Herbert Losinga, the first bishop of Norwich. The chapel was intended as a replacement for a Saxon church dedicated to St Michael, which had been demolished in order to build Norwich cathedral.

On display in the Museum of Norwich at the Bridewell

Because of this chapel's association with Kett's Rebellion, the chapel ruins became known as Kett's Castle. These ruins have been the subject of numerous paintings and illustrations from the 18th century onwards.

20th July 1549

St Leonard's Priory was built at the top of Gas Hill by Bishop Losinga in 1094. During the Reformation, in 1538 – eleven years before Kett's Rebellion – this priory was dissolved, and many of its buildings were demolished.

The site was subsequently owned by the Duke of Norfolk, whose son, the Earl of Surrey, had a grand house built. This house was named Mount Surrey (or Surrey House). During Kett's Rebellion, Kett used this house to imprison members of the gentry.

Today, you can still see part of the external wall of the priory on the lower part of St Leonard's Road.



21st July 1549

A royal herald arrived in Norwich from London, conveying a message for the rebels from Edward Seymour, the Lord Protector. The message was that their twenty-nine requests were turned down unequivocally. So, Kett and his followers realised they had to take their rebellion to the next level in order to have their demands heard ... They had to invade Norwich!

22nd July 1549

On this day, thousands of rebels led by Robert Kett charged down from Mousehold Heath to capture Norwich. On the east side of the city there aren't any defensive walls, the thinking being that the River Wensum would provide the city with sufficient protection. However, many of Kett's men were able to swim across the river, between the Cow Tower and Bishopsgate. From here, they went on to capture the city.



23rd July 1549

The rebels took over Norwich wholeheartedly, arresting the Mayor Thomas Codd and other city leaders and aldermen. They decided to trust Augustine Steward, the Deputy Mayor. Steward had been mayor of Norwich previously, and he acted as mayor once more, following on from Kett's Rebellion.

31st July 1549



Then the Earl of Northampton arrived outside Norwich. He sent a herald to call for the city's surrender, and without the rebels' knowledge Deputy Mayor Steward let Northampton and his troops into the city. That evening, Northampton and other army leaders dined at Steward's distinctive house (which still exists in Tombland today), and they planned their attack on the rebels. As a result, later that evening and throughout the night, fierce fighting took place across the streets of Norwich. By the end of the night, Kett's rebels were forced to retreat out of Norwich.

1st August 1549

However, the rebels refused to be defeated, so the next day they stormed Bishop Bridge. (Bishop Bridge dates from around 1340 and is one of the oldest active bridges in England.) Like all entrances into Norwich, there was a gatehouse which was difficult to breach. So, most of Kett's army crossed the River Wensum by wading next to the bridge.



The rebels confronted the Earl of Northampton's army in Holme Street (today known as Bishopsgate). In order to avoid being trapped in Holme Street, the walls of the Great Hospital were broken down.

Kett's rebels went on to conquer Northampton's army on St Martin's Plain, close to where the Law Courts are today. Norwich was theirs once more!

2nd August 1549

Have you ever noticed this plaque outside the law courts in Bishopsgate? It marks where Lord Sheffield fell from his horse into a ditch during the Battle of St Martin's Plain.



Sheffield followed the chivalric code of removing his helmet, as a signal that he had surrendered and was prepared to be captured and ransomed. Unfortunately, one of Kett's men was not familiar with this chivalric code, and he brutally attacked Sheffield. Allegedly, in an attempt to save Sheffield's life, he was taken to the Adam and Eve pub, but he died swiftly from his wounds.

21st August 1549

In Cambridge, the Earl of Warwick assembled an army of 10,000 men, including 1,400 German mercenaries or *landsknecht*. Their intention was to conquer Kett and his rebels in the name of the King. They undertook a three-day march to Norwich, through Newmarket, Thetford and Wymondham.

Warwick sent his herald to negotiate with Kett and his rebels. He offered to pardon Kett and the rebels for capturing the city of Norwich as long as they withdrew their list of twenty-nine demands. The negotiation took place on the outskirts of the city at Bishop Bridge. While the discussion was underway, a boy in the crowd bared his backside. At the time, this was considered a standard insult, as, indeed, it is now! One of the herald's men reacted to this insult by shooting the boy. With this, all hope of negotiation ended.

Warwick managed to break into Norwich through the Brazen Gate (on Queen's Road), and Augustine Steward helped him further by ordering for the Westwick Gate (presumably the Heigham Gate on Westwick Street) to be opened. As a result, Warwick and his army took the city from Kett's rebels. However, the rebels managed to capture Warwick's artillery.


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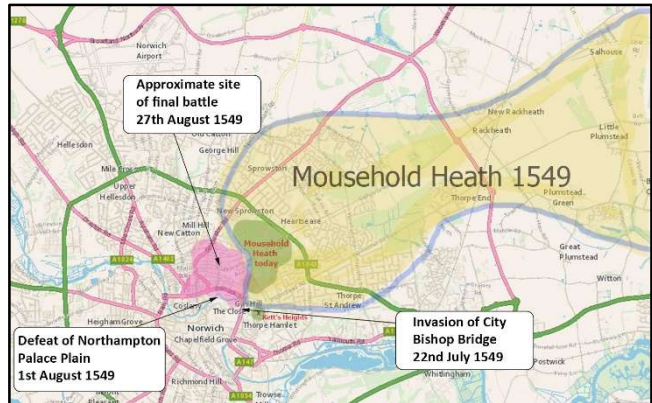
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The Earl of Warwick set up his headquarters in Augustine Steward's house on Tombland. He also commandeered the Maid's Head, and was intent to thwart Kett and rebels once and for all!

27th August 1549

After six days of strategic planning by both sides of the cause, Kett's rebels and Warwick's army of 10,000 men met in the Battle of Dussindale.

It has generally been assumed that Kett's rebels were poorly armed but this wasn't, in fact, the case. Their weapon stock included old but serviceable swords and



armour, and old pikes and halberds. In addition, Kett's blacksmiths on Mousehold Heath had produced additional pikes, and at least fifty percent of the rebels held longbows. During their raids of Norwich in August 1549, the rebels had acquired a decent amount of arms and gunpowder. They had also captured artillery, and were estimated to have had thirty-five cannons of varying calibre.

The final battle lasted from early in the morning until four o'clock in the afternoon. It has been assumed that the location of this battle was in the area of Norwich now called Dussindale. However, it has been argued very convincingly by Leo Jary in his book on Kett's Rebellion that the site of this battle was probably Magdalen Hill, off Magdalen Road, to the west of Mousehold Heath. The battle was bitter, and very closely fought. In the end, the rebels were defeated, and it's estimated that 3,000 of them were slaughtered.

8th August 1549

After the Battle of Dussindale, Robert and William Kett were captured by the Earl of Warwick. They were held in Norwich's Guildhall before being taken to London for trial. The Guildhall was built in 1407-24, and it is the largest and most elaborate medieval city hall ever built outside London.



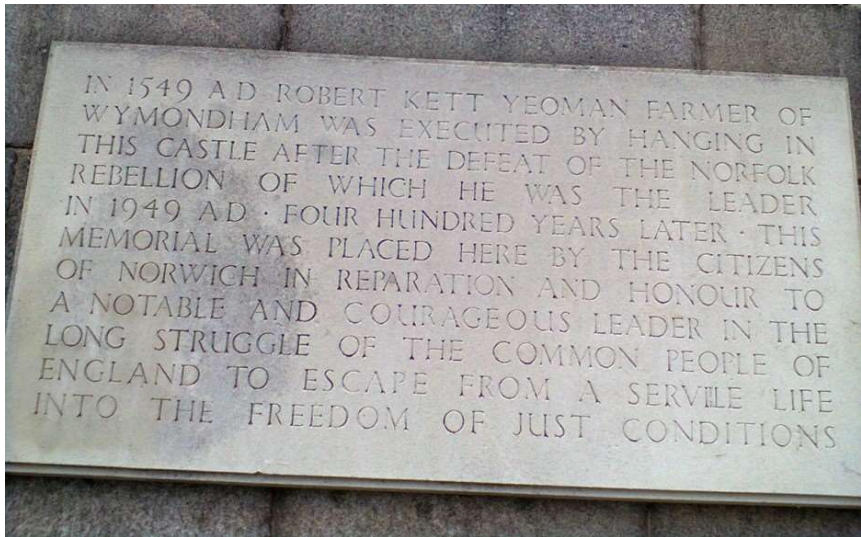
7th December 1549

In September 1549, Robert Kett and William Kett were tried in London for treason. Both of the brothers were found guilty, and they were transported back to Norfolk to be executed.

On 7th December, Robert Kett was hanged in chains from the walls of Norwich Castle. His corpse was left hanging from the castle walls long after his death, as a brutal warning of the fate that could await any future 'traitors'.

William Kett was hanged in a similar way from the walls of Wymondham Priory.

The fame of the Kett brothers lives on today. Their attempt to achieve social justice for ordinary people is rightly recognised.



The events of July and August 1549 provide the setting for C J Sansom’s latest book *Tombland*. A Tudor lawyer, Matthew Shardlake, visits Norfolk in July 1549 and finds himself caught up in Kett’s Rebellion.



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