CHAPTER ONE

The end of an era

On 21 June 1377 King Edward III of England lay on his deathbed at Sheen, a royal manor house on the banks of the Thames at Richmond, just outside London. He was sixty-four years old – a good age for a medieval monarch – and even more remarkably was in the fifty-first year of his reign. But the man who lay dying was no longer the charismatic and commanding figure he had once been. A wooden funeral effigy, created from his death-mask and still preserved in Westminster Abbey, reveals the strong features, prominent forehead and aquiline nose of his Plantagenet ancestry but also the drooping at the corner of his mouth typical of a stroke victim. The impressive muscular physique which had enabled him to excel on the battlefield and in the tournament lists had become wasted and enfeebled. Even more cruelly, the series of strokes which had taken their toll on his health and strength over the previous five years had also destroyed his mind and character. Long gone were the force of personality and political acumen

which had transformed England from a kingdom torn apart by internal factional squabbles into one of the greatest military powers in Europe.

Edward had withdrawn from court and government and in his last years had rarely been seen in public, appearing only occasionally when required to preside at state occasions: even then he cut a pitiable figure, having to be propped upright in his chair, unable to speak and looking 'like a statue'. Sometimes he was borne prostrate and hidden from curious eyes on a covered barge along the Thames between the palace of Westminster in the city of London and his beloved country manor houses at Sheen, Rotherhithe and Havering-atte-Bower. These offered him the peace, privacy and comfort not available at court; surrounded by parkland and gardens, they had all been lavishly refurbished in recent years to incorporate the latest modern conveniences such as mechanical clocks and hot water piped into the king's baths.[1]

For a man who throughout his long career had inspired extraordinary personal loyalty it was a particular tragedy that, at the end, he had been deserted by those who had once looked to him for decisive leadership and friendship. He had outlived most of the friends with whose aid his greatest triumphs had been won and many of the next generation, including his own son and heir the Black Prince, had also died before him. Ambitious young men no longer looked to him for advancement but to his sons and the court from which Edward himself was to all intents and purposes exiled by his physical and mental incapacity. The all-powerful monarch before whom the captive kings of France and Scotland had once been forced to bend the knee was now effectively a prisoner in his own household, which was dominated by the malign presence of his mistress, Alice Perrers. Since the death of Queen Philippa in 1369 Alice had openly flaunted her position and influence. She

stood at the head of Edward's bed when he received officials, enriched herself and her favourites at his expense and scandalised Londoners in 1374 by appearing at a tournament presided over by the ailing king as 'Lady of the Sun' – her costume being an impertinent reference to their relationship since Edward's personal heraldic badge was a golden sun.[2]

The chronicler Thomas Walsingham, a monk of St Albans who, as we shall see later, did not scruple to bend facts to fit his own particular brand of proselytising history, gives a particularly poignant description of Edward's last hours. Paralysed and robbed of speech by his latest stroke, the helpless king was deserted by his household, who, as it became apparent that he would not survive the night, all slipped away with whatever they could carry, leaving behind only a solitary priest to administer the last rites. Alice, 'that unspeakable whore', sat at the king's bedside until his breath began to fail him – then made off with the rings she had snatched from his fingers. Though almost certainly apocryphal, the story neatly epitomises how contemporaries viewed the king's mistress – and it was undoubtedly true that by the time Edward died Alice had acquired not only jewels worth over three thousand pounds (including a selection which had belonged to the late queen) but also lands in fifteen counties. The dignity denied Edward III in his final years was accorded to him in death by his successor: his tomb, in Edward the Confessor's chapel at the abbey, was adorned with a noble gilt-bronze effigy which bore only a passing resemblance to the more unforgiving and lifelike representation based on the death-mask. Serene and authoritative in expression, with the flowing locks and luxuriant beard of a prophet or sage, the king reposes above a legend proclaiming him 'the glory of the English, the paragon of past kings, the model of future kings, a merciful king, the peace of the peoples . . . the unconquered leopard'.[3]

Those who looked back to Edward's reign in the troubled years of his successors would regard it as a golden age. He had presided over one of the longest periods of domestic peace in the history of medieval England. What is more, in an age when such things mattered, his unprecedented success in his military campaigns, particularly in France, had demonstrated that he was the chivalric monarch par excellence: 'famous and fortunate in war; in all his battles, by land and sea, he always won the day and triumphed gloriously'. He had inflicted three major defeats on the French, at Sluys (1340), Crécy (1346) and Poitiers (1356), conquered Calais and its marches (1347), turning them into an English enclave which would endure for two centuries, and laid claim to the crown of France itself. It was no wonder that Froissart, the greatest chivalric historian of the day, lamented his passing by declaring that 'his like had not been seen since the days of King Arthur'.[4]

Yet even as the old warrior king lay dying one of the largest French invasion forces ever yet assembled was gathering across the Channel. The truce with England would come to an end on 24 June and Charles V of France had spent years preparing for this moment. What he envisaged was no less than an all-out assault on England and its dependent territories. He had reformed the royal arsenal at Rouen, begun a huge shipbuilding programme and recruited further naval reinforcements from his Castilian allies. By the beginning of June some fifty or sixty ships were awaiting his orders at Harfleur, including thirty-seven galleys, the most feared of all warships, equipped with cannons capable of firing stones and lead shot and manned by three thousand armed seamen, 3500 crossbowmen and several hundred men-at-arms. For the first time in forty years, the French were about to take the war to England.[5]

The onslaught began barely a week after Edward's death and less than seventy miles from Sheen, where he had died. The

French admiral Jean de Vienne landed his fleet unopposed on the Sussex coast and seized the port of Rye, which he held for several days before reducing it to ashes and carrying off a number of its wealthiest citizens as prisoners, together with a large haul of booty. Over the next few weeks he struck repeatedly and with similar success, raiding as far west as Plymouth in Devon and as far east as Dover in Kent, burning and pillaging some of England's most important Channel ports: Winchelsea, Folkestone, Portsmouth, Weymouth, Poole, Dartmouth, Southampton and Hastings were also attacked and most were put to the torch, as were Yarmouth, Newtown and Newport on the Isle of Wight. The government had received intelligence six months earlier that just such a campaign was in the offing but little had been done to prepare for the onslaught. Plans had indeed been laid for a naval expedition to be led by the king's son, John of Gaunt. Merchant ships had been requisitioned for service and 3940 men had been signed up for the campaign and paid the first instalment of their wages, but the death of Edward III at the critical moment when the truces lapsed threw everything into confusion. No one of any note, least of all Gaunt himself, had any intention of absenting themselves from court at this critical time in the political life of the nation. All preparations for the campaign were therefore suspended, so that when Jean de Vienne led his first wave of attacks on the south coast in June and July there was nothing in place to resist him. Worse still, of the twenty-seven ships in the king's navy in 1369, only five were left in service: against the might of the combined Franco-Castilian fleet they were helpless.[6]

The terrified and despairing inhabitants of the south coast were therefore left to fend for themselves. No English fleet patrolled the Channel to protect the southern coast, vulnerable town walls were non-existent or had fallen into disrepair and

aristocrats with castles in the area, including Gaunt, had failed to put them on a war-footing. The French were able to make daring lightning strikes without meeting any serious resistance. Their raiding parties leapt from the Castilian galleys as they swept into port at high tide, fired any ships in the harbour to prevent a pursuit and, in the three hours before they departed on the ebb tide, inflicted as much damage as possible.[7]

In the absence of the local aristocrats who should have taken the lead in defending their estates and the realm, it fell to the other great landowners, local churchmen, to shoulder the burden. The day after the French seized Rye, Abbot Hamo of Battle Abbey became a local hero by donning his hauberk, wielding his crossbow and personally leading the county levies to neighbouring Winchelsea, which stood between Rye and the beached French fleet. Not only did he refuse to discuss terms with the invaders but, when they attacked his forces, successfully fought them off, compelling them to abandon their occupation of Rye – only for them to sack Hastings instead. Several days later, the prior of St Pancras at Lewes, head of the most important Cluniac house in England, tried to repel the invaders at Rottingdean but the Sussex levies he commanded were slaughtered and he was himself among the prisoners taken back to France; his unfortunate monks not only lost their crops and suffered flooding owing to the destruction of their sea defences but also had to find a crippling ransom of £4666 to obtain his release a year later. The abbot of St Augustine's at Canterbury rallied the local Kent levies and succeeded in driving the invaders out of Folkestone, though not before they had already burned much of the town. Where such spirited leadership was missing local people had no choice but to buy their freedom from attack: the Isle of Wight only escaped further destruction after the burning of its three main towns by paying the French one thousand marks simply to go away.[8]

It was not an auspicious start to the new reign but it was a highly significant one. Forty years after the outbreak of what would misleadingly become known as the Hundred Years War, the tide of victory was no longer running in England's favour. The epic battles and successes of the 1340s and 1350s were a distant memory; the war in Spain, where the French and English had continued their struggle by proxy on behalf of the rival contenders for the Castilian throne, had seen a resounding English success at the battle of Nájera in 1367 – but that had been negated by the death of their claimant two years later and his opponent's accession to the throne. The French king, whose defeat and capture at the battle of Poitiers had led to the humiliating Treaty of Brétigny and the concession of great tracts of French territory to his English rival, had died a hostage for his still-unpaid ransom in London in 1364 – but his successor, Charles V, had proved an altogether more able adversary than his father. He had renewed the military and political 'auld alliance' with Scotland, supported the efforts of Owen Lawgoch, a mercenary in his service who claimed lineal descent from the last Welsh princes, to foment rebellion in Wales and forged offensive and defensive agreements with the new king of Castile. More importantly, by 1375, under the leadership of Bertrand du Guesclin, a professional soldier whom he had controversially appointed Constable of France, his armies had recovered almost all the lands that had been ceded to the English at Brétigny.

In the face of these setbacks the English had turned once again to the tried and tested tactic which had formerly brought them such success: the *chevauchée*. Like the French naval raids on the English coast in 1377, though land-based, these were fast-moving military campaigns to spread terror and devastation among the civilian population by killing, burning and pillaging and to draw the enemy out to engage in battle. Under

the wise guidance of du Guesclin, however, the French armies refused to take the bait and a series of expeditions launched in 1370, headed by the mercenary captain Robert Knolles, and in 1373 and 1375 under the leadership of Edward III's sons, John of Gaunt and Edmund of Langley respectively, failed to achieve anything. Lack of success in the field was made incomparably worse by the heavy losses which marked these fruitless campaigns: an army bound for English Gascony in 1372 was ambushed at sea off La Rochelle and both the fleet and the expeditionary force it carried were totally destroyed by France's Castilian allies; the following year, after his raid from Calais to the borders of Burgundy, Gaunt lost more than half his men by marching them across France to Bordeaux in the depths of a bitter winter. Perhaps even more frustrating was Edmund of Langley's expedition to Brittany in 1375, which had to be aborted within weeks of its arrival – not by defeat, but by his brother Gaunt's conclusion of a truce with France. An otherwise welcome respite from war was thus soured by the need to abandon an expensive campaign which, unusually, had begun well and promised better.[9]

Where was the great warrior king himself during these years of 'abject and costly failure'?[10] Edward's last personal intervention in the war occurred in 1372 when he decided to avenge the disaster at La Rochelle by raising a large army and leading it himself to Gascony. He never arrived. Contrary winds prevented his fleet leaving English waters (it took three weeks just to sail the fifty-odd miles from Sandwich to Winchelsea) and, after five weeks at sea, he was forced to abandon his plans and return home without even setting foot in the duchy. Whether it was the humiliation of this futile expedition after so many great victories, or simply a growing awareness of his own frailty, Edward now increasingly retreated from his public role. His lack of engagement with his daily duties in his last years created

a serious problem for a realm and government which depended on the king as the ultimate source of all authority. More than a decade before his death Edward had declined the king of Cyprus's urgent invitation to join his crusade against the Mamluk Turks on the grounds, he said then, that 'I am too old. I shall leave it to my children'.[11] He might have hoped that his offspring would also help him bear the burden of kingship in his declining years: there were, after all, plenty of them. His queen had borne him at least twelve, including four daughters and five sons who had survived into adulthood, though their third son, Lionel of Antwerp, had died shortly before his thirtieth birthday in 1368.

First and foremost among the royal children was Edward's son and heir, Edward, known since Tudor times as the Black Prince, who for three decades had proved his mettle by leading his troops into victory on the fields of Crécy, Poitiers and Nájera. In addition to the customary titles of earl of Chester, earl of Cornwall and prince of Wales granted to him in childhood, Edward had also been created the first prince of Aquitaine. This was a deeply symbolic act, for Aquitaine, or Gascony as the English preferred to call it, was actually a duchy subject to the French crown which had been inherited by English kings after the marriage of Eleanor of Aquitaine and Henry II. Its status had long been a source of dispute and conflict between the two kingdoms, leading ultimately to the outbreak of the Hundred Years War in 1337. Edward III's military victories since then had forced the Treaty of Brétigny upon the French, compelling them to recognise Gascony as a sovereign state owned by the English crown. Accordingly, in 1362, Edward had granted the 'principality' for life to his eldest son to rule as a 'true prince', owing a nominal ounce of gold annually to his father in recognition of his ultimate authority, but otherwise holding it as a virtually independent

state.[12] The following summer the prince sailed for Bordeaux with his new bride, Joan of Kent, and for the next nine years he ruled his new principality with an insensitivity which was not calculated to endear him to his subjects: virtually his last act there was to raze the city of Limoges to the ground for its temerity in surrendering too hastily to the French. Decades of fighting in foreign fields had taken their toll on his health, however, and at the beginning of 1371 he returned permanently to England with his wife and their son, four-year-old Richard, who had been born at Bordeaux.[13]

The return of the heir to the throne should have been an opportunity to bolster the monarchy but the prince was in no position to take up the reins of government that were slipping from Edward III's grasp. He was already sicker than his father. Though from time to time he would put in an appearance on state occasions, he rarely travelled more than fifty miles from London and could no more cope with the minutiae of royal business than Edward himself. For five more years he lingered on, his illness as much a mystery to his physicians as it is to historians today, eventually dying, as he had piously wished to do, on Trinity Sunday 1376. Contemporary chroniclers were lavish in their praise of this 'second Hector'.

> When he died, all the hopes of the English died with him. As long as he survived, they feared no enemy's invasion, and, while he was in the field, no shock of war. While he was present, the English had never suffered the disgrace of a campaign that had been badly fought or abandoned. He attacked no nation that he did not conquer. He besieged no city that he did not capture.[14]

The criticism of other military leaders implicit in this obituary was probably justified but the prince's eulogists might have been

less fulsome had he been well enough, or lived long enough, to take an equally active and personal role in England's governance. Impatient and unsubtle by temperament, he had no natural inclination for politics and his diplomatic and administrative record, particularly in Gascony, where he had effectively exercised supreme authority, varied 'from the competent to the disastrous'.[15] Such was the king that England never had, for, by predeceasing his father, Edward never had the chance to tarnish his reputation in that realm by ineffective or divisive government. That distinction would pass instead to his brother and to his son, both of whom shared his autocratic tendencies but not his military skill.

The prince died just a week before his forty-sixth birthday, leaving as heir to the throne his nine-year-old son, Richard. Almost immediately the House of Commons petitioned Edward III that the boy should be recognised as prince of Wales and brought before the parliament then sitting 'so that the lords and commons of the realm could see and honour the said Richard as the true heir apparent of the realm'. The unseemly haste of this intervention, not to mention the pointed reference to the 'true' heir apparent, seems to have been fuelled by fears that Richard's uncle, John of Gaunt, might seize the throne for himself. Whether Gaunt genuinely harboured such ambitions it is now impossible to determine; it seems unlikely but it is telling that such suspicions were already being voiced even before the old king died. There were good reasons for this. A child-king was a prospect dreaded by all medieval societies since it created a vacuum at the heart of government which laid the realm open to faction and abuse of power: a powerful, experienced adult, particularly one of the royal blood, might therefore be an attractive alternative. And there was no one in the entire kingdom more powerful than John of Gaunt. The deaths of his three older brothers had now made him the eldest of Edward

III's legitimate sons but, since the age of twenty-two, he had also been the richest nobleman in the country having inherited, through his wife, the dukedom of Lancaster and earldoms of Derby, Leicester and Lincoln. His gross annual income of around twelve thousand pounds was more than double that of any other English aristocrat.[16]

Gaunt was obviously aware that, once his ailing father died, his young nephew would be all that stood between himself and the throne. He did indeed have his heart set on becoming king – but it was not the crown of England to which he aspired. After the death of his first wife he had married again, this time to Constanza, the elder of the two daughters of Pedro I, king of Castile, on whose behalf the English had fought the battle of Nájera. By this means Gaunt had obtained a claim, by right of his wife, to the throne of Castile, which was currently occupied by his father-in-law's murderer, the pro-French Henry of Trastamara. If Gaunt could gain acceptance of his claim by persuasion or main force he would not only win himself a kingdom but also remove one of France's most important allies, thereby protecting both England and Gascony from the depredations of the much-feared Castilian navy. In 1372, therefore, with the approval of Edward III and his advisers, Gaunt had formally adopted the title 'king of Castile and Léon'; a few months later his younger brother Edmund of Langley married Constanza's sister Isabella to reinforce the link between the two dynasties and prevent anyone else acquiring a claim to Pedro's former throne. However remote, unattainable and even irrelevant Gaunt's ambitions might have seemed to the ordinary man in the street or the field, their repercussions would be felt at every level of society over the next fifteen years. His preoccupation with them would influence, and sometimes dictate, his policies at home and abroad.[17] And throughout the long years of his father's and brother's debilitating illnesses, followed

by his nephew's minority, his pre-eminent position meant that his policies were often those of the government.

Not even his brothers were in a position to challenge Gaunt. Edmund of Langley, though only a year younger, lacked the family enthusiasm and aptitude for war. Despite his taking part in numerous military expeditions, his leadership was in name only and he was never entrusted with sole command. Described by Froissart as 'indolent, guileless, and peaceable', Edmund had accepted the choice of bride dictated by his brother's Castilian ambitions even though this deprived him of the opportunity to make a financially advantageous marriage as Gaunt himself had done. Although his father had created him earl of Cambridge and granted him an annuity of one thousand marks in 1362, Edmund never acquired the great estates which would have given him the resources and influence to make him a major player in the affairs of the realm.[18] The same was also true of Edward III's youngest son, Thomas of Woodstock. He was born more than thirteen years after Edmund, and his father had intended to provide for him by marrying him to Eleanor de Bohun, the elder daughter and co-heiress of the earl of Hereford, in 1374. As his bride was then just eight years old Woodstock was given custody of her lands until she came of age and could inherit them in her own right; he was also appointed to her family's hereditary office of constable of England. Any hope of acquiring the entire Bohun inheritance that he might have cherished would be thwarted in 1380 when Gaunt took advantage of his brother's absence on campaign to marry Eleanor's younger sister and co-heiress, Mary, to his own son and heir, Henry, earl of Derby, an act which permanently divided the vast Bohun lands and left Thomas with a festering sense of resentment at the injury done to him. Thomas was the only one of all Edward III's adult sons to whom he did not give an earldom: that honour would have to wait till the eve of his

nephew's coronation, when he was created earl of Buckingham and granted an annuity of a thousand pounds – a sum which was entirely dependent on the continuation of war with France since it was derived from the revenues of French-owned priories which were always taken into the king's hands during times of conflict.[19]

Gaunt had no doubt expected that he would be appointed regent for Richard when Edward III died in 1377 but, surprisingly, no plans had been drawn up to anticipate the delicate but inevitable situation of a child inheriting the throne. In the last months of his life Edward had indeed drafted letters patent[20] which entailed the crown on his male heirs and set out the order of succession on his demise: his grandson Richard was first in line but, in the absence of heirs of his body, the crown was to go to John of Gaunt. The legal status of the document is doubtful as it does not appear to have been enrolled or even made public, but the principle that the crown descended to the eldest son, and to his eldest son after him, was already well established in England. Even so it was not necessarily a foregone conclusion that Richard would succeed his grandfather. In 1199 King John had set aside the claims of his elder brother's twelve-year-old son Arthur of Brittany to take the throne himself. It was a precedent that could easily have been repeated in 1377 – and throughout his nephew's minority Gaunt would be haunted by persistent rumours that he intended to seize the crown for himself – but Edward III clearly intended that his grandson should succeed him. He had effectively endorsed him as his heir apparent by creating him prince of Wales in November 1376 and, in his last public act, by dubbing him a knight and admitting him to the Order of the Garter on St George's Day 1377, but he had made no provision for how the boy's reign would work in practice. There was little previous experience to draw on as there had only been one minority since the Norman Conquest. Before

King John died in 1216 he had appointed a council of thirteen to 'assist' his nine-year-old son – a burden which the council almost immediately offloaded on their foremost member, William Marshal, who became 'guardian of our person and of our realm'.[21] Gaunt was an executor of the old king's will, as he had been of his brother's, but neither appointed him to a position of authority over Richard's person or realm.[22]

If the idea was ever mooted that Gaunt should become regent it was quickly abandoned: unlike Marshal, he was not a man around whom people could rally or unite. In fact he was widely considered the most unpopular man in the kingdom. He was blamed not only for the expensive military failures of the early 1370s but also for his crass and high-handed behaviour during the last years of his father's reign. Instead, the business of running the country in King Richard II's name was delegated to a continual council composed of two earls, two bishops, two barons, two knights banneret and four knights. Neither Gaunt nor his brothers had a place on it, though as the king's uncles their status guaranteed them a role in directing state affairs which, in Gaunt's case, was further reinforced by the influence brought him by his unparalleled wealth.[23]

It was not until the middle of August that the council finally threw off its paralysis and began to organise its response to the renewal of war. By that time, not only had the south coast of England been ravaged, but Calais was under siege by land and sea and Gascony's defences had collapsed in the face of a French invasion which had captured major towns, as well as the English seneschal himself, and was now even threatening the capital, Bordeaux.[24] Disaster and humiliation loomed on every front.


England in 1381
N
SCOTLAND
NORTHUMBERLAND
CUMBERLAND
DURHAM
WESTMORLAND
Scarborough
YORKSHIRE
York
Beverley
Hull
LANCASHIRE
CHESHIRE
Chester
DERBY
NOTTINGHAM
LINCOLN
Horston Castle
Dunsby
NORFOLK
Norwich
Great Yarmouth
STAFFORD
LEICESTER
RUTLAND
Leicester
Peterborough
SHROPSHIRE
Coventry
Ramsey
Ely
HUNTINGDON
Huntingdon
NORTHAMPTON
WARWICK
WORCESTER
WALES
SUFFOLK
Bury St Edmunds
CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge
Ipswich
BEDFORD
HEREFORD
HERTFORD
Hertford
Colchester
GLOUCESTER
OXFORD
BUCKINGHAM
ESSEX
Oxford
St Albans
R. Thames
Brentwood
MIDDLESEX
London
Isle of Sheppey
Isle of Thanet
Bristol
BERKS
Harmondsworth
Sheen
Rochester
WILTS
SURREY
Guildford
Maidstone
Canterbury
SOMERSET
HAMPSHIRE
Farnham
KENT
Bridgwater
Winchester
Folkstone
Salisbury
SUSSEX
Rye
Romsey Abbey
Winchelsea
Arundel
Lewes
Hastings
DEVON
DORSET
Rottingdean
Isle of Wight
Plymouth
Dartmouth
0 10 20 30 40 50
English miles

CHAPTER TWO

The state of the nation

On Thursday 16 July 1377, eleven days after Edward III's solemn interment in Westminster Abbey, his ten-year-old grandson returned to the abbey church and knelt on the cushions before the high altar. There he swore a sacred oath to uphold the laws and customs of his ancestors, to protect the Church and clergy, to do justice to all and to uphold the laws which the people would 'justly and reasonably' choose. He was then anointed with holy oil, handed the three symbols of his authority – the sword to protect the kingdom, the sceptre to chastise wrongdoing and the ring signifying his pastoral responsibilities – and finally crowned. Perhaps in a concession to his age after the long service, he was carried from the church to receive the acclamation of his people on the shoulders of his tutor, Sir Simon Burley, but, in the press of the crowd, he lost one of the slippers of St Edmund which were part of the coronation regalia.[1] On a day of such pageantry and symbolism this

was unfortunate but apt: a boy-king would inevitably struggle to fill the shoes of his predecessors.

The kingdom Richard inherited from his grandfather was bounded on three sides by the sea. It stretched across England from the North Sea in the east, across the principality of Wales, which had been annexed to the crown by his great-great-grandfather, Edward I, to the Irish Sea and Atlantic Ocean in the west, and from the Channel coast in the south up to the border with Scotland in the north. Despite English efforts to enforce lordship over Scottish kings, the realm remained fiercely independent and a constant threat to the peace and stability of the border region and also of the wider kingdom. Farther afield, English crown possessions included the Isle of Man in the west and the Channel Islands off the French coast, the latter being all that remained of the English duchy of Normandy lost by King John in 1204. English kings also claimed the lordship of Ireland – a euphemism for an authority over the numerous petty Irish kingdoms which had been asserted since Norman times but was barely enforceable outside a small area around Dublin known as the Pale; the native Irish who lived outside this enclave were regarded as being ungovernable, giving rise to the phrase 'beyond the Pale'. Few English kings ever ventured to set foot in Ireland, Richard himself being a rare exception.

Far more valuable and important in English eyes were the two crown possessions on the continent. The duchy of Gascony extended some 120 miles along the western seaboard of France from the city of Bordeaux (Richard's birthplace) in the north to that of Bayonne in the south but beyond that secure area fluctuated enormously in size according to the fortunes of war. And rapidly acquiring even greater significance was Edward III's conquest just across the English Channel from Dover, the port of Calais and its marches, which spread

roughly ten miles in each direction from the town and were guarded by a ring of small fortresses. Both Gascony and Calais were vital to English trading interests. Gascon wine and salt were both highly prized commodities at a time when water was generally unfit to drink and the life of fresh food, particularly meat and fish, could only be prolonged in changeable climates by salting or smoking. The ships that brought these cargoes to England returned with corn, wool, cloth and hides, as well as the salted herrings that were the staple diet of all Christians on the fasting days of Friday and Lent.[2] Calais was both an important garrison and bridgehead into France for military campaigns but also, since 1363, the site of the Staple, or monopoly, on all sales of wool and hides exported from England. The merchants of the Staple company controlled the quality and quantity of goods sold abroad, ensured that the king received his customs duties, and regulated transactions between English and foreign merchants. Their members included the richest and most important merchants in England and, although they were not necessarily resident in Calais, they were nationally influential and significant, not least because they exploited the hugely important cloth markets of the Low Countries on their doorstep and regularly lent money to the crown.[3]

Even at this early period, England was already a seafaring nation. John of Gaunt, in one of Shakespeare's most memorable speeches, would describe the realm as

> This fortress built by Nature for herself
> Against infection and the hand of war …
> This precious stone set in the silver sea,
> Which serves it in the office of a wall,
> Or as a moat defensive to a house,
> Against the envy of less happier lands.[4]

The sea did indeed serve as a 'moat defensive' but it was also a key factor in England's economy. In a country ranging over fifty thousand square miles of land nowhere was more than seventy-five miles from the coast and a large network of navigable rivers reduced even that distance significantly. As a consequence both personal travel and bulk transportation of goods were often swifter, easier and cheaper than simply using roads, which had to be maintained to be effective, required both bridges strong enough to withstand heavy traffic and an abundant supply of horses and draught animals to cover any distance, and were frequently made impassable by bad weather or difficult terrain. The rivers teemed with boats of every shape and size: coracles, propelled by a single oar and made from basketwork covered with animal hide for the single fisherman or reed-gatherer; larger and sturdier wherries, which were rowed or poled across rivers and marshes to ferry passengers and their horses; shallow clinker-built barges, the workhorses of the river, designed for the bulk transportation of heavy goods such as the iron arrow-heads manufactured in Yorkshire and carried down the Ouse for transportation by sea to the Tower of London. Some of these barges were equipped with a sail and seaworthy: hugging the coastline, they brought a regular supply of coals from Newcastle to feed London's insatiable demand for domestic and industrial fuel. Larger ocean-going vessels, known as cogs, carracks and balingers, usually single-masted with a deeper keel and sometimes with 'castles', or half-decks at the bow and stern, made the longer international journeys to and from the markets of the Baltic and Mediterranean.[5]

If England was first and foremost a trading nation this was because its temperate climate and fertile soils, particularly in the south and east, allowed it to produce a surplus to sell. Unlike in more arid areas of Europe, there was little subsistence farming in the late fourteenth century. In every village or hamlet

there were undoubtedly some people who struggled to make ends meet and to feed their families from what they could grow themselves; the northernmost counties on the borders with Scotland also had a higher proportion of people scratching a bare living from land which was less suitable for arable crops and also regularly subject to slash-and-burn raids by the Scots. Generally speaking, however, the majority of those working the land were able to produce more than they could consume, even if it was only a few vegetables, a clutch of eggs or several pats of butter, all of which found ready markets in neighbouring villages and towns.

What is more, farming on a larger scale had become much more common, with entrepreneurial individuals building up substantial estates dedicated to animal husbandry, which was less labour-intensive than growing crops to eat and produced meat, hides and the all-important wool upon which so much of the nation's wealth depended. It was no coincidence that the fourteenth century saw a transformation in the diet of the English lower classes from one composed mainly of cheap cereals, beans and pulses, with coarse black bread (made from rye or barley) and the occasional flitch of bacon to one with a high proportion of meat, particularly beef and mutton, and bread made from wheat. Though domestically brewed small beer with its low alcohol content remained a household staple, the demand for professionally brewed strong ale also increased: manorial officials at one Sussex manor in 1354 had to buy in ale to replace the cider normally offered to its reapers because the reeve in charge 'would not drink anything but ale in the whole of the harvest time'.[6]

That workers were able to imitate their superiors by demanding – and receiving – better-quality food and drink was in no small measure due to the greatest natural catastrophe to befall the Middle Ages. The first outbreak of the great plague

now referred to as the Black Death occurred in England in the summer of 1348. The disease arrived from the continent, by August it had reached London and by the following summer it had spread throughout the country. Precisely what it was or how it was transmitted is still debated, though recent analysis of skeletons found in plague pits seems to confirm that it was caused by an early variant of the *Yersinia pestis* bacterium, which causes bubonic and pneumonic plague. The symptoms, as described by contemporaries, certainly point that way: the sudden appearance of egg-shaped swellings in the groin, neck and armpits and the equally sudden haemorrhaging and vomiting of blood, which both presaged immediate death. The shocking nature of the disease was compounded by its indiscriminate choice of victim: rich and poor, young and old, town and country dwellers, laymen and churchmen all succumbed; there was no cure, no palliative, and people who had appeared fit and healthy one day were struck down and died a few days later. Whole families, sometimes whole communities, were wiped out. In the city and suburbs of Rochester, Kent, fifty per cent of the priory's tenants died; it was the same story in the Cambridgeshire manor of Cottenham, the Norfolk manor of Hakeford Hall in Coltishall and, in the north of England, on the estates of Durham priory, where the death rates on some manors reached as high as seventy-eight per cent.

Parish priests who visited the sick and dying were particularly at risk from infection and in 1349 more than eight hundred died in the diocese of Norwich alone. St Mary's Abbey at Malling, Kent, lost three abbesses in the space of three weeks and was reduced to just four nuns and four novices, while the brothers in the small Augustinian houses of Alnesbourne and Chipley in Suffolk were wiped out completely; even the hugely wealthy and privileged abbey of Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, one of the greatest Benedictine houses in the country, lost forty per

cent of its monks. 'So great a multitude was not swept away, it was believed, even by the flood that happened in the days of Noah', wrote one monastic chronicler. It was a catastrophe on an apocalyptic scale which was explicable only to a medieval society familiar with the biblical stories of Noah's flood and of the ten plagues inflicted on the Egyptians (which included boils, blood and death of the first-born) as God's punishment for sin. The survivors therefore flocked to their churches to do penance and seek forgiveness: the golden shrine of one of England's most popular saints, Thomas Becket, at Canterbury Cathedral cannot have been the only object of pilgrimage to receive a massive boost to its funds as a direct result of penitential almsgiving in the wake of the first onset of the plague.[7]

As a result of the pandemic the population of England, which had probably peaked at around five million in the first half of the fourteenth century, suddenly plummeted by between a third and a half. What is more, further outbreaks in 1361–2, 1369 and 1374–5, though not as severe in their mortality, prevented any recovery in population levels, which remained stagnant at between two and three million from the mid-fourteenth century until the end of the fifteenth.[8] The second plague, in particular, which was colloquially known as the 'mortality of the children', wiped out large numbers of the next generation, and had a knock-on effect on the replacement birth rate in the future. High infant mortality, possibly combined with lower fertility rates, combined to ensure that in London and most major provincial towns, where the records exist, seventy-five per cent of families failed to produce a male heir for even three successive generations.

Statistics tell us that life expectancy may have been reduced to around thirty-five years but the figures are warped by the fact that infant mortality rates were so high. Even before the advent of the plague at least thirty per cent of babies and children died

before their seventh birthday and the wealthiest and most privileged could not escape unscathed: Edward I, for example, lost seven of his sixteen children before the age of seven. In fact, however, even after the advent of the plague, anyone who survived their first five years stood a good chance of living much longer. Though few could hope to attain the three-score years and ten which the Bible taught was the natural span of human life, men who reached the age of twenty could expect to live into their fifties whether they were wealthy London merchants or agricultural labourers in the Midlands or south-east of England. Despite the dangers of childbirth, life expectancy among women appears to have been similar. Aristocratic women, however, had a disconcerting tendency in this period to live much longer than their male counterparts, not least because so many of the latter became casualties of war: over twenty per cent of the nobility born between 1351 and 1375 met violent ends.[9]

Horrific and tragic though the high levels of mortality were for victims of the plague and their families, the financial circumstances of many of those who survived improved dramatically. As we shall see, shortage of manpower created opportunities for the ambitious and able to demand higher wages both in cash and in kind, to negotiate improved terms of employment (including better food), to exploit gaps in the market and to acquire more land. Greater availability of land and fewer mouths to feed also removed the pressure to grow crops in marginal land and encouraged its conversion from arable to pasture. Living conditions also improved. If there was ever any truth in the popular image of several generations of medieval peasant families living cheek by jowl with their animals in the cramped and squalid conditions of dark, windowless, smoke-filled and filthy hovels, it was no longer pertinent by Richard's reign. Longhouses, where livestock occupied

a byre built under the same roof as the family home, were already a rarity in most regions by 1350, though for pragmatic reasons they survived in the harsher climates of northern England. Even the smallest landholdings usually consisted of a single-storey house of up to three bays (a hall and two chambers) with a separate barn, and many, if not most, had at least one or two additional buildings for food processing and agricultural use clustered round a yard where the animals were kept. The main edifices were generally professionally constructed from timber and stone or, where the latter was not available, cob, which was made from a mixture of compressed clay, straw, sand and water; they were either thatched with straw or reeds or roofed with tiles or slates. Buildings like these were valuable assets and landlords were quick to punish tenants who allowed them to become dilapidated and to enforce their repair or even rebuilding. Although more than one family might share a holding, they lived in separate quarters and the evidence of the 1377 poll-tax returns suggests that by then most households were composed of small conjugal units consisting of just over two people above the age of fourteen (younger children did not appear in the returns). Single dependent relatives, or elderly people who had given up their landholding or urban tenement to others in return for bed and board for the remainder of their lives, usually occupied specifically designated private rooms or even a cottage on site, rather than sharing in the communal domestic arrangements.[10]

The face of England was changing in other ways. Rural industries were flourishing in an increasingly cash-based economy. Open-cast tin-mining in Cornwall, famous since at least Roman times, was now said to consume more than three hundred acres annually; similarly, ancient open-cast mining for lead in Derbyshire and for coal in the shallow seams along the banks of the river Tyne in north-eastern England had thrived under

the impetus of urban building and the demands of war. The ten per cent of the country that was still covered by woodland was carefully managed by coppicing to provide charcoal, a vital fuel for many industries, mature timber for the construction of buildings and ships and cover for game, which the aristocracy alone was privileged to hunt. A significant new rural industry was also emerging in the years after 1360. It was now more profitable to sell finished cloth rather than raw wool, particularly for the domestic market, so weavers, dyers and finishers multiplied in villages and towns with access to the necessary supplies of wool and flowing water – the latter just as necessary as the raw material, since plentiful supplies were needed to wash both wool and cloth and to drive the mechanical fulling machines.[11]

Although England remained primarily an agrarian society, some twenty per cent of the population now lived in towns where specialist trades, crafts and markets could flourish more easily than in the countryside. As we shall see, these ranged from the suppliers of daily essentials such as the tailors, smiths, butchers and grocers to be found in every small town to the more exotic and unusual parchment-makers, embroiderers and goldsmiths plying their skills in the shadows of, and for the benefit of, great cathedrals and monasteries. The influence of the Church permeated society and daily life. It was the Church calendar, rather than simply the weather, which dictated and marked the passing of the seasons. The very hours of the day were marked out for both labourers in the field and townsmen going about their business by the bells which called monks and canons to their prayers.

Church buildings literally dominated town and country in both their scale and magnificence. Nothing, not even a royal castle or palace, could compare with the exquisite tracery and soaring pinnacles of a remote Cistercian abbey in Yorkshire or

an urban cathedral like Salisbury or Gloucester. For the weary traveller these were landmarks which would be seen hours before they could be reached by road: signposts not only to God's kingdom but also to the baser pleasures of rest and refreshment. Parish churches too were enjoying a building renaissance in the wake of the plague as grateful survivors sought to extend and beautify their local places of worship by adding porches and steeples and to memorialise themselves and their families by paying for tomb effigies, stained-glass windows and chantry chapels where a priest or priests sang masses continually for the souls of the dead. Even those who could not afford such ostentatious alms-giving were legally obliged to give their tithe to the Church, a tenth of their annual income, which was claimed from every adult in the kingdom, whether it was in cash from wages or rents or in kind in the form of grain, wool or livestock. The Church claimed other 'gifts' or payments too, on feast days, for churching ceremonies to purify women after childbirth and, most notoriously, as a mortuary fine on the death of a parishioner.

All these funds were necessary to support a church hierarchy which ranged from bishops and abbots, some of whom lived like princes and were just as involved in the country's administration as their secular peers, to simple anchorites like the mystic Julian of Norwich who had voluntarily immured herself in a cell adjoining the church of St Julian in 1373 and remained there till her death in 1414, surviving on donations of food and drink from local well-wishers and the pilgrims who sought her out. In towns like Norwich it must have been virtually impossible to stir abroad without encountering a cleric of some sort: monks conducting their abbey's estate business, friars sermonising to the crowds from the preaching crosses erected in most churchyards, canons hurrying to take their places in the cathedral, parish priests paying duty calls to the bishop, perhaps even

a Knight Hospitaller riding to visit his order's local preceptory; not to mention the host of unordained clergymen, such as the lawyers, clerks and even pardoners who sold papal indulgences granting remission of sins and, like Chaucer's charlatan, false relics of varying degrees of ingenuity (the pigs' bones alleged to be those of saints, the pillowcase said to be the Virgin Mary's veil, even a piece of sail from the boat from which Christ called St Peter) to the unwary and credulous. Something like one in thirty men in England in 1377 was either a member of a religious order or a fully ordained clergyman. An unquantifiable number, probably far in excess of that, were members of the minor orders who were tonsured, wore ecclesiastical vestments and enjoyed benefit of clergy, which meant that they could not be executed for certain crimes by secular courts so long as they could read or recite the 'neck-verse', the first verse of the Fifty-First Psalm (literacy being regarded as proof of a clerical vocation); as they were not fully ordained they were therefore free to marry and live and work in secular society. It was these men who were the backbone of English government and administration: the clerks working in the royal chancery, in the sheriffs' and bailiffs' courts and in the localities, where they wrote wills and charters and kept accounts for the lord of the manor.[12]

The higher echelons of the Church were also deeply embedded in the government of the realm. Those who had served the king well could expect promotion not only within his various departments of state but also within the ecclesiastical hierarchy: parishes, prebendaries, canonries, archdeaconries, even bishoprics, were often the reward of loyal service to the crown, with many of the offices being held at the same time by a single individual who could not, therefore, perform his sacred duties in person. Bishops always served as members of the king's council and regularly held the highest offices in the land: in 1381 the

chancellor was none other than Simon Sudbury, archbishop of Canterbury and head of the Church in England and Wales, while the treasurer was Sir Robert Hales, prior of the Knights Hospitaller and head of this international military order of monks in England, Wales and Scotland. The Church owned vast swaths of land, putting bishops and abbots on a par with the secular aristocracy: even the poorest see, Rochester, was worth four hundred pounds a year, while the wealthiest, Winchester, brought its incumbents an annual income of over ten times that amount. The same people who advised the king and played a large part in determining the course of national and even international politics were therefore among the greatest landlords in the country, whose exercise of secular lordship affected the daily lives of a large proportion of the population.[13]

This identification of Church and state fuelled anti-clericalism in a society which was still deeply religious. The wealth of the Church, contrasting so sharply with the simple life of Christ himself, had been a source of contention almost since its foundation. Every reforming movement, including the Cistercians, the friars and, most recently, the Carthusians, attempted to strip the Church back to its fundamental concept of apostolic poverty. The pride, greed, sloth, ignorance and sexual misconduct of the clergy were frequently attacked by churchmen themselves, though the convention was that this was done in Latin and reserved for an audience of clergy, monks and scholars. Sermons for the laity were preached in the vernacular but were supposed to abstain from criticism of the Church and concentrate instead on admonishing the vices of laymen, encouraging reformation of character and giving instruction on the prayers, creed and Ten Commandments that were the building blocks of the liturgy. Yet because parish priests were only required to preach four times a year, and many of them had neither the talent nor the inclination to do

so, an army of itinerant preachers had grown up to feed the huge popular appetite for sermons. Though some preachers complained that their congregations fell asleep, 'for in these days men like a short sermon, or no sermon at all, when in church, and long drinking in the ale-house', the demand since the mid-century had literally changed the face of churches, leading to the introduction of pulpits and huge naves where the congregation could gather to hear a sermon.[14]

Many churches, including most famously St Paul's in London, also had preaching crosses in their churchyards, enabling travelling preachers to address vast crowds of people without entering the building itself. This facility was particularly used by the friars, whose obvious personal commitment to evangelical poverty and highly emotional rhetoric played deeply into contemporary notions of individual responsibility for sin and hopes of salvation. They were unsparing in their criticism of the Church and its hierarchy, feeding the anti-clericalism of the age, which was so at odds with its genuine piety. Just like the renegade and rebel John Balle, they were accused of denigrating the clergy and discouraging the payment of ecclesiastical dues. Balle's instruction to withhold tithes from priests who were richer or less moral than their parishioners finds echoes in the preaching of his contemporary, the Franciscan friar Thomas Richmond, who told vast crowds gathered to hear him on the outskirts of York that 'A priest fallen into mortal sin is not a priest. Again I say that he is not a priest; and thirdly I say that before God he is no priest'; he even argued that secular judges should cleanse the Church of immorality by jailing offenders. Another contemporary Franciscan, John Gorry, was the subject of a royal writ ordering his house in Dorchester, Dorset, to silence and punish him for encouraging the tenants of the abbot of Milton to rebel against the abbey and to violate the Statute of Labourers. And it was two Augustinian friars who, in 1371,

submitted a set of learned articles to parliament arguing that the Church's property should be impounded by the king and used for the service and defence of the realm.[15]

Such attacks on the Church by its own members blurred the distinction between what was acceptable criticism within the bounds of reformist zeal and what was actually heresy and therefore contrary to orthodox teaching. The last quarter of the fourteenth century was one in which the Church's wealth and its moral standing were being questioned at every level of society. Even the papacy itself was under attack. Its authority had already been compromised and challenged by its relocation from Rome to Avignon in 1305. Subsequent popes were, of necessity, Francophile, and therefore unable to act as the independent arbiter and mediator of Europe at the very time when such intervention was most required to halt the Hundred Years War. The papacy reached its lowest point in 1378 when rival popes were elected, Urban VI in Rome and Clement VII in Avignon, beginning the Great Schism which would divide the loyalties of Christendom until 1417. As the two popes struggled indecorously for supremacy and the Church throughout Europe fractured along national lines, it was no wonder that there was growing disillusionment with God's representatives on earth.

There were plenty of people in England, even around the young king, including his mother and his uncle Gaunt, who were prepared to protect and sanction those who argued that the Church had lost its way and should therefore be stripped of its worldly wealth. Whether they did this for purely pragmatic reasons, so that they could force the Church to contribute to the cost of the war against France, or because they were genuinely persuaded of the need for a root and branch reformation of a corrupt institution, court patronage of dissident preachers was bound to endorse and encourage the spread of their message. Gaunt's most famous protégé was John Wyclif, an Oxford

doctor of philosophy and former master of Balliol, whose ideas were even more radical than John Balle's. His treatises denied the pope and the Church the right to exercise not only temporal lordship, but also spiritual authority, rejected the central role of the priest in man's relationship with God by elevating preaching above the sacraments as the means by which salvation could be found, and considered the words of the Bible itself, not anyone else's interpretation of it, to be the true foundation of all authority and law in Church and state.[16]

Such ideas were doubly dangerous in the changing world of the late fourteenth century because literacy was no longer the sole preserve of the clergy. The aristocracy had long educated its children by means of private tutors, often the household chaplain, who taught their sons and occasionally their daughters to read and write in Latin, the language of diplomacy, administrative and legal record, and French, the written and spoken language of the court, polite society and chivalric literature. Monasteries and convents too had always educated their novices in preparation for entering the religious life and sometimes opened their doors to local children, whom it was hoped would also join them: one of the reasons why the abbot of St Albans was so vindictive in his treatment of William Grindecobbe, who had forced him to concede freedoms to the abbey's tenants and townsmen during the great revolt, was the fact that he had been educated and brought up in the abbey's school.[17]

Many religious houses sponsored or ran grammar schools for the laity where university graduates taught Latin to fee-paying students from dawn to dusk. Some were boarding schools and some admitted able pupils free of charge, depending on whether the school had a foundation which could cover the cost of a schoolmaster; William Wykeham, bishop of Winchester, who owed his own spectacular rise from relatively

humble beginnings to his education, founded Winchester College in 1382 to support seventy free scholars who were destined for his other foundation, New College, Oxford, and a career in the Church. Smaller and less exalted institutions existed throughout the country, usually in towns. Where there was no dedicated room or building available, classes were held in the local church: in 1373 the bishop of Norwich prohibited this practice in the schools of King's Lynn on the grounds that the cries of beaten children interrupted services and distracted worshippers.[18]

But side by side with these ecclesiastical schools which aimed to produce a new generation of clergy were independent schools and teachers, which had flourished in towns for at least two hundred years: Boston, Bristol, Coventry and Nottingham, for example, boasted such schools by the end of the fourteenth century. Many of these owed their foundation to the generosity of individuals, particularly wealthy merchants, but also to the enterprise of individual teachers, who were not always university graduates but who were educated enough to earn a living by teaching. And though the impression we get from both modern historians and contemporary books of advice on how to bring up girls (which were inevitably written by men) is that the female sex was destined solely for a domestic role and to make their husbands happy, the extent of their education has been consistently underestimated. As early as the beginning of the fourteenth century it was acknowledged that 'mother teacheth child on book' and since the most common books available in the days before printing were primers, or first books, containing the prayers of the liturgy and of the hours, these implied at least a basic knowledge of Latin. Significantly too one of the most popular subjects for depiction in manuscripts, wall paintings and stained-glass windows at this time was St Anne teaching her daughter the Virgin Mary to read. By

1335 we even have our first documented example of a professional female schoolteacher, Margaret Skolmaystres, who ran an establishment in Oxford.[19]

Education, as Wykeham's career demonstrated, was the key to social mobility. Though clerics liked to consider that they had the monopoly on learning, they, and consequently later generations, greatly underestimated the levels of literacy among the laity at this period. The ability to understand, read and write both letters and numbers was a daily necessity for a significant part of the population, from the bailiff producing his records in the manorial court to the merchant putting his signature to a contract or casting his accounts. What is more, the supremacy of Latin was being challenged by a burgeoning confidence in the native language as an effective means of communication outside and beyond the simple verbal exchanges of ordinary people in the normal course of their everyday lives. It is no coincidence that Richard's reign would see an extraordinary flowering of English literature, from Chaucer to Langland, Gower and the anonymous author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. English was not just the new language of choice among poets. The ability to read and write in the vernacular had percolated down through society. In the year of the revolt, William Smith, an artisan from Leicester who had taught himself to read and write, embarked on a project which eventually led to his being forced to hand over 'weighty books which he had written in the mother tongue, from the Gospels and from the epistles and bishops and doctors of the Church, and which (he confessed) he had worked studiously at writing for eight years'.[20]

Smith was exceptional but not unique. One of the most striking and unusual features of the great revolt would be its emphasis on the written word. The rebels set out to destroy the records which restricted their freedoms but also to replace them

with new documents enshrining in perpetuity their newly won liberties; they communicated by letter and written proclamation; and, perhaps most significant of all, at least six letters, purportedly written by John Balle, were in circulation at the time of the revolt and preserved by contemporary chroniclers as examples of the sort of revolutionary rhetoric which had inflamed the people to rebel. If Balle's letters were a call to arms they are pretty opaque: they include no practical information such as the date, place or time to begin the revolution and are, in fact, simply a patchwork of enigmatic quotations from well-known phrases, proverbs and verses which also occur in fourteenth-century mendicant preaching manuals, sermons and sermon notes. Their author could just as easily have been a perfectly orthodox member of the Church inveighing against the sins of the age, rather than an incendiary preacher intent on raising rebellion. It was their timing that made them so dangerous – at least in contemporary eyes – combined with the fact that Balle had chosen to write, as he preached, in English. Whatever his message was, he wanted it to reach the widest audience possible.[21] And, as we have seen, there was a growing audience for such material. What is more, that audience was increasingly well informed and interconnected. The idea that medieval men and women rarely stirred off their native manors, let alone outside their villages or shires, is wide of the mark. Aristocrats were continually on the move, visiting their various homes, attending the royal court and parliament, employed on diplomatic or military business in various parts of the realm and even overseas. They did not travel alone, but literally took their households (and often their household contents) with them: not just their immediate family and personal servants but their esquires, chaplains, surgeons and physicians; further down the social scale their kitchen staff, including cooks, clerks of the table linen and scullery boys; their minstrels and entertainers,

grooms and stableboys, even their falconers and masters of the hounds.

It was not just those in the service of medieval noblemen who could expect to travel. Merchants were also continually on the move, purchasing wool or corn in the English countryside, travelling overseas to bargain for wine, spices or the essential dyes and chemicals needed for the burgeoning English cloth industry, taking up residence in Calais to supervise the Staple. Churchmen too were frequently to be found on the road, going to London to present their petitions to the king, to Rome to seek preferment from the pope or employment in the papal curia, acting as diplomats or envoys on behalf of Church and state. Friars were peripatetic by the very nature of their order, wandering from town to town preaching and begging as they went. Minstrels, messengers and pedlars were similarly itinerant and, like friars, could travel great distances, both on horseback and on foot. Even those living on rural manors travelled regularly, if only within a relatively small radius of their homes, to visit markets to buy and sell, but their children would often find employment in nearby towns as servants or apprentices, returning for the harvest. The humblest carter on a great monastic estate could find himself driving two-wheeled carts or the more cumbersome four-wheeled wagons pulled by a team of draught animals to the coast to collect barrels of fish or wine, or to one of the great towns to pick up spices and incense.

Freemen were required to travel regularly to the hundred courts and shire courts to act as jurors, transact business and pursue or defend legal action; male villeins over the age of twelve were also obliged to make one or two annual trips to the hundred courts to prove that they were enrolled in a tithing, the basic administrative unit for enforcing justice. And every able-bodied Englishman, whatever his social status or place of residence, was required by law to be prepared to fight in

defence of the realm, which, in practice, meant regular attendance at certain designated places within each county to be arrayed and demonstrate that he had the appropriate weapons in good working order. From these commissions of array were chosen the local levies, who would turn out to resist invasions by the Scots and French, including those of 1377. Edward III's law of 1363 requiring every able-bodied man between the ages of sixteen and sixty to practise at the archery butts every Sunday and feast day fulfilled its intended purpose of ensuring that the kingdom had a ready supply of trained and well-equipped soldiers standing by; the unintended consequence was that half the population was legally armed with at least longbow, sword and dagger, and knew how to use them. This undoubtedly contributed to general levels of violence in society but in periods of civil unrest, particularly the great revolt, it had the potential to create serious problems for the government.

There was one other facet of medieval society which contributed to its mobility and that was its piety. This was not expressed solely by attendance at the nearest church but by visiting shrines and holy places in England and overseas. The travails, dangers and expense of the journey were regarded as expiation for sin; indeed some pilgrimages were imposed by ecclesiastical and secular authorities as punishment for moral failings and even criminal acts. Other pilgrims voluntarily took up the scallop shells and staff that symbolised their status in order to find a cure for failing health, as an act of thanksgiving for recovery from sickness or, like Chaucer's knight, for a safe return from campaign, or even, as two veterans of Agincourt would do, in fulfilment of vows they had made on the battlefield. From Beverley in Yorkshire to Walsingham in Norfolk, the country was liberally provided with shrines for the pious to visit, buy their leaden pilgrim's badge to add to their collection and make their sacrificial offering. Many of the great abbeys,

such as Bury St Edmunds and St Albans, had grown up around such shrines and owed their own prosperity to the miracles attributed to their patrons. The most popular English shrine of all was that of St Thomas Becket at Canterbury, where some two hundred thousand pilgrims were said to make their way annually, from both home and abroad, making donations valued at almost a thousand pounds a year.[22]

The importance of pilgrimage as a means of obtaining and spreading information should not be forgotten. Chaucer's pilgrims to Canterbury, who were an authentic representation of the genuine article, were a disparate lot drawn from Church and laity, country and town, and from every rank of society below that of the nobility, thrown together in close proximity in a way which would not have occurred in any other aspect of life. First and foremost were the two real characters, the author himself and 'oure Hoste' Harry Bailly, organiser of the story-telling, who was a genuine innkeeper of Southwark and not only appears in the 1381 poll-tax returns paying twelve pence each for himself and his wife Christiana but also acted as the controller, or chief accounting officer, for the collection of the tax in the borough. The fictional characters included a prioress with her accompanying retinue of a nun and three priests, a monk, friar, Oxford clerk, physician, poor country parson and pardoner standing for the Church; a knight, squire, franklin (wealthy farmer), yeoman, reeve (manorial official), miller and ploughman exemplifying rural life. The more complex nature of urban society was reflected in its representatives: a merchant, a shipman from Dartmouth, Devon, who knew every harbour from Gotland in Sweden to Finisterre in Spain, the much-married Wife of Bath, a haberdasher, carpenter, weaver, dyer, tapestry-maker and cook, together with a small but important legal sub-group consisting of a sergeant-at-law or barrister at the peak of his profession, a summoner who identified wrong-

doers and brought indictments against them in the courts, and a manciple of the Temple, who acted as quartermaster for the Inns of Court.[23]

Chaucer was not being fanciful in the range of his fictional pilgrims – even the Wife of Bath, who had already been on pilgrimage to Rome, Santiago de Compostela, Boulogne, Cologne and three times to Jerusalem, had a real-life contemporary counterpart in Margery Kempe, the wife of a burgess of King's Lynn, whose outbursts of noisy weeping as she contemplated the passion of Christ irritated preachers and her fellow pilgrims the length and breadth of England and as far afield as the Holy Land, Assisi, Rome and Santiago. Pilgrims would play a small but significant role in the great revolt, not least because they travelled the same route between London and Canterbury as so many of the rebels. Well aware of these travellers' potential value in spreading the revolt, the rebels deliberately blocked every pilgrimage route to Canterbury and compelled them all to swear allegiance to 'the king and his true commons', to enlist their neighbours in the cause and to join the rebels when summoned to do so. In this way the pilgrims carried first-hand news of what was happening back to their home towns, just as they had always done. Several months after the great revolt, it was pilgrims to Canterbury from northern England who sparked a fresh uprising in Kent by bringing rumours that John of Gaunt had freed the villeins on all his estates.[24]

The England that the boy-king inherited from his grandfather was in the process of significant change. Post-plague, its population had begun to find its feet again. There was a sense of opportunity, of dynamism in the air. The old, more rigid structures of society, particularly those at the lowest levels, had been challenged and subverted. Earlier medieval churchmen had preached that humankind was divided into three simple groups (three being the mystical number representing the

Trinity): those who fought, those who prayed and those who worked; the body politic was similarly divided into three, with those who governed in Church and state as its head, their officials as the body and those who were governed as the feet. That remarkable preacher and fearless critic of abuse of power Thomas Brinton, bishop of Rochester since 1373, could now offer a more nuanced view:

> the head are kings, princes, and prelates; the eyes are wise judges and true counsellors; the ears are clerics; the tongue, good learned men; the right hand, soldiers ready to mount a defence; the left hand, merchants and faithful artisans; the heart, citizens and burghers placed as if in the centre; the feet are farmers and labourers as if firmly supporting the entire body.[25]

Among those merchants, artisans, burgesses and farmers who had at last had their role in society not only recognised but put at the heart of the state, as well as providing the base upon which it stood, there was a new feeling, perhaps of individualism, certainly of confidence, fostered by the growth of personal wealth, literacy and numeracy. Increasing physical and social mobility in a more market-driven economy added impetus to the exchange of ideas – and grievances. A new middle class had been created which was aspirational, questioning and articulate but had little or no voice in the way the realm was run. And the forces of reaction were mustering and closing in as both government and landowners sought to exploit the new-found wealth being created by their subordinates and yet, at the same time, to turn back the clock and reassert their authority over them. A clash was inevitable.