

Lessons from Cromer

By James Cater

'Cromer in Lockdown' screamed recent headlines, as tales of civil unrest were promulgated. Business premises closed and police were deployed. Back in 1549 Norfolk knew how to really put on a show. Robert Kett, initially a target, changed sides to lead rebels protesting against land enclosure, as they stormed and took control of Norwich.

Within a few weeks' order was restored and on December 7, 1549, Kett was hanged from the walls of Norwich Castle like an early Christmas bauble.

There are a number of noteworthy points to take from this tale.

Firstly, mediaeval justice was a speedy process which mitigated against repeat offending.

Secondly, changing sides may bring dominance in the short term but that power may be short lived - some politicians may wish to ruminate on this!

Thirdly, a crisis in agriculture can have far reaching consequences.

While there are unlikely to have been agricultural factors driving the Cromer conflagration, other than perhaps barley and hops, agriculture does periodically find itself staring into the abyss. In this world of low commodity prices in which food commands an increasingly smaller proportion of average income, the challenge of profitability can seem daunting. As has been widely experienced, austerity can have a bitter taste. Only so many economies can be made.

Agriculture not only suffers from market pressures but also faces political pressures. Brexit may mean

Brexit but does that mean an end to subsidies, uncommon welfare standards for livestock, different levels of control and prohibition on agrichemicals and varying GM crop rules?

Kett's C16th shopping list to the authorities included measures which would have constrained rapid economic change, prevented the overexploitation of communal resources and limited the power of the elite. Do these objectives have relevance in today's world?

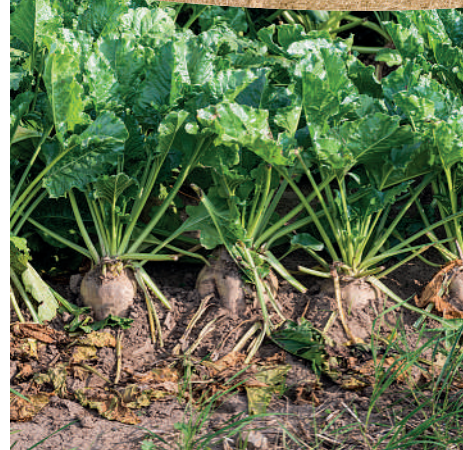
Rapid change is something which many of us find challenging despite us being the generation which has seen the GPS tractor race away from the Shire horse. Economic change of such magnitude could challenge today's business structures and lead to unforeseen consequences.

The exploitation of common resources for Kett's generation was about enclosure - the introduction of fencing to support greater sheep and wool production - for our children it may be about landscape and pollution. Already fracking is a contentious issue. Will the public countenance, for example, abrupt changes to the landscape arising from farming, or lack thereof?

As for limiting the power of the elite, this has been a hallmark of our constitution. The repatriation of our legal system through Brexit is itself a symbol of our rebuttal of remote power.

Our Cromer combatants may not have been of a calibre to capture Norwich City but equally there will be no corpses hanging from the gibbet.

Robert Kett should be remembered.



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