

This information is for teacher colleagues who are not so confident in their knowledge of England in the later Middle Ages. The text comes from an introduction to the period by Dr Helen Lacey, Mansfield College, University of Oxford. It could be adapted for pupils in order to 'world-build' knowledge of England in 1381.

If we were to walk through a wardrobe door or hitch a lift in a TARDIS and find ourselves in England early in 1381...

... we would be struck by how few people were around. The population of the whole of England was about 2.5 million and this was skewed to the east of the country, from York southwards. The North West was sparsely populated. London had a population of about 40,000, but most places were very small, with towns of a few hundred people and 90% of people living in villages and hamlets. England's second largest town was Norwich, centre of the prosperous wool trade, with a population of nearly 10,000. Whereas a county such as Kent had many small towns and a proximity to London, many places would feel very remote to us. The people would know each other. They were very aware of their social status and their membership of families and local communities.

However, these communities were not isolated. People travelled, to markets and fairs, to buy and sell, to local shrines or on a major pilgrimage, such as to the shrine of the holy St Thomas Becket at Canterbury. They travelled slowly, mostly on foot. The wealthier rode, and speedy royal messengers could cover the ground from York to London in six days on their small trotting ponies. Bulky goods travelled on coastal ships and on inland barges along the tributaries of the many rivers.

You might be surprised to find a clock in the house of a wealthy family, or surprised at the existence of handguns. Water mills were providing more power, and advanced metalworking technology had reduced the price of metal goods. And there was financial innovation. While the coinage consisted of silver pennies, there was credit and there were bills of exchange. Medieval England was not a technological backwater. It was also highly litigious and bureaucratic. For example, there were specific fines that you would have to pay if you drove your animals over the lord's land, and people could be sued if they failed to comply. From the age of around ten, all boys would be placed into a 'tithing', a group of men in their area who had to watch out for any misdemeanours that others committed and report them, or face being punished collectively. 'Medieval' is wrongly used as a pejorative to imply backwardness and violence. In fact, systems were sophisticated and political risings unheard of.

These people were not so much shorter than us. There were also old people, though people in their fifties would be considered advanced in years. Some estimates suggest that there was up to 90% infant mortality, and the pain of bereavement would be familiar to most. Physical disability would be noticeable, perhaps from poorly set previous bone breakages, or from deformity caused by childhood rickets, or from the impact of hard labour causing osteoarthritis. Perhaps worse was the impact of diseases such as TB and leprosy. And these people were survivors. Since the terrible plague had wiped out probably half of the population in around the year 1349, the plague had returned in waves and struck the young. Can we imagine the psychological impact? However, we must be careful not to impose our modern sensibilities, shaped by long average life expectancy and

very low rates of infant mortality, upon the people of 1381, where death and dying, particularly among young children and child-bearing women, were commonplace and everyday occurrences.

Almost everyone was Roman Catholic Christian, and the Church was part of the warp and weft of life. Religion was not a private Sunday matter. The Archbishop of Canterbury anointed the King at his coronation, the holy days gave rhythm to the year, the large monastic orders were hugely important economic powerhouses of the wool trade, men in holy orders could write, and the dying required the ministrations of priests. In this period, as many as one in five had taken Holy Orders. It could provide an opportunity for social mobility or perhaps a chance to be tried in the church courts (which gave an exemption from receiving a capital punishment). However, we need to be cautious in thinking that the Roman Catholic Church had a uniform domination over people's faith, thinking and lives. There were debates about salvation, John Wycliffe made the Bible available to scholars in English, and Lollard heresy was challenging established ideas.

Climatic change was making life harder. The many years of good harvests in the 1200s were beyond living memory. Perhaps 10% of the population had died between 1310 and 1320, as a result of years of crop failure and waves of cattle disease. In what some historians call a 'mini ice age', the 1360s and '70s had seen low-lying coastal areas in the east severely affected by storm surges and flooding. These extreme weather effects had a profound impact on traditional ways of life, with significant loss of crop yields and animal pasture. This was made worse by local nobles switching to fishing and disrupting the local economy further. Is it surprising that some of these areas featured prominently in the uprising to come?

And what of the landscape elsewhere? A single farmhouse required 333 trees and all cooking required wood, so there were not so many trees, although the royal forests were protected by the forest laws. There was more forest land in the 1300s, and forests often had rules of their own. At the beginning of the period, about a quarter of the land was forest, and different rules applied there. These were places that held a lot of mystery. While nobles were technically in charge, there were many opportunities for criminality as well, which we see in the Robin Hood stories. Sheep roamed on the high ground and English wool from these hardy hillside animals was highly prized across Europe. Marginal agricultural land had been abandoned since the halving of the population, but agricultural production had risen, with cereals and grazing widespread.

Ruling England was a 14-year-old boy king. In reality, power was exercised by leading nobles of royal blood in continuing councils. Prominent among these was John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, the younger brother of the King's father and one of King Edward III's many sons. King Richard II was not granted his majority until 1389 and he is known for the first royal portrait, for something of a Renaissance court, for dedicating the country to the Virgin Mary... and for his deposition by John of Gaunt's son in 1399.

Nobles did not see themselves as limited to what we now call England. There were English settlers in Ireland in an area around Dublin referred to as the Pale. John of Gaunt laid claim to the crown of Castille. English was a third language for many of the most famous kings of this period, who more often spoke French and Latin, depending on the circumstances. English kings were also connected to wider events. Before he became king, Henry IV (who deposed Richard II) spent three years on Crusade in what is now Lithuania, while trying to convert Eastern Europeans to Christianity.

Of course, no one at the time knew that they were not yet halfway through what we call the 'Hundred Years' War'. War against the King of France, conducted mainly in France, was changing life and culture in England. In the few years before 1381, there were fears of French attacks on the south of England. Over £467,000 was spent in the various theatres of war between 1376 and 1381. The wars increased the financial burden and kings needed money. Naval operations alone in these years cost over £100,000. Parliament had to assent to money being raised via taxation, and the importance of this body grew due to the greater need. The Commons had to agree to the tax, not least because they would be relied on to organise tax collection in the localities.

The clergy paid more in tax, though of a different sort. The wars had led to some suspicion of the large monasteries with mother houses in France. They had also allied England to Rome in the Papal Schism, which saw rival popes in Rome and Avignon. Meanwhile, England's oldest ally was Portugal, an important trading partner. The once mighty holdings of the Angevin kings had been reduced to the coastal strip of south-western France, with still important trade in wine and salt. But loss of revenue from France had led the King of England, King Edward I, to be the first known European sovereign to default on loans.

Social mobility had been the silver lining to the very large cloud of pandemic plague. A shortage of labour increased wage labour and reduced serfdom. People were better off than they had been. It is wrong to think of people as either freemen or villeins; many people worked land in different roles. Aspiring survivors could hope to reach towards the gentry across a few generations. Historians such as Caroline Barron and Jeremy Goldberg have argued that there may have been more opportunities for women to advance their status when their menfolk died.

Kent was an area where people were pushing for more freedom of land tenure. There was an active land market, as land-rich but cash-poor nobles raised money by selling to aspiring merchants. However, the powerful were anxious to restrict social movement via reactionary laws. For the first time, the government tried to intervene, and in quite extraordinary ways. For example, they tried to hold wages down at 1346 levels, a weak year for peasant incomes. They even tried to reinforce status via sumptuary laws to control more firmly who could wear furs, expensive fabrics and certain fashions. People of the time were used to recognising someone's social status on sight.

However, we need to be cautious in viewing early 1381 as a time of rigid social hierarchy, where everyone 'knew their place' and authority and order went unchallenged. It was a period in which there was a growth of political discourse and discontent in wider society, perhaps fuelled by a rise in literacy, rising prosperity, social change and also the increased role and reach of government through taxation, justice and legislation. People followed news and they had political knowledge, but it seems unlikely that anyone was expecting 1381 to be the year of the largest ever uprising in English history.