

John of Gaunt and the Peasants' Revolt

In May 1381, John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, was in his London home, the Savoy Palace on The Strand. He loved this home and he had taken great care to furnish it well, with gold, silver, jewels and the most beautiful carvings and wall-hangings. It was, after all, a palace. And he was a very rich royal prince. He was the son of the late King Edward III, the loyal younger brother of Henry, the Black Prince, and uncle to King Richard II. When his nephew, Richard, had become king at just ten years old, Uncle John had become a powerful influence on the young boy king. It was his right, and he had many years of experience of serving the Crown well, both as a warrior and as a governor.

John was Duke of Lancaster, and the Savoy Palace was not his only home. He had lands and houses across England, especially in the North. Many people worked for him. He also had land overseas, in Aquitaine, in what is now south-west France. He was also ambitious to gain greater power abroad. In May 1381, he was busy gathering an army together to try to take the throne of Castille, in what is now Spain, in the name of his Castilian wife, the Princess Constanza.

It had been a busy spring, and in May he was required to go north to negotiate with the Scots. There had been fighting between men in Northumbria and the Scots borders. To avoid the costs of a full-scale war between England and Scotland, John was needed in the North to negotiate peace. He left his beloved Savoy Palace, little knowing that he would never see it again.

John of Gaunt had been unpopular with London merchants for many years. They did not like his dealings with merchants from Genoa and they suspected him of wanting to curb their power. For years there had been rumours in London about the Duke, his actions and his ambitions. The King was anointed by God at his coronation, and he was young. He was hard to criticise. Instead, people in many parts of England said that it was his evil advisors, especially Gaunt, who were leading England into trouble, causing failure in the wars against France and making English people suffer high taxes.

John of Gaunt had actually been in Scotland at the time when the Parliament met in Northampton and agreed the third heavy poll tax on all the people. This was wildly unpopular and provoked the Revolt of the spring and summer of 1381. It did not matter that Gaunt was absent when the decision was made. He was one of the King's evil advisers and therefore was said to be to blame. We can see evidence of this in the hatred that was directed at his property and at people who supported or worked for him. From the attack on his castle at Hertford, to attacks on his lands and people in East Anglia, people made their hatred of John of Gaunt clear. The most famous example is the attack on the Savoy Palace.

By 13 June, rebels from Kent and Essex were in the City of London. Londoners rose up to join them and made their way to the Savoy Palace. John of Gaunt was away in the North, and so their anger was focused on his property. They mostly did not steal the precious items that he owned; they smashed, burnt and threw them in the Thames. They then burnt the Palace to the ground, killed people who worked for the Duke and burnt his land records, making it hard for him to raise money from his lands for many years.

We can be fairly sure that John of Gaunt's life would have been in danger if he had been in London. The rebels took one of his jackets, made a puppet of him using a lance and hacked the puppet to pieces. His son and heir, the future King Henry IV, was in the Tower of London. He seems to have escaped by hiding in a cupboard. Meanwhile, John of Gaunt stayed safely far up north until the Revolt was over.