

## John Preston

I was a tenant of [rented his land from] St Osyth Abbey in Hadleigh in Suffolk. I was no poor peasant, though! I could read and write, and I had lots of things that made me well off. My animals, crops and wool came to a value of £4 4s 2d, which means that I was quite wealthy.

There is no record of me taking part in the main part of the uprising in 1381. Perhaps my involvement was not recorded, or I was too law-abiding to take matters into my own hands. However, I firmly believed in what the rebels were fighting for. I heard what King Richard II told the rebels to do when they faced him at the Tower of London on 13 June: to go home and put their complaints in writing. I also found out that Thomas of Woodstock, the King's uncle, was holding a court in Chelmsford in Essex to punish the rebels. I decided that this was my chance!

I went along to the session and handed a written note to the justices, which was addressed to the King. In it, I tried to be very polite and show my loyalty but also make the point that we need fairer rent and the end of serfdom. I also wanted justice and the King's law to always be followed. This is what my note said:

'We the commons request of the special grace of our Lord the King that nobody should pay for customary land more than 4d [pence] an acre annually or 2d for half an acre... be it with or without buildings for all services and demands... We also request that no court should be held in any village but the leet [court] of the Lord King annually and perpetually [forever]. Furthermore we request that if any thief, traitor or malefactor [bad person] against the peace be captured in any village, you decree us a law by which he will be punished.'

I felt confident that the King would listen to my just demands. Perhaps some of the rebels went about things the wrong way, but the King said that he would sort out all of our problems. I was sure that he would help us.

I had made a big mistake! As soon as I handed over the note, the atmosphere changed immediately. They started to ask lots of questions. They asked whether I had written it myself and whether I still meant what I had written. I was confused but stood firm – of course I had written it! Before I knew what was happening, I had been arrested and sentenced to death. I was quickly beheaded.

My execution led to strong protests and more violence in north-east Essex. On 27 June, two men called Lewis Chapman and John Lewys from Colchester made death threats against the abbot [head] of St Osyth Abbey and other people because of my murder. They thought that the abbot should have intervened and stood up for me. The unrest only died down at the beginning of July.