

## St Albans and the 1381 Revolt – cause cards

England has been at war against France almost continuously since 1337. At first the war went well but it had started to go very badly after 1369, resulting in a number of English failures and defeats.

The war against France was very expensive. From 1377, three successive poll taxes were introduced to pay for it. Every adult in England was expected to pay the poll tax.

1376 saw the death of Edward, the Black Prince, the son of Edward III, and then Edward III himself died in 1377, succeeded to the throne by his ten-year-old grandson Richard II.

From the 1360s onwards, England had become an increasingly militarised society. Many people had weapons and armour and experience of fighting in the French wars, and all adult men were expected to practise weekly in the use of the longbow.

After the Black Death, Parliament also passed laws that tried to regulate the types of clothes that ordinary people wore and the food that they ate. The wealthy wanted to keep the lower classes in their place.

By 1381, there was widespread popular hatred of important people such as John of Gaunt, Simon Sudbury and Sir Robert Hales, who were blamed for increasing taxes and failures in the war against France.

After the Black Death, there was increasing religious upheaval and disputes caused by popular anger at the power and wealth of the Church, the work of radical preachers and the Papal Schism. The authority of the Catholic Church was increasingly challenged by 1381.

From the 1370s onwards, a religious group called the Lollards, influenced by John Wycliffe, criticised the power, wealth and practices of the Roman Catholic Church, which they argued were sinful.

The continuing war with France led to a loss of trade and rising prices in England, which increased the cost of living for many people, made worse by three poll taxes.

John Ball was the most famous of a number of radical priests who spoke to crowds in market squares, challenging the power of the landlords:  
*When Adam delved and Eve span  
Who then was the gentleman?*

Disputes between peasants and landlords were common in the fourteenth century. Many peasants were expected to work for their landlords as a feudal service. This led to bitter disagreements, made worse by floods, drought, famine and plague.

Between 1348 and 1351, the Black Death killed nearly half the population of England. Landlords were forced to lower rents and increase wages because of the shortage of labourers.

In 1351, Parliament passed the Statute of Labourers, which said that everyone under 60 years had to work and that wages were to be no higher than in 1347, before the Black Death.

The lower classes increasingly used the law to challenge their landlords. In 1376, 100 villages requested copies of the Domesday Book in order to challenge the feudal duties demanded of them by their landlords.

The townspeople of St Albans had been in dispute with the Abbey for over 100 years. The Abbey had demanded feudal services from them, enclosed common land and forced them to use the Abbey's mills to grind corn.

In 1274, 1314 and 1326–27, the St Albans townspeople had refused to use the Abbey's mills to grind corn in protest.

In 1327, the St Albans townspeople successfully took the Abbey to court, referring to the Domesday Book, and was recognised as a town, free of the Abbey's control.

In 1331, the Abbot of St Albans successfully lobbied the King to have the 1327 decision overturned, restoring the Abbey's authority over the townspeople. The Abbot seized the hand mills of the local people, which were broken up and used as flooring in the Abbey.

In 1377, the Abbot took away an acre of land legally bought by William Grindcobbe, claiming that it belonged to the Abbey.

Grindcobbe was excommunicated and then forced to do penance for violently attacking two monks in the town.

The St Albans townspeople were angry with the Abbey because it fenced off common land (called enclosure) that they had previously used for their animals, fishing in the ponds, hunting rabbits and collecting firewood.

The villagers under the control of the Abbey in Barnet, Watford, Tring, Rickmansworth, Luton and Redbourn were angry with the Abbot because of increasing demands for feudal service from them.

St Albans was on the main road between London and the North (Akeman Street). It had many visitors and travellers passing through. News from London about protests against the poll tax spread quickly to the townspeople.

The townspeople believed that St Albans had been granted status as a town, free of control of the Abbey, by King Offa in the eighth century. They believed that the Abbot had hidden this ancient charter from them.