

The Revolt of 1381 in St Albans in (about) two minutes

As tensions rose in London in mid-June 1381, across the country others began to rise over a combination of local and national grievances. In St Albans, discontent focused on the relationship between the Abbey – one of the wealthiest and best connected in England – and the townsfolk. However, anger with the Abbey also extended to those living in villages across Hertfordshire that were under the Abbey's control. Some of the rebels in St Albans, among them William Grindecobbe, made their way to London and, inspired by what they had seen and heard, began to take matters into their own hands. They tore down hedges and fences demarcating land ownership, and demanded that the monks hand over key legal documents that established the Abbey's control over the town and surrounding countryside. Some rebels made their way inside the Abbey and ripped up millstones that had been confiscated from people in an earlier dispute, as well as destroying the Abbey gaol. While the Prior and some of the monks fled north, the Abbot, Thomas de la Mare, stayed behind to negotiate with the townsfolk.

Over the course of a fortnight, there was an uneasy truce between the townsfolk and the Abbey, with the rebels regularly meeting with the Abbot in front of the Abbey's Great Gateway. The townsfolk succeeded in gaining some of the documents that they wanted and burned them in the area now in front of the town's clock tower. The Abbot continued to meet with the townsfolk and rebels regularly. However, on 29 June, Sir Walter atte Lee, a local knight working on behalf of the King, arrived with 50 men-at-arms and a large number of archers, and arrested the rebel leaders. While the townsfolk refused to prosecute Grindecobbe and the others, raising over £300 in bail, the rebels were taken to Hertford and tried before the King a week later, being sentenced to death. The townsfolk were forced to return their charters of freedom won during the rising, and pay the Abbey compensation for the damage caused. Grindecobbe and 15 others were executed in a wood to the south of St Albans – almost a month to the day on which the rising had started there. When the townsfolk attempted to take down the bodies, the King ordered that they be exhumed and rehung. It was not until well over a year later that the King allowed Grindecobbe's body to be buried, after a request from Grindecobbe's wife.