

## Rogue, respectable or revolutionary: why do historians disagree about William Grindecobbe and the 1381 Revolt in St Albans?

Dobson (1970, pp. 18–19)

*The rising at St. Albans was only one particularly vicious round in a continuous boxing match for both the Abbott and his tenants.*

Dobson (1970, p. 269)

*Thomas Walsingham was himself a monk of St. Albans in 1381, and his lengthy description of the rebellion against the Abbey is inevitably that of a partisan as well as an eyewitness. Nowhere is the monastic chroniclers' incomprehension of the movement and lack of sympathy with its aims more obvious [than with] St. Albans' own tenants, but almost in spite of the author, the following extracts from his records of events at St. Albans are of exceptional value to the historian of 1381. Not only is the reader made aware that the rising was only an exceptionally stormy episode in the long and bitter struggle between monks, tenants, and local towns people, he is likely to be impressed by the restraint with which the rebels pursued their quest for a little liberty. Under the leadership of the talented and attractive William Grindecobbe, the men of St. Albans put forward their specific objectives in an articulate, moderate, and constitutional form. No monk lost his life at the hands of the rebels, but several of the insurgents including Grindecobbe himself were executed during the subsequent repression of the revolt by Robert Tresilian, Chief Justice of the King's Bench.*

Thomas Walsingham (*Historia Anglicana*, 1456–67, cited in Dobson, 1970, pp. 270–76)

*The chief agent of this business before the King was William Grindecobbe. A man who owed much to the monastery because he had been educated, nourished, and maintained there, and because of his relationship to those monks who had been and still were his kinsman. He obtained the said letters after he had knelt to the king six times in the presence of the mob. Grindecobbe was also the chief spokesman for the villeins in their business before the said Walter, idol of the Rustics. But there many other workers of malice who came before Walter Tyler to slander the Abbot and prior, as well as several other monks for their unjust lordship over their rustics and for oppressing the Commons and withholding the stipends of poor men and labourers.*

Dan Jones (2009, pp. 163–166)

*By the weekend, St. Albans was slipping into anarchy. William Grindcobbe, an intemperate man with a history of assaults on monks in excommunication, had taken leadership of the townsfolk and represented them at Mile End, where he had obtained a charter of legal rights from the King... [W]hen Grindecobbe and a baker called William Cadyndon returned they declared themselves great lords and began to lead the townsfolk on a series of night raids to smash houses and wooden gates belonging to the monastery...*

*By Saturday vandalism and destruction had become utterly widespread. Large groups of rebels descended on the town from nearby villages and... the conventions of rebellion that had been observed in London were now applied to St. Albans as Grindecobbe's rebels made a conscious effort to identify themselves through their actions with the wild philosophy of Tyler's radicals. The protest about specific grievances had rapidly mutated into staged violence, which demonstrated not just their legitimate grievances against the Abbot but sang to the world of their righteous dissatisfaction with the whole social order; another bloody summer game had begun.*

Mark O'Brien (2006, pp. 86–92)

*Putting aside all concern for his own fate Grindecobbe was urging his followers to hold firm and defy the forces of reaction. Of all the moments of historical greatness that characterise the revolt, this must stand as one of the finest.*

*'Fellow citizens who now ask a scanty liberty has relieved from long oppression. Stand while you can stand and fear nothing for my punishment since I would die in the cause of the liberty we have gained if it is now my fate to die, thinking myself happy to be able to finish my life by such a martyrdom. Act now as you ought to have done if I had been executed yesterday at Hertford for nothing would have prevented my death if the Abbot had not recalled his soldiers too soon. They had indeed brought many charges against me, and they had a judge favourable to them, and eager for my blood.'* (Lindsay and Groves, 1950)

Rodney Hilton (1973, pp. 140–170)

*In Hertfordshire, the townsmen of St. Albans were supported by the peasants from the St. Alban estates and there were attacks on other landowners in the county... Under the skilful leadership of William Grindecobbe, the St. Albans townsmen combined the threat of a march by the London rebels on the town with royal instructions, obtained when they were in London, which were addressed to the Abbot himself. As a result, the men of St. Albans and the Abbey's tenants in the market, towns, and villages on the Abbey estate, obtained a number of charters, which granted away a whole range of rights. It was not until 12 July, a month after the dispersal of the rebels at Smithfield, that the Abbot was restored to power at St. Alban's by the King and his justices...*

*The leader of the urban movement was William Grindecobbe, said to have been educated in the monastery. Before the rebellion he was involved in a fracas with the monks over the confiscation of land by the Abbot's officials... Even less is known of the other leaders, such as the baker, William Cadyndon, Richard of Wallingford or John Barber. These gaps in our knowledge being possibly caused by the burning of some of the Abbey's judicial records during the course of the rebellion. Whatever may be obscured, however, it should not be imagined that these men were drawn from the rank and file of the town's population.*