

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

Dobson (1970, pp. 18–24)

*The rising at St. Albans – perhaps the only locality in England where it is possible to set the events of 1381 within a detailed context of existing manorial relationships – was only one particularly vicious round in a continuous boxing match for both the Abbott and his tenants; a voluntary concession was inconceivable, and an extorted concession something to be retracted as soon as possible. (pp. 18–19)*

*Walsingham's vivid picture of Tyler's interview with a party of St. Albans tenants leaves no doubt of his appeal to the imagination of the would-be rebel. Every insurrection re movement of the type experienced by England in 1381 is fated to throw up popular leaders at short notice, and it follows that the qualities and abilities of such leaders tend to be the single most important determinant of the course of the rebellion. Even their admirers would have to admit that most of the rebel captains of 1381 fall into the well-known category of 'social bandits'. Others acted as more articulate and well-intentioned spokesman, but for purely local interest. William Grindcobbe's move in quest for a little liberty was firmly based on the specific situation at St. Albans. (p. 24)*

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 were 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.*

*Therefore, the prior and four other monks fled together with several servants of the monastery after a long and very dangerous journey, some on foot and some on horseback. The frightened monks arrived at Tynemouth. Not long after the prize departure, the villeins returned to St. Albans. First to arrive were William Grindecobbe and William Cadyndon. These two men desired to be held specially responsible for what was done in order to be treated as great men thereafter and so on their arrival they announced that all had gone well and that henceforward there would be no longer servants but lords and that great and wonderful matters against the Abbey had been accomplished.*

*Accordingly, and in order to fire the Abbot, they first had the folds erected by him in falcon wood broken down... and the gates of other words destroyed. That same night they also decided to destroy completely the subcellars house which stood opposite the street where fish are sold because it seemed to hinder the outlook of the burghers and slighted the nobility of the citizens for such that they now call themselves. Without delay, these fools agreeing to the suggestion of other forwards proved themselves completely mad by spending the whole night before they were to rest in breaking down folds, destroying gates and overturning the said house.*

*Now the Abbot had already decided that it was better to die in order to preserve the liberty of the monastery, rather than to do anything which would produce prejudice the Church. But he was swayed by the prayers, warnings, and advice of his monks, who said his death for this cause would be of no advantage to the monastery. Although he had decided to die when the censorious people had declared their firm intention, if either obtaining what they sought or killing him and his monks, as well as burning the monastery, the Abbot was nevertheless finally won over and went down to meet them. When he appeared in the church, Richard of Wallingford greeted him briefly and had about him the Royal writ, which, as we have said William Grindecobbe had lately extorted rather than obtained from the King.*

*The Lord Abbott received this letter and read it through. He then tried to inform and remind the rebels that all these issues had been terminated in the time of their fathers and a record of the judgments was written in the royal roles at Westminster. Therefore, according to the long-established laws of the realm, the Abbot asserted that the rebels had no right or legal claim to any of those things which they sought. Richard, of Wallingford, spokesman for them all, replied that the Commons now ruled over the laws, which therefore no longer had any effect. They neither expected nor would accept such an argument.*

Dobson (1970, p. 269)

*Thomas Walsingham was himself a cloister monk of St. Albans in 1381, and his lengthy description of the rebellion against the Great Benedictine 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.*



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 Grindcobbe 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 Grindcobbe'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.*

*... The situation was saved by rumours spreading constantly and ever more urgently from London that Wat Tyler was dead. That took some of the steam out of the rebellion. Grindcobbe and his fellow leaders continued to act in the high and pompous lordly fashion which they had adopted in previous days, but they tempered it with a great sense of decorum in their negotiations. The roads around the Abbey were no longer blocked and there seemed suddenly to be a chance of saving the monastery from the mob.*

*Negotiations continued on Sunday in a more civilised fashion though with Abbot de la Mare presumably grinding his teeth at the presumption and arrogance of the rebels. For the next few days, nearby villages continued to arrive at the Abbey, trampling round the grounds, waving rusty axes and making demands for liberties.*

Rodney Hilton (1973, pp. 140–170)

*The main focus of activity in Hertfordshire was the town of St. Albans, where the townsmen, traditionally loggerheads with their overlord, the Abbot to St. Albans, took advantage of the weakness of the government to force the Abbot to give them certain elementary rights long enjoyed by other townsmen...*

*In Hertfordshire, the townsmen of St. Albans were supported by the peasants from the St. Albans estates and there were attacks on other landowners in the county... Under the skilful leadership of William Grindcobbe, 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. Albans by the King and his justices...*

*The leader of the urban movement was William Grindcobbe, said to have been educated in the monastery. He had some relatives among the monastic body and owned real property in the town. 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. This was recognised at the time by the Westminster chronicler, who, in describing the repression of the rebellion, states that the King went to St. Albans to punish those upper-class townsmen who had wanted to destroy the Abbey.*

Mark O'Brien (2006, pp. 86–92)

*Grindcobbe now left the bulk of his delegation to wait for the charters of freedom for their town and its surrounding areas. Grindcobbe himself now set off with a smaller group back towards St. Albans to bring the news of freedom. He arrived in Saint Albans that evening, having travelled 30 miles since the early morning. The great crowd had gathered to hear what he had to say.*

***That evening in torchlight, perhaps the old market lit also from open windows. For who would grudge even wax on such a night? Was one of which it is pleasant to look back, even when we know the bloody sequel. For a brief time, these men and women believed that they were free. Chains were soon to follow. Death was to come to many, but even while they suffered in their heart must remain the memory of that moment. When Grindcobbe cried, the news of freedom. A freedom from villains, chain of freedom to hunt, to fish to pasture their cattle, a freedom to grind their own corn. (Fagan, 1936)***

*When the St. Albans delegation arrived back from Mile End with the charters of freedom carrying the King's seal, Grindcobbe went again to the Abbot. He demanded that the Abbot now acknowledge the freedom of the town. After some attempt at legal obfuscation, the Abbot consented to give a statement which recognised the new situation. Still not satisfied, the rebels withdrew to draw up their own charter, which would be free of the ambiguities...*

*Putting aside concern for his own fate, Grindcobbe 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)***