

How do we know about the people of 1381?

Here, you can find a list of the fragments of the past that remain to us as sources and some notes about how historians use them.

Chronicles

In particular the (R. B. Dobson-named) '4 Gospels': *Anonimale Chronicle*; Thomas Walsingham's *Chronicon Angliae*, *Historia Anglicana* and *Gesta Abbatum*; Henry Knighton's *Chronicon*; and Jean Froissart's *Chroniques*

And also...

Westminster Chronicle

London Letter-Book 'H'

Brut Chronicle

Historia Vitae

Eulogium Historiarum sive Temporis

Literary texts

William Langland: *Piers Plowman*

John Gower: *Mirour de L'omme* and *Vox Clananti*

Geoffrey Chaucer: *The Canterbury Tales*

Anonymous poems (see Dobson, *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, 1983, pp. 357–404)

Sermons of Thomas Brinton, Bishop of Rochester (1373–89)

Records of prosecution

Commission files relating to the trials of rebels exist for five counties:

West Kent: TNA, KB 9/43; East Kent: TNA, JUST 1/400

Essex: TNA, KB 9/166/2; TNA, KB 145/3/6/1

Suffolk and Norfolk: TNA, KB 9/166/1

Cambridgeshire: TNA, JUST 1/103

Records of the King's Bench court – extracts of commission records in the files of the King's Bench: TNA, KB 145/3/5/1; KB 145/3/6/1

This was the central, powerful appeals court. Chief Justice John Cavendish was killed by the rebels. He was replaced by Chief Justice Robert Tresilian (described as a 'legal thug'). The documents are in a fragile state. They were working documents held together with a thong down the middle. Then, for years they were kept in sacks in the Tower of London and became badly water-damaged. Then they were moved to sacks in Somerset House Public Records' Office. Dr Andrew Prescott was the first to work with them in modern times and Dr Herbert Eiden has followed him.

Escheator records:

Escheator's Inquisitions: TNA, E 153

Escheator's Particulars of Accounts: TNA, E 136

Escheator's Accounts Rolls (Pipe Office): TNA, E 357

The escheator was a royal officer in a county, like the sheriff, who upheld the King's rights as the feudal overlord, e.g. if a tenant-in-chief died without an heir, the land reverted to the King and a feudal fine had to be paid to take it back. Therefore, the escheator was in charge of the King's property. Goods of convicted felons became the King's property. This means that the escheator records give us the records of what the rebels owned, e.g. a bed, musical instruments, armour... For example, we know that Grindecobbe was a miller as the escheator took his grain to make bread for the King's household.

Key points: Medieval bureaucracy was sophisticated, and a wealth of documentation has also survived.

Pardons and petitions

Parliament Rolls were kept in French, but there are now online English translations. A total of 287 people were excluded from general pardons. Individuals therefore petitioned for pardon, e.g. Margery Tawney

Parliamentary exclusion from amnesty: TNA, PROME/Nov 1381 and Oct 1382 item 63 and item 16

Pardon Rolls: TNA, C 67/29 (41 membranes)

Pardons enrolled in Patent Rolls (calendar of the Patent Rolls)

Pardons noted in the rex-section of the King's Bench rolls: TNA, KB 27

Petitions (special collections, ancient petitions): TNA, SC 8

Poll tax records

There are 4,000 records of three poll taxes (1377, 1379, 1380–1), catalogued at TNA in alphabetical order of counties: E 179 (edited by Fenwick, *The Poll Taxes of 1377, 1379 and 1381*, 1998). We get some names of local poll tax collectors (some were rebels) and of county collectors (some were victims).

Manorial and estate records

The manor was a piece of landed property with tenants, over whom the landlord exercised rights of jurisdiction in a private court. The records show court rolls, rentals, accounts (income and expenditure), terriers (property descriptions) and surveys. These documents can be found online by the name of the village for which records are extant. Rent was paid at Easter and Michaelmas in money or produce.

There is a massive hole in the records, as many were burnt in the Revolt. They will say, for example, 'first after the burning' – and that is one way in which we get to know that the rebels were there. As a result of the burnings, lands were all taken back and redistributed. This is not necessarily a sign that every person to whom this happened was a rebel – it was just a reset of recording and ownership. They had to pay new entry fines! We get their names and witnesses via these title deeds and grants. It is possible to flesh out some lives.

Physical remnants

Physical remnants still exist, e.g. Cressing Temple in Essex has barley and wheat barns from the thirteenth century. It was once the property of the Templars and Robert Hales (Chancellor of the Exchequer and executed during the Revolt), who was head of the Order

of St John of Jerusalem. Cressing Temple was attacked on 11 June by people from other parts of Essex – but they left the barns.

Evaluation of sources by historians

Philological critical approach: The first issue is whether this is in the original language. Has it been translated? Does it tell us something about the author? Class, area, etc.? Authenticity – is it real? Is it fake? There are examples of medieval deeds which have been proved to be fakes.

Critical evaluation of the information: Can we corroborate the information? Is it unique? Is it relevant?

Placing sources in historical context: We need to consider spatial and horizon issues – the standpoint.

Interpretation: We need to look at the argument – can we make a comparison? Is it grouped with other sources?

All of these encourage a critical view.

How do we recapture the rebel voice?

This is a time of transition, from feudalism to early capitalism, and there are revolts across Europe. The rising of 1381 is among the most thoroughly documented of such events in Europe. Thousands of participants were named, enabling rebel biographies to be reconstructed.

But these records generally derive from the suppression of the Revolt – the lens is one of oppression, an exercise of power. The people emerged from the suppression of the Revolt. There was extensive manipulation and abuse of the proceedings against the rebels. How do we recapture the rebel voice from these sources?

Problems with the chronicles and literary texts

These are the 1381 equivalent of learning about a protest by reading the *Sun* or the *Daily Mail*. They shape the discourse and have a clear language, but they are often anti-rebel.

Anonimale Chronicle: This has had a reputation as an exceptionally accurate report of the rising, but how justified is that? It's pieced together from other texts. It's seen as sympathetic to the rebels, but is that the case?

Thomas Walsingham: He was eyewitness to some events and reproduced key documents, but he was keen to discredit the rebels.

Jean Froissart: His text was written in France. He obtained information from those accompanying the King during the Revolt, but there can be some confusion about the overall structure.

Henry Knighton: He was in Leicester but reproduced rebel letters and vividly described panic in Leicester.

Chronicle presentations of rebels

NOTE: In this presentation, the rebels are seen as less than human because they are bestial/possessed by the devil. We need to think all the time: why did the chronicler choose to present this incident, or choose this quote/letter to include? The elites were worried that the English had access to writing – this is similar to worries during the 2011 riots re social media. The rebels are deliberately portrayed as a ‘mob’ to dehumanise the crowd. They deliberately suggest a sinister motive – note Wycliffe and his ‘heretical’ preaching.

Chronicle accounts focus on London. They present rebels as inhuman beasts descending on the city.

Walsingham: ‘Words could not be heard among their horrible shrieks but rather their throats sounded with the bleating of sheep, or, to be more accurate, with the devilish voices of peacocks.’

Knighton: ‘In the evening you could see them lying scattered about on the streets and under the walls, sleeping like slaughtered pigs. That night, many of the rebels, emboldened by drink, secretly killed those of their colleagues whom they had previously hated.’

Eulogium: ‘One good man, a herald of arms, stated he had seen 100,000 men with several devils among them; he began to sicken and died shortly afterwards.’ Rebels are described as ‘terrible multitude, decrepit old men and young men armed with rusty arrows, bows and sticks’.

Disparagement would seem to be less evident in *Anonimalle* and Froissart.

It was previously thought that few direct references to the Revolt were to be found in contemporary literature, but recent scholarship has shown how the Revolt cast a long cultural shadow:

- Themes on the inhumanity of the rebels loom large again in the work of Gower and Chaucer.
- The Revolt may have prompted Langland to rework his epic *Piers Plowman*.
- The increasing popular literacy and rise of English were factors in the Revolt.

How to find the rebel voice?

An analysis of legal proceedings across time generally counteracts the knee-jerk view that protestors are criminal, dehumanised mobs. We find a range of people who are networked, writing letters, geographically spread, etc., meeting at places with resonance, e.g. Bocking. They were not a mob, but lots of people aiming to replace manorial lordship with a cash rent. There is A LOT of mention of a desire to end ‘all lordship pertaining to divers lords’ – wanting to replace manorial lordship with cash rent. Is this the heart of what was wanted, or an attempt to portray the rebels as going against the natural order of things?

Some questions puzzle us, e.g. why did they empty the jails as the first thing? We catch echoes of the rebel voice, e.g. in the trial and execution of John Shirley, who praised John Ball.

Many of the places from which records survive had been centres of the Revolt. Petitions can tell us about individuals caught up in the process.

How do we get closer to the words, thoughts and actions of the people of 1381?

Think: why is this source saying this in the way that it is?

Notice changes, e.g. demands on 13 June at Mile End compared to 15 June at Smithfield – a desire to push it further?

Be aware of the new and unusual, e.g. cancelling pardons was a new precedent.