

## Making sure that what we teach about 1381 is up to date with current academic scholarship

### What is wrong with our traditional textbook narrative?

Victorian historians focused on the march of the Essex and Kent rebels on London. They judged success or failure by focusing on government and how far the rebels won concessions. This gives a very partial story. For example:

- It does not consider the aims of the people of 1381.
- It ignores the Revolt elsewhere – and it was very big in East Anglia and Kent.
- It gets the timeline of the Revolt wrong and places too much emphasis on Mile End and Smithfield.
- It calls everyone who rebelled ‘peasants’.
- It ignores the fact that many of the rebels in London had not marched there; they were Londoners.
- It implies that there was one leader and a ‘mob’ (an idea developed in the 1880s); instead, Dr Andrew Prescott thinks that the model of the Arab Spring may be more relevant, with disparate but connected leadership of events and co-ordinated actions.
- It ignores the fact that the rebels were clearly highly informed, politically engaged, litigious and militarily capable (they took the Tower of London!).
- It places too much emphasis on evidence from the chronicles, described by The People of 1381 academic team as the equivalent of learning about a rebellion today from the *Daily Mail*.
- It ignores the fact that the events of 1381 were very unusual in medieval England and lived long in the memory.

### Who were the rebels?

The Peasants Revolt is the wrong name if it leads us to think that all the rebels were poor workers of the land. However, England in 1381 was a peasant economy. That is, it was agrarian-dominated and agriculture was pre-capitalist. Many rebels were peasants, but this is far from a homogenous term. The same person could also have freehold land but have the status of villein (i.e. an unfree tenant). The people of 1381 who rebelled were also from all parts of society, from the gentry down, including city and townspeople, clergy, soldiers, etc. They were men and women from across the country. They had grievances in common and local concerns. Some were more radical than others. They communicated with each other and also acted on their own initiative. The Revolt was so large that every level of society was affected by it and many local areas.

Sylvia Federico has argued that the role of women in 1381 has been overlooked. She argues convincingly that the presence of a significant number of women’s names on the Pardon Roll suggests a ‘horizon of plausibility’ for female participation in the Revolt – even if we don’t know what (if any) crimes they committed, and even if it was motivated by a fear of false accusation, the fact that they thought obtaining a pardon necessary is significant, as it indicates that their participation was plausible. Federico also highlights the importance of women as victims. Unlike the French revolt of the Jacquerie in 1358, there were no explicit allegations of rape or sexual assault of women in 1381 – nevertheless, in other respects, female victims were subject to the same crimes as

men, whether this was theft or destruction of property, extortion, threats or, in some cases, actual physical violence.

The 'people and places' section of the 1381 website is a place to go for case studies that highlight the diversity of the people involved. In the 'classroom resources' section, you can find pen portraits of people to use with students.

### Some wider context points

- Royal government was pushing more and more into people's lives – the pushback was versus 'corrupt officials' ('the King is on our side').
- Rebels invoked the 'Laws of Winchester' – meaning more autonomy to look after their own villages. It is debated what is meant by 'Laws of Winchester'. Very likely, the rebels referred to the Statute of Winchester (1285), which granted a degree of local or communal 'self-policing'.
- A culture suspicious of movement and vagrancy worked against the post –Black Death economic situation incentivising travel, with wandering firebrand friars added into the mix.
- Rules versus the children of peasants going to school can be compared with reaction versus social movement.
- Kingship and being part of the royal family was important. There is very little rhetoric against the King, and even in September (when it can be found in a testimony in Kent concerning a trial by combat and accusation of others) the rhetoric was to put John of Gaunt on the throne, as there was a rumour that he had freed his serfs in the North.
- The King was the fount of all justice and to petition him was a right – he was approachable to all. Through a petition, they could tell the King of the corruption under him affecting his true and loyal subjects – Richard II received petitions on the day of Mile End.
- Serfdom was always central – even when people weren't serfs – so it had an ideological as well as a practical dimension.
- Everyone knew everyone, in small places in a small country, with badges of retinue and sumptuary laws to define status.
- Rebels did have moral codes, with a possible link to the military, e.g. don't loot!
- The rebels communicated using messengers on horses, bells, waterways and letters, and they did it at speed.

### Where were there serious uprisings?

From the spring to the late summer of 1381 and beyond, there were serious uprisings in many parts of the country. The largest uprisings seem to have been in Kent and East Anglia. The demands of people here were radical and seem to have been put down most brutally.

Across southern England there were risings. For example, there were major uprisings in Winchester and Salisbury. There was a rising in Gloucester and a withdrawal of services in Worcestershire and Leicester. In Sussex, more prisoners were taken than Arundel Castle could hold. We have records of legal proceedings against people in Warwickshire and Northamptonshire. There were major risings in Bridgwater, St Albans and Bury St Edmunds, focused on ecclesiastical institutions.

In Yorkshire there were serious riots in Scarborough, due to conflicts between smaller tradesmen and powerful merchants. There was a similar story in York, where revolt drew on a long-standing

conflict over the tax burden of war and profiteering by wealthier tradesmen. The people of Beverley may have had direct connections to rebels in southern England. There was no distinction made at the time between rural and urban risings.

The threat of the Revolt may well have been from its huge scale, its disparate nature, its connectedness, the way it ranged across society and the number of soldiers involved. To focus on London and one moment in time is to miss the point.

In the 'classroom resources' section, you will find a map of the rebellion.

### **What motivated the rebels?**

School history has overplayed the influence of the Black Death. Of course, it had shaped later fourteenth-century society, but the impact of war with France was also key. This was specific where there was a threat from French invasion in the south. More generally, the handling of the war and discontent at the state of government under the deteriorating King Edward III and then his child grandson King Richard II were also important. John of Gaunt played a leading role in government, and his lands and property were targeted in many places. Poor government impacted local issues – for example, in the weak response to supporting victims of terrible flooding in Essex. In London, the Flemish weavers (invited by Edward III and seen as an economic threat by English weavers) were targeted, but not the German Hanseatic merchants.

The rebels burnt very specific court rolls and targeted ecclesiastical institutions too. The focus on land service can even be found relating to townspeople, and so it may have been more of a symbolic than practical focus for uprising. Struggles between town and ecclesiastical institutions seem to have played out. The chroniclers had reasons to overplay the impact of heresy and the direct threat to the King, whereas we find rebels keen to state their loyalty to the 'King and true commons'.

### **What about Wat and John?**

Wat Tyler is central stage in the chronicles. He is mentioned in a judicial record in Kent and as a ringleader in the London alderman returns (although this latter document may be faked). Wat Tyler might be fictional. John Ball is also a difficult figure to find. He seems marginal to the Revolt. Possibly he was imprisoned in Bishop's Stortford (Hertfordshire) and not Maidstone (Kent) at the time. He is not heard of again until he is picked up in Coventry.

### **What was the response and aftermath?**

There was much discussion at the heart of government and a real sense of not knowing what to do for the best. This feels very 'real' – the idea of there being a whole spectrum of solutions on offer and no one having the benefit of insight to judge. Also, there was a very 'real' range of views by power-wielders about how to deal with it and what was just and right as a response.

The rebels may have been barely literate and suspicious of the written record, but they were in a litigious culture. After Smithfield, they didn't know what was going to happen next. If the King was 'good', he still might be misled by advisors (perhaps when John of Gaunt returned to London). What about lords who might not have heard about this pardon? The rebels needed proof of pardons and would not leave until they had the documentation. They queued up in front of jobbing clerks who

had set up desks stacked with parchment to churn out pocket-sized copies of pardons at the King's Wardrobe. These had the Royal Seal and rebels would not go home without this proof of pardon.

Once the rebel bands had these and had left London, the gates were secured. Everyone had to take an oath of fealty back to their lord on their manor (this was an interesting moment of trying to restore normality). Lists of oath-swearers were kept and seem to have been related to later pardons – and later exemptions from pardons.

Possibly for the first time in English history, military commissions were sent to the local areas with judicial force. Essex was particularly tough. Rebels were ordered by John Geffrey, bailiff of East Hanningfield, to meet at Rettendon Wood to fight against the commission, and many were killed. The profile of John Preston, who was executed having done as the King said and written down his complaints, is interesting; more can be found here:

[www.1381.online/people\\_and\\_places/?story\\_id=7](http://www.1381.online/people_and_places/?story_id=7)

The pardon letters were made 'null and void' on 2 July – so was it a ruse to get them out of London or a sign that the 'crush them' voices were now leading in court? – and this restarted revolt in some areas.

After the Parliament of autumn 1381, people then had to go to London (or send people) for one of three sorts of pardons: 1) for the lords and great men who acted outside the law in quelling rebellion; 2) for those implicated in rebellion (with certain named exceptions); and 3) for the 'good and loyal commons', rewarded with a general amnesty for offences committed before Revolt. People were still applying for these into the 1390s.

*A note on pardons...*

Pardons were based on the concept that human law is fallible and only God can give perfect justice – even the guilty can therefore be shown mercy and pardoned. The King was seen as the fount of mercy on Earth. It was easier for people in the South East to take their case to the King, and there was also a need to pay a clerk and buy parchment. Leaders from areas seemed to take requests for groups of people. There was a profit for the Crown from pardons that was not available from executions!

In the fourteenth century, a pardon was normally 18s 4d (a day's wage for a labourer was 1d, and a master would receive 3d!). However, in the immediate aftermath of the Revolt, rebels were paying far more than this to secure a pardon (some paid several pounds). BUT in November 1381, Parliament agreed to a general pardon, which anyone could access *free of charge*.

### **How did the Revolt live on in memory?**

There were strong memories in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, e.g. Cade's Revolt of 1450 at Blackheath and Kett going to Mousehold Heath in 1549. The revolt of 1381 seems to have been the first purely popular rising and inaugurated a period where popular uprisings and disturbances became more common. Did 1381 provide a template for subsequent protest and insurgency?

Mementos of the event were made – for example, the altar piece in Norwich Cathedral made by Bishop Henry Despenser as a thank you offering for the defeat of the Revolt. Rebels were being told to accept their fate like Christ. Other examples include the tomb of Thomas Sudbury at Canterbury Cathedral and the keeping of his skull in the church of St Gregory in Sudbury.

There is a monument at North Walsham to the final stand of the Norfolk rebels. A dagger reputed to be the one with which Mayor Walworth killed Wat Tyler is at Fishmonger's Hall in London. The Lord Mayor's Parade celebrated Walworth.

The Chartists embraced Tyler as a proto-democrat. The socialist William Morris wrote *A Dream of John Ball* and he became a socialist hero, although the British Labour movement did not take up the Revolt fully.

The Savoy was not rebuilt for another 100 years.