

Changing the 1381 narrative to engage with the people of 1381

Thoughts from Fellowship participants and the academic team about how we need to change the narrative that we teach about 1381 in schools and to engage with the people.

'In schools we have been using simplified narratives of 1381 (often seemingly from a Victorian writing of history) in a decidedly unchallenging manner. Hence the focus on a few key individuals, London and a lumping together of "peasants". When you scratch the surface, this is woefully inaccurate!'

'I would like students (and colleagues) to grasp some of that complexity and to bring some of the "messiness" back into the study of the past, where there are multiple narratives and the crowd is not a monolithic mob.'

'I want students to know about the complexity, the locality, the personal. While all people are "exceptional" in some way, the very "ordinariness" of each group, place and person shines through. Their voice (or the echoes and refractions of their voices) seems far more modern than I expected. I want my students to really grasp this. Meaningful encounters with the sources and the database, in particular, are the way to achieve this.'

'These were people from a wide range of different backgrounds, not a stereotype of a medieval "peasant", who were protesting for a similarly wide range of reasons. Their protest and the responses to it tell us much about the reality of medieval England and the people in it.'

'The idea that a crowd is made up of people. The idea that it wasn't "peasants" with one voice but a combination of voices and aims, from the petty to the significant gripes. This can then lead us to more complex questions about the uprisings – e.g. What did they want? Who were they? Where did they come from? What was the role of women and children? Why were people so angry? – and then to see whether these can be reflected on in terms of modern acts of protest.'

'I feel that short on time and with a need to teach to an exam specification, it is easy as a history teacher to become uncritical about the narratives we teach. Despite telling children to challenge their sources, I am often very uncritical when doing some planning from a textbook, which might be doing a great job at retelling the version we all know, but simply repeating back a narrative that has long become obsolete. The result is that the version of medieval history taught in schools can have little resemblance to what academic historians have discovered. Despite always having been passionate about bringing academic history into the classroom, this has made me question how I often use it to fit the narrative I have always taught ("Let's include a passage where a historian is talking about Wat Tyler"), rather than to completely overhaul it ("Does the historian say that we should be mentioning Wat Tyler at all?").'

‘There seems so much potential for students to see the human stories and motivations of the people in this period, and to challenge assumptions about the medieval period lacking in bureaucracy and justice. It seems that there is so much potential for this topic to do a lot within the wider history curriculum.’

‘I want to help pupils get to grips with the complex, multi-layered nature of the Revolt and people of 1381. What pushed them towards the Revolt? This would not have been an easy decision to make – there were risks and consequences – so what pushed them to act in the way that they did? I think that it is important that pupils can see that this was not just a “mob” – to be able to see the people in the crowd. When labelled as a “mob”, people become depersonalised, objectified or even dehumanised [compared with wild animals]. They become “othered”. Yet, as Prof Adrian Bell and Dr Andrew Prescott note, “Far from being exclusively composed of downtrodden serfs, the 1381 rising drew on every level of society below the aristocracy. The ranks of the insurgents included not only a wide range of rural tenants but also craftsmen, merchants, sailors, small farmers, disaffected gentry and women from a range of social backgrounds.” In other words, a rejection of classic crowd theory. Perhaps there are opportunities here to do some work on interpretations and even “revolts through time”.’

‘I think we also need to help our pupils to develop an understanding of protest, revolt, rebellion, insurgency and “the crowd” – not just in terms of definitions but in terms of a wider understanding. For example, why do people protest? How do they protest? What prevents people from protesting? What turns protest into a revolt? If we are to help pupils gain an insight into the people of 1381, then would it be helpful for them understand the nature of protest and revolt?’

‘A lot of these people were soldiers and they used their military knowledge and experience, e.g. distributed leadership, using the muster systems, knowing how to take places, giving orders. Many served again as soldiers afterwards.’

‘People lived and connected across small towns and villages. These people created the first and largest popular uprising in English history – across 26 counties. It lived on in memory and shaped actions and identities. These people were not rebels OR victims. It is all more messy and complex than that.’

‘Politics mattered to these people. They could make a difference. They were a litigious lot. They kicked back in the uprising against increasingly being administered and controlled as “subjects” by the state.’