

Teacher Fellowship participants' thoughts about the sources of 1381

Here are some thoughts about the sources of 1381 that may be useful to colleagues as they think about teaching the topic.

'School history use of sources seems to have drifted a long way from how historians use them. In school we SAY we start with the sources but we don't. What we do is select (often a tiny extract from a longer source) to prove a point. This is not doing history justice.'

'Much of our evidence for 1381 comes from the period afterwards, from documentary rolls, reports and testimony following the uprising. It's from here we can work out the serious nature and spread of the Revolt across the country. The consequences of the Mile End meeting might be a good place to start. Smithfield feels like a distraction.'

'I realise there are issues with the sources:

- The chronicles are, probably, the easiest to access, but are compared to the equivalent of finding rebel voices by reading the *Sun* or the *Daily Mail*. They tend to: 1) focus on the dramatic and London; 2) present the rebels as "a mob"; 3) downplay the grievances that led to the largest uprising in English history; and 4) conflate time so that violent/dramatic moments gain a greater profile in the narrative than they may deserve.
- The sources require layers of expert knowledge in order to understand and interpret them, as demonstrated to us by the academic team during our residential weekend.
- The academic historians struggle with finding narratives from the fragments of the past that remain – what hope for Year 7?

I think we need to be honest about how difficult it is to work with sources well in the classroom, and also that this is not an easy source base to use.'

'There is a "wealth of source material", much more than might be expected of the fourteen century. Despite this, there are gaps; be prepared to make inferences, speculate and acknowledge that we cannot be sure, particularly in looking at the ordinary lives of the people of 1381. Be cautious and critical of "official" accounts that reflect the prejudices and preoccupations of the elites that wrote them. Consider what a source does not tell you as much as what it does tell you; read beyond the source.'

'The records that we have are records of power. They are records created primarily by those who suffered at the hands of the rebels, and therefore have something to gain by stretching the details. Hidden among them are the rebel voices themselves, but these nuggets have to be carefully and diligently searched for and hoarded to reveal their stories.'

Be aware – as with any topic – that the story you bring to the source is what you will find reflected there, so being aware of the new research and the challenges to the “traditional” story is important to avoid simplistic assumptions.

A final thing: going back to basics can really help. The challenges of the sources surrounding this topic can really support cautious inference-drawing and challenging “reliability” (shudder), and demonstrate the importance of context in interpreting sources. Careful scaffolding and modelling will be needed to help students avoid the “classic” source pitfalls.’