

## Conflict and Upheaval – The Peasants’ Revolt, 1381

### Overview of key information

#### Introduction...

The Peasants' Revolt started in Essex on 30 May 1381, when a tax collector tried, for the third time in four years, to levy a **poll tax**. Richard II's war against France (the next phase of the Hundred Years War) was going badly, the government's reputation was damaged, and the tax was 'the last straw'.

The peasants were not just protesting against the government. Since the **Black Death**, poor people had become increasingly angry that they were still **serfs**, usually farming the land and serving their king. Whipped up by the preaching of radical priest **John Ball**, they were demanding that all men should be free and equal; for less harsh laws; and a fairer distribution of wealth.

Soon both Essex and Kent were in revolt. The rebels coordinated their tactics by letter. They marched to London, where they destroyed the houses of government ministers. They also had a clear set of political demands.

On 15 June, the 14-year-old king, **Richard II**, met the rebels' leader **Wat Tyler**. William Walworth, the Lord Mayor of London, attacked and killed Tyler. Before the rebel army could retaliate, Richard stepped forward and **promised to abolish serfdom** (although he later broke this promise). The peasants went home, but later government troops toured the villages hanging men who had taken part in the Revolt.

Although the Revolt was defeated, its demands – less harsh laws, money for the poor, freedom and equality – all became part of democracy in the long term.

#### Causes of the Peasants’ Revolt...

Historians have identified a number of factors which caused the Peasants' Revolt:

LONG TERM CAUSES = issues that added to the grievances of the peasants over a long period of time / built up tension over a number of years.

- The **Black Death** (1348 - 1350) had killed many people. This meant there was a shortage of workers and wages went up. Parliament passed the **Statute of Labourers** (1351), which set a maximum wage and said that people would be punished with prison if they refused to work for that wage. This meant that despite the demand for workers and the greater availability of land, poor people stayed poor.
- Life for ordinary Medieval people was strictly controlled by the local lord. The law also allowed the lord to stop his villeins moving for better wages. Coming after the Black Death and the consequent shortage of labour, this crushed the villeins' higher expectations for their income.
- The **feudal system** too had for centuries tied most peasants to the whims of their lord. The lord even had the power to approve any one of his villein's spouse. Not surprisingly it made sense that peasants developed an appetite for change.

MEDIUM TERM CAUSES = issues that added to / intensified the above issues in the years running up to the event.

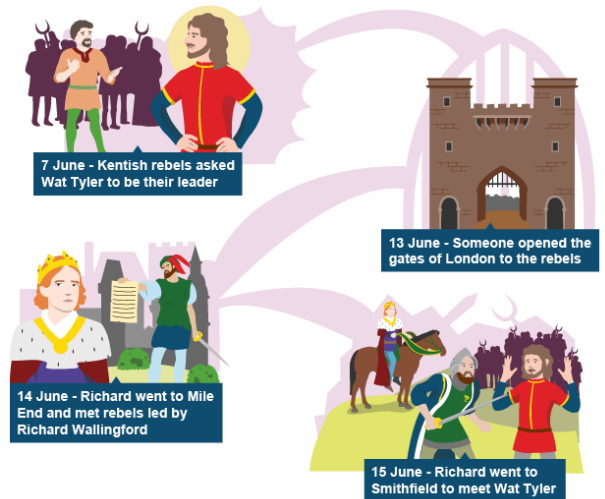
- Since 1360, a priest called **John Ball** had been preaching that people should throw away the evil lords. In a famous sermon he asked, 'when Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?' – this means that all people are born equal. This intensified peasants' feelings about inequality since the Black Death.
- After 1369, the **war against France** - over control of land claimed both by English and French kings - began to go badly. This would have made people despise the government.
- In 1377 Richard II – a boy of 10 – became king and his uncle, the unpopular John of Gaunt, ran the country. Peasants were worried about the King being advised by 'evil' councillors.

SHORT TERM / TRIGGER CAUSES = issues that were the 'tipping point' for peasants / issues that turned their general grievances into rebellion.

- John of Gaunt introduced a **Poll Tax** to pay for the war against France. The Poll Tax had to be paid by everyone over the age of 15 no matter how much money they earned – this was seen as deeply unfair. In March 1381, the government demanded the **third Poll Tax in four years**. When people avoided paying this, Parliament appointed commissioners to make them pay.
- On 30 May 1381, **Commissioner Thomas Bampton entered the village of Fobbing in Essex**. His brutal methods made the villagers angry and – led by Thomas Baker, a landowner who helped start the revolt, they rioted. Soon both Essex and Kent were in revolt.

### Events of the Peasants' revolt...

1. 30<sup>th</sup> May – early June 1381: Local rebellion and violent in Essex and Kent in response to Commissioner's investigating tax payments. The riots spread across the local area.
2. On 6<sup>th</sup> June, peasants free Rochester Castle and prisoners are released.
3. On 7 June 1381, the Kentish rebels asked an ex-soldier named Wat Tyler to be their leader.
4. The priest John Ball had been imprisoned by the Archbishop of Canterbury for heresy. The rebels freed him and he preached to them, saying that God intended people to be equal.
5. The rebels were joined by others – e.g. the poor people of London. They were led by people who would have been important in their villages – reeves, priests and even local landowners. They sent letters round the countryside calling for people to join them.
6. On 13 June, someone opened the gates of London to the rebels.
7. The rebels entered the city and attacked the houses of Richard's advisers, including John of Gaunt (Richard's uncle) and Simon Sudbury (the Archbishop of Canterbury).
8. On 14 June, Richard (who was only 14 years old) went to Mile End and met a group of rebels led by Richard Wallingford. They demanded that King Richard II dismiss some of his advisers and abolish serfdom. Richard agreed. Some of the rebels went home. While this was happening, a group of rebels broke into the Tower of London and beheaded Simon Sudbury, the Archbishop of Canterbury. It is said that he endured eight strokes of the axe.
9. On 15 June, Richard went to Smithfield to meet Wat Tyler, who had refused to accept the deal with Wallingford. Tyler demanded that the law should be less harsh, the Church's wealth be given to the poor, there should be no lords and all men should be free and equal.
10. William Walworth, the Lord Mayor of London, attacked Tyler.
11. As he died, Tyler ordered his army to attack, but Richard stepped forward and said: I will be your king and leader. He promised to abolish serfdom. The peasants trusted him and went home.



## Outcome / consequences of the Peasants' Revolt...

- **Richard did not keep his promises.** Serfdom was not abolished. Royal armies put down the revolts. Hundreds of rebels were hanged, including John Ball.
- Some historians believe that the revolt made Richard proud and over-confident, and that it made him rule in a way which led to his fall in 1399.
- The rebellion had frightened the rich, and made them realise that they could not push the poor too far. **No government collected a Poll Tax until 1390.**
- The government was angry at the role of John Ball, the priest who belonged to a group of Christians called the Lollards, who challenged the power of the Church. For the next century the **government persecuted the Lollards** because they were seen as linked to rebellion.
- In the longer term, the demands of the peasants were largely met, even if they were on the king's conditions and **nothing really changed on a day-to-day basis for some time.** Eventually, peasants could work for more money and slowly gained more freedoms from their lords to work where they pleased and make more of their own choices such as who to marry.

## Things to consider for source analysis questions on the Peasants' Revolt...

The chroniclers who witnessed the revolt were either rich people or monks, so they had a bias and did not sympathise with the rebels – this could mean documents over exaggerate how dangerous the rebels were, or how well the King dealt with them.

Landowners did not want to increase the cost of peasants by paying them more money – they had a lot of self interest in keeping wages down and rents high, they wanted to maintain control of peasants. Both the Church and the lords relied on peasants to farm for them: the biggest source of wealth in the middle ages. They portrayed them as a vicious mob – 'the maddest of mad dogs' – and Wat Tyler as an arrogant and rude man.

The majority of peasants (either followers or leaders) probably couldn't read or write, so we do not have many documents that really explain their individual views. This means that contemporary evidence is mainly from the rich and wealthy, who would have wanted to maintain control of the peasants. How might this influence how peasants were written about at the time?

## How have historians viewed the Peasants' Revolt – things to consider for interpretation questions...

Different historians have different views on events from the past, depending on their own beliefs (political and religious), on the perspective they are writing from, the range of evidence they have used for research, and their intended audience. All these things can impact on an historian's opinion, and explains why people have different views on the same topic / event.

- Some historians have portrayed the revolt as the start of the English people's fight for freedom – as the beginning of the end of the feudal system. Similarly, some historians have always seen the rebels as the first working-class heroes, fighting for ordinary people.
- Other historians have begun to question these ideas. They said the feudal system was coming to an end anyway because the Black Death had made labour so expensive. One writer described the revolt as 'unnecessary' and its effect as 'negligible'.
- More modern historians have seen the peasants differently: they were not a mad rabble – they were disciplined and organised. Some historians say they were not only peasants – some historians refuse to call it the 'Peasants' Revolt', and call it the 'English Rising' instead.
- After studying letters produced by the rebels, the historian Steven Justice (1994) concluded that poor people had well-defined political beliefs in the 14th century, and that these ideas survived – the Peasants' Revolt was the beginning of English ideas about freedom.

## Key words glossary...

1. **abolish**

Formally end or stop.

2. **bias**

Prejudice or favour shown for one person, group, thing or opinion over another.

3. **chronicler**

A person who records events for historical record.

4. **democracy**

A type of government where people govern themselves or elect representatives to govern for them.

5. **feudal system**

The feudal system was a way of organising society into different groups based on their roles. It had the king at the top with all of the control, and the peasants at the bottom doing all of the work.

6. **heresy**

A belief or opinion which disagrees with the teachings of the Church.

7. **levy**

To calculate and collect taxes.

8. **Lollard**

A follower of John Wycliff. Wycliff believed that churchmen should lead simple lives and that the Bible should be translated into English.

9. **parliament**

The law-making body of a country.

10. **poll tax**

A tax paid by all adults. The amount was the same for everyone, regardless of their income or occupation.

11. **reeve**

A foreman appointed by the lord to supervise work done by the other peasants on the manor.

12. **revolt**

An uprising against a powerful person or group.

13. **serfdom**

The social position of most peasants who were controlled by their lord.

14. **socialist**

Someone who believes that society should be classless and that all property and wealth should be owned by the whole community and not by individuals.

15. **villein**

Someone who worked without pay for their lord in return for land.