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Richard II and life in the towns

Richard II, 1377–99

Richard II, like his great, great, great-grandfather Henry III, became king when he was very young. He was unfortunately more like his great-grandfather Edward II in the way his reign ended.

The Peasants' Revolt

At the age of fourteen, and still very much under the care and protection of men such as his uncle John of Gaunt, Richard faced one of the greatest challenges of his reign. The Peasants' Revolt of 1381 shook the very foundations of English life and brought the young King into real danger.

Some of the causes of the revolt lay in the events of the past. As we have seen, the Black Death had changed English life in many ways, including the way in which the land was farmed. Labourers demanded higher wages and villeins wanted to be paid for their work on their lord's land. This was made worse in some places where some villeins were allowed to rent their land like freemen and others were not. Added to this, some lords used the law courts to have their own way and to keep wages low, based on the Statute of Labourers of 1351.

Jean Froissart, a French priest who knew many of the nobles of England, wrote the following about the causes of the revolt:

In England, as in other countries, the noblemen have great power over the common people. Their villeins plough their lords' lands, gather and bring home their corn, make their hay, cut their wood and



■ Richard II; a contemporary portrait

bring it home. These unhappy people began to complain. They said that in the beginning of the world there were no bondmen, and so no one ought to be bond now. They were men, like their lords, so why should they be kept under, like beasts? This, they said, they would no longer suffer. If they did any work for their lords, they would have wages, the same as any other.

There was also a general unhappiness about the war against France, which had been going badly by the end of Edward III's reign. Some in England were also questioning the way the Roman Catholic Church worked. One priest in particular, John Ball, had caused enough problems to be put in prison.

The trigger for the uprising was the **Poll Tax**. In order to raise money for the French war, the government demanded that everyone pay a tax. This tax was first used in 1377 and again in 1379, but in 1381 everyone over the age of fourteen was expected to pay one shilling, three times more than the previous rate. This wasn't a problem for the wealthy, but was almost impossible for the poor. When very little money was collected, the government tried to get tough with some areas of the country and this sparked off the uprising, which first broke out at Brentwood in Essex.

Course of the revolt

In late May and early June 1381, an armed uprising of peasants and townspeople occurred over the south-east of England and in particular Essex and Kent. Law officials and tax collectors were attacked and some were killed. Rochester Castle and Canterbury were captured. John Ball, the 'mad' priest, was released from prison and became one of the leaders. He is believed to have said to the rebels: 'When Adam delved and Eve span, who then was the gentleman?' In other words, why should peasants do all the hard work while the lords did nothing? Another leader to appear was Wat Tyler. These men and others led the rebels to London to see the King and to demand changes.

There was panic in London as the rebels approached and the city leaders tried to close the gates. But there were people in the city who agreed with the rebels and they helped them enter on 13 June. Prisons were broken open and certain places were burnt, such as the Inns of Law and John of Gaunt's Savoy Palace (though any rebel trying to steal from the burning palace was quickly punished by the others). A number of foreigners, particularly the Flemish, were killed as they were seen as a threat to the jobs of ordinary Londoners.

At the time, the young King Richard was in the Tower of London with his advisors. He had made one attempt to talk to some of the rebels from a boat on the Thames before they entered the city, but had failed. According to a contemporary chronicle, the *Anonimale Chronicle* written by an unknown author:

From a turret in the Tower, the King could see the Savoy and many other buildings all on fire. He called his lords to his room and asked them what he should do. None of them could give him any advice. Wherefore the King said that he would have it cried that all men should go the next morning to Mile End. There he would meet them to listen to their demands. He did this so that the rebels would leave the Tower and go to Mile End. Those in the Tower could then escape.

The next day King Richard rode to Mile End, just outside the city, to meet the rebels. He agreed to the rebel demands, that there be no more villeins, wages should be fair and that no one would be punished for the rebellion. This satisfied a large number of the rebels who



■ The death of Wat Tyler; from a manuscript produced around 1460

immediately started for home. But others were not satisfied and some of these rebels managed to break into the Tower of London and seize two important government officials, Simon of Sudbury (who was both Chancellor and Archbishop of Canterbury) and Robert de Hales (the King's Treasurer), who were hauled off to Tower Hill and beheaded. Sudbury's head with his mitre hat nailed on was paraded on a pole through the streets.

Once again the boy King agreed to meet the rebels, this time at Smithfield on Saturday 15 June. Wat Tyler presented a number of radical demands, such as all lordships to be abolished except for the king, and for Church lands to be seized. Again Richard agreed. What happened next is not clear. This is how the *Anonimale Chronicle* recorded the event:

Presently, Wat Tyler called for a jar of water. When it was brought, he rinsed his mouth in a very rude and disgusting fashion before the King. Then he made them bring him a jar of ale, of which he drank a very great deal.

At this time, a gentleman from Kent asked to see the rebel leader. When Tyler was pointed out, the gentleman said he was the greatest thief and robber in all Kent. For these words Tyler tried to run him through with his dagger. But the Mayor of London, William Walworth, accused Tyler of contempt and violence in the presence of the King, and arrested him. Tyler struck the Mayor in the stomach with his dagger. But, as God would have it, the Mayor was wearing armour, and took no hurt. Then the Mayor drew his sword and gave Tyler a deep cut in the neck, and another on the head. In the fight, one of the King's gentlemen drew his sword and ran Tyler through the body, mortally wounding him.

Before the surprised rebels could react, Richard rode to them and shouted out that he was their leader and they should follow him. This caused a number of the rebels to leave. Soon, a number of armed men appeared from London and the rest of the rebels were surrounded and forced to depart.

There were smaller risings throughout the country in June, but by the end of the month, the King's forces were in control. The promises made by Richard were not kept and many of the leaders of the rebellion, including John Ball, were found and hanged.

Did the Peasants' Revolt achieve anything? Villeins continued to work for their lords, for as Richard told one group: 'Villeins ye are, and villeins ye shall remain.' But changes in population and farming meant the old system was dying, if more slowly than many peasants wished. England's nobility became much more careful when dealing with the commoners. One thing was certain: the Poll Tax was never used again in the Middle Ages.

Simon of Sudbury's head was taken back to Sudbury in Suffolk and remains there today. In 2011 it was used to make a reconstruction of the archbishop's face. Find out about this technique. How can it help us to appreciate historical people and events?

○ The fall of Richard II

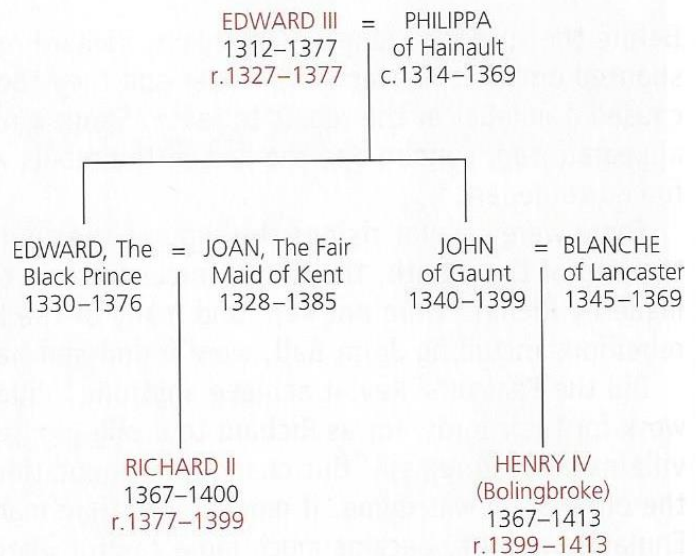
Richard, partly because of his success during the Peasants' Revolt, became convinced of his own powers and was not happy being under the control of his uncle, John of Gaunt. Thus he wrote:

I am of full age to govern my house, and my household, and also my realm. For it seems unjust to me that the condition I am now in should be worse than the condition of the least of my kingdom.

Richard wanted to create a stronger monarchy by increasing his own powers, but he and his supporters in government ran into trouble with some of the mightiest lords of the land and Parliament. To put a check on the King, the Merciless Parliament was called in 1388. It demanded the arrest and trial of a number of Richard's government officials, including the Chancellor Sir Michael de la Pole. Most fled the country but the vice-chamberlain Sir Simon Burley was executed. A group of nobles called the **Lords Appellant**, which comprised the Duke of Gloucester and the Earls of Arundel, Warwick, Nottingham and Derby, took control of the government and ran the country for a year before handing power back to the King in 1389. Things settled down for several years, as Richard seemed to have learnt his lesson and a truce was agreed with France.

However, Richard never really forgave the Lords Appellant for the way he felt he had been mistreated. He quietly continued to increase his power by creating his own permanent force of knights and archers, starting peacetime taxation, making himself more 'royal' by being addressed as 'Your Majesty' and making anybody he glanced at bow before him. In 1397, Richard struck at his enemies by arresting three of the Lords Appellant and executing one, exiling one and having one murdered. The other two Lords Appellant, including his first cousin Henry Bolingbroke, son of John of Gaunt, had joined with Richard, but he distrusted them and a quarrel between them allowed the King to send both into exile.

Richard now had an obedient country, where he seemed to reign supreme. However, the death of his uncle, John of Gaunt, in February 1399 upset everything. Richard seized Gaunt's lands for himself instead of allowing Henry Bolingbroke to inherit his father's vast estates. Enraged, Bolingbroke broke his exile, and returned to England and won support from important nobles. Richard had been in Ireland and returned to be arrested by Bolingbroke. There did not seem to be many in England ready to stand up for the



■ The relationship between John of Gaunt, Richard II and Henry Bolingbroke

King and he was deposed in Parliament in September 1399. Henry Bolingbroke now became King Henry IV. Richard was imprisoned at Pontefract Castle and was murdered in February 1400.

Exercise 8.1

Match the following events with their correct dates and put them into the proper chronological (time) order:

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| 1 Wat Tyler is killed at Smithfield. | (a) 1397 |
| 2 Death of John of Gaunt. | (b) February 1400 |
| 3 The Merciless Parliament is called. | (c) February 1399 |
| 4 Sudbury and de Hales are killed. | (d) 15 June 1381 |
| 5 Poll Tax is introduced. | (e) 1388 |
| 6 Richard II is murdered. | (f) 14 June 1381 |
| 7 Richard II is deposed by Parliament. | (g) 13 June 1381 |
| 8 The Lords Appellant hand power back to Richard. | (h) September 1399 |
| 9 The rebels enter London. | (i) 1377 |
| 10 The Lords Appellant are arrested. | (j) 1389 |

Exercise 8.2

Write a sentence or two about each of the following:

- 1 The Poll Tax
- 2 John of Gaunt
- 3 Wat Tyler
- 4 The Merciless Parliament
- 5 The Lords Appellant

Exercise 8.3

Look at the *Anonimalle Chronicle* description of the death of Wat Tyler on page 119 and compare it to the picture on page 118. Then answer the following questions:

- 1 According to the *Anonimalle Chronicle*, what did Tyler try to do to the Mayor of London? Make sure you use a quotation when answering this question.
- 2 Does the picture of the death of Tyler agree or disagree with the *Anonimalle Chronicle's* account? Make sure you clearly compare what the two sources show or say before giving your final answer.
- 3 Using all the sources and your own knowledge, how far do you agree that Wat Tyler's death was an accident?