



# The Peasants' Revolt. 1381

In 1381 an outbreak of violence threatened the existence of the English monarchy. This event is known as the Peasants' Revolt or '**The Great Rising**' or **Tyler's Rebellion** as it was called at the time.

The causes of the revolt had been building up over many years, and concerned mainly differences in the standard of living between the nobility (ruling classes) and everybody else, particularly the peasants. For many peasants there was no way that they could escape from the near slavery of the Feudal System except to change the law, but no one represented the peasants in Parliament to speak up for them.

## 1. WHY DID THE PEOPLE REBEL? WHAT WERE THE LONG TERM CAUSES?

### a: PEASANTS' LIVING CONDITIONS

- Since the Norman Conquest, **living conditions steadily worsened** for the peasants, while life improved for the nobility.
- The Black Death had changed social life in England for ever. At least 40% to 50% of the population had died. There was now a **shortage of workers** who saw a chance to better their quality of life.
- The Black Death had left 3000 villages deserted. Surviving peasants from these villages moved and found Lords willing to pay wages for their services.
- Other villages were untouched by the Black Death and the living conditions of the peasants remained unchanged.
- The Church owned nearly 60% of land in England. Therefore as a peasant you were more than likely to have an abbot or bishop as your Lord. Church Lords were harsh and many refused to pay wages or replace workers, making remaining workers work even harder.
- Before the Black Death some **towns** had been granted charters of **freedom**. These charters increased after the Black Death as Lords sought to make money. This had resulted in a better standard of living and more independence for town dwellers (burgesses/burghers). Understandably, their village cousins wanted a similar standard of living.
- A series of famines had resulted in a **shortage of food**. Some Lords had tried to make their workers work harder than ever. Profit was more important than workers' rights.

For the peasants this varying situation was unjust and unfair. Everybody should be treated the same.

At the same time some lords, particularly bishops and abbots disliked paying wages and complained to Edward III

- Edward III and Parliament tried to restrict wages demanded by workers by issuing the Ordinance of Labourers (1349) and **Statute of Labourers**. (1351) Workers realised their importance to the economy of the country and would not accept a return to pre Black Death conditions.

## **b: HUNDRED YEARS WAR**

- The Hundred Years War was unpopular with many people. Taxes were being wasted.
- Edward III was now dead. Why carry on?
- The victory at Crécy was a distant memory. Many alive in 1380's were not alive at the time of English successes at Sluys, Crécy and Poitiers. Since 1360 English success had all but disappeared.
- With the death of Edward III, France changed tactics. They invaded the Isle of Wight and attacked ports on the south coast of England. This change of tactics concerned people in England. An invasion by France would mean a call up of all men over 15. They hadn't survived the Black Death to die at the end of a French sword!
- Traders/merchants wanted an end to the war as it was damaging their business.

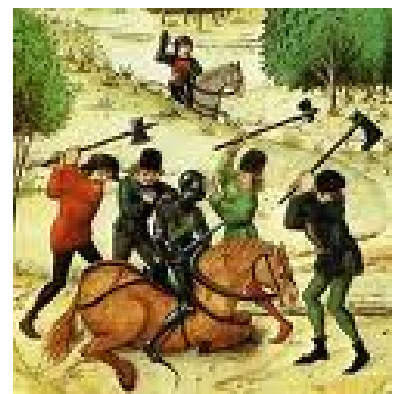
## **c: PEOPLE'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE CHURCH**

- The popularity of the church was dropping. 45% of priests and many monks had died of the Black Death. Why if they were God's servants? Had they sinned?
- The Church was desperate to replace the dead priests and offered increased wages. Many men came forward attracted by the money but not interested in doing God's work. This resulted in more people being dissatisfied with the Church.
- Some bishops had died. Some bishops did two jobs (pluralism); some bishops were never seen doing their job (absenteeism); some bishops gave jobs to their friends and relatives (nepotism) and some men could buy themselves a job in the Church (simony). This increased unpopularity of the Church
- The Church was a **major landowner**. Working for the Church was often worse than working for other landowners.
- In the 1370's **John Wycliffe** criticised the Pope and **the Church**. He said that many clergy (churchmen) failed to live up to the standards expected of them. Wycliffe's beliefs spread throughout England. His followers were known as Lollards. Among these was **John Ball**, a particularly radical priest who travelled the land preaching sermons on equality and freedom which often landed him in trouble.

## **d : OTHER REBELLIONS**

- Peasants heard about rebellions in other countries, particularly the '**Jacquerie**' in France.

The nobility ignored these grumblings and murmurs of discontent. Their attitude was: "**They're only peasants. What can they do?**" However, they underestimated the strength of feelings.



## 2) IMMEDIATE CAUSES OF THE REVOLT (WHAT SPARKED OFF THE REVOLT?)

Because the war with France was going badly, Richard II's council led by John of Gaunt decided to raise money. A series of poll taxes followed

- In 1377 a **poll tax** was raised at 4d per person over fifteen. (To pay for war)
- A **second poll tax** followed this in 1379. (To pay for war)
- In November of 1380, the **third poll tax** in four years, at the price of one shilling (12d) per person over the age of 15. This was a huge amount for a hard-working family. Daily wages were around  $\frac{1}{4}$  -  $\frac{1}{2}$ d a day for villeins.
- The idea of the poll tax was that everyone would pay the same amount, regardless of their personal wealth or lack of it

The 1380 poll tax upset everyone. **a)** Peasants couldn't afford it, **b)** traders were angry at paying a tax for a war they didn't want because it was already losing them money, **c)** those who were already angry with the Church were even more so as Archbishop Sudbury was responsible for the poll tax.

### What happened next?

- Tax collectors were easily bribed into **falsifying records**, and many people simply lied about the number of adults in their household because they could not or would not pay the required sum.
- The resulting amount of money collected was, not surprisingly, barely two thirds of what the government expected.
- Therefore, in the spring of 1381, the people of England were taxed again. **Archbishop Sudbury** sent in tax collectors to **enforce payment**.

## 3. THE REVOLT BEGINS

Some villagers in Essex who refused to pay. Three tax collectors were murdered at Fobbing. Trouble spread quickly to neighbouring Kent, where peasants armed with scythes and old weapons stormed a castle. **Wat Tyler** was chosen as their commander and they marched on to Canterbury. There they freed John Ball from the Archbishop's prison. Although, it appears organised whether or not the revolt had been planned is unclear.



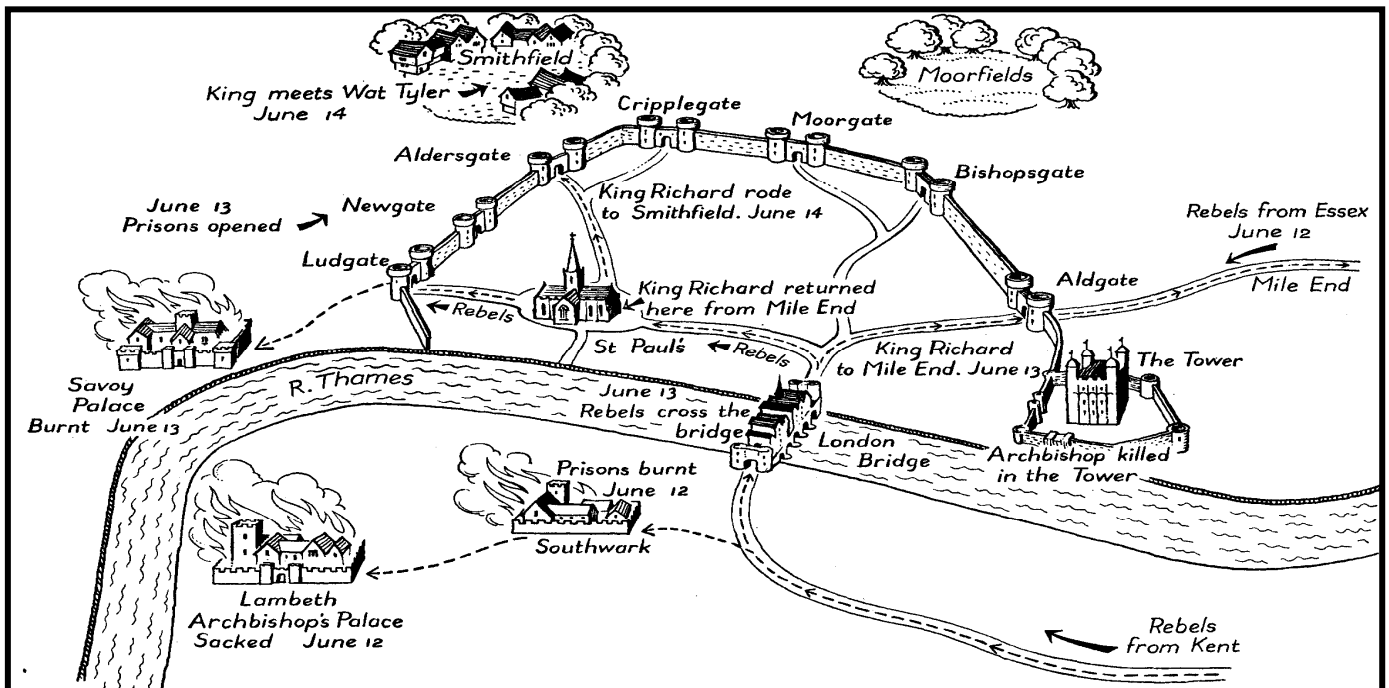
- It is clear, however, that while taxes sparked off the rebellion, the real aim behind the outbreak was the **end of the feudal system** under which they lived. Quite simply, the peasants wanted **freedom, equality, and justice**.

The rebels of Kent now headed to London as those in **Essex (led by Jack Straw)** approached the city from the north. Supported by local people who gave them food and shelter, rebels attacked abbeys and monasteries, opened prisons, burned records and murdered hated officials.

Anybody of authority was their target, from tax collectors and sheriffs to judges, bishops, and dukes. In particular they wanted the heads of the three people responsible for the poll tax: **Archbishop Sudbury**, (the chancellor); **Sir Robert Hales** (Hobbe the Robber), the treasurer and **John Legge**, the organiser of the poll tax. John of Gaunt was often added to the list as the man most obviously responsible for bad government. Only the King was exempt from the rebels' anger.

#### 4. THE REBELS REACH LONDON

- By the time they reached London, the rebels numbered twenty thousand (20,000).



#### 5) The Meeting at Mile End. 13th June

An earlier meeting at Rotherhithe was abandoned, fearing for Richard's safety. Richard II's advisors had up to now dismissed the danger of the rebels. Now, reports of rioting from all corners of England and an army of peasants on their doorstep made them realise that they were in serious trouble. With **John of Gaunt** up at the **Scottish border** and the English army setting off for Spain, there was little they could do. The king's bodyguard included only a few hundred soldiers; London couldn't be relied upon to provide an effective force since many of the citizens sympathised with the rebels. Faced with such limited options, the council decided to play for time and negotiate. They sent **King Richard**, a lad of 14 years, to talk to the rebels.

1. The rebels asked that **the Feudal System be abolished**. Instead of providing goods and services to their landlords, they wanted to earn money and pay rent.
2. Parliament should not fix wages
3. A flat rate of **fourpence** (4d) per acre should be the **lawful charge for rent**.
4. All those who took part in the rebellion should be **pardoned**. **King's advisors** should be **punished**.

Richard was in a difficult position. No army; no commander; and he couldn't let the rebels have what they wanted. It would send a message to anyone that if they wanted something, all they had to do was to march on London and threaten violence. Richard has to defuse the situation, calm the rebels temper and get as many to go home as possible. Having given himself time, he could then deal with the rebels in his own time and with the full force available to him. Richard II said that he would agree to their demands and royal charters would be signed by Richard himself.

And indeed, with these promises many rebels did pack up and go home. Some rebels remained behind. Why, some to see London, others did not trust Richard and wanted to make sure that Sudbury and others were punished as Richard had promised!

## 6) RIOT IN LONDON 13TH JUNE

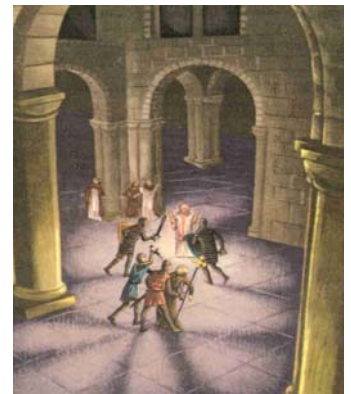


But while Richard was handing out empty promises, London had opened the city gates to Wat Tyler and his rebels. Once in London they started to cause havoc. Their first stop was the Tower of London, where they found and killed, among others, three of their targets: **Archbishop Sudbury, John Legge and Robert Hales.** Archbishop Sudbury had his mitre (hat) nailed to his head! John Starling his executioner walked around with the axe dangling around his neck.

John of Gaunt palace, the Savoy was destroyed. On Wat Tyler's instructions, rebels were not to loot the building of its contents. **Savoy Palace** was burnt to the ground; some peasants being trapped and burned alive as they enjoyed its wine cellars.

They then started burning houses and murdering lawyers and foreigners. This destruction and murder turned **the tide of public opinion** against Tyler and his followers. It was one thing to stand up against injustice; it was quite another to burn London and risk the lives of thousands of innocent people.

In the meantime, Master of War, Sir Robert Knollys had managed to assemble a small army of trained, experienced soldiers to deal with the crisis. The rebels were forced to leave London. Suddenly, the fortunes of the rebels had taken a **drastic turn for the worse.**



Rebels seize Sudbury



## DEATH OF WAT TYLER

## 7) MEETING OF RICHARD II AND WAT TYLER AT SMITHFIELD. 14TH JUNE

Tyler suspected that Richard's promises were false. He knew that for him there was no turning back. He would be granted no pardon, no charter of rights, and no freedom whatsoever after the trouble in London. He was a desperate man. His only hope was to seize power for himself and this appears to be his intention when he arranged a meeting with King Richard the following day.

Once again King Richard went out with his followers to meet with the rebels. This time the demands put forward by Wat Tyler were more extreme.

- There was to be **total abolishment of all rank** and status under the king.
- **Church holdings** were to be taken and divided up among the people.
- The Church hierarchy was also to be abolished, leaving **only one bishop** in England.
- He wanted to be commander of the army.

These unreasonable demands were undoubtedly **designed to provoke Richard** into a refusal and give Tyler an excuse for seizing the king. But the plan was foiled when Richard again agreed to everything. What happened next is likely to remain always unclear; accounts are highly coloured by the opinions of those who recorded the event.

Still hoping to provoke trouble, Tyler may have behaved with extreme vulgarity, spitting in front of the king and swilling a beer before climbing back on his horse. At this point he was either loudly insulted by one of the king's retinue or picked the quarrel himself. Tyler drew his dagger to attack one of Richard's servants, and might have succeeded were it not for the intervention of William Walworth, Mayor of London.

Walworth (possibly by command of the king) seized and arrested Tyler, who tried to stab him in the stomach but met instead with the mayor's armour. In return, Walworth drew his cutlass and dealt Tyler a pair of nasty head wounds. A member of the king's followers then ran the rebel leader through with his sword; Tyler rode several yards away, screaming for vengeance, before falling from his horse to the ground. The death of Wat Tyler was at hand; whether he died immediately or was taken from the battlefield is also a matter of which chronicle tells the tale.

In the chaos that followed, many peasants drew their bows and some arrows were even let fly. The mayor rode with all haste back to the city to summon the armed force raised by Robert Knollys. In an act of supreme bravery, King Richard rode forward alone, ordering no one to follow him, and faced the rebels. "Sirs, what aileth you?" he is reported to have said. "Ye shall have no captain but me: I am your king: be all in rest and peace."

As Richard was speaking to the confused and frightened rebels, Knollys and his force arrived and surrounded them, weapons displayed. Tyler's severed head was raised up on a lance and brought to the king; and at the grisly sight of their leader's head, the rebel force wilted. Again Richard II promised the rebels that their complaints would be dealt with; and as intended the rebels were fooled by these empty vows, the peasants dispersed.

## 8) THE EVENTS AT SMITHFIELD

*An account based on the writings of nobles and churchmen who supported Richard II.*

London was saved yesterday (15th June) by the quick thinking of our young noble King Richard II. As he had promised, the King went with a group of his advisors to meet the rebels at Smithfield. This followed the meeting at Mile End at which King Richard promised the rebels freedom from their lords and an end to work service.

In the dusty heat of the dying day the rebel leader, Wat Tyler, rode up to the King on a small pony. Dismounting, he half bowed, then dared to shake the king by the hand, not even taking off his cap! The King took no offence at this and asked Tyler what the rebels wanted. Tyler replied that as well as the charters of freedom that were being written for them, they wanted the king's word that land would be taken from the lords and the Church and divided among the people. He threatened that the lords of England would regret it if these things were not settled.

The King tried to calm Tyler down and said that he would agree to his demands. But the rebel continued to act rudely and called for a flask of water to rinse his mouth. He then spat it out in a disgusting fashion, typical of an ignorant peasant, and then demanded ale which he drank down in huge gulps.

A quarrel broke out between Tyler and a squire - one of the King's men - The squire shouted that Tyler was the greatest thief and robber in Kent. Tyler then lashed out at the squire with his dagger. The Mayor of London, William Walworth, tried to stop the fight and would have been badly wounded by Tyler had he not been wearing armour. In the scuffle that followed, Tyler was dragged from his horse and stabbed to death. Seeing their leader fall, the rebels drew their bows with shouts of 'Kill them all.'

Bravely the King rode out in front of them. 'Gentlemen,' he said, 'What do you want? I am your leader. Follow me!' With this, he led the mob out of the city. Thanks to the actions of our young King, the revolt appears to be over. Pardons have been granted to all the rebels, who are returning to their homes with all haste. However, such a wicked uprising by people who do not know their place can surely not go unpunished!

## 9) SIR JOHN FROISSART'S ACCOUNT OF THE EVENTS AT SMITHFIELD.

Wat Tyler spurred his horse and came close to the King. Then he said, 'Do you think, King, that these people will go away from you without having your signed guarantees?'

'No,' said the King, 'you shall have them. They are ordered for you and shall be given to everyone. So, good fellows, go back to your people and get them to leave London.'

Wat Tyler cast his eyes on a squire who was there carrying the King's sword. Wat Tyler hated the squire because he had annoyed him before. 'Give me that sword,' said Tyler.

'No,' said the squire. 'It is the King's sword. You are not fit to have it, for you are only a knave.'

'By my faith,' said Tyler, 'I shall never eat meat until I have your head.'

At that moment the Mayor of London arrived with twelve well-armed knights and broke through the crowd. He said to Tyler 'Ha! Would you dare to speak like that in front of the King? The King began to get angry. 'Set hands on him,' said the King. Tyler said to the Mayor 'What have I said to annoy you?' 'You lying, Stinking, crook,' said the Mayor, 'would you speak like that in front of the King? By my life, you'll pay dearly for it.' And the Mayor drew out his sword and struck Tyler such a blow on the head that he fell down at the feet of his horse. The knights clustered around him so that he could not be seen by the rebels. Then a squire called John Standish drew out his sword and put it into Tyler's belly and so he died.

Seeing their leader killed, the people began to murmur and said, 'Let us go and kill them all.' And they got ready for battle.

The King rode alone to these people and said, 'Sirs, what is the matter? You have no leader except me. I am your King. Be peaceful.' Most of the people were ashamed and began to leave.

## 10) Another Version of the Events at Smithfield

In front of the King, with the lords and knights on one side and the angry mob on the other, Sir William Walworth bravely rushed upon Walter Tyler while he was arguing with the King and his nobles. He first wounded him in the neck with his sword, then threw him from his horse, fatally wounding him in the chest.

Then he rode on with the King. Meanwhile the whole of the angry mob was getting ready against the King and refusing to make peace unless they first had the head of the Mayor. The Mayor went into the City at the request of the King. In half an hour, he led a great force of Londoners to help the King. The whole crowd of madmen was surrounded. Not one of them would have escaped, if the King had not advised them to go away. So the King returned to the City with the greatest of glory, all the wicked crowd fled at once to hide. The King himself knighted the Mayor for what he had done.

***Account from the City Record Book.***

## 11) RESULTS OF THE PEASANTS' REVOLT. SUCCESS OR FAILURE?

### a) Positives for the rebels

- There is no doubt that the **rebellion shook Richard** and his advisors. It had been a very close call and they didn't want a repeat.
- The **Poll tax was withdrawn** and not raised again.

### b) Negatives

- Most of the rebels were allowed to go home. However **bloody assizes** were set up and the more outspoken leaders such as Ball were quickly hanged. (15th July)
- The king then set about **punishing the rebels**; Lord Chief Tressilian had so many hanged that there was a shortage of gibbets, and nine or ten men at a time were hanged simultaneously from the same beam. Although, a general pardon was finally declared in November 1381, this excluded 287 known rebels still at large. Overall it was estimated that over 7,000 common people were executed for their part in the Peasants' Revolt. An example had to be set.
- On 2nd July, Parliament decreed that the promises the king had given were made 'under duress and without consent of the government; the **charters of freedom were cancelled**. (revoked) When a few brave men from Essex reminded the young king that he had promised to abolish villeinage, his curt response was, "Villeins ye are, and villeins ye shall remain."
- In 1388, a **new Statute of Labourers** was approved in Parliament. Fearful of a new rebellion, they had resorted to the tools of repression.

**Not much changed** for those peasants at this time and many were disheartened at the failure of the revolt. However, although they didn't know it, things were improving for peasants throughout England. Their freedom would come.

1. There was a chronic shortage of labour. Landowners were still in competition.
  2. Gradually over the next few years more workers were given greater freedom and rented land and earned a wage. They could work for whomever they liked and wherever they liked.
  - 3: By 1430 work service (bondage) had ended. There were no peasants left in England.
- In time, Parliament gave up trying to hold down labourer's wages.
  - The Church resisted reform even more, and corruption flourished.
  - In terms of personal loss, the Peasants' Revolt had been a tragedy.
  - Violent protest, as it often seems to do, did more harm than good to the cause of freedom.



## 12) WHY DID THE REVOLT FAIL?

1. **Poor leadership** by Tyler and Straw and little control over their followers.
2. Rebels **lacked an orchestrated plan** of action once they arrived in London.
3. **Lawlessness** of many of the rebels lost support of Londoners and some rebels themselves. This support was vital if the revolt was going to succeed.
3. **Naïve trust** put in Richard II. Richard knew they trusted him and used this to his advantage. He made promises he had no intention of keeping! (Henry VII –Pilgrimage of Grace). The rebels' misplaced trust allowed Richard to play for time.
4. **Extreme demands** made by Tyler could never be agreed to otherwise this would lead to anarchy.
5. Rebel mob was match for a **king's army**.
6. Richard could not afford to give it to rebels' demands.

## 13) SOURCES ABOUT THE REVOLT

### Source A                      **The poll tax**

Parliament granted the King a tax of two shillings from each married man. The unmarried paid one shilling. Yet this tax did not bring in as large a sum as the tax of 4 pence in the previous year. '**Chronicle of Henry Knighton,**' 1381

### Source B                      **Peasants' anger**

The people of Fobbing, Corringham and Stanford-le-Hope numbered over a hundred. They went to Thomas de Bampton - the tax collector - and told him they would not give him any money. At this, Thomas ordered his men to arrest the villagers and put them in prison. But the villagers attacked Thomas and his men and it looked as if they were going to kill them. Thomas then fled to London.

'**Anonimale Chronicle,**' 1381

### Source C

The villeins went to the church of St Mary to discuss their services to the monastery. They wanted land around the town where they could graze their animals freely. They wanted to fish, hunt deer, pheasants, deer and ducks without being punished by their lord. They demanded that the lord's bailiff should stop interfering in the running of the town.

**Thomas Walsingham, 'Historica Anglicana.'** c.1381

### Source D

"All men are created equal. Work service had been started by evil men and must be ended. It is against the will of God. Good people, things are not going well in England, nor will they until everything is shared and there are no nobles and no peasants. How ill they treat us! For what reason do they keep us in slavery? Are we not all descended from the same ancestors, Adam and Eve? And how can they show that they should be greater masters than ourselves. They are dressed in velvet and other rich cloths, decorated with ermine and other furs, while we are forced to wear rags. They have wines, spices and fine bread, while we have only black bread and the scraps from the straw. When we drink it must be water. They have handsome houses and estates, while we must brave the wind and rain to labour in the fields. It is by our labour that they have their goods to keep up their pomp. We are called slaves, and if we do not perform our service, we are beaten. We have no one we can complain to or who is willing to listen to us. Let us go to the King and argue with him. He is young and may help. If not we must put things right ourselves."

**A sermon by John Ball**

