

THE PEASANTS' REVOLT – 1381 (TYLER'S REBELLION)

YOU MUST KNOW THIS WELL! (Feb 2010)

Long Term Causes

1. Black Death – Effect on Quality of life for Peasants

- a) Black Death had killed 40% of workers. 3,000 villages abandoned.
- b) Lords desperate for workers – and willing to pay workers- This **commutation** allowed some peasants to earn wages and pay rent for their land and homes. They were now better off.
- c) However some peasants untouched by effects of BD. They still lived under Feudal System with little freedom.
- d) Church owned 30% of England. Many church lords refused to allow commutation. The Church was unwilling give up the privileges it had from the feudal system.
- e) This inequality of life was seen as unfair.
- f) Some towns were sold Charters of Freedom, whilst others weren't. Again this inequality caused upset.
- g) In 1351 Parliament introduced **The Statute of Labourers** to regulate wages and working conditions. Prices and wages had to revert to pre-plague levels. Peasants saw this as an attempt to take away the freedoms that they had gained immediately after the Black Death. In the years leading up to the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, resentment about the Statute was never far from the surface and there were constant rumours that Parliament would attempt to reintroduce the Statute of Labourers.

2. Corruptness of Church

- a) Many were unhappy about the way the Church was behaving. Priests/monks fathering children – Bishops abusing their positions – Nepotism, absenteeism, pluralism.
- b) John Ball an outspoken priest attacked the rich lifestyle of the lords and bishops and contrasted it with the dreadful conditions of the peasants. He said that Christ lived in poverty and yet those who ruled His Church (the bishops) lived in palaces. *'When Adam dug the ground and Eve span, who was then the gentleman'*
- c) Many saw the high death rate of priests during the BD as a punishment for the Church's sins. The men who replaced the dead priests were often attracted by money rather than by a wish to do God's work.

3. Hundred Years War

- a) War unpopular in England – England losing – taxes being wasted – Why are we fighting? French had invaded Isle of Wight and attacked ports in South of England. Victory at Crécy was a distant memory.
- b) Traders/merchants wanted war to end as it affected their trade. They were losing money.

Short term causes of Revolt

- a) Edward III died in 1377 and was succeeded by his ten year old grandson Richard. England ruled by a Regency Council which consisted of the king's uncles, leading churchmen and nobles. **Council was unpopular and was seen as incompetent.**
- b) War in France going badly and soldiers often not paid so **Poll taxes** were introduced between 1377 and 1380.
- c) Everyone would pay the same amount, whether rich or poor. The amount charged in 1380 was one shilling (5p in modern money) for everyone over the age of 15. A shilling was the monthly income of a peasant (equivalent to £1000 or more today). This obviously hit the peasants hard since the amount they had to pay was huge and if they were unable to pay in cash they would have to give their tools or seeds instead. Losing their seeds and tools would mean they would be unable to farm and provide food for their families. It was the heavy handed attempts of government officials to collect the tax from the many people who had avoided paying it that was the spark that started the Peasants' Revolt.

The Revolt begins

- a) Because so many avoided paying the crippling poll tax the government had not collected enough money, so it sent tax collectors to find those who had not paid and make them pay.
- b) 31st May 1381 two collectors arrived at the village of Fobbing, in Essex.
- c) Some peasants hid from the collectors but others attacked them. Peasants from other villages joined them and soon the whole of Essex was in revolt.
- d) Peasants attacked and killed troops sent to restore order and killed anyone who attempted to stop them destroying or stealing property.
- e) News of the revolt spread south to Kent where similar events took place.
- f) John Ball (the imprisoned priest) was released from Maidstone jail by a mob of Kentish rebels and another group captured Rochester Castle.
- g) By 12th June 1381 huge armies of peasants from Essex and Kent had arrived at the outskirts of London, armed with farming tools and sticks.
- h) Wat Tyler emerged as the leader of the peasants along with John Ball and Jack Straw.

Aims of the Rebels

- a) They were determined to capture London and get rid of the hated government ministers whom they blamed for the poll tax.
- b) Once London was captured they were convinced the young king would grant their demands to abolish the Feudal System.

Events in London

- a) Gates of London were locked, however sympathetic Londoners opened the gates to the rebels and once inside they went on the rampage. Property was attacked and they burnt homes of lawyers and foreign merchants were targeted and beheaded in the streets. John of Gaunt's *Savoy Palace* was burnt to the ground. This looting and sacking of London was one of the most violent events in English history. Richard II and his ministers fled to the Tower of London for safety. London was in the hands of a mob of drunken and violent rebels. Wat Tyler tried to control them, but his actions have little effect.
- b) **Meeting at Mile End 14th June.** Richard and his advisors realised that they needed to get the rebels out of London if they were going to regain control. A meeting was arranged with Richard of Wallingford at Mile End on June 14th and documents were issued for the peasants to take back to their villages outlining what the king had agreed. **i)** right to rent land at 4d an acre, **ii)** the end of feudal system, **iii)** wages not to be fixed by parliament **iv)** dismissal of the king's ministers, **v)** Rebels not to be punished.
- c) Richard II was 14 years old at the time and the peasants did not blame him for the poll tax, they believed that he had been badly advised by his ministers. Rebels felt they were the king's loyal subjects and his ministers were traitors to him. The rebels believed Richard's promises. They were then asked to return to their villages peacefully.
- d) While the meeting was taking place at Mile End, another group of rebels had entered the Tower of London and captured the Archbishop of Canterbury (Simon Sudbury) and Robert Hales, (the Lord Treasurer) two men were seen as the architects of the hated poll tax. Both men were beheaded and their heads paraded around the streets in triumph.
- e) The following day, **June 15th**, the king met the some of the rebels again at **Smithfield**, just outside the walls of the London. These rebels were the hardcore of the rebel army and during the meeting Tyler's way of speaking to the king was thought to be offensive and one of the Lord Mayor of London's assistants **stabbed and killed Tyler** in anger.
- f) Richard managed to calm the situation by showing great bravery. The rebels were then about to attack the king and his followers but Richard made a speech telling them that he would now be their leader and reminded them of the promises he had made the day before at Mile End.
- g) This worked and the rebels made their way back to their villages, believing they had won. The king and his surviving ministers now had London back under their control and were able to plan their revenge.

Richard II takes revenge

- a) Straw and Ball were quickly arrested and executed.
- b) A small army of rebels were defeated at Billericay.
- c) Lord Tresillian was appointed as judge to try rebels. He travelled around Essex and Kent hanging rebels. Over 7000 hanged before a pardon was issued in November.
- d) Charters of Freedom were cancelled by Richard. They had been made under duress.

Success or failure? Depends whether you are a rebel or supporter of Richard!

Success?

- a) Revolt had shocked Government and caught them off-guard.
- b) First ever large scale protest march in England. It was the only example of a rebellion of this type in Medieval England.
- c) Poll tax was never raised again.
- d) Capture of London was the only time the city has fallen since 1066.
- e) Although to people at the time it was seen as a failure, looking at the broader historical picture we can see that the revolt was a response to the events of the Black Death and that it was to lead to a slow change in attitude among the lords and peasants of England.
- f) After 1381 the rights of working people, limited as they were, had to be given some consideration.

Failure?

- a) Violence damaged the cause of the rebels. It was one of the most violent events in English history.
- b) They failed to achieve their objectives of ending the Feudal System then and there.
- c) The Church remained corrupt until the Reformation in the 1530's.

The lords were fearful of another revolt meant that there was an uneasy calm in the years after 1381 and slowly and surely living condition improved. By 1420 the Feudal System had collapsed and all men were free from bondage.

Why did the revolt fail? (If you accept that it failed!)

For any revolt or rebellion to succeed a number of factors have to be in place. The Peasants' Revolt lacked these.

- a) Tyler and Straw lacked ability to control rebels particularly in London.
- b) The violence in London lost rebels vital support.
- c) Leaders lacked an organised plan of action. It was knee-jerk.
- d) Rebels failed to realise the advantage that they had at the start. John of Gaunt away and Richard had limited military resources available.
- e) Rebels naively believed Richard would keep promises. Richard knew this and turned it to his advantage.
- f) Tyler's death deflated rebel hopes and removed the only strong leader the rebels had.
- g) Rebels' army would never be a match for the King's army.
- h) Richard could not allow the revolt to succeed. This would lead to anarchy. It had to be stopped no matter what methods were used! (Henry VIII and the Pilgrimage of Grace 1536)

This is a very popular topic for the Common Entrance Exam. You must know it off by heart!