

## Teaching about 1381 – what would we like KS3 students to remember?

Let's get my hobby horse out of the way.

I hate the term 'Peasant's Revolt'.

'**Peasants**' is the major problem. It may be a very specific piece of terminology in the historian's armoury but in general it's a word used pejoratively, conjuring up images of dim-witted farmworkers who have no knowledge or interest in events outside their village. This image is far from an accurate description of many of those who rode and marched to London in 1381. And '**revolt**' implies a desire to overthrow the government and/or the crown – but was this true or would '**protest**' be a more accurate word?

The title 'Peasant's Revolt' gets to the heart of the issue of what we might teach about 1381 – the temptation is to focus simply on the rollicking, exciting, violence-strewn story when behind that story (the one told by the winners to the detriment of the losers) is a more subtle story that can link far more effectively to later events in history and, crucially, enables us to respect many of the people who took part in the march on London in 1381.

### What does recent research and publications tell us about the events of 1381?

a) this was no instant recourse to violence. When faced with yet another tax the first reaction was tax avoidance. In Kent over 56,500 paid tax in 1377 but only 43,800 in 1381. In Essex nearly 48,000 taxpayers fell to 30,700 in 1381. [The Poll Tax records have been published – in some counties e.g. Essex you can track this pattern village by village and even in some cases follow named individuals]. It was only when a second batch of tax collectors was sent out that violence and protest flared up.

Another tax related issue is that the lay subsidies collected in 1378 and 1380 were based on figures pre-Black Death – so there were far fewer people in each village but they had to find the same amount of money as in the 1340s. It wasn't just the Poll Tax that was resented and this also suggests people loathe to rise in 'revolt' until pushed to their limit.

b) many of the 'rebels' were respectable individuals, the leaders of their communities. They included constables, reeves, even local tax assessors. They were also the men who were at the centre of the system of raising local defences if the French invaded and this explains the quality of

organization in 1381 – they simply used the government’s own system for raising forces. Many had their own horses so rode to London as they would have ridden against the invading French.

c) they were well-informed about national events such as the progress of the war. They knew the name of John Legge, the relatively minor government official who had suggested the tax evasion enquiries. This (as well as the points above) foreshadows Cade’s rebellion of 1450, another well-organized protest aimed at solving government problems.

d) their organization also included good communications, letters circulating emphasising loyalty to the king and solidarity to the cause - ‘stand manly together in truth’ was one slogan. It’s not surprising therefore that en route to London the protesters targeted the destruction of tax records and court rolls, destroying evidence of what they saw as the unjust exactions and of villeinage. See, for example:

[http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/citizenship/citizen\\_subject/docs/burning\\_lists.htm](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/citizenship/citizen_subject/docs/burning_lists.htm)

The above points create a very different picture than those in the late 14th century narratives written by monks, officials and others horrified at what happened in 1381. These narratives focus chiefly on the violence of the rebels. None of the above gainsays the violence, both in the localities and in London, but it does build up a much more complex picture with many hallmarks of protest, not revolt. It’s the contrast between the narratives and recent research that perhaps offers the most fruitful way forward in the classroom.

### **Why teach about 1381**

One activity that I have doubts about is the kind that compares various accounts of the death of Wat Tyler and tried to decide what really happened. Given the lack of variety in the provenance of such accounts it’s like asking six Manchester United fans for their verdicts on a Manchester City manager. They may provide different details but they share exactly the same prejudices. More importantly, how exactly Wat Tyler died isn’t a fundamental part of the story – it doesn’t help us understand why the events of 1381 were significant and identifying the significance of any event must be at the heart of what we teach about it.

So why teach about 1381? It’s the first chronological opportunity to teach about a situation that recurs regularly in history and still happens today – a co-ordinated, justified protest that gets out of hand and leads to violence, one that happens when first people have had hope of improvement and

then it's been snatched away (as the prosecutions under the Statute of Labourers did to people in the late 14th century). Within many such events there's a variety of people involved, a variety of motives, people who are not naturally protesters but are eventually pushed to do so, violent counter-action, limited immediate consequences but significant long-term consequences.

As well as 1381 being the forerunner of Cade's rebellion in 1450, some or all of these features can be observed in such events as the Pilgrimage of Grace, Peterloo and the 19th century reform riots, the Suffragette movement and Civil Rights movements around the world in the 20th century. And, of course, the history of all these events was initially written by the winners, the ruling classes who painted the protesters as violent mobs, just as monks such as Thomas of Walsingham did in describing the events of 1381.

Therefore I'd suggest that the focus of teaching about 1381 should be about understanding:

- a) what drove people to protest – which sounds like 'the causes' but is subtly different, far more focussed on who protested and when they protested.
- b) how the nature of the protest changed – how good intentions became transmuted into violence
- c) how an event can have few national consequences at the time but have significant consequences later on
- d) how an event can be misrepresented by those in authority or with the power to control communications

What binds this together is treating the people of 1381 with respect. If we don't see the people of 1381 as intelligent, thoughtful individuals then any attempts to understand those events will be as flawed as the monastic accounts.

Such an approach then creates opportunities for linking back to later protests and rebellions and using what's been learned about 1381 to look for patterns or to start students thinking about the kinds of causes behind protest, what sparks them, how they develop and the nature of their consequences. If 1381 is simply seen as a 'good story' or as an exercise in source evaluation it's likely to be just a one-off that can't be linked across KS3 or even into GCSE.

And finally – if you’re constructing an enquiry into the events of 1381 how about this for an enquiry question:

### **Does it matter what the Peasants’ Revolt is called?**

It would embrace most or all of the above discussion points and could get students very steamed up – especially if they’ve begun by thinking about the events of 1381 ‘from the inside’ by using the ‘The decisions of a Kentish villager’ decision-making activity (below).

### **Linked activities on Thinking History**

- Decisions of a Kentish villager 1381 (designed with the above discussion in mind)

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/DecisionsKentish1381.html>

- Why did people rebel in 1381?

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/WhyDidPeopleRebelin1381.html>

### **Good reading**

The best really brief account I’ve come across is:

Christopher Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages* (2002) pp.286-291

But anything by Dyer is worth reading!

For a full length book see:

Alastair Dunn, *The Peasants’ Revolt* (2004)

Interestingly first published as *The Great Rising of 1381* in 2002.