

How and why did the peasants revolt?

Learning objectives

- Know about the main events of the Peasants' Revolt.
- Understand why the revolt came to an end.

Did you know?

Although Wat Tyler is an important person in English history, historians know very little about him and how he became involved in the rebellion. However, he must have been an impressive leader to command such a large force. Why do you think it is often difficult for historians to research the lives of 'ordinary' people like Wat Tyler?

The Black Death had killed millions across the world, but also improved the lives of many of those peasants who had survived. How did the peasants react when it seemed that many of those improvements were being taken away?

At first, people simply tried to avoid paying the Poll Tax. However, the investigations into why so few had paid made the problems worse. In May 1381, tax collectors in the town of Fobbing in Essex were attacked. Soon, the violence had spread across much of East Anglia and the surrounding counties. Two key groups of rebels began to emerge in the counties of Essex and Kent. The rebels selected a man called Wat Tyler as their leader. The rebels also managed to release the preacher John Ball from prison.

The rebels felt that if only they could explain their grievances to the king, he would understand. Therefore, both groups of rebels set out for London to plead their case. As the groups neared London, they sought out and destroyed records about the hated Poll Tax.

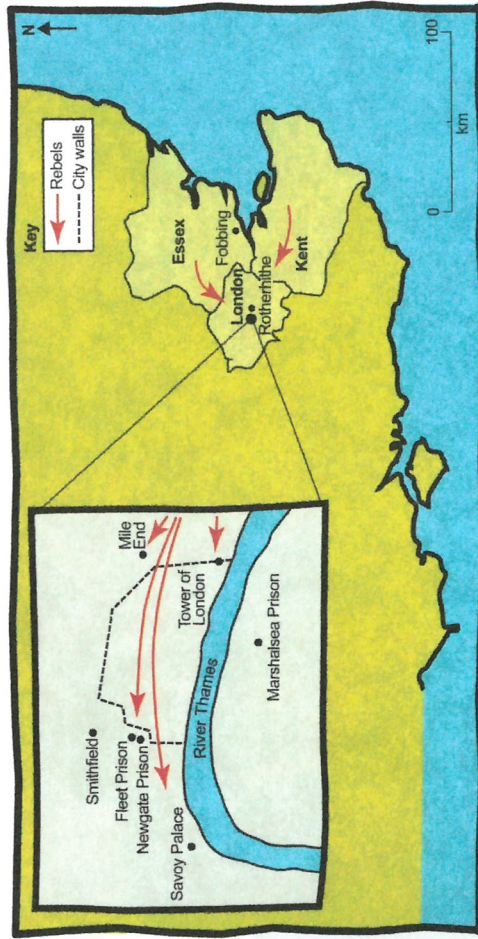


Figure 5.10: Map of the Peasants' Revolt.



Source A: From a speech given by the radical preacher John Ball in June 1381 at Blackheath during the Peasants' Revolt.

When Adam delved and Eve span, Who was then the gentleman? From the beginning all men by nature were created alike, and our bondage* or servitude* came in by the unjust oppression of naughty men... I exhort you to consider that now the time is come, appointed to us by God, in which ye may (if ye will) cast off the yoke of bondage, and recover liberty.

By 12 June, the groups had reached the London suburbs. Their numbers are hard to estimate, but are thought to have been around 50,000 – larger than most armies of the time.

The rebels demanded an audience with the king at Rotherhithe. The king travelled to the meeting place on the Thames in his royal barge, but after seeing the huge crowd he turned around and returned to the Tower of London.

The rebels, frustrated and angry, managed to enter the gates of the City of London. They broke into the Fleet prison, freed the prisoners, and burned down the Savoy Palace, home of John of Gaunt, Richard II's unpopular adviser.

On 14 June, the king again agreed to meet with the rebels at Mile End, just outside the City of London. The peasants presented their demands, and the king agreed to them. They included an end to feudalism, a pardon for the rebels and death for the king's unpopular advisers. Many of the rebels were satisfied and went home. However, that same afternoon some 400 rebels forced their way into the Tower of London. They dragged out Simon Sudbury (the Archbishop of Canterbury) and Robert Hales (the king's treasurer), and hacked off their heads. Had the peasants won?

Source B: From an illustration in *The Chronicles of Froissart*, drawn in the 14th century. John Ball is on horseback, Wat Tyler is front left in the red tunic. The rebels are carrying the flags of the king and St George.

Key term

Bondage/servitude*: To be an unfree peasant.

Your turn!

A lot happened during the Peasants' Revolt. One of the skills you need to learn as a historian is to reduce the amount of detail to a few key points.

- 1 Read this section again, and aim to pick out six key moments. Make a list of them.
- 2 Using your six points, make a storyboard telling the story of the Peasants' Revolt in chronological order. Each box should include a picture and a brief description of what happened, with any key terms highlighted.
- 3 In pairs, pretend that one of you was present at the events described in this section, while the other was not but is very interested to find out what happened. Using your storyboard as a guide, practise talking through the events. Make sure you understand them and get them in the right order.