John Ball Encourages Peasants in the 1381 Uprising

John Ball—a Lollard priest who believed that people were equal and should not be subjected to the will of "evil lords"—supports the 1381 Peasant Revolt in this illumination from Jean Froissart's *Chronicle*.

What led to the 1381 Peasant Revolt which John Ball, the Lollard priest, had so enthusiastically supported?

It started with the aftermath of the Black Death which had decimated people in Europe—including Britain—during the first half of the 14th century. How bad was that disaster? We can read the words of an Irish monk, Brother John Clynn, who lamented in 1349:

> *I [am] waiting among the dead for death to come... and I leave parchment for continuing the work, in case anyone should still be alive in the future...* (Quoted by Rosemary Horrox in *The Black Death*, at page 84.)

In his monastery, all the other monks had died of the plague. Brother Clynn seemed convinced that the end of the world was upon him.

That wasn't really the case, but historians estimate that around one-third of people living in Europe died during the Black-Death pandemic. That translates to about 70 million people.

The Black-Death disaster did have a silver lining for peasant workers. Because so many people had died, there were fewer peasants to do the work. Applying the law of supply-and-demand, the peasants could demand better wages for their labor and could seek more civil rights.

Perhaps recognizing the surviving peasants' new power, the government of Edward III passed two key laws. The Statute of Labourers (enacted in 1351), for example, set a maximum wage (freezing wages for workers at pre-plague levels).

When Edward died, his son—Edward of Woodstock, the Prince of Wales (later known as "The Black Prince")—was already dead. Because Woodstock was dead, his ten-year-old son, Richard, was in line to take the throne. In 1377, he became King Richard II.

Too young to rule in his own right, Richard needed advisers and regents to help him rule. They, and the country, were cash-strapped because Britain was still fighting an expensive war with France.

To generate more cash, the government decided to impose new taxes—called poll taxes. This was like the highly unpopular poll tax which Margaret Thatcher introduced when she was Britain's Prime Minister (leading to riots throughout the country).

The poll taxes of 1377 and 1379 were bad enough, but the poll tax of 1381 was even worse. It required every person to pay a faxed rate of 12 pence (no matter how rich or poor a person was). This placed an unfair burden on poor people since they had to pay the same amount as wealthy people.

Fed-up peasants became angrier-than-usual with tax collectors. When a tax collector showed-up in the town of Brentwood—northeast of London—the townspeople kicked him out.

After that event, a band of rebels didn't wait for the next tax collector to arrive. They began to march through Kent and Essex, picking-up other angry volunteers as they went along.

The rebels decided to take their message to London in what has become known as the Peasant Revolt of 1381. They approached the city from the south and the east.

Who were their leaders? Jack Straw was the leader of the Essex men. John Ball—a priest who'd been in prison because he believed in social equality and a fair distribution of wealth inside the church—was broken out of jail by Kentish rebels. He was another leader.

As the growing crowd of rebebls reached Blackheath, then just outside London, Ball gave a rousing speech (as chronicled by Thomas Walsingham, a monk and English historian):

> *When Adam delved* [which means to dig] *and Eve span* [which means to spin]*, 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. For if God would have had any bondmen* [meaning servants] *from the beginning, he would have appointed who should be bond and who free.* (See *Speeches in World History*, by Suzanne McIntire and William E. Burns, at page 104.)

Wat Tyler, a former soldier, agreed to lead the Kentish rebels. He'd become extremely angry when a tax collector treated his daughter with utter disrespect.

As the crowd of rebels approached London, some individuals inside opened the city gates. This allowed the rebels access to places like the Savoy Palace (where John of Gaunt, one of the young King's advisers lived). The rebels ransacked the place.

Approaching the Tower of London, the rebels were similarly helped when guards opened the gates.

With no one to stop them, the rebels freed the Tower's inmates and found Simon Sudbury—the Archbishop of Canterbury and Lord Treasurer of England—who was hiding inside. They promptly executed him (although his beheaded skull was saved, allowing facial reconstruction in the 21st century).

When the crowd saw Flemish immigrants, who were wool merchants, they refocused their rage and killed them in the streets. The merchants, of course, had nothing to do with the taxes and restrictions imposed on the rebels.

Richard II, the teenaged King, decided he had to do something to end this deteriorating situation. He traveled to Blackheath where he'd agreed to talk with rebel leaders.

The rebel leaders had several demands:

- End the poll taxes;
- Immediately end serfdom;
- Introduce a more democratic form of government; and
- Fairly distribute wealth and power (instead of keeping it in the hands of the nobility).

The young King agreed-to these demands and issued pardons to everyone who had been involved.

With such assurances from their King, most of the rebels thought they had achieved victory. Surprised, and pleased, by the results of their efforts, most of them went back to their homes.

The rebel leaders, however, were not so easily deceived. They demanded another meeting with Richard II, at Smithfield (beyond the city walls).

The mists of history have descended somewhat on that meeting. Differing accounts provide differing reasons why one of the King's advisors fatally stabbed Wat Tyler.

The other leaders were thereafter rounded-up and executed (with their severed heads ending-up on pikes overlooking the city they'd entered, and ransacked, not-long before).

The Peasants' Revolt of 1381 was thereby crushed, and Richard II promptly broke the promises he'd made at Blackheath. However ... things were changing in favor of the working poor:

- Peasants had proven they could be a powerful force to change society's status-quo.
- About 300 years would pass before another British king tried to impose another poll tax. Charles I was the next to do so, not long before the outbreak of the English Civil War (during which the King lost his head).
- Serfdom—where peasants (also known as villeins) "belonged to their lords"—was not abolished, but it was starting to crumble.
- Employers began to discover that paid labor, performed by employees, produced better results than forcing people to work via some sort of feudalistic system.

At the end of the story, and with the benefit of hindsight, perhaps we can make a different assessment of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. Maybe the rebels were the first "working-class heroes?" Maybe their revolt was actually a success (and not a failure)?

Credits:

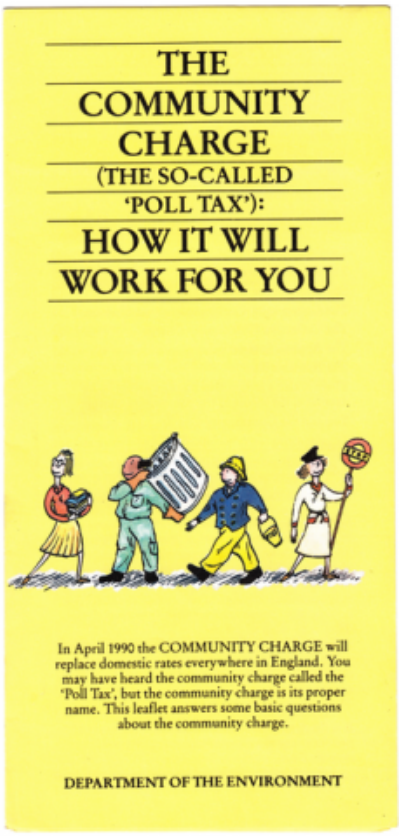
Illumination from a 1470 manuscript of Froissart's Chronicle, by an unnamed artist, is maintained by the British

Library as manuscript "Royal 18 E. I f.165v." Online via Wikimedia Commons. Public Domain.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/John-Ball-Encourages-Peasants-in-the-1381-Uprising

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/John-Ball-Encourages-Peasants-in-the-1381-Uprising

Media Stream



Poll Tax - Community Charge Poster

Leaflet regarding the UK Community Charge ("poll tax") online courtesy UK National Archives.

View this asset at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Poll-Tax-Community-Charge-Poster

Poll Tax Riots - March, 1990

News clip, from ITV News, online via YouTube.

View this asset at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Poll-Tax-Riots-March-1990