

HPHI7016

Past Peoples, Present Societies:

Research Methods and Skills

Assignment 1

Archival Research – The Peasant's Revolt (1381)

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The Peasants' Revolt against the poll taxes imposed by Kings Edward II and Richard II, also known as the Great Revolt or the 1318 Revolt, can be considered as the first riot of the general population of England. Some scholars point to the shortages of agricultural labour caused by repeated outbreaks of the Black Death from 1348 onwards, which had shifted the balance of power between peasants and landowners, empowering peasants to negotiate on wages. The government sent out commissioners to investigate widespread failures to pay Richard's second Poll Tax in 1380 which caused widespread resentment and triggered bands of peasants to organise in Kent and Essex.¹

Other scholars argue that political tensions beginning in the late 1370s were a more important causal factor of the Revolt. These factors include the minority kingship of Richard II, the expensive war with France and the unpopularity of certain political figures, such as John of Gaunt. This view may be supported by the evidence that the rebels targeted senior figures associated with the regime, attacking and murdering the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lord Chief Justice and the Treasurer.²

The National Archives (TNA) in Kew, London and various local archives, particularly in Kent and Essex, hold many documents which describe the events of 1381 and their aftermath.

A useful starting point is a podcast on the National Archives website, in which archivists discuss the content and significance of manuscripts held at Kew relating to the Revolt.³ For example, JUST 1/400 documents one of several inquisitions which were held to discover what happened during the revolt, who was responsible and if any crimes, including treason, had been committed.⁴ This document does not assess

¹ The National Archives (TNA), *Revolt: The Story of England's first protest*. [podcast], On the Record, 15 January 2020, <<https://media.nationalarchives.gov.uk/index.php/revolt-story-englands-first-protest/Revolt: The story of England's first protest | The National Archives>> [accessed 1/11/2025].

² Mark Bailey, *After the Black Death: Economy, Society, and the Law in Fourteenth-Century England*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp186-197.

³ TNA, *Revolt*, 2020.

⁴ London, TNA, *General oyer and terminer, Kent, inquiry into the Peasants' Revolt 1381*, date unknown, JUST 1/400.

the causes of the revolt, rather focussing on detailed descriptions of the events and makes accusations of crimes against named individuals.

C 67/29 holds details of pardons granted for low level crimes, not including murder, and includes names, aliases, jobs and addresses for those receiving pardons.⁵ As anyone with sufficient funds could purchase a pardon, this manuscript also provides information about the operation of the legal system and access to it.

The detail contained in these manuscripts enables researchers to understand the geographical spread of the events in Kent and gain knowledge of the backgrounds of participants. JUST 1/400 names Wat Tyler, the leader of the Kentish rebels but also many lesser-known participants, including some women, who can then be identified in other documents to give a more complete picture of the involvement of individuals and the outcomes that they experienced.⁶

TNA holds documents relating to the operation of the Court of the King's Bench during the years following the revolt. KB 9/43⁷ and KB 9/166/1 m.2⁸ relate to commissions dealing with the insurgents in Kent and in Norfolk and Suffolk respectively. These resources list the participants in the riots and also the jurors who sat on these cases, making it possible to follow the stories of lesser-known participants, including a woman involved in the death of the Chief Justice, John Cavendish. Other King's Bench records provide details of the stages of court cases relating to the revolt.^{9 10 11}

The Special Collections of TNA contain petitions addressed to Richard II following the Revolt which shed light on the economic, political and social impact of the events. For example, SC 8/20/970 is a petition calling for the retrospective conviction of Wat Tyler, Jack Straw, John Hanchatt and Robert Phippe among other leaders of

⁵ London, TNA, *Letters patent for pardons*, June 1381-June 1398, C67-29.

⁶ TNA, JUST 1/400.

⁷ London, TNA, *Enquiry commission, Kent, concerning those who were against the king and his people between Trinity and Corpus Christi (9-13 June 1381), during the Peasants' Revolt, taken at Maidstone, 4-5 July, from west Kent juries: indictments file*, 1381, KB 9/43.

⁸ London, TNA, *Returned commission to deal with insurgents from Norfolk and Suffolk*, 1381, KB 9/166/1 m.2.

⁹ London, TNA, *Coram Rege Chief Justice's roll, venue: Westminster*, 1382, KB 27/483 rot. 40.

¹⁰ London, TNA, *Coram Rege Chief Justice's roll, venue: Westminster*, 1381, KB 27/482 rex rot. 39d.

¹¹ London, TNA, *Coram Rege Chief Justice's roll, venue: Westminster*, 1381, KB 27/486 rex rot. 5.

the Revolt. These men had been captured and beheaded but had not received due process of law which was necessary to prevent their heirs from inheriting their estates.¹² In SC 8/94/4698, the abbot and convent of Peterborough request assurances from the King that the abbey will not be burned by the rebels in the future.¹³

The People of 1381 website is a useful online resource for identifying archival material relating to the revolt and for follow up research on individuals identified in the documents previously referred to.¹⁴ The site contains a database which was developed in collaboration between researchers from the universities of Oxford, Glasgow, Reading and Southampton. The database is searchable by people or places and gives a summary of information contained manuscripts, a reference to and image of the original archival material (with English translation), as well as links to associated people or places. For example, the entry for Margaret Carpenter states that she was involved in burning manorial records in Moulsham, Essex and contains links to her husband's record and to ERO D/DM m.30 which is held in the Essex records office and lists the indictments against Margaret and John Carpenter.¹⁵

The continuing scholarly debate indicates that there is scope for further research into the causes and impacts of the revolt. In addition, the TNA archivists have identified a research gap into the role that women took in these events.¹⁶ It has been demonstrated that archival material is available to support this research. However, apart from that available through the People of 1381 project, much of this material has yet to be digitised and therefore onsite research at TNA in Kew would be necessary to take this forward.

¹² London, TNA, *Petitioners: Commons of the realm. Addressees: King and council.*, 1381-1385, SC 8/20/970.

¹³ London, TNA, *Petitioners: Abbot and convent of Peterborough. Addressees: King and council.* C1381, SC 8/94/4698.

¹⁴ AHRC-funded, *The People of 1381 Online Database* < <https://www.1381.online> > [accessed 1 November 2025].

¹⁵ Chelmsford, ERO, *Manorial records of North East Essex, 1382*, ERO D/DM m.30 from the AHRC-funded *The People of 1381 Online Database*, < https://data.1381.online/projects_database/pr_sources_ro/?action=view&id=4080 > [accessed 1 November 2025].

¹⁶ TNA, Revolt, 2020.

Archival Material

London

The National Archives (TNA)

London, TNA, *Coram Rege Chief Justice's roll, venue: Westminster*, 1381, KB 27/482 rex rot. 39d.

London, TNA, *Coram Rege Chief Justice's roll, venue: Westminster*, 1382, KB 27/483 rot. 40

London, TNA, *Coram Rege Chief Justice's roll, venue: Westminster*, 1381, KB 27/486 rex rot. 5.

London, TNA, *Enquiry commission, Kent, concerning those who were against the king and his people between Trinity and Corpus Christi (9-13 June 1381), during the Peasants' Revolt, taken at Maidstone, 4-5 July, from west Kent juries: indictments file*, 1381, KB 9/43

London, TNA, *General oyer and terminer, Kent, inquiry into the Peasants' Revolt 1381*, date unknown, JUST 1/400

London, TNA, *Enquiry commission, Kent, concerning those who were against the king and his people between Trinity and Corpus Christi (9-13 June 1381), during the Peasants' Revolt, taken at Maidstone, 4-5 July, from west Kent juries: indictments file*, 1381, KB 9/43

London, TNA, *Letters patent for pardons*, June 1381-June 1398, C67-29

London, TNA, *Petitioners: Abbot and convent of Peterborough. Addressees: King and council*. C1381, SC 8/94/4698

London, TNA, *Petitioners: Commons of the realm. Addressees: King and council.*, 1381-1385, SC 8/20/970

London, TNA, *Returned commission to deal with insurgents from Norfolk and Suffolk*, 1381, KB 9/166/1 m.2

London, TNA, *Petitioners: Commons of the realm. Addressees: King and council.*, 1381-1385, SC 8/20/970

Chelmsford

Essex Record Office (ERO)

Chelmsford, ERO, *Manorial records of North East Essex*, 1382, ERO D/DM m.30¹⁷

Online

AHRC-funded, *The People of 1381 Online Database* < <https://www.1381.online> >
[accessed 1 November 2025]

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<<https://media.nationalarchives.gov.uk/index.php/revolt-story-englands-first-protest/Revolt: The story of England's first protest | The National Archives>>
[accessed 1/11/2025]

¹⁷ From the AHRC-funded *The People of 1381 Online Database*,

< https://data.1381.online/projects_database/pr_sources_ro/?action=view&id=4080 > [accessed 1 November 2025].