

Archival Exercise – The Peasants' Revolt of 1381

Methodology

Contemporary chronicles have to be the historian's first port of call when researching the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. Four chronicles provide colourful narratives of events

: Froissart's chronicle and the monastic chronicles of Henry Knighton, Thomas Walsingham and the Anominalle Chronicle. These sources are widely quoted in most modern studies of the Peasants' Revolt. Searches in the National Archives and British Library for court rolls and inquisitions of 1381 yielded some results, whilst an exhibition on the website of the National Archives also provided pointers to some further manuscripts connected with legal matters in the aftermath of the Revolt.

Primary Sources

1. Froissart's Chronique

London
The British Library
Royal MS 18 E I

Jean Froissart's Chronicles are an important source for events in England, France and the Low Countries from 1322 to 1400. This manuscript, the second of four volumes, was a copy made in Bruges in the late 15th century, probably for William, First Baron of Hastings (d.1483) and is written in French. Froissart was a court historian, so inevitably the rebels are not presented in a favourable light.

Using historical and eye witness accounts, Froissart describes the events of the Peasants' Revolt in a dramatic narrative style and, importantly, outlines the reasons for the Revolt. This source provides pictorial representations of the Revolt, including the death of Wat Tyler.

2. Anominalle Chronicle

Leeds
Brotherton Collection, University of Leeds
BC MS 29

The Anominalle Chronicle was written by monks of St. Mary's Abbey in York. and chronicles events between 1333 and 1381. Written in French and Latin, it includes descriptions of Wat Tyler's meeting with the King at Smithfield and Tyler's death there.¹

¹ VH Galbraith , *The Anominalle Chronicle 1333 - 1381*, ed. by V.H. Galbraith (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1927).

3. Henry Knighton Chronicle to 1395

London
British Library
Cotton MS Tiberius C VII

Henry Knighton's Chronicle was written in the last quarter of the 14th century at the Abbey of St. Mary of the Meadow, Leicester, where Knighton was a canon. The manuscript was written in Latin, though the sections relating to the Revolt are in English.²

4. Petition from the Commons to the King and Parliament

London
The National Archives, Kew
SC 8/102/5088

This manuscript is written in French and internal evidence dates it to shortly after the Revolt. The petitioners request that all those ousted from their estates during the "great uprising (now ceased)" should have their property restored to them, with heavy penalties to be exacted upon anyone who tries to retain rights or properties acquired during the Revolt. This manuscript sheds light upon the extent of the upheaval persisting in the aftermath of the Revolt.

5. Petition by Robert Beachamp, Prior of Harmondsworth

London
The National Archives
SC 8/116/5755/5755

Dated on the guard to c. 1381-2, the events described almost certainly relate to an attack during the Peasants' Revolt. The Prior of Harmondsworth states that "during recent disturbances, the commons had entered his house, threatening him and burning all his muniments."³ He requests new copies of charters and relief from his rent to alleviate the poverty being suffered by the house. This manuscript substantiates claims that the rebels destroyed documents relating to tax and ownership.

² Henry Knighton, *Knighton's Chronicle 1337 – 1396*, ed. by G.H.Martin, trans. by G.H.Martin (Oxford: OUP, 1995).

³ National Archives 2020 Exhibition 'Citizenship'