

Basildon Borough

Wat Tyler

And

The Peasant's Revolt

Who were the peasants?

Feudalism

The feudal system was introduced in 1066 by Norman the Conqueror. It was a way of organising society based on wealth, land ownership and loyalty.

At the top was the king, followed by the barons, nobles and knights, who were rewarded with land (fiefs) for their service to the king.



14th Century nobleman and his servant

A peasant was a member of the agricultural work force in a feudal society. Peasants were one of the lowest social classes below the nobles or clergy. They were typically farmers who owned or rented small plots of land, on which they kept animals and grew crops to feed themselves. They could choose their occupations and had some freedom to move around.

As well as working their own small pieces of land, they were expected to pay taxes and provide labour for their lords, which could include military service or working on public projects such as roads or bridges.

Despite their low social status, peasants were vital in the economy of feudal societies. They produced the food and raw materials that were necessary for the survival of the population and were important to the social and cultural life of their communities.

Serfs were a type of peasant who were legally tied. They could not leave without their lord's permission and were expected to pay taxes and provide labour for them. They were often considered the property of the lords meaning they could be sold with the land.



What went wrong?



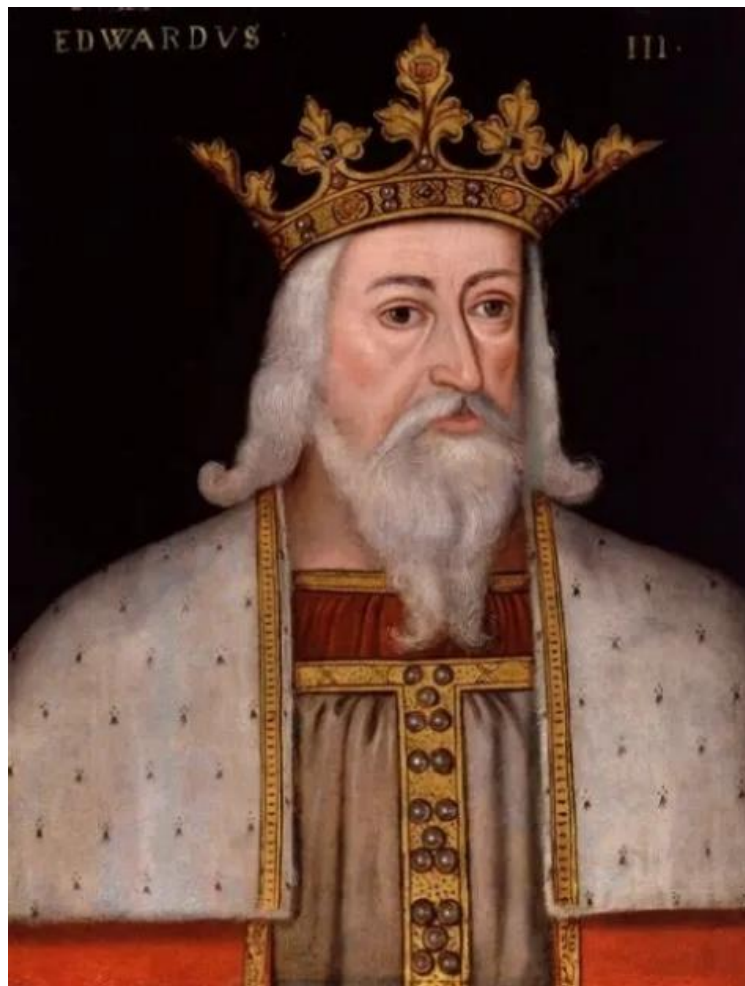
In October 1347, twelve trading ships put into the harbour at Messina in Sicily. The sailors were sick and dying from a disease called bubonic plague, or The Black Death, spread by physical contact or respiration (coughing, sneezing and breathing). It developed very quickly; someone could go to sleep at night feeling fine and be dead by morning.

The disease spread quickly with whole villages and towns being affected as the plague raged across Europe.

The prices of agricultural products increased because agricultural labourers were wiped out by famine or by the plague. As there were fewer peasants to work the land, they began to demand higher wages which were necessary because of the high price of goods.

Landlords looked for new ways to increase their incomes. One way was to put up rents, which they did. Another was to find a way of making more money where they needed fewer workers which they found by raising sheep.

In 1352, the king, Edward III, tried to solve this problem by passing the **Statute of Labourers**, a law passed at the end of the Black Death to stop the peasants taking advantage of the shortage of workers and demanding more money. Peasants were forced to work for the same wages as before, and landowners could insist on labour services being performed, instead of accepting money. This meant that the landowners could profit from shortages, whilst life was made very much harder for the peasants.



King Edward III

The young King - Richard II - During the Black Death and the years following it, England had a strong and warlike king, Edward III. However, his son, the Black Prince, died before him, leaving his grandson as heir to the throne. In 1377, Edward III died, and this boy of ten became king. The true power lay with the powerful barons, in particular the boy's uncle, John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster. The barons, already hated by the peasants, began to take advantage of the situation.



The ten year old King Richard II

The Poll Tax – Since 1337 England had been involved in war with France in what was later known as the Hundred Years War.



This had left the treasury empty, and the barons were tired of paying for the war. In 1377, John of Gaunt imposed a new tax, the Poll (head) Tax, which was to cover the cost of the war. Unlike normal taxes, this was to be paid by the peasants, as well as the landowners. Although this was meant to be a "one-off" event, it was so successful that it was repeated three more times. The first tax was 4 pence from every adult (adult: 14yrs+), then it was raised to 4 pence for the peasants and more for the rich, and in 1380, it was raised to 12 pence per adult.

At this time, a peasant could expect to earn £2 a year, which meant 2 pence per day. A knight could expect to receive 4s, or 48 pence a day. A modest baronial income was around £600 a year, 300 times that of a peasant.

When John of Gaunt examined the poll tax receipts for 1380 he found less money had been collected than before and it was obvious many were not paying what they should.

On May 30th 1381, tax collectors were sent out again, with instructions to collect the full amounts. One of these men was Thomas Bampton, who arrived at Fobbing in Essex, and summoned the villagers of Fobbing, Stanford and Corringham to appear before him.



Those law-abiding villagers who turned up were shocked to discover that they would have to pay the hated tax a second time, and that they would also have to pay for the people who had failed to turn up. Not surprisingly, a riot followed, and Bampton and his men were beaten and driven from the village.

How did the revolt start?

THOMAS BAKER OF FOBGING

Essex peasants led by Thomas Baker, a landowner, chased Thomas Bampton out of Fobbing and started the revolt.

Robert Belknap, Chief Justice of Common Pleas, was sent to investigate the incident and to punish the offenders but was captured by the rebels.

On June 1st 1381, Essex rebels killed three of Bampton's servants (Tax Collectors) and their heads were put on poles and paraded around the neighbouring villages.

After releasing the Chief Justice, some of the villagers looted and set fire to the home of John Sewale, the Sheriff of Essex. The people responsible sent out messages to the villages of Essex and Kent asking for their support in the fight against the poll tax. Many peasants decided that it was time to join the rebellion.

On June 2nd 1381, Bampton, commanded Baker to investigate the tax evasion in Fobbing. Baker refused because he saw it as an excuse for another tax.

Bampton was furious, threatening Baker and the men of Fobbing and ordered his two men to arrest them, even though they were outnumbered by around 100 Essex villagers. The villagers advanced, flinging rocks and arrows, and the royal collectors fled.

The men of Essex fled, too, but only to the woods, and the next day returned to their homes with accounts of what had happened.

That was all it took. Soon riders were traveling far and wide to join the protest. When the messengers returned, they brought news that hundreds of others were willing to rise up. By this time, the violence had spread, and the counties of Essex and Kent were in full revolt.



Wat Tyler

On 5th June 1381 there was a Peasants' Revolt at Dartford and two days later Rochester Castle was taken.

It was not long before Wat Tyler, a former soldier in the Hundred Years War, emerged as the leader of the peasants in Kent.

John Ball was a rebellious priest who was very critical of the way the church, which owned a lot of land, taxed people and he urged people not to pay their taxes. The Archbishop of Canterbury had John Ball arrested and confined him in Maidstone Castle.

Tyler's first decision was to march to Maidstone to free John Ball from prison. The revolt spread through Essex, Hertfordshire, and Suffolk.

The confrontation resulted in violence, which spread across the south of the country. Many local officials and workers from rural areas rose up and destroyed court records and released prisoners from prisons.

Those involved in the revolt wanted taxes to be reduced, serfdom to be ended and a removal of the King's senior official and his law courts.



The march on London

A number of rebels from Kent marched on London, led by Wat Tyler. The rebels were met by officials of the royal government who attempted to turn the rebels back, but they were unsuccessful.

A few days later they entered London with many townsfolk. They attacked the prisons and murdered anyone they found that was linked to the royal government.

A day later the 14-year-old King Richard II met with the rebels at Mile End. He agreed with several of the requests, including the abolition of serfdom.



The following day Richard and his party went to Smithfield to meet with Wat Tyler. Tyler was killed and the King took the opportunity for the Mayor of London to raise a militia and then break up the rebels.

King Richard went back on his promises to the rebels and sent out 4,000 soldiers to restore order across the country. Many of the rebel leaders were found and executed.

On 28th June 1381 the King's soldiers marched into Essex and defeated around 500 rebels in an area thought to have been Norsey Wood. They were buried at Great Burstead.



The church of St Mary Magdalene, Great Burstead

Wat Tyler Country Park

In 1984 Basildon Council opened a country park in Pitsea and named it after Wat Tyler, even though it was unlikely he ever came to this area.



Artist Robert Koenig designed and made seven wooden sculptures to represent some of the local 'peasants' that were involved in the revolt. This is on display in Wat Tyler Park.

