

Conflict and Upheaval: England 1337-1381

England in the fourteenth century

Eduqas GCSE History

Component 1: British Study in Depth

England in the fourteenth century

What were the main characteristics of life in fourteenth century England?

English society in the fourteenth century

The Norman Conquest of England during the eleventh century had started a process of change for English society that had a considerable impact upon every aspect of people's lives. The introduction of the feudal system had reorganised land ownership throughout the country and defined the obligations and duties by which the peasantry had to live. The king and nobility were obviously top of the social structure, which was strictly hierarchical in nature. Senior churchmen were of an equal status to nobility and by the fourteenth century about two hundred figures formed the ruling elite, owning over 75% of the land in England. Below the nobility in the social structure were the knights and by the fourteenth century it has been estimated that there about one thousand knights, who had achieved their position either through outstanding service or because they had accumulated enough wealth to do so.

Agriculture was overwhelmingly the major occupation in England, with the open field system the usual method of farming. Up to the coming of the Black Death, agriculture appeared to have been flourishing. Village communities surrounded by three or maybe four great fields in which the villagers held scattered strips were the norm. Virtually all these villages throughout England were under the control of a lord, or sometimes several. Four or five villages might be grouped together into one large manorial unit. Approximately one sixth of the population were freemen, owning around 20% of the land which could be passed on to their descendants in return for carrying out certain services and paying rent. However, the largest proportion of the population was made up of those who were not free, the villeins who were tied to the land and the manor on which they lived. Poorer villeins were known as cottars. They farmed the land in return for being allowed to live on the manor. Although by the fourteenth century some had managed to change this to paying rent, the majority still undertook labour service as a means of payment.

The population of England during the fourteenth century can only be estimated and figures of two and a half million to four million exist. There can be no doubt that prior to the Black Death the population had been increasing and although that may appear

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to be sparse by today's standards, by those of the fourteenth century, especially in relation to the primitive farming techniques that existed, population saturation had been reached. Towns were few and far between with only London and possibly York having populations in excess of ten thousand. Road connections were not as primitive as one might think, with many Roman roads still in use during this period, along with other well established routes. Evidence shows that trade between different parts of the country was considerable by the standards of the age, suggesting that the roads that existed were adequate for carts to travel along regularly.

Importance of the church; importance of the wool trade

Without a doubt, the **church** played an extremely important role in the everyday lives of the population. The age was genuinely religious with **traditional Catholicism** essentially controlling many areas of the lives of ordinary English people. During the first half of the fourteenth century, the supremacy of the Pope was hardly questioned and any laws extending the powers of the church were accepted. As far as ordinary people were concerned, the church was the cornerstone of their lives. Marriages, baptism, burials, attending Mass and confessions of sins were fundamental to people's lives.

The church was also physically important, being the most prominent place in the community where people could meet and the parish priest was basically the link between the community, the Catholic Church and God. **Priests** also looked after the sick and dying, performing spiritual duties to ease their suffering. However, the church also performed many administrative duties, such as the collection of tithes, recording births, deaths and marriages. As a result, the church tended to provide the majority of **educated men** during the period. It is also estimated that there were about 17,500 monks and nuns during the first half of the fourteenth century. In addition to this there were thousands of Franciscan and Dominican friars.

However, despite the pre-eminence of the church, it did begin to face several **challenges** as the fourteenth century progressed. The **Black Death** and the obvious inability of the church to prevent its spread, led many to question its power and undermined people's faith in it. From the mid-1300s on the church also faced a challenge from **Lollardy**, a religious and political movement that called for the reduction in the power of church officials such as the Pope and which challenged many other ideas of church supremacy. Founded by **John Wycliffe** and his followers, who became known as Lollards, were declared to be heretics and faced persecution from the church. They did however, pave the way for the later Protestant Reformation that would sweep Europe.

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Source 1: A nineteenth century painting showing John Wycliffe giving his followers a copy of his translation of the Bible

Whilst the church played the most important spiritual part in people's lives, financially many had come to rely upon the expanding wool trade that characterised the period. The wool trade had developed throughout the medieval period to become the chief export of England. During the early fourteenth century the average annual exports of English wool amounted to 35,000 sacks, with the finer grades being some of the most valued in Europe. Before the fourteenth century, the majority of England's trade was with Flanders, but the influence of Italian merchants became stronger during this period. They were superseded in by the mid-1350s by English merchants who were granted a monopoly by Edward III. This became known as the Staple, where in return for the monopoly merchants organised the trade via a few markets through which all wool was to pass, making it easier for tax to be calculated. However, the financial demands of the monarchy ruined many of these merchants. Whilst the monopoly enabled them to pay low prices in England, it damaged English growers who received less for their wool. Charging high prices on the wool abroad also damaged the English wool trade and the later fourteenth century saw a gradual decline in the monopolies granted.

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The financial importance of the wool trade to the English economy cannot be underestimated. The trade was politically important too as revenues from the sale of wool financed wars. This was particularly the case during the reign of Edward III and the taxation demands upon those involved in the wool trade were considerable. Prior to the Hundred Years' War Edward encouraged Flemish master weavers to move to England and this strengthened the links with Flanders. The industry was responsible for large scale employment, as the cloth trade expanded during the century. In terms of spinners and weavers, economic depressions in the industry were associated with periods of increased poverty and starvation. Many wealthier people and indeed the Church measured their wealth in terms of their sheep flocks. Indeed after the Black Death, due to the lack of available farm labourers, the numbers of sheep kept increasing which further expanded the industry.

Position of women; rich and poor

Throughout this period, the position of women was one of subordination to men. In essence, a woman in medieval England belonged to a man, be it her father or husband. The fact that the chronicles of the time were written by men has pushed accounts of women's lives to the background. However, there is no doubt that despite this, women played an essential role in fourteenth century English society. The domestic roles of women were of course extremely varied. Since nine out of ten women lived in the countryside, they worked in the fields, sowing, harvesting and threshing. They fed and looked after the family, brewed beer, spun wool and wove cloth. Marriage by fifteen was commonplace, where 'ownership' passed from father to husband and of course childbirth, given the lack of medical knowledge and care, was very dangerous and death before the age of 40 was common for women from poor backgrounds.

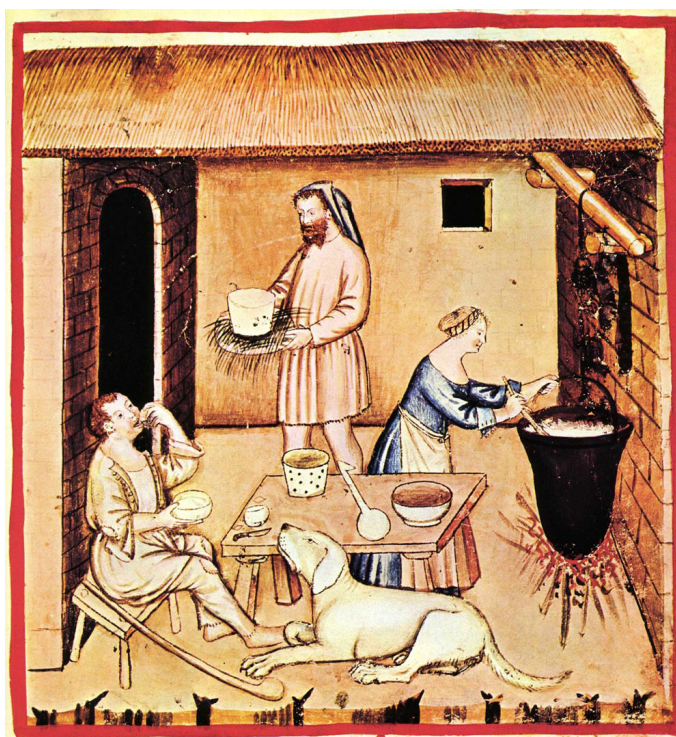
The control exerted over women was considerable. For example, they could not get married without their parents' consent; they could not divorce their husbands; nor own any property unless they were widowed. In the towns, women found it difficult to become merchants or traders and entry to the guilds was almost impossible since many barred women from joining. Skilled jobs, apart from making clothes, were therefore usually out of reach for women. However, widows were often able to assume control of their dead husband's business and this enabled some women to lead reasonably independent lives.

Life for women from richer backgrounds was obviously easier than for those from poor ones and as a result they tended to live longer. However, arranged marriages for social, financial or political reasons were common and producing a male heir was deemed to be essential. In times of war, the wives of the nobility were often left in charge of manorial

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estates and castles, thus achieving an element of political power. Noblewomen were often taught to read and write, but this tended to be the limits of their education. The most learned women of the period were those who joined nunneries, which offered an alternative path to marriage. Indeed as abbesses, women could hold considerable power. However, the general view of the Catholic Church towards women was that they were to be considered weak and sinful. Adultery on the part of women was certainly thought of as being immeasurably more serious than if committed by a man. It could be said that women were viewed as being essential for the reproduction of the family, but the examples of women who prospered during the period show that the overall experience of women was very diverse.



Source 2: Family life as depicted in a fourteenth century chronicle

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The start of the Hundred Years' War

What factors contributed to the outbreak of the Hundred Years' War?

Overseas possessions of English kings; relations between France and Scotland

The Hundred Years' War is a rather misleading term since it 'officially' lasted 116 years. It was more a series of military campaigns with long intervals in between. In one sense it was merely one stage in the warfare between the French kings and their great vassals, the Kings of England. There were many intertwined factors that led to outbreak of hostilities in 1337, some of which dated back many years. One of the main issues that led to war was the possessions of land in France held by the English kings. The English king controlled a considerable area of France. The area of Gascony, part of Aquitaine in southern France, had been confirmed as being in the possession of English kings in the Treaty of Paris, 1259. English kings however, were expected to pay homage to the French kings as a vassal, or servant, in return for the land. This had led to strained relations between the two countries and twice, in 1294 and 1324, French kings had attempted to confiscate the area, or duchy as it was also known.

This situation was made worse by the growth of national spirit during this period. The English king had to give homage every time there was a new French king, which happened frequently in the fourteenth century – indeed it was necessary five times in fifteen years. This was considered a humiliation for English kings. The border of Gascony was also poorly defined and French royal officials were continually trying to extend the influence and jurisdiction of their king into the duchy. Some inhabitants of Gascony had even been prosecuted for treason and this interference led to increasingly strained relations between the two monarchies. The issue of Flanders also contributed to the increase in tension, with both kings seeking to exert influence over the area which was economically very important due to the cloth trade.

English influence in Flanders and in the south of France had resulted in the territories of the French king being sandwiched in between. This had partly led to the French seeking an alliance with Scotland, a traditional enemy of England. The 1294 conflict between England and France had coincided with hostilities between England under Edward I and Scotland. The French subsequently supported the Scots in any dispute with their southern neighbour and this threat from the north and south was an important factor in causing the war. During the early fourteenth century the English kings Edward I and II had fought wars for control over Scotland with mixed results. After 1330 Edward III made determined efforts to conquer Scotland and this strengthened the 'auld alliance' between Scotland and France. Indeed French support for David Bruce (David II) for the throne of Scotland, as opposed to the English chosen 'pretender', Edward Balliol,

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led to the breakdown in relations between England and France that began the war.

Isabella of France; Edward III's claim; role of Philip of France

The issues of English possessions in France and the 'auld alliance' were however, in many ways subordinate to the problem of the succession in France. A series of late Capetian French kings, Louis X, Philip V and Charles IV had all died without male heirs. Their father however, King Philip IV, known as Philip the Fair, also had a daughter **Isabella**. Isabella had married King Edward II of England and was therefore the **mother of Edward III**. This in theory gave Edward a claim to the French throne. However, the so-called **Salic Law**, a supposedly ancient law of the Franks that stated that the throne could not descend through a female, had been resurrected by French royal officials to ensure that Edward's claim would not be valid despite him being the closest blood relative of Charles IV who died in 1328. Isabella was also very **unpopular** in France and this, combined with French hatred for the idea that Edward might become King of France, meant that in April 1328 the great Council of the Nobility chose Charles' first cousin, **Philip, Count of Valois** as King Philip VI. He had already acted as Regent and there might have been civil war if he had not been chosen.

Aged fifteen in 1328, Edward did not pursue further his claim to the French throne. He reluctantly recognized Philip as his overlord for his French possessions and duly paid him **homage** in 1329 and 1331. During the 1330s however, relations deteriorated and as mentioned earlier, the issue of **Scotland** reared its head. Edward's intervention in Scotland had led to the exile in France of King David II. The dual threat from Scotland and France was made worse in 1336 when the French assembled a large fleet for a proposed crusade. The plan was abandoned but the fleet instead moved to the Normandy coast, thereby threatening England. On their part, the French were concerned about England's close relations with the Low Countries, which were economically important. Tensions therefore rose further and events would unfold that would lead to Edward reasserting his claim to the French throne.

Philip of France was determined to reassert the power of the French monarchy that had been developed by a succession of Capetian kings. The problem of Aquitaine and the influence of the English in France was undoubtedly a major problem that he wished to solve. Despite enjoying reasonably amicable relations with Edward at first, the underlying issues between the monarchies resulted in increased tension. Philip viewed support for Scotland as a way of weakening the English king and thereby his influence in France. After giving refuge to King David II in 1334, Philip stated that he was championing the Scottish king, a declaration that enraged Edward. However, Philip did feel in a position of power, given the fact that at the time France was richer

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than England and also had a larger population. He might have reasonably assumed therefore that the French would prevail should conflict break out.

Confiscation of Aquitaine; Edward III's aims

Given the above factors, it was inevitable that a final breach with England would occur. In 1336 Edward offered refuge to one of Philip's former close advisors, **Robert, Count of Artois**. Robert had been accused of forging documents in order to gain an inheritance and was now declared to be Philip's 'mortal enemy'. His extradition to France was demanded but not granted. In April 1337 Philip refused to meet an English delegation and issued a call to arms. The following month at a meeting with his Great Council in Paris, it was agreed that **Aquitaine would be confiscated** from Edward due to his sheltering of Robert and due to Edward's general disobedience as a vassal of the French king.

The response of Edward was not to seek a diplomatic solution to the crisis, but to issue a **clear challenge** to Philip's claim to the French throne. Indeed in 1340 he formally assumed the title of King of France. Reasserting his own claim, Edward aimed to destabilise Philip, but whether he seriously aimed to take the French throne is a matter of debate. It may well have been his aim to achieve a military victory merely to confirm his possession of Aquitaine and Ponthieu, another smaller English possession in France. He could also use his claim as powerful **negotiating tool**, possibly offering to give up the claim in return for territorial concessions from the French king. Either way, the crisis that led to the start of the Hundred Years' War was one of a series of periods of tension that had existed since King John had lost the Angevin Empire to Philip II of France in 1204.

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The course of the War

What events shaped the course of the Hundred Years' War?

Alliances; tactics – chevauchees, long-bow

The start of the war saw Edward seek to overcome his lack of financial power and numerical disadvantage of his forces by attempting to make **alliances** to strengthen his position. For example, the Holy Roman Emperor Louis IV indicated he would support Edward's cause. In January 1340 Edward was recognised as the King of France by the economically important Flanders towns of Ghent, Bruges and Ypres. The **alliance with Flanders**, with which England had long established and lucrative trading links, was part of a wider strategy to seek alliances with the Low Countries and with those nobles in France who were **disaffected** with the reign of Philip. However, these alliances actually did little to improve Edward's financial position and proved to be **very costly**. The Anglo-Flemish alliance for example, was agreed at a cost of £140,000 meant for the defence of Flanders, providing them with ships and weapons in case of a French attack. The slow start to the war with no decisive military engagements fought saw costs increase further.

One problem faced by Edward was the need to control the English Channel which was being ravaged by French pirates disrupting the bringing of supplies. The first significant engagement was not actually fought on land but in the harbour at **Sluys** in June 1340. Sailing his ships into the port where the French fleet were moored, Edward's forces comprising of longbowmen and soldiers overwhelmed their opponents, killing their generals and almost totally destroying their fleet.

On land, the English adopted the tactic of **chevauchee**. The basic premise of the tactic was that forces of mounted soldiers would quickly sweep across the countryside destroying property and pillaging in order to weaken the enemy's ability to gather resources from the land and therefore damage them financially. Villages were razed to the ground, livestock stolen and the local population terrorized. The effect was to break the morale of enemy peasants and weaken any resolve they may have had.

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Source 3: A later depiction of the Battle of Sluys, 1340,

Chevauchees were also cheaper to organize than sieges and were sometimes viewed as a means to draw the enemy into fighting a large scale pitched battle, since the ongoing destructive nature of chevauchees would become an intolerable financial burden on those affected by them. As a result Edward used the tactic to considerable effect. After the victory at Sluys Edward led a force of 12,000 men on a chevauchee through Picardy, but no major battle was fought with the French. The tactic was also effectively pursued by his son **Edward, the 'Black Prince'** who launched grand chevauchees in the mid-1350s that were extremely destructive.

Another very important weapon and tactic used by the English forces was that of the **longbow**. The first effective use of the weapon was at the Battle of Sluys, where the tightly packed French ships found themselves at the mercy of a continuous hail of arrows, which cleared the way for soldiers to board and capture the French vessels. During the land campaigns however, the long-bow would prove equally effective and as a tactic dominated battles up to and including the Battle of Agincourt in 1415, after which effective countermeasures began to lessen the impact of their use. However, during the fourteenth century, the longbow was easily superior to the more conventionally used cross-bow, having a faster reload that meant it could fire almost twice as many bows in the same time.

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Battles of Crecy, Calais, Poitiers

After the initial success at Sluys and the chevauchee that followed, which resulted in no engagement with the French, Edward was forced to return to England due to on-going problems with Scotland and a lack of money with which to continue the campaign. In July 1346, Edward returned, crossing the Channel with a force of over 15,000, planning a grand chevauchee through Normandy which would weaken the French monarchy and prove financially lucrative. Edward's forces plundered their way through **Normandy**, sacking the town of **Caen** with brutality. Philip, in the Norman capital of Rouen, was fooled by Edward who had rebuilt a bridge over the River Seine and was continuing his way eastwards, soon to be pursued by Philip's forces.

Reaching the River Somme at **Crecy**, Edward was fortunate to find a perfect defensive position on a slope at Crecy-en-Ponthieu, where it would be impossible for the French to outflank them. His forces, through their plundering, were now resupplied and ready to face the French who went straight into battle from the pursuit. The English forces were arranged in three groups led by Edward, his son the Black Prince and the Earl of Northampton. The French King ignored the advice of his generals and at 4 o'clock in the afternoon they engaged the English forces.

Genoese crossbowmen attacked the English lines but rain reduced the effectiveness of their weapons and they were forced to retreat into the French cavalry who were advancing after them. The result was chaos and Philip lost control of his forces. The French cavalry rode over their allies towards the English but attacking uphill on a wet slope they were faced with an onslaught of **longbow** fire which decimated their numbers. The English stood their ground and the melee continued into the late evening when Philip's ally, the blind king John of Bohemia was killed in attack on the Black Prince's position. Philip was able to escape with groups of survivors, but the result was a **crushing English victory** that made a hero of Edward III. The victory also set the pattern for battles to come over the forthcoming decades, where the long-bow would dominate over horsemen and strong defensive positions became almost impossible to capture due to the long-bow's power.

Edward's next objective was the strategically important port of **Calais** and by September 1346 his forces reached the imposing outer defences of the town. After initial attempts to enter the town failed, Edward decided upon a **siege** as the best way to achieve his objective. French attempts to supply the population by sea were gradually blocked by the English and by June 1347 the situation was desperate. Philip proved himself to be an inadequate leader, half-heartedly sending a relief force that upon seeing the strength of the English position, withdrew a short distance. The town

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finally **surrendered** in August, after which Edward removed almost all the inhabitants replacing them with English.



Source 4: The Battle of Crecy as depicted in Froissart's Chronicles

Edward was now clearly in the ascendancy, helped by the defeat of the Scots at the **Battle of Neville's Cross** and the capture of King David in the same year. However, the war now petered out into occasional skirmishes as its financial demands took their toll. The coming of the **Black Death** to Europe also reduced the ability of the sides to wage war and weariness set in. The ensuing years were spent strengthening the English position in Gascony, but it was certain that Edward had not intended to come to terms with the French, even after the death of Philip VI in 1350. Edward's son, the **Black Prince** was now a man and had ambitions of his own and in **1355** he went to Gascony with a small army, leading an extremely destructive **chevauchee** through the South of France. This was followed in **1356** with another great chevauchee in central France, principally against the city of Bourges. This time however, the English were pursued by a large French force under Philip's successor, **King John II**, who caught up with the English at **Poitiers** in September.

The English once again adopted the tactics used at Crecy ten years earlier and adopted a defensive position with **archers** in the front and knights in the rear. King John attempted to send his best cavalry force to break through a hedge which

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separated them from the English, but it was cut to pieces by English longbow fire. French infantry attacks followed, led by John's son, the **Dauphin** (meaning heir to the throne), but they withdrew which confused the next infantry wave who fled. The third French division under the King himself rushed into attack but were outflanked and overwhelmed. **King John was captured** and the result was a disaster for the French who also lost many important nobles, either captured or killed.

French fortunes following the defeat at Poitiers deteriorated further. In the absence of his father, the nineteen year old Dauphin was faced with internal squabbles as chaos became rife within the French kingdom. A **major peasant rebellion** took place in 1358 and groups of soldiers roamed the kingdom plundering at will. It was from this position of weakness that the French sought to open peace negotiations that would eventually culminate in the **Treaty of Bretigny**.



Source 5: The capture of King John at the Battle of Poitiers

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Role of the 'Black Prince'; Treaty of Bretigny

Edward III's eldest son, also named Edward, was born in Woodstock in 1330 and for much of his early life was referred to as **Edward of Woodstock**. The title '**Black Prince**' was popularly ascribed to him from around Tudor times. In 1343 he was given the title **Prince of Wales** and even at 16 was displaying military prowess, playing an important role for example at the Battle of Crecy in 1346. His military successes made him very popular during his lifetime and although he was viewed as the model of a chivalric knight, he was undoubtedly ruthless as was shown by the brutality of the several chevauchees that he led.

In addition to the important part played by these devastating raids in terms of weakening resistance to the English and gaining wealth, he was at the forefront of the success achieved by the English during this period – at Calais, during the campaigns of 1355-6, the Battle of Poitiers and the campaign that resulted in the Treaty of Bretigny in 1360. He was rewarded by his father with the title Prince of Aquitaine and Gascony, but died in 1376 after an illness that it has been suggested he had contracted many years previously. There can be no doubt that he played an **extremely important role** during this phase of the Hundred Years' War and English fortunes soon began to change around the period of his and then his father's death in 1377.

The **Treaty of Bretigny** was the high point of English success during the fourteenth century and even though its terms were harsh to the French, was generally welcomed in France given the suffering and turmoil that had engulfed the country. The Treaty ended the first phase of the war, but failed to establish a lasting peace. Under the terms the English were **granted control** over several areas of southwest France without having to do **homage** for them. Edward in turn **renounced his claim** to the French throne. It was agreed that a **ransom** of three million gold coins would be paid for the release of the captured French King John. Although John was released in order to raise the money whilst hostages were kept in England, he failed to do so and returned to England where he died in captivity in 1364. However, neither side honoured the terms and by **1369 war erupted again**.

The years following the Treaty would gradually see the **French regain lost territories**, under the able leadership of John's successor **Charles V** and his general Bertrand du Guesclin. The death of the two Edwards would place England under the control of the young **Richard II**, whose harsh taxes to pay for the resumed war would partly cause the Peasant's Revolt. English defeats continued and it would not be until the reign of Henry V in the early fifteenth century that England would achieve supremacy in France again.

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The Black Death

What was the short term impact of the Black Death upon society?

Arrival of the Black Death; immediate impact

During the period that it struck England the Black Death was undoubtedly an event of catastrophic proportions for those it affected and its impact would alter the fabric and attitudes of society. It changed the relationship between lord and peasant and partly contributed the outbreak of the Peasants' Revolt. When it arrived in **1348** England was reasonably **prosperous**. Scotland and France were subdued after English successes at Neville's Cross, Crecy and Calais and Edward III's reputation was at its height. The wool export trade was doing well and the wealth of farmers, merchants and gentlemen was increasing as a result. It would be the success of this trade that would bring the plague to England; as far from being isolated the southern part of Britain was an important trading area for continental Europe and Scandinavia.

Although contemporary records do not agree on the precise date of its arrival, the consensus of opinion is that a ship carrying a victim of bubonic plague arrived at **Melcombe Regis** in Dorset at the end of **May** into **June 1348** and that by the middle of August it had begun to spread inland. The immediate impact of the plague, or 'great pestilence' as it was often referred to at the time, was to create panic among people who were obviously ignorant. Records talk about outbreaks of violence and an increase in suspicion but the most overwhelming impact was to create a feeling of helplessness. The plague was seen to be the work of God and against that there was no defence.

England was overwhelmingly a **rural economy** and as such the Black Death had a considerable impact upon village communities, the manorial system and food production. In some places where the impact was severe, **organized society broke down** for a period of time and even permanently, shown by the number of deserted villages that were never again to be inhabited. However, as time went on the basic functions of society were restored and a resilience displayed that still resulted in the payment of taxes and the undertaking of duties.

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Strains of plague; contemporary views

Views of contemporaries were of course extremely narrow given the ignorance that prevailed in terms of medical knowledge. Today it is asserted that the pestilence was plague, more specifically caused by bacteria known as **Yersinia Pestis**. The bacteria, originally in the bloodstream of rats, was carried by fleas that drew blood from the rats they infested. Upon biting humans the fleas would regurgitate into the human bloodstream and thereby transmit the bacteria. Attacking the lymph nodes, the victim would develop swellings, or **buboes**, on the neck, in the armpits and groin. This is where the term **bubonic plague** derived from. Spreading through the bloodstream it would attack internal organs causing internal bleeding, evidence of which it has been suggested by some gave it the title the **Black Death**, although some historians have asserted that this phrase was not actually mentioned in any contemporary records. Attacking the nervous system causing severe cramps, death would normally occur within a few days with the mortality rate being about fifty per cent of those infected.

Although bubonic plague was the most common form, another variant was **pneumonic plague**, which was essentially secondary bubonic plague. When victims contracted bubonic plague they could develop pneumonia which could then develop into pneumonic plague. Unlike bubonic plague, this was spread through **airborne** means, when victims coughed out blood and the plague bacteria were sprayed out into the air every time the patient breathed. This strain had a far higher mortality rate, upwards of ninety per cent with patients dying within two days. It is believed that these two strains were by far the most prevalent during the Black Death. However, there seems little doubt that another strain, the rare septicaemic plague, was also at work. Just as lethal as pneumonic plague it killed its victims with even more speed.

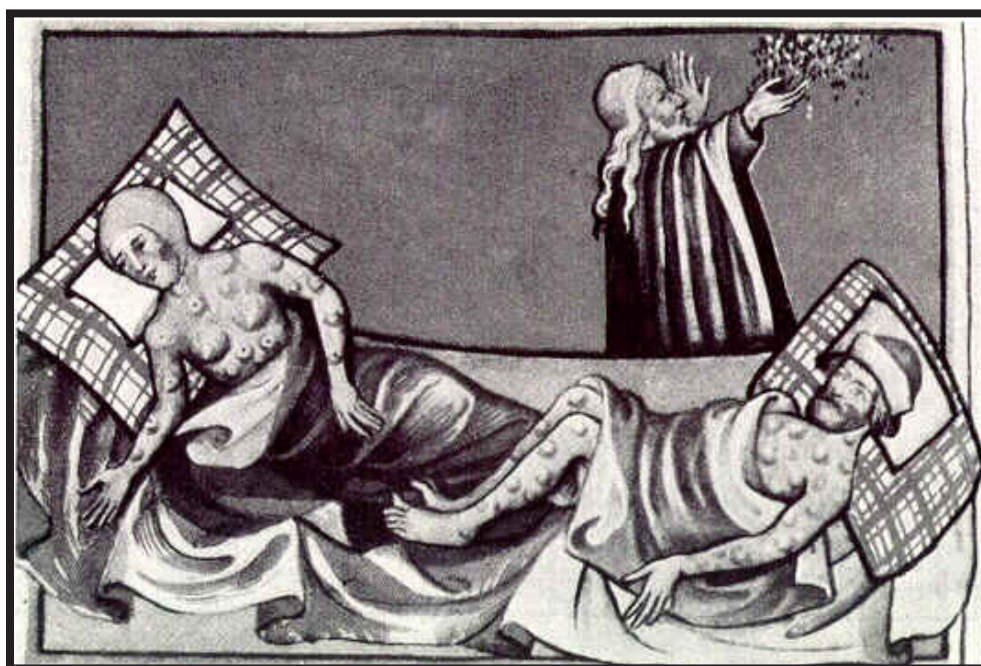
Contemporary views overwhelmingly reflect the confusion that reigned through all sections of society. Combined with this was quite naturally widespread fear that afflicted all who encountered the plague. Disgust at the nature of the disease, in terms of the smell, excrement, buboes and so on, was also common in contemporary accounts of the plague. The knowledge possessed at the time was obviously totally inadequate to explain or deal with the plague. In such a religious period, references to the wrath of God and it being a punishment due to the wickedness of the time were common.

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Many were concerned by the means by which the disease spread. The common views were that it was either spread via **person-to-person** infection or that there existed a form of **poison cloud** that moved across the country from village to village. Indeed records show that many fourteenth century doctors assumed that 'pollution' of the atmosphere was responsible for unpredictable spread of the plague. The most alarming aspect of the plague to contemporaries was the **speed** by which it spread. This often resulted in victims being hastily abandoned to their fate, with safety only coming from total, but impractical, isolation. It is also apparent that people realized there was no need to have physical contact with a victim to become one themselves. What complicated matters further of course, was the somewhat haphazard nature of the plague. In some places the entire community would perish, but in others possibly only one or two. This added to the overall bewilderment and fear that contemporaries felt.

Progress of the plague; factors aiding spread



Source 6: The Black Death as depicted in a fifteenth century manuscript

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After its arrival in Dorset, the plague spread quickly through the south west of England, having a significant impact on **Bristol**, the first major urban centre it struck. The population of Bristol was close to ten thousand and contemporary records, even if somewhat exaggerated, reveal the horror of what was inflicted upon the city. Approximately thirty-five to forty per cent of the population is thought to have died. By the middle of 1349, the majority of Devon and Cornwall had been affected.

The progress of the plague inland was rapid from west to east, spreading into Oxfordshire, up from Hampshire, Wiltshire and Surrey eventually reaching London. The counties had already suffered a series of harsh winters and were impoverished so the plague had a devastating economic effect, even though the areas did manage to recover within the next few years. The summer saw it reach East Anglia, with the prosperous city of **Norwich** losing over half its population.

By July 1349, the Midlands and northern counties were being badly affected as the plague carried on its rampage through the country. The county of Lincolnshire was severely affected, more so than its neighbours. Such was the devastating impact of the plague that in some areas the population did not recover until the nineteenth century. The same month saw it reach the northernmost counties of England, such was the speed with which it spread.

The spread of the plague through the countryside was assisted by several factors. Some people undoubtedly tried to **flee affected areas** and may therefore have carried the disease with them. Along coastal areas, towns and villages with ports were susceptible due to the rats aboard the **ships** that docked. In what constituted living accommodation, the inhabitants would be crowded together, sleeping in the same room, often with their animals. In such conditions, **isolating the sick** was almost impossible, even if it had occurred to people at the time. The warmth and dirt of fourteenth century houses, with families huddling around fires also provided the ideal environment for rats to thrive.

Conditions in the **towns and cities** of the time are well known. What passed for streets were deep in mud, excrement and general filth with little effort being made to try to improve conditions. It was only when the amount of waste became intolerable that any measures were undertaken to try to clean some of it away. Sanitary arrangements were at best primitive and in cities such as London, the rivers were known and recorded to be full of sewage. Another factor aiding the spread of the plague was the problem of disposing of animal carcasses and other refuse. Once again, dumping into any available water course, preferably a tidal river if one were nearby was considered the most appropriate solution. Of course when the plague hit such areas where **public**

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hygiene was extremely basic, they were in no position to cope adequately with the demands of preventing its spread and of disposing of the many corpses. The closeness of houses, the squalor, the surprising mobility of fourteenth century society and the virulence of the disease aided by the warm weather of summer 1349, all assisted its devastating path across the country.

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Legacy of the Black Death

How important were the longer term consequences of the Black Death?

Population decrease; labour shortages; the Statute of Labourers

The Black Death undoubtedly had a devastating impact upon the population of England. Of course there can be nowhere near any precise measurements as to how many were killed, during a period where at best the total population has to be estimated. Such is the degree of uncertainty, estimates range from around **25% to around 60%** of the total population, which was generally estimated to be around two to three million during this period. Despite the lack of consensus among historians, estimates of around **a third to a half** of the population being killed are generally deemed to be appropriate.

A complicating factor, as mentioned earlier, was the fact that the impact was not uniformly felt across the country. Some areas were relatively lightly affected, whereas for example, East Anglia which through its proximity and contact with continental Europe, suffered greatly. There were also variations between the classes of society in terms of death rates. Those of peasant class, particularly in the towns where the conditions for the spread of the plague were very favourable, were badly affected. It has also been suggested that the clergy suffered due to their contact with victims and that around 40% of priests died during the epidemic. However, it certainly seems to be the case that those in the higher levels of society suffered a far lower mortality rate due to their ability to remain removed from contact with the lower class.

The consequences of such a rapid depopulation were far reaching and impacted greatly upon fourteenth century English society. The most immediate impact was a **shortage of farm labourers**, which was to have short and longer term effects. The number of days worked by peasants on manorial estates fell considerably. This resulted in fewer crops being grown and fields going to waste. Labour shortages naturally meant that those available for work were now in high demand and as will be discussed, this led to a rise in wages.

The shortage of labourers in the countryside also had the effect of increasing the **bargaining power** of the peasantry and severely **weakened** the entire **feudal system**. The demand for labourers and the ignoring of feudal obligations meant peasants could move from manor to manor working for the best wages. The effects in the towns were similar in terms of wages and mobility. This increase in physical and social mobility gave the peasantry and the urban poor a greater **sense of freedom** that worried the

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ruling classes who wished to retain control over the labouring classes.

The response of the ruling classes to these effects was indeed one of seeking a return to the pre-plague situation in terms of feudal obligations, wages and mobility. In 1349 the government issued the **Ordinance of Labourers** which was a direct response to the effects of the plague. The order was an attempt to impose wage and price controls as well as stipulating that everyone under 60 had to work; employers must not pay and workers not be paid wages that were higher than pre-plague levels and that food was to be reasonably priced.

However, the enforcing of the order proved difficult in the turmoil of the plague. By 1350-1, many of the great landowners were complaining about the increase in wages to King Edward III, so in 1351 the Ordinance was reinforced in law by the **Statute of Labourers**. The law stated that labourers' **wages** were to return to those of **pre-plague** levels with year being set at 1346. It restated the order for all able-bodied men and women under 60 to work and harshly punished those who refused to, considering them to be 'idle'. The aim was clearly to ensure a cheap supply of labour, but it also aimed to prevent peasants from leaving their manor until their contracts were fulfilled and other lords were not allowed to employ them until so.

The enforcement of the Statute of Labourers was naturally to be carried out at local level with the burden of responsibility falling upon stewards, bailiffs and constables. Punishment for breaking the law included time in the stocks, fines and imprisonment, the term of which was doubled for every repeat offence. However, in reality the measures were **not rigorously enforced** and were of course exceptionally unpopular with peasants of all grades. In longer term it failed to control wages and the movement of labour and would certainly be a factor in causing the **Peasants' Revolt** thirty years later.

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**Source 7: The deserted village of Hound Tor in Devon –
a result of the Black Death**

Effects on survivors – wages, rents; art and medicine

Those who lived through the Black Death undoubtedly experienced or were witness to the suffering around them, losing family members, suffering dislocation, the disappearance of communities and the old certainties that characterised life during the period. Economically however, the plague proved to be **beneficial** to the peasant class. As previously mentioned, the shortage of labourers and the desperation of landowners to maintain as far as possible the productive use of their land saw **wages increase** rapidly. Labourers now demanded and received higher wages in cash. During the 1340s wages had already increased by around twenty per cent and in the decade following the plague by about another twenty to forty per cent. Records show for example, that a ploughman earning two shillings a week prior to the plague could demand ten shillings. However, another result of the plague was an increase in prices to cover the wage increases. This inflation did restrict somewhat the benefits of higher wages.

The lords were not only faced with the prospect of increased wage demands from labourers who they relied on for seasonal work. Those peasants who were bound to the land by feudal duties now sought to exchange these duties, rents and dues for less burdensome conditions and fewer responsibilities. Lords who refused merely

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encouraged peasants to look for better conditions elsewhere, despite the efforts of the authorities to prevent them from doing so. The lack of peasants to farm the land and the increased bargaining power of those that survived meant that **rents** fell rapidly and in some cases was not even demanded from the lords. The result of these factors was that the estimated income of the lords shrank by over twenty per cent during the period of the plague and the immediate years following.

For many peasants the years following the plague were good, despite the Statute of Labourers. Many were able to purchase small areas of land and the average size of a peasant holding grew. **Standards of living improved** and freed from labour service to the lord, peasants farmed the land for themselves, enjoying some of the **luxuries** that had previously only been accessible to those of a higher class, such as the regular consumption of meat. The reaction of the authorities was often to pass laws that prevented them from for example, dressing above their social class. This clearly shows that despite the turbulence of the period, those in authority were keen to retain the social structure as it was.

Whilst the economic and social impact of the Black Death was clear for all to see, the **cultural effects** were also significant. **Architectural styles** became simplified possibly due to the lack of skilled masons available. Construction techniques that previously revolved around producing buildings that were highly ornate, were now replaced by straight lines and less ambitious techniques. More noticeable were the effects on the **art** of the period. The themes that became overwhelmingly common were those of suffering and punishment. Images of death were abound, as were those of the Virgin Mary protecting mankind from the punishment of God. Death as represented by skeletons dancing became another common theme, choosing their victims at random.

Understandably, the impact of the plague upon **medical knowledge** was limited although greater interest was taken in how sickness affected the human body. Measures taken at the time were of course ineffective with a wide variety of plague 'cures' ranging from placing toads on the buboes to drinking various potions, among many others. Some Italian cities badly affected by the plague did try to introduce isolation measures of up to forty days, hence the term **quarantine**.

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Source 8: The Dance of Death by Michael Wolgemut (1493).
Many artistic interpretations of the Black Death followed this theme

However, these measures were generally introduced after the outbreak had occurred and were therefore of minimal value. The plague had a greater effect upon public hygiene and in the years following the Black Death efforts were made to improve the disposal of waste that had contributed to the rapid spread of the disease.

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Peasant discontent

What long and short-term factors led to the Peasants' Revolt of 1381?

Effects of the Black Death; the issue of serfdom

The economic effects of the Black Death, as previously discussed, were far-reaching and in many ways transformed fourteenth century society. The increase in peasants' **wages**, their bargaining power and the gradual **ending of feudal service** had prompted the government to try to stem the tide of change by passing laws such as The Statute of Labourers. However, the scale of change meant that these measures were generally **ineffective** and wages continued to rise during the period, as did the trend towards lords giving peasants **freedom** from service in return for paid wages. The consequences of the labour shortages and the increased power of the peasantry were considerable. Economically, they were better off in terms of wages, but this also led to an increase in prices, or inflation, as lords sought to recover the cost of the extra expenditure. In some places the effects were negative, with food shortages leading to hunger and discontent.

Another effect of the Black Death was that peasants now began to re-evaluate their worth and their **attitudes** towards authority and their place in society began to harden. This naturally led to the fear that the government and authorities would try to curtail these new found freedoms and increased the resolve of the peasantry to fight for them. The survivors of the Black Death undoubtedly felt emboldened, possibly with the view that they had been saved whereas others had not. In summary, it was a period of enormous change. Peasants no longer felt bound by the duties of **serfdom** and these changing attitudes were reinforced by the spread of revolutionary religious ideas during the period.

Religious ideas; John Ball

Since the **Church** was one of the biggest landowners in England, issues over wages, rents, feudal service and duties clearly affected it greatly. As part of their duties many peasants had to work for free on church land, in many cases up to two days in a week. The obvious result of this was that peasants' land was left unfarmed which increased the burden upon them to provide food for their families. The Church's view towards the above issues was in line with those of the government, that pre-plague conditions of service should be restored and the peasantry kept firmly in their place. This attitude made the Church extremely **unpopular** amongst the peasantry, who felt betrayed by the fact that the Church was exploiting them rather than improving their lives.

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The changing attitudes of the peasantry were reflected by some members of the Church who challenged the view that God had determined that there be rich and poor in society. Ideas of **equality** were increasingly preached by priests who challenged the old order of society. The most prominent of these priests was **John Ball**, whose ideas about equality were in stark contrast to those of the Church in general. His preaching of such sermons in his church at Colchester angered his superiors and in 1366 he was removed from his post. Ball travelled around local churches continuing to deliver sermons that challenged the authority of the Church and as a result was imprisoned on several occasions. Such was the threat he posed that the Archbishop of Canterbury ordered that anyone listening to his sermons should be punished. This however, did not reduce his popularity and the ideas he put forward continued to influence large audiences. His continual defiance eventually resulted in him being **imprisoned in Maidstone Prison**. Despite this he was an important factor in creating the conditions for the Peasants' Revolt and would indeed play an important role during the actual events.

French wars; the Poll Tax

The background to these changing attitudes as well as to the changes brought on by the Black Death, was provided by the ongoing **war against France**. The war was reignited in **1369** when the Black Prince refused to go to Paris when summoned by the French King **Charles V**. The 1370s saw England lose many of the gains they had made during the early stages of the Hundred Years' War and the deaths of the Black Prince in 1376 and his father King Edward III in 1377, seriously weakened the ability of England to successfully pursue the war. The new **King Richard II**, the second son of the Edward, the Black Prince, was only ten years old at his accession and as a result England was governed by a series of councils.

The main result of these military defeats was that **money** was required to continue the war. The cost of maintaining garrisons in France was considerable and any attempt to undertake an actual fighting campaign required enormous sums of money. This money was raised through **taxation**, which during the fourteenth century had been through Parliament, mainly by means of taxes on goods. By the late 1370s however, fresh revenue was needed with the matter being complicated by the fact the pre-Black Death records were being used which meant that administering the collection of taxes was difficult due to the population changes that had occurred.

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The response to the need for additional money came in the mid 1370s when Parliament introduced a **poll tax** which was to be paid by every person over the age of fourteen at a rate of four pence each. The first poll tax raised over £22,000 but obviously proved to be extremely **unpopular**. Continual failures in the war against France increased the financial pressure on the government and in 1379 a second poll tax was demanded. The demand led to many people evading the tax by not registering and in addition to this there was a feeling amongst many that the King's advisors were corrupt and that the money raised was being wasted. By 1380 the crisis in France and the government's overall need for money, led to a **third poll tax**, this time to be levied at twelve pence per adult. The inevitable result was widespread **tax evasion**, with people hiding from tax collectors who were sent out which resulted in a drop in tax revenue. By 1381 the government responded by sending out commissioners to investigate and identify those who refused to pay. It was the arrival of **tax collectors** that would begin the Peasants' Revolt, worsening an already tense situation

Role of Wat Tyler; events of May – June 1381

On May 30th 1381, **Thomas Bampton**, an MP and Justice of the Peace, arrived in Essex to investigate the non-payment of the poll tax, ordering the villagers of Fobbing, Corringham and Stanford to appear and explain the short-fall in tax payments. The villagers of **Fobbing** refused to pay any extra tax and when Bampton attempted to arrest the villagers' representative a riot broke out, resulting in Bampton fleeing and three of his clerks being killed. Within a short period of time word of the action spread and when officials were sent to restore order they were driven out by the same villagers.

The result was a widening of the revolt with villagers from across the Essex region turning on landowners, destroying property as well as records of any taxes, debts or feudal duties that were owed. It now appears that the aim of the peasants was to march to **London** to argue their case with the young King Richard. Peasants from nearby counties, such as Norfolk and Suffolk joined in and within a short period of time several thousand were on their way to the capital, exacting revenge on those opposed them.

In Kent the actions of a notorious tax collector, John Legge, seemed to have prompted revolt which became organised on June 5th. The next day, the peasants of Kent, along with some from Essex, forced the surrender of Rochester castle, freeing prisoners. By June 7th they reached Maidstone and this is where **Wat Tyler** became the revolt's leader.

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Little is known of Wat Tyler but stories about him are many and varied. It is possible he was a disbanded soldier who instigated revolt when his daughter was insulted by a tax collector. Whatever the truth about his background it is certain that he soon attracted a strong personal following amongst the peasants and was a charismatic figure. Led by Tyler the peasants moved on to Canterbury, having **freed John Ball** from the archbishop's prison. The march now made for London, covering seventy miles in two days. Royal messengers were informed the peasants wished to speak to the King and get rid of his advisors who they considered to be corrupt.

Greatly alarmed, Richard and his advisors took refuge in the Tower of London. By June 12th thousands of peasants were encamped at Mile End with thousands of others on Blackheath waiting for the king. The lack of an adequate military force to deal with the revolt led to Richard making his way by barge down the Thames to meet the peasants, but since the barges did not, or would not land, the meeting did not take place and the royal party returned to the Tower.

On the afternoon of the 13th the peasants were able to cross London Bridge after the gates were opened and now proceeded to attack Marshalsea prison, going on to destroy chancery records at Lambeth. The wave of destruction continued, including the **Savoy Palace** which belonged to the powerful John of Gaunt. Flemish immigrants were attacked with many murdered as the violence continued.



Source 9: Richard II meeting the peasants. From Froissart's Chronicles

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Richard met the peasants at **Marston** on the 14th and agreed to their demands for the abolition of serfdom, to work on the basis of a free contract and for the right to rent land. However, the same day a mob gained entry to the Tower and murdered the Archbishop of Canterbury and Lord Chancellor, **Simon of Sudbury**, along with **Robert Hales** the Lord High Treasurer. Both men were key targets for the peasants who blamed them for the poll tax and general corruption in government. They were beheaded and their heads paraded through the city before being set up on London Bridge.

The turning point of the revolt came the next day when Richard once again met the peasants led by **Tyler**, this time at **Smithfield**. Accounts generally agree that Tyler spoke to the king in an informal and even rude manner, making several demands in excess of what had been previously demanded. This provoked an argument with the King's followers and resulted in the Mayor of London, **William Walworth** knocking Tyler from his horse, after which **Tyler was killed** by a squire called Standish. At this moment of danger Richard addressed the angry crowd, asking whether they would shoot their king and requested they follow him which they did. Walworth, quickly gathering a force including some professional soldiers, was able to surround the peasants at Clerkenwell Fields and in the absence of their leader and in general confusion, the peasants surrendered, were persuaded to disperse and the danger in the capital passed.



Source 10: The events at Smithfield as depicted by Froissart. On the left Tyler is being struck off his horse by Walworth whilst Richard II watches. On the right, Richard addresses the peasants

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The revolt was not confined to London however, with several disturbances taking place throughout the country, one of the most serious being at St Albans. Outbreaks of violence also occurred in Cambridgeshire, Norfolk, Somerset and York but petered out within a few days. Suppression and retribution now took place as the authority of the crown was restored.

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The Peasants' Revolt

What was the significance of the Peasants' Revolt?

Richard's broken promises; Poll Tax

The Peasants' Revolt was the culmination of many factors, both long and short-term and was a striking example of the general discontent prevalent throughout Europe. France, for example had witnessed its own peasants' revolt in 1358, known as the Jacquerie. This had been ruthlessly suppressed and similar action was now taken in England. On the 23rd June Richard issued a proclamation that the actions of the rebels had not had his approval, as rumours were abound. Visiting Essex he apparently told the peasants' deputation that 'Villeins ye are and villeins ye shall remain'. Letters of pardon that had been granted to the rebels were revoked and significant figures in the revolt were arrested. Jack Straw and John Wrawe were executed with **John Ball** being tried and executed by hanging, drawing and quartering at St Albans.

Fear of being implicated in the revolt led to many informing on others to avoid punishment. Charges ranged from treason to destroying property and the result was by November an estimated 1,500 had been killed. However, by the end of August Richard ordered that arrests and executions should cease and an amnesty was announced apart from a few remaining significant figures. All the **promises** made by the king during the revolt were broken with the **charters revoked**. Peasants were ordered to return to work under the conditions that had previously been the case. A general sense of normality returned although there were undercurrents of discontent throughout the remainder of the century.

Despite the scale of the Peasants' Revolt, it did not really have any significant effects upon the condition of peasants' lives. The government did reflect upon the causes and it was agreed that the corruption of royal officials had been a contributory factor. More importantly, the **poll tax was abandoned** and no further attempts were made to introduce it.

Control of wages; decline of serfdom

Despite the abandonment of the Poll Tax however, the immediate circumstances for the peasants did not improve. Villeins and workmen were worse off as lords once again sought to **control wages**. The commutation of labour service for wages slowed and to a certain extent the repressive approach undid many of the gains the peasants had achieved since the Black Death. However, there can be no doubt that as a whole

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the peasantry were now more aware of their value in terms of being labourers. The Black Death and then the Peasants' Revolt hastened the **decline of serfdom** which had started to become apparent at the start of the century. In the longer term, the position of the peasants did improve and opportunities for land ownership increased as did their general standard of living, albeit starting from a low base. The preaching by people such as John Ball gave strength to the ideas of medieval peasants' rights, as well as those of fairness and justice.

Effects on the Hundred Years' War

The effects of the revolt on the **Hundred Years' War** were significant however. The abandonment of the poll tax meant that there was now an attempt to reduce the crippling expensive military commitments in France. Richard himself appears to have had a lack of interest in continuing the war and he became entangled in domestic politics, favouring a few close advisors much to the anger of several lords who became known as the Lords Appellants. Despite the willingness of the Appellants to restart the war, efforts were now made to negotiate a peace due to the lack of funds and in 1389 a three year truce was signed at **Leulinghen**.



Source 11: Richard II and Charles VI signing the truce at Leulinghen, 1389

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The upheaval throughout the century had also, to a certain extent, changed the attitudes of the knightly class who were now somewhat more reluctant to go to war, partly because the financial rewards were in decline. The threat from the Peasants' Revolt had also made the government more cautious about foreign military campaigns that could provoke further unrest at home. Throughout the 1380s **Parliament** had objected to continental campaigns and had refused to grant tax demands intended to pay for them. The majority view seemed to be that the war was unwinnable and it is in this light that the Truce of Leulinghem should also be viewed. English fortunes in France would be revived and reach their peak during the reign of Henry V (1415-22), but by 1453 only Calais would remain in English hands.

Although Richard II emerged from the Peasants' Revolt with his authority enhanced, particularly in light of the way he dealt with the immediate threat at Smithfield, his problems were to grow through the 1380s and 90s. 1399 would see his deposition by Henry Bolingbroke, who became **Henry IV** and Richard would die in captivity the next year. The century of conflict and upheaval would end with the same turmoil that it had experienced on such a dramatic scale.

Acknowledgements

Source 1:

[John Wycliffe, Wikimedia Public Domain](#)

Source 2:

[Family life 14th Century, Wikimedia Public Domain](#)

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Source 4:

[Battle of Crecy, Wikimedia Public Domain](#)

Source 5:

[King John, Wikimedia Public Domain](#)

Source 6:

[The Black Death, Wikipedia Public Domain](#)

Source 7:

[Hound Tor, Devon, Historic England Archive](#)

Source 8:

[The Dance of Death, Wikimedia Public Domain](#)

Source 9:

[Richard II, Wikimedia Public Domain](#)

Source 10:

[Smithfield, Wikimedia Public Domain](#)

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