

Would the Peasants' Revolt have happened without the Black Death?

Learning objectives

- Recap prior learning of the Black Death and use this to explain the causes of the Peasants' Revolt.
- Develop understanding of cause and consequence.

Task 1: Retrieval practice

1. The Peasants' Revolt took place in 1381. Which century was this and in which time period?
2. Explain two features of a peasant's life.
3. What was the feudal system?
4. What was a serf?

Task 2: Black Death recap and consequences

Watch this short clip giving an overview of the Black Death and its key features:

Timelines TV Black Death episode: youtu.be/YhsPPBGtquo

How many consequences can you pick out?

Task 3: What happened next?

Read through the event in this timeline:

Date	What happened?	Reaction of your character (see task 4)
1349	Peak of the Black Death in England. It is estimated that between one third and half of the English population were killed by the plague. As a result, wages started to increase as there were fewer peasants to work on the land and survivors were demanding more money from their lords.	
1351	The Statute of Labourers was passed by the government because local lords were unhappy about peasants' wages rising. The Statute was a law which stated that no peasant could be paid more than he/she was before the Black Death.	
1366	A priest called John Ball started travelling around the country telling peasants that they were just as important and good as the rich. He pointed out that Jesus had been poor and called for more equality between peasants and lords.	

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1369	War broke out between England and France. Wars are very expensive for governments. Worse still, the war was going badly for England and there were rumours that the French might invade.	
1377	England's old king Edward III died. He was succeeded by his grandson, Richard II, who was only 10. Some worried that the real power in England would lie in the hands of Richard's uncle, John of Gaunt. He wasn't popular.	
1377	Richard II's government raised a new tax: the poll tax. This was an unusual (and unpopular) way to raise money because it didn't matter how rich or poor you were - everyone had to pay the same amount. It was set at four pence.	
1379	Another poll tax was demanded from everyone over 15. It hadn't just been a one-off tax. Some angrily remarked that the money would be used to pay for John of Gaunt's luxurious palaces, not the war with France.	
March 1381	The poll tax was raised again! This time, the amount demanded trebled from four pence to 12 pence. Many people simply refused to pay, so the government hired tax collectors to force them to.	
May 1381	A particularly brutal tax collector was attacked in the village of Fobbing, Essex.	

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Task 4: Character reactions

Work in a group of four and choose one of the imaginary characters below. Go back to the timeline (task 3) and complete the last column with the reaction of your character to each event.



Thomas Banford

You have a wife and eight children. You are a serf, meaning that your local lord has a huge amount of control over your life. You have to do whatever work the lord asks you to do. In return he allows you to farm a small piece of land on which you grow crops to feed your family. Your wages are very low.

Isobel Tallow

Your family really struggled because of the Black Death. Your two brothers and first husband died of the plague. You started doing some work for your local lord so your family had more money coming in. You work long hours spinning and cleaning.



Simon Wick

Your family were freemen before the plague hit England, meaning they had some land to call their own and farm as they wished. However, the Black Death killed off your father and two of your uncles. You inherited their land. You are very protective of the wealth you've recently gained because of this.

John Dudsley

You are a serf whose village was devastated by the Black Death - you were one of only three serfs to survive. Your lord demanded that you continue to work on his land, but you knew your worth! He refused to increase your wages so you took your family to another village where the lord was paying more. With more money coming in, your family increased to 10 children.



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Task 5: How direct were the links between the causes of the revolt and the Black Death?

Add a rating of 1-5 in the second column, according to how directly the causes of the revolt were linked to the Black Death, in your view. A rating of 1 would indicate that the event had almost nothing to do with the Black Death and that the revolt would have happened anyway. A rating of 5 would suggest that the events were totally dependent on the Black Death. Give reasons for your ratings in the final column.

Cause	Rating 1-5	Explain your rating here
Growing numbers of peasants were very unhappy about the feudal system that kept many of them tied to their lord's land. They wanted more freedom and the chance to earn higher wages.		
The Statute of Labourers meant that no matter how hard a peasant worked, or how much land he had inherited from relatives killed by the Black Death, he could never earn more than he had in 1348.		
John Ball's message started to spread and peasants liked the sound of it. He told them they were just as good as the lords that controlled them, and that they should not feel ashamed to be poor because Jesus was too.		

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<p>The English were doing badly in their war against the French. This meant the war dragged on for longer and the government needed more money to pay for it. Rumours spread that the French would invade.</p>		
<p>Richard II was young and his advisers were deeply unpopular. They included his uncle, John of Gaunt, who enjoyed showing off his wealth, and Simon Sudbury, who was both Archbishop of Canterbury and Lord Chancellor. The poll tax was Sudbury's idea.</p>		
<p>The poll tax shocked many people as it was a completely new idea. They were very suspicious of such an unusual tax, and everyone had to pay the same.</p>		
<p>Many tax collectors sent by the government to make sure everyone paid up used violence or intimidation.</p>		

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Teaching notes

This lesson is the second part of a four-lesson scheme of work on the Peasants' Revolt (see resources 35366, 35368, and 35369). It is designed to recap prior learning and develop understanding of causes and consequences.

In preparation for task 4, it is worth discussing the impact of the poll tax on these imaginary characters in some depth so students understand why a tax of four pence was hard for many to pay. For example, Thomas Banford may only have had one child older than 15 (let's say a daughter) so would have to pay for himself, his wife and his daughter (12 pence) despite being the only wage earner. Serfs were lucky to earn two pence a day and had outgoings to pay, including rent.

Answers

Task 1: Retrieval practice

1. 1381 is in the 14th century, during the Middle Ages.
2. Peasants mostly lived in feudal villages, in peasant houses made of wattle and daub. They would attend church every Sunday, on all feast days, and many Saints' days.
3. The feudal system was a hierarchy set up by William the Conqueror, following the Norman Conquest. It organised England's people into three main ranks, below the King himself, and divided England's land.
4. The word 'serf' is another word for peasant - a farming labourer who worked land in exchange for somewhere to live, as part of the feudal system.

Task 2: Black Death recap and consequences

Students may identify a range of key consequences, including:

- **Political:** the integrity of the feudal system was challenged, the King had to pass a number of laws to reinforce his authority and restrain the growing power of the peasants.
- **Economic:** peasants began to ask for higher wages, as they had to do more work with less people. In turn, Edward III reacted with the 1351 Statute of Labourers. England's finances remained stretched by the time Richard II took over, which led to his implementation of the poll tax.
- **Social:** the prevalence of death in England led to a shift in art, religion, and social behaviours as many became more nihilistic and willing to challenge authority. The Catholic Church was particularly shaken by the Black Death, with up to 90% of travelling priests succumbing to the Black Death in some areas - this was particularly undermining for the Church in an age when disease was associated with sin and God.
- **Military:** many wars around Europe stopped, or at least halted, as the plague struck down entire armies.

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Task 5

Cause	Rating 1-5	Explain your rating here
Growing numbers of peasants were very unhappy about the feudal system that kept many of them tied to their lord's land. They wanted more freedom and the chance to earn higher wages.	1	The feudal system had existed since 1066, long before the Black Death. It is certainly true that the Black Death exacerbated the tensions at the heart of the feudal system, but this impact is better explained by other consequences.
The Statute of Labourers meant that no matter how hard a peasant worked, or how much land he'd inherited from relatives killed by the Black Death, he could never earn more than he had in 1348.	4	The Statute of Labourers was a direct consequence of the Black Death, passed by Edward III to control the spiralling cost of labour in post-plague England. This said, I am not rating this as a 5, as the Black Death did not force Edward III to pass this law - he bears some personal blame for his own poor leadership.
John Ball's message started to spread and peasants liked the sound of it. He told them they were just as good as the lords that controlled them, and that they shouldn't feel ashamed to be poor because Jesus was too.	2	It is likely that John Ball would have preached this message with or without the impact of the Black Death. It should simply be noted that the Black Death did profoundly impact the Church and priesthood, and so it is possible that John Ball was somewhat radicalised by the profound impact of the Black Death on England.

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The English were doing badly in their war against the French. This meant the war dragged on for longer and the government needed more money to pay for it. Rumours spread that the French would invade.	2	Wars between England and France raged throughout the Middle Ages, both before and after the Black Death. It could be argued that England's poor performance in the war was impacted by the toll that the Black Death took on England's army and yeomanry; however, it is unlikely that the plague affected England's army so much more severely than France's.
Richard II was young and his advisers were deeply unpopular. They included his uncle, John of Gaunt, who enjoyed showing off his wealth, and Simon Sudbury, who was both Archbishop of Canterbury and Lord Chancellor. The poll tax was Sudbury's idea.	1	Throughout England's history, unhappy peasants have preferred to complain about the King's advisers than the King himself - this was nothing particular about post-Black-Death England.
The poll tax shocked many people as it was a completely new idea. They were very suspicious of such an unusual tax, and everyone had to pay the same.	3	Whilst the novelty of the poll tax may not appear a direct consequence of the Black Death, it should be remembered that it was the extreme and (relatively) unprecedented impact of the Black Death on England's finances which pushed the King and his advisers into considering such a radical approach in the first place. It is likely that, without the consequences of the Black Death, the King may not have felt the need to double down on the poll tax between 1377 and 1381.
Many tax collectors sent by the government to make sure everyone paid up used violence or intimidation.	1	The approaches taken by the poll tax collectors were no different to those taken by tax collectors throughout medieval Europe. They would have acted this way with or without the Black Death.