The peasants’ revolt

The peasants’ revolt 1381: why?

Power in the Middle age was held by the king, the barons and the Church. The peasants and the workers in town could not vote and had few rights. But they were very hungry, felt over-taxed or that their rulers needed to be challenged, there was a course of action they could take: they could group together, refuse to do as they were told, arm themselves to take the streets. This is called rebellion or revolt.

Reasons for revolt

On May 1381 tax collector called John Bampton was going about his work in Fobbing, Essex. He was collecting tax known as the Poll tax. Bampton asked the villagers for more money. But instead of paying, they told him they had already paid enough tax and would not pay anymore. Bampton got angry and threatened the villagers. They chased him and the soldiers, who had come with him out of the village. This was the spark of the peasants’ revolt.

Imagine you are a peasant from Fobbing. You have heard your villagers’ reasons for revolt against the tax collector and his soldier. Read the list of reasons below, as they are said by villagers. Then, link the causes, writing sentences as shown in the example.

List of reasons

- We hate the Poll tax which makes everyone, rich and poor, pay the same, 12 pence. The rich can afford to pay the tax but we cannot.
- The level of our wages is set up by Parliament; that cannot be right and the wages are too low.
- We are fed up of being owned by feudal Lords.
- We do not like having to give the Church two days’ work for nothing every week.
- The French are winning the war and have started raiding the villages on the coast.
- This war with France is too expensive and should be stopped.
- Our young king, Richard II, is only 14 years old. He is getting bad advice from evil men such as John of Gaunt (who is the regent), Simon Sudbury (who is Chancellor and archbishop of Canterbury) and sir Robert Hales (who thought up the Poll tax in the first place). We need to rescue our king from the bad people around him.

Example

The demand that the villagers pay a Poll tax is linked to the king having to pay for the expensive war in France.

Adapted from M. Collier – R. Rees, History in progress, Heinemann, p. 45 - 46