

When Adam delved¹ and Eve span², Who was then the gentleman? From the beginning all men by nature were created alike, and our bondage or servitude came in by the unjust oppression of naughty men.

Attributed to John Ball

Richard II (1367–ca.14 February 1400) was a son of Edward, the Black Prince, and succeeded to the throne at the age of ten in 1377 upon the death of his grandfather Edward III. Richard was intelligent and well-read, tall and good-looking King -- although less of a warrior than either his father or grandfather.

The coinage of Richard's reign remained largely unchanged from that of his grandfather – gold *nobles* and *half-nobles* were struck at London and Calais and *quarter-nobles* at London; silver *groats* and *half-groats*; silver *pennies* at London, York and Durham; *half-pennies* at London; and *farthings*. A minor design modification was the first appearance of symbols on the ship's rudder on some of the gold coinage.

Richard's reign ended when Henry of Bolingbroke who deposed Richard and had himself crowned as King Henry IV. Richard died in captivity (probably murdered through starvation) in the following year.

THE most significant event of Richard's reign was the six-weeks 'Peasants' Revolt', also known as 'Wat Tyler's Rebellion', or the 'Great Rising', of 1381 led by Walter Tyler, Jack Straw and the religious visionary John Ball. The Revolt was precipitated by two factors – the 'Black Death' and the '100 Years War'.

Forty years previously the Black Death had reached England and by the time it subsided in 1349 perhaps half the population had died – resulting in an increase in real wages – which the landowning class resented and resisted through legislation and punitive measure. Fewer people meant less tax to finance the '100 Years War' which was a futile war in France to restore England's former Continental lands as well as other wars closer to home. In 1377 Richard's first poll tax of one *groat* levied was to finance military campaigns. A second poll tax was levied in 1379 at a scheduled rate [sic] which allowed some of the poorer classes to pay a reduced tax. The Revolt was sparked by the third poll tax of 1381 levied unfairly at a rate of up to three *groats* per adult.

The rebellion started in Kent and Essex in late May, and on 12 June, bands of peasants gathered at Blackheath near London under their leaders. The mobs burnt down the Savoy Palace which was the property of the King's unpopular uncle John of Gaunt. Richard, sheltered within the Tower of London with his councillors, agreed that the Crown did not have the forces to disperse the rebels and that the only feasible option was to negotiate.

The King, aged only fourteen, set out by river on 13 June, but the large number of people thronging the banks at Greenwich made it impossible for him to land, forcing him to return to the Tower. The next day he set out by horse and met the rebels at Mile End. The king agreed to the rebels' demands but this move only emboldened them and they continued their looting and killings. The Archbishop of Canterbury Simon Sudbury, who was also Lord Chancellor, as well as the King's Lord High Treasurer, Robert Hales, were both beheaded by the rebels, who were demanding the complete abolition of serfdom. Lawyers were particularly targeted as being agents acting for the peasants' oppressors. So too were foreign merchants and unpopular priests.

Richard met Wat Tyler again the next day at Smithfield and reiterated that the agreement should be met, but the rebel leader was not convinced of the King's sincerity. The King's men grew nervous, an altercation broke out, and William Walworth, the mayor of London, pulled Tyler down from his horse mortally stabbed him. The situation became tenser once the rebels realised what had happened, but the King acted with calm resolve and led the mob away from the scene. The Mayor meanwhile gathered a force to surround the peasant army, but the King granted clemency and allowed the rebels to disperse and return to their homes.

The King soon revoked the charters of freedom and pardon that he had granted, and disturbances continued in other parts of the country. On 28 June at Billericay, Richard defeated the last rebels in a skirmish and effectively ended the Peasants' Revolt. Although the revolt itself was a failure it later came to be seen as a mark of the beginning of the end of serfdom in medieval England.



Groat of Richard II

Reference: JONES. D., 'Summer of Blood: The Peasants' Revolt of 1381' (HarperPress, London 2009)

¹ Middle English 'to dig'.

² Middle English past tense of 'spin'.