

The 1381 Peasants' Revolt: Lessons for the 1990's?

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1. Introduction

This paper investigates the change in the population of England between 1377 and 1381 in response to a poll tax which was levied on the population at the time to pay for English wars in France. The evidence suggests that the population decline is, significantly, negatively related to miles from London.

2. The Poll Tax and the Peasants' Revolt

Britain's recent experience with the poll tax was characterised by two factors; a disappearing population and open hostility towards the tax by the population. On the first of these issues, the preliminary 1991 Census population headcount figures indicated a one million under-estimation of the population (see Wormald (1991)). In an earlier article in *Population Trends* (1991), it had been noted that, since 1988, there had been a marked decline in the number of people enrolled on the electoral register. This idea of a disappearing population was quickly picked up by the newspapers, and it was given extensive coverage (see, for example, *The Guardian* 23 July 1991 or *Independent on Sunday* 13 September 1992). Smith and McLean (1994) argue that a substantial proportion of the fall in the number of people registered on the electoral register evident since 1988 can be attributed to the introduction of the poll tax, as individuals disenrol from the electoral register in an attempt to avoid paying the poll tax. On the second factor, hostility towards the poll tax peaked on 1 April 1990, when a march protesting against the poll tax in London turned into a riot.

Both of these responses might have been predicted from a study of the historical record. Although it was a journalistic commonplace that 'the last poll tax, in 1381, led to the Peasants' Revolt', we are not aware that the parallel has been explored in any detail (see Gibson (1986) for a brief introduction. Where not further specified, all facts in the following paragraphs are from the original documents assembled in Dobson (1983)).

The population of England was heavily depleted by the Black Death of

1349. One consequence was a rise in wages and food prices as labour became relatively more scarce. The Statute of Labourers of 1351 tried unsuccessfully to hold wages to pre-1349 levels; it was implemented by local Justices of the Peace, who as employers of labour would have been the beneficiaries if they had succeeded. This evidently heightened class antagonisms, which were further exacerbated by demands for new taxes to pay for unsuccessful military campaigns in France. There were three successive levies of poll tax. The first, in 1377, was at a flat rate of a groat (four pence) on 'each lay person of either sex older than fourteen years' except for 'notorious paupers who begged publicly'. The second, in 1379, was on a sliding scale, with a base rate of one groat per household, and higher charges rising to, for instance, 40 shillings (120 groats) for lawyers and £4 (240 groats) for the highest status positions. The third, in 1380-1, was again at a flat rate at a level of 3 groats per head, with villages to be responsible for collection of the sum due in proportion to population subject to a constraint that nobody should pay less than one groat (compare the 20% minimum levy in 1987). On each of the three occasions, there was a separate taxation schedule for clergy, with an exemption (as in 1987) for members of mendicant orders.

This 'hitherto unheard-of tax' provoked fierce resistance, which took the forms of both rioting and evasion. The parliament which levied the third tax presumably anticipated this, ruling "that it is to be absolutely understood that no knight, citizen or burgess present at this parliament shall be made either a collector or a controller of the said sums".

Commissioners were sent to various counties where tax returns were poor, and there were complaints at their allegedly high-handed ways. One chronicler states that Wat Tyler, one of the leaders of the revolt of 1381, was provoked to join it because a commissioner insisted on an indecent examination of his daughter to establish whether she was over 14.

Two separate and un-coordinated marches converged on London in June 1381, one from Kent and one from Essex: contemporaries numbered the rebels at 50,000 from Kent and 60,000 from Essex. (Note from Table 1 below that if these numbers are accurate, they are of the same order as the entire adult lay population of the two counties). The Kent rebels stopped at Blackheath, where the 14-year old King Richard II went to meet them, but on the advice of counsellors, did not disembark from his ship at Greenwich but sailed straight back to London. Both rebel bands therefore marched on London itself, where some got into the Tower of London and 'arrogantly lay and sat on the king's bed while joking; and several asked the king's mother to kiss them'. Some property was destroyed, especially a palace at Savoy (close to present-day Trafalgar Square). The king met the rebels first at Mile End and then at Smithfield, where the rebels demanded a reduction in baronial and church privileges and the end of serfdom. However, the revolt disintegrated after Tyler was stabbed to death by the mayor of London at

Smithfield. The riots of 1381 are, nevertheless, generally regarded as the most serious internal challenge to the English state during the Middle Ages.

A poll tax register was compiled in 1377 and another in 1381. The recorded lay, non-beggar population aged over 14 in England declined from a total of 1,355,201 in 1377 to 896,451 in 1381: a drop of 33.9 per cent. *Table 1* shows the county-by-county totals (which do not add up to the numbers above because some towns which were recorded separately have been omitted).

Figure 1 shows there was a significant negative association between distance from London and decline in the recorded population. Distance from London was operationalised as distance in miles from London of the principal town in each county. In the case of some counties near London, this would have had misleading results, as in Essex, Kent, and Sussex the bulk of the population was considerably closer to London than were the principal towns in 1381 (taken as Colchester, Canterbury and Chichester, respectively). For these counties, and for Middlesex and Surrey, we have therefore substituted our estimate of the mean distance from London of the county population. Accessibility from London was not, of course, a simple function of miles; in particular counties with a coastline would have been easier to reach than those without. However, the presence or absence of a coastline had no significant effect on the decline of county population from 1377 to 1381. (The counties corresponding to the numbers in this figure can be found in *Table 1*).

The results from estimating a model in which the percentage decline in the adult population (*DPOP*) is a function of the number of miles the county is from London (*MILES*)¹, and dummy variables for the county being on the coast (*COAST*), whether rioting took place (*RIOT*) and whether commissioners were sent to the county (*COMM*) are reported in equation (1).

$$DPOP = -19.976 - 0.512MILES^2 - 6.1645COMM \quad (1)$$

(-9.388) (-8.158) (-2.154)

$$R^2 = 0.646, s = 8.809, FF = 0.875, H = 0.151.^2$$

The model appears to be well specified and the coefficient on *MILES*² is significantly less than zero at all conventional significance levels. The presence of poll-tax commissioners also has a significant negative effect on

¹ *MILES* enters the equation quadratically reflecting that counties far from London make take a disproportionately long time to reach.

² *FF* is the functional form test for misspecification, *H* is the test for heteroscedasticity and *N* is the Jarque-Bera test for normality, these tests are asymptotically distributed as [chi-squared(1), chi-squared (1), and chi-squared (2)], respectively.

the recorded population.³ This association might have been expected to be in the other direction if the commissioners had been effective poll-tax registrars. Sending in the commissioners seems rather to have been counter-productive for the royal administration: it alerted people to the advantages of evasion rather than drawing them into the tax net.

Essex, Kent, London and Middlesex were the main centres of physical revolt. But there is no association between rioting and recorded population decline. This confirms that rioting and evasion were separate responses, neither mutually exclusive nor mutually reinforcing. Judged by the riots, the poll tax was defeated in Essex and Kent. Judged by evasion, it was defeated in Cornwall and Cumberland.⁴

3. Concluding Remarks

The evidence suggests that the population decline in England between 1377 and 1381 was an attempt by many to evade the poll tax and that the ability of people to achieve this was positively related to distance from London, which we are using to proxy the likelihood of being caught. Thus evasion and the riots, ought to have been a lesson learnt, in which case the events following the introduction of the poll tax in 1990 ought not to have been surprising.

³ 'Simultaneity' bias could potentially be a problem in this equation, although 'Instrumental Variable' estimation yielded comparatively similar results.

⁴ The non-returns from Cheshire and Durham and the partial non-return from Northumberland - all of them remote and Durham and Northumberland two of the remotest from London - are consistent with the hypothesis that the poll tax was hardest to collect in the most remote places.

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TABLE 1 - The Population change between 1377 and 1381

No.	County	POP 81	POP 81	MILES	RIOTS	COAST	COMM
1	Bedfordshire	20339	14895	50	0	0	0
2	Berkshire	22723	15696	21	0	0	0
3	Buckinghamshire	24672	17997	62	0	0	0
4	Cambridgeshire	27350	24324	60	0	0	1
5	Cheshire	NA	NA	NA	0	0	0
6	Cornwall	34274	12056	265	0	1	1
7	Cumberland	11841	4748	313	0	1	0
8	Derbyshire	23243	15637	123	0	0	1
9	Devon	45635	20656	200	0	1	1
10	Dorset	34241	19507	128	0	1	0
11	Durham	NA	NA	NA	0	1	0
12	Essex	47962	30748	20	1	1	1
13	Gloucestershire	36760	27857	104	0	1	1
14	Hampshire	33241	22018	79	0	1	1
15	Herefordshire	15318	12659	136	0	0	0
16	Hertfordshire	19975	13296	21	0	0	1
17	Huntingdonshire	14169	11299	58	0	0	0
18	Kent	56557	43838	20	1	1	1
19	Lancashire	23880	8371	230	0	1	0
20	Leicestershire	31730	21914	98	0	0	0
21	Lincoln:Kesteven	21566	15734	142	0	1	0
22	Lincoln: Holland	18592	13795	142	0	1	0
23	Lincoln: Lindsey	47303	30205	142	0	0	0
24	Middlesex	11243	9937	5	1	0	0
25	London	23314	20397	0	1	0	0
26	Norfolk	88797	66719	115	0	1	1
27	Northamptonshire	40225	27997	68	0	0	1
28	Northumberland	14162	NA	NA	0	0	0
29	Nottinghamshire	26260	17442	131	0	0	1
30	Oxfordshire	24982	20558	57	0	0	0
31	Rutland	5994	5593	123	0	0	0
32	Salop	23574	13041	163	0	0	0
33	Somerset	54604	30384	167	0	1	1
34	Staffordshire	21465	15993	131	0	0	0
35	Suffolk	58610	44635	68	0	1	1
36	Surrey	18039	12684	20	0	0	0
37	Sussex	35326	26616	40	0	1	0
38	Warwickshire	25447	20841	106	0	0	0
39	Westmoreland	7389	3859	268	0	0	0
40	Wiltshire	42599	30627	88	0	0	0
41	Worcestershire	14599	12043	114	0	0	0
42	Yorkshire N Riding	33185	15690	212	0	1	0
43	Yorkshire E Riding	38185	25184	189	0	1	0
44	Yorkshire W Riding	48149	23029	199	0	0	1

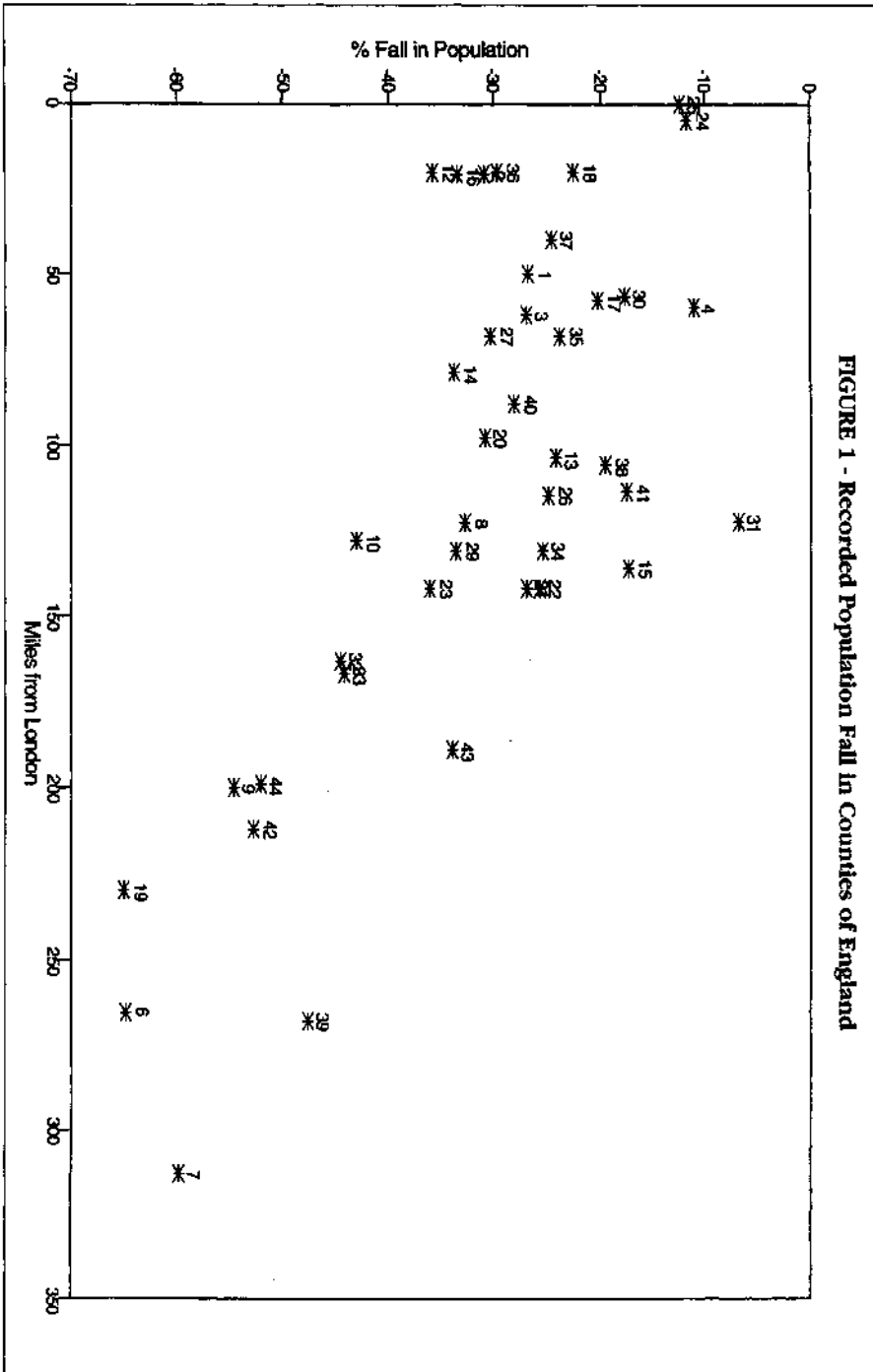


FIGURE 1 - Recorded Population Fall in Counties of England

