



William Grindecobbe and the St Albans Uprising (1381)

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Introduction

William Grindecobbe (d. 1381) led an unsuccessful uprising in 1381 against the powerful monastery at St Albans in Hertfordshire, southern England, as part of the unrest known as the Peasants' Revolt. The St Albans rebels led by Grindecobbe demanded greater liberties for townsfolk and a new (or revived) supporting charter. In the theological conceptualisation of their cause, the St Albans rebels overlapped with the wider English uprisings of 1381, including those articulated by the leading millenarian priest, [John Ball](#).

Grindecobbe and the St Albans rebels used the Bible to interpret their situation. They were said to have looked for a resolution to their predicament by threatening the destruction of St Albans abbey on the basis of Jesus's prediction of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple (Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 21). At the same time, the St Albans rebels were inclined toward a diplomatic route to bringing about social change, preferring implied threats rather than accepting the necessity of executions found in Ball's millenarian thinking and the wider revolt.

As with Ball, a new or revived social order after destruction and punishment invoked language connected to those carrying out physical labour. Concerns about the salvation and liberation of those working with bread were present at St Albans in the rebels' disputes over milling rights. This understanding of the transformation of England in St Albans (and elsewhere) involved the biblically inspired myth of the just king and a new or revived idealised bureaucracy and hierarchy. The rebels believed the transformation was already happening; new laws and new privileges were thought to have been long established based on a belief in the existence of founding documents and charters from the distant past. England was in a new position where things could be shared in common as they once were among the first followers of Jesus. In the context of the St Albans uprising, this was interpreted as having common land for hunting, pasture, and fishing.

Grindecobbe, St Albans, and the English Uprising of 1381

The St Albans uprising was part of wider discontent in England. In the summer of 1381, England saw

unprecedented violent uprisings from peasants, serfs, artisans, village elites, townsfolk, local officials, lower clergy, and others against the lords, landowners, ecclesiastical leaders, and royal advisors. The uprisings took different forms but, broadly speaking, were generated by hostility towards aggressive taxation, prevention of social mobility, and exploitation of labour, alongside various grudges and vendettas, in the decades of socioeconomic upheaval following the Black Death (1348/49). These events are now typically referred to (if slightly misleadingly) as the Peasants' Revolt. Lower clergy featured prominently in the uprising, and we have occasional retellings of their activity and theology. By far the most prominent example is [Ball](#), whose teachings give us insight into the millenarian understandings of the uprising among rebels and their hopes for the transformation to a golden age.

Local challenges to the dominant role of the monastery shaped the St Albans uprising. Aspirational townsfolk continued their battle to gain greater privileges while drawing on wider regional discontent with the monastery's power. While hardly timid, the rebellion did not involve the same levels of violence as happened elsewhere in England. There were, for instance, no executions of monks, the abbot, or the prior, in stark contrast to what happened in London and [Suffolk](#).

Grindecobbe was the leader of the St Albans uprising. We know little about his life, but what we do know is of importance for understanding his motivations and role as a leader (for the general narrative outline of Grindecobbe and the uprising, see Walsingham, *Chronica maiora* 444–479, 509–512, 524–545, 551–563; *Gesta abbatum* 285–372). Grindecobbe was educated at the monastery and appears to have had relatives there. He was later involved in a land dispute with the monastery. In 1377, he had one acre confiscated by monastic authorities after he was granted the land by charter (*Peasants' Revolt in Hertfordshire* 1981, 63–65). Grindecobbe also attacked two monks who came to measure and claim land for the monastery. This deed appears to have led to his excommunication, and he was forced to undergo penance naked.

By the summer of 1381, Grindecobbe and the St Albans rebels were connected with the wider national uprisings. On 14 June, Grindecobbe led a group to London while the abbot (Thomas de la Mare) sent his own delegation to establish what was happening there and offer the monastery's loyalty to the king, Richard II. Rebels, too, were said to have offered their loyalty to the king and their cause before the mysterious leader in the London revolt: Jack Straw. From the story of the visits to London, we further learn about the rebels' aspirations and their concerns about life under the monastery's dominance. They wanted new boundaries around the town and freedom from monastery monopolies, thereby allowing them to "pasture their animals, obtain fishing rights in certain places with impunity, have rights of hunting and fowling again in certain places, and erect hand-mills that they could freely use wherever they wished" (Walsingham, *Chronica maiora* 444).

Some rebels also sought the support of the famed leader of the revolt in London and the southeast: Wat Tyler. In Tyler, some rebels saw the future of the realm following the expected destruction of the existing legal system. Presumably, rebels were aware of the violent threat Tyler's name would carry in any future negotiations in St Albans. Other rebels sought the direct support of the king and expected that an official letter would convince the abbot of their cause and secure the restoration of their lost liberties. Both options were accepted, and Grindecobbe took on the lead role in approaching the king and Tyler. He apparently knelt six times before the king—most likely at the meeting between the rebels and the king at Mile End on 14 June—and left his associate Richard Wallingford to secure the king's approval.

Grindecobbe and the baker William Cadindon arrived back in St Albans ahead of the other rebels and

declared their new liberties. Rebels from the area immediately targeted the boundaries or restrictions imposed in local woods, such as folds and gates. They destroyed the house of the sub-cellarer, a figure who would have been involved in providing food for the monastery and collecting payment for access to the abbot's mills (Barker 2014, loc. 4171).

The next day (15 June), similar activities continued while St Albans townsfolk discussed how they might consolidate their position. They proposed that all townsfolk capable of bearing arms should help form a military presence, assisted by local peasants and surrounding villages. Joining hands, the rebels agreed to be loyal to one another and marched on the monastery gates, which were left open. Demands for access to rabbit trapping seem to have been partly behind the gesture of capturing a live rabbit and fixing it high for the town to see—a symbol of their freedom and authority (Dunn 2004, 143). They had the prison opened, with prisoners ordered to swear allegiance to the commons on pain of death. One released prisoner was beheaded. Accompanied by loud shouting, the prisoner's head was fixed on top of the pillory, signalling the advent of the new lawmakers of St Albans.

Richard Wallingford returned to St Albans bearing both the king's approval and the authority of the commons. Faced with Wallingford's delegation, the abbot read the letter dated 15 June, which explained the rights returned to the townsfolk concerning (for instance) the commons, pasture, and fishing. Wallingford informed the sceptical abbot that the world had changed and that the commons now controlled the legal system. The abbot conceded some demands, and people were released from inherited obligations to the monastery with the agreement that new charters would be drawn up.

As was typical of the 1381 uprising, the rebels burned bonds, deeds, and legal documentation in the marketplace. The rebels wanted more and demanded access to an ancient town charter from the time of King Offa and the founding of the monastery in 793. The abbot claimed he did not know of this charter, but if only to buy time and pacify the rebels, he promised to try to track it down.

Some rebels had got into the cloister and lifted up the millstones that the monastery had used as paving stones after a previous victory over the St Albans locals. The millstones were brought to the commons and smashed up. The rebels further announced that if the abbot, prior, or monks owed anyone money, then this should be reclaimed. The burgesses would ensure that people were reimbursed from the monastery coffers. This offer seems to have been unsurprisingly popular.

On the Sunday, news of Tyler's death had reached the rebels. The king also issued a proclamation of peace and a charter of protection for the abbot, the monastery, and monastery property. The townsfolk, backed by popular support from the region, pushed their demands, but now in a more conciliatory manner. The abbot was able to meet the rebel demands for the time being, allowing the use of handmills outside the monastery and accepting freedoms for the townsfolk. Boundaries once achieved by their ancestors decades earlier were (for now) restored, and townsfolk marked the occasion with a celebratory perambulation.

When Richard II finally turned his attention to St Albans, the local knight Walter atte Lee feared destruction should the king intervene. He convinced the king and council that he would instead resolve the situation. On Friday 28 June, rebels heard that atte Lee and his army would arrive the next day. This news panicked some of the rebels, but the authoritative Grindecobbe calmed them, allegedly claiming:

Be sensible men, for we are wealthy; we shall not lack help as long as we are not without our money. Look! the towns surrounding us are our allies, and they will help us if there is need. Let us go out tomorrow morning like men, and meet the knight on our horses outside the town, and let us ask him, before he comes near the town, whether he comes in peace. If he does not, we shall pound him and chase him from our town. (Walsingham, Chronica maiora 525)

The idea of argument and diplomacy backed by an implicit threat of violence seems typical of Grindecobbe. His attitude may also reflect that of a number of the rebels who were said to have enthusiastically supported his speech. Accordingly, atte Lee was given a cordial and honourable welcome on 29 June, even if the threat of force from both sides kept the peace.

Locals were summoned before atte Lee, who explained the situation to a warm reception. The knight asked for the leading figures to be handed over and tried before a jury of twelve locals, but they replied that they would not accuse anyone because "all were good men and loyal to the king, and they knew of no other amongst them who was disloyal" (Walsingham, *Chronica maiora* 529). To resolve the situation, atte Lee had Grindecobbe (and others openly accused of criminal acts) arrested, imprisoned, and brought before him at Hertford. Grindecobbe was released on bail (1–6 July) after three townsfolk raised the money. Terms were suggested that the townsmen must either satisfy the abbot by restoring the charters or Grindecobbe would be executed on return to prison. Grindecobbe, for his part, knew his martyrdom was near:

Fellow-citizens, whom a breath of freedom has now for a time relieved from long oppression, stand fast now, while you can, and do not be afraid of any punishment I may suffer. If I am to die in the cause of the freedom we won, if I am to die now, then I shall consider myself fortunate to be able to end my life by such martyrdom. Act at this time as you would have been obliged to act if I had been executed yesterday at Hertford. In fact there was nothing that would have prevented me from seeing the end of my life, had not the abbot recalled his esquires so timely. Indeed, they had charged me with many offences, and had a judge who was favourable to their cause and eager for my blood. (Walsingham, Chronica maiora 535)

Grindecobbe's speech emboldened the rebels to defend their newly won liberties while he was taken back to prison where he awaited his trial.

On 13 July, orders were given for Grindecobbe and others to be brought from Hertford. Through no small cunning, the justiciar (Robert Tresilian) ensured the judicial process worked for him. While some were imprisoned and later pardoned, Grindecobbe was found guilty of disturbing the king's peace. He was among fifteen men who were drawn and hanged. They were dragged across the same fields and executed in the same woods to which they had made claim. When their corpses were hanging, one Thomas de Wycresley managed to release the bodies so that they could be buried, but townsfolk were forced to put them back. It was not until September 1382 that the remains were allowed to be buried (*Calendar of the Patent Rolls* 1897, 43, 168; *Gesta abbatum* 3.354–56; cf. *Calendar of the Close Rolls* 1920, 5). This may not be the end of the punishment; shortly after, the freehold property of one rebellious "William Grenecob" was granted to another in 1384 rather than to his wife, Joan (*Calendar of the Patent Rolls* 1897, 416).

Millenarian Theology in St Albans

We do not have much detail about the theological thinking of the St Albans rebels, nor how Grindecobbe reformulated his ideas after time spent in the monastery. Any historical reconstruction will, therefore, include a degree of speculation. We are further hindered by rebel ideas being represented by hostile sources, including a chronicler bent on discrediting them. Yet, while the uprising in St Albans has distinctive local characteristics, the views and actions of Grindecobbe and his supporters thematically overlapped with the wider uprising. What we do know of the St Albans rebels points to a softer version of the more violent millenarian theology of John Ball, whose ideas were recorded in more detail and were more well known.

United in Labour

In his assessment of the situation that needed changing, Ball referenced biblical passages criticising wealth in his explanation of the lords' exploitation of serfs. Grindecobbe similarly cast his understanding of the state of the present with reference to the role of the monastery. Echoing biblical injunctions not to defraud workers and the poor of money owed (e.g., Deuteronomy 24:14-15; Malachi 3:5; Sirach 4:1; Mark 10:19), Grindecobbe accused the abbot, the prior, and some monks "of oppression of the commons, and of withholding the pay of poor men and labourers" (Walsingham, *Chronica maiora* 446). Where Ball preached eschatological judgement on the lords using the Parable of the Wheat and Tares (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43), the St Albans rebels intimidated the abbot with reference to the extended eschatological or apocalyptic discourse in the Gospels. They threatened to kill the monks and burn and destroy their buildings "so that no stone in it would be left standing upon another," a direct reference to Jesus's prediction of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple (Matthew 24:2; Mark 13:2; Walsingham, *Chronica maiora* 445). This story might have been invented by the chronicler Thomas Walsingham for dramatic effect and to discredit the rebels who he wanted to show as almost senselessly violent. However, this story only carries a conditional threat, which is typical of the St Albans revolt. Alternatively, this could suggest that Walsingham used what he found or heard and accordingly tried to make his propagandist point as best he could. We can at least say that this example of a prophetic threat of destruction shows the interpretative options available in understanding 1381 in millenarian terms.

An important feature of Ball's preaching was foregrounding the role of the labour carried out by his intended audience. Ball famously referenced an idealised beginning of human society when Adam dug and Eve spun. Letters associated with Ball mention the coded name John Miller, the language of grinding (bread), and how the "King of Heaven's Son shall ransom all" (Walsingham, *Chronica maiora* 548). Such thinking belonged to eucharistic language and imagery of the time, which in this setting was refocused on salvation of those who produced the bread. Indeed, the rebel entries into London and Bury St Edmunds both took place on the day of the popular festival of Corpus Christi (13 June), a celebration of the Eucharist and the body of Christ. The timing of entries is regularly understood in scholarship to have functioned as an implicit criticism of the state of the social body. This was also a festival that included retelling stories of liberation and the Exodus: as the Israelites had been freed from slavery, so the crucifixion would provide liberation for all (on eucharistic language, Corpus Christi, and the 1381 uprising, see Aston 1994). Regarding the uprising, salvation now emphatically had connotations of liberation for those under the bondage of masters, lords, abbots, and senior clergy.

One leader noted in the context of Ball's eucharistic thinking was Thomas Baker. Baker as an occupation or name is common among the legal records concerning the uprising (see 'baker' on the [People of 1381 database](#)). In this respect, we recall that, on return to St Albans from London, Grindecobbe was accompanied by William Cadindon, a man identified by his occupation: baker (Walsingham, *Chronica maiora* 548). The theological connotations were, presumably, not lost on at least some of the St Albans rebels in their dispute with the monastery over the millstones. After liberating the millstones from the monastery, bringing them to the commons, and smashing them, the rebels were said to have taken the symbolism further. According to Walsingham, the rebels celebrated their victory by distributing the smashed stones to the people, supposedly in the manner of bread distributed after the mass, i.e., "the bread that has been blessed is distributed and bestowed upon the Lord's people in the parochial churches" (Walsingham, *Chronica maiora* 459 with n529). Again, Walsingham may have been attempting to discredit the rebels through his own interpretation of their actions, but it remains that eucharistic and related interpretations of the new world order in St Albans were obvious options.

Myth of Just Kingship and an Alternative Kingdom

This understanding of the proper social order worked with an idealised notion of the king and kingship. The 1381 uprising seems to have worked with the common assumption that the king stood above all and was trusted to do good (cf. Lacey 2008), while close advisors and local lords were the problem. In broad terms, the myth of just kingship was likely tied in with expectations at the enthronement of a monarch and assumptions underpinning inherited prophecies of an expected Christian leader dispensing justice (Cohn 1970, 32-35; Shoemaker 2015; Crossley 2022, 23-30). As we have seen, the authority and approval of the righteous king was essential for Grindecobbe and the St Albans rebels.

In London and the southeast at least, the alternative hierarchy in England transformed would include a sole national spiritual leader (in this case, John Ball). There was an elevated role in this new national hierarchy for Tyler, a view which seems to have been assumed by the St Albans rebels. As Walsingham disparagingly put it, the St Albans rebels sought Tyler's support because "they thought that there would never be a greater man again in the kingdom and that the laws of the land would in future be invalid, since most of the lawyers had now been put to death, and the rest, in their estimation, should be killed" (Walsingham, *Chronica maiora* 445). While there does not seem to be discussion of a county 'king' and a county 'priest' as we see in the East Anglian uprising, St Albans was connected to larger regional and national imagination and social networks, not least through the local leadership of Grindecobbe who saw himself subordinate to Tyler. As with elsewhere in the Peasants' Revolt, these tendencies in St Albans were seen as pointing to a new England. When Wallingford returned to St Albans as Grindecobbe's envoy to the king, he placed down a standard or pennant of St George.

Ball's understanding of the transformation of England was cast in violent millenarian and fantastical language. For Grindecobbe and his followers, this language was understood to have immediate practical and bureaucratic consequences. Wallingford was reported to have told the abbot at St Albans that royal authority had decreed that the commons were now the lawmakers and the abbot's insistence on what he thought was the law of the realm was outdated. Indeed, the execution of the prisoner at St Albans and the placement of his head on top of the pillory for all to see signalled a transformed St Albans, with "new laws" and "new privileges" (Walsingham, *Chronica maiora* 451).

More broadly across the revolt, new laws and charters in England remade were, as we have seen,

grounded in ancient (or relatively ancient) authority. This might be biblical (as in the case of Adam and Eve) or founding documents or charters from England's past, as we saw in the reference to the time of Offa, a general view found elsewhere in the revolt (including elsewhere in the St Albans uprising—Walsingham, *Chronica maiora* 445) and typical enough of the time (Faith 1984).

In this transformed England, all things would be shared in common, as the first followers of Jesus had done according to Acts of the Apostles. By 1381, the meaning of all things shared in common meant different things to different interpreters according to their social location (Crossley 2022, 38–41). When Tyler met the king at Smithfield, the rebels were said to have desired that “all game, whether in waters or in parks and woods should become common to all, so that everywhere in the realm, in rivers and fishponds, and woods and forests, they might take the wild beasts, and hunt the hare in the fields, and do many other such things without restraint” (Knighton, *Chronicle* 218–219). This was the kind of view also associated with St Albans and the region. We saw the rethinking of the commons involving milling rights and targeting boundaries around local woods (for instance), with the captured rabbit becoming symbolic of their cause and their demands for hunting rights and liberties. There may have been another application of the principle of commonality of goods at St Albans when rebels made available the popular offer of compensation from the abbot, prior, and monks. More explicit is the case of when Wallingford had got the king's support as asked of him by Grindecobbe: he was welcomed by a crowd in St Albans revelling in the name of the commons and freedom from the lords and believing “no name more honourable than the name of ‘the commonalty.’” The king's letter commanded the release of charters to townsfolk concerning “common land, pasture, fishery, and certain other possessions” (Walsingham, *Chronica maiora* 453–455).

Sources

For narrative accounts of the St Albans revolt and the role of Grindecobbe, see Walsingham, *Chronica maiora* (Taylor, Childs, and Watkiss 2003, 444–79, 509–12, 524–45, 551–63) and *Gesta abbatum* 1869, 285–372.

Judicial records are searchable thanks to the AHRC-funded “The People of 1381 Online Database,” available at www.1381.online and the work of Adrian Bell, Anne Curry, Helen Lacey, Andrew Prescott, Herbert Eiden, and Helen Killick.

Other published sources include *Calendar of the Patent Rolls* (1897), *Calendar of the Close Rolls* (1920), and *Peasants' Revolt in Hertfordshire* (1981).

For scholarly discussion of the St Albans revolt, see, e.g., Réville 1898, 5–31, 144–48, 151–52; Oman 1906, 92–97; Fagan and Hilton 1950, 139–42; *Peasants' Revolt in Hertfordshire* 1981; Dunn 2004, 139–49; Baker 2014, loc. 4149–329.

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