

# The Western Rebellion of 1549

Religious protest in Devon and Cornwall

What was the Tudor rebellion in Devon and Cornwall all about? Where did it begin? How did it spread? How was it eventually put down?

## Exam links



**AQA 1C** The Tudors: England, 1485–1603

**Edexcel paper 3, option 31** Rebellion and disorder under the Tudors, 1485–1603

**OCR Y136/Y106** England 1485–1558: the early Tudors

**OCR Y306** Rebellion and disorder under the Tudors, 1485–1603

**D**uring the summer of 1549, a huge popular rebellion took place in Devon and Cornwall. Thousands of people took part in the insurrection and the government of Edward VI was eventually forced to raise a powerful army in order to suppress it.

### Background to the rebellion

The Western Rebellion had many contributory causes, but it was basically a protest against religious change.

### Henry VIII and religious tradition

During the 1530s, King Henry VIII had broken away from the Catholic Church, led by the Pope in Rome, and had established himself as supreme head of an independent English Church. Henry had then proceeded to dissolve the monasteries and to seize their wealth.

Yet while the king had changed the religious landscape of England forever, he had remained firmly opposed to the new strain of Christianity which was then taking root across large parts of the continent, and which would eventually become known as Protestantism. As a result, religious traditionalists — who almost certainly made up the great majority of Henry's subjects — had generally managed to adapt themselves to the old king's unsettling policies. Following Henry's death in 1547, however, and the accession to the throne of his 9-year-old son, Edward VI, England witnessed a full-blown religious revolution.

### Edward VI and religious revolution

Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset, was appointed as Lord Protector and therefore effectively ruled England in the boy-king's name. Seymour soon made it clear that Edward's government was determined to steer the English Church in an unambiguously Protestant direction. As a result, bitter disputes broke out in communities across the land. Religious reformers — made bold by the new thrust of royal policy — openly accused their conservative neighbours of being 'Papists', or treacherous supporters of the old Church of Rome. Religious traditionalists, for their part, accused the reformers of being 'heretics', or enemies of God. Distaste for 'the new learning' was particularly strong in the deeply traditional southwest.

## The 'Cornish Commotion' of 1548

Violent opposition to the Crown's religious policies first surfaced in the west country in April 1548. During this month the archdeacon of Cornwall's deputy, William Body, was murdered by an angry crowd in the west Cornish town of Helston: according to some reports, because he had been overseeing the destruction of traditional religious imagery in the church there. Several thousand men subsequently gathered in arms before being dispersed by the local gentry.

### Ethnic tension

The Helston disturbance was chiefly the result of deep-seated religious conservatism, but it may well have had an ethnic dimension, too. The village of St Keverne, from which many of the protestors came, lay in the heart of the Lizard peninsula. This was a district in which the ancient Cornish language, nowadays long extinct, was then still widely spoken. The inhabitants of west Cornwall — like their close cousins, the Welsh — saw themselves as an entirely separate people from the English during the Tudor period. So the fact that west Cornwall was Cornish-speaking can only have made its inhabitants even more stubbornly resistant to the message of the **Protestant Reformation**: a message which was almost always preached and taught to the ordinary people in English.

### The outbreak of the Western Rebellion

The 'Cornish Commotion' of 1548 was quickly suppressed. However, it foreshadowed the much bigger revolt which was to break out in the west country during the following year.

## Chronology



<b>January 1547</b>	Death of Henry VIII, accession of Edward VI
<b>July</b>	The Crown issues orders for religious reform
<b>April 1548</b>	Fear of religious change provokes an uprising in West Cornwall
<b>1549</b>	The Crown orders the adoption of an English Prayer Book
<b>10 June</b>	The new book sparks protest at Sampford Courtenay in Devon
<b>Late June</b>	The protests escalate into full-scale rebellion
<b>2 July</b>	The rebels besiege the city of Exeter
<b>5 August</b>	The rebels are defeated by a royal army at Clyst Heath
<b>17–18 August</b>	The rebels are again defeated at Sampford Courtenay
<b>January 1550</b>	The surviving rebel leaders are executed in London



Frontispiece to the Book of Common Prayer

### The new Book of Common Prayer

In 1549 the Crown ordered that every parish in the kingdom should adopt a new prayer book for use in church services. The **Book of Common Prayer** was written in English, not Latin, and incorporated a good deal of Protestant doctrine. Unsurprisingly, religious conservatives disliked it, and after the inhabitants of the remote mid-Devon village of Sampford Courtenay had heard the new service, in June 1549, they decided that enough was enough. Led by a local man named William Underhill, they persuaded their parish priest to abandon the new book and revert to the old Latin service instead.

### Wider grievances

Word of what had happened quickly spread and, within days, many protesters had gathered together at Sampford. They now asked, not only that the new prayer book should be withdrawn, but that various other grievances should be redressed as well. The growing band of protestors next made their way to the town of Crediton, a few miles from the regional capital of Exeter.

Here, they were attacked by a group of local gentlemen — led by ardent Protestants, Sir Peter and Sir Gawen Carew — who killed several of the demonstrators on the spot. This was a fatal mistake, for the Carews' aggressive action infuriated the local countryfolk. They now rose in arms across large parts of Devon, and what had previously been a relatively modest protest against the Crown's policies turned into a full-scale rebellion.

### Protestant Reformation

A European-wide movement aimed at reforming the practices of the Catholic Church.

**Book of Common Prayer** The Act of Uniformity (1549) abolished the Latin mass in England. The new Book of Common Prayer was issued with the Act, providing the text for services to be held in English. It is commonly supposed that it was written by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer. It was superseded in 1552.



## The siege of Exeter

Towards the end of June 1549, the rebels urged the inhabitants of Exeter to let them into the city. Many of the citizens sympathised with the rebels, but there was also a small group of committed Protestants who were determined to resist them, and — bolstered by this faction — the town governors resolved to remain loyal to the Crown. Affronted, the Devon rebels, led by William Underhill and other local captains, now proceeded to besiege the city.

Meanwhile, the flame of insurrection had spread into Cornwall, where more rebels had assembled at Bodmin under the command of a gentleman named Humphrey Arundell. Soon afterwards, Arundell led a powerful Cornish force across the River Tamar to assist the Devon rebels in the siege of Exeter.

Because Edward's government was facing several other rebellions elsewhere in the kingdom at this time, it was unable to send down many troops to the west country. As a result, the nobleman whom Somerset had ordered to suppress the disturbances — John, Lord Russell — did not dare to attack the rebels, who were massed around Exeter, and had to hover on the eastern borders of Devon instead.

## Rebel demands

Russell's evident weakness must have caused the insurgents to feel increasingly confident, especially as it now seemed that they were on the brink of starving the citizens into surrender. Around 26 July 1549, the rebels drew up a formal set of 'articles', or demands, which they sent to the government in London. These demands made the rebels' determination to oppose

Memorial to the men of St Ives who died in the Western Rebellion of 1549



## Questions

- Why did the Western Rebellion spread so quickly?
- Why did the rebels decide to besiege Exeter, rather than just bypass it?
- Why did it take the government forces so long to defeat the rebels?
- Was it always probable that the rebellion would fail?

the Crown's religious policies absolutely clear. Among them was one that declared that:

“We will not receive the new service, because it is but like a Christmas game, but we will have our old service...in Latin, as it was before. And so we the Cornish men, whereof certain of us understand no English, utterly refuse this new English.”

The way that this particular demand was phrased suggests that there were a number of Cornish-speakers in the rebels' ranks.

## The defeat of the rebels

Unfortunately for the rebels, powerful reinforcements were by this time arriving in Lord Russell's camp. Among them were bands of mercenary soldiers, drawn from as far afield as Germany and Italy, whom the government had originally hired to fight the Scots, but whom it now decided to turn on its own people.

## Liberating Exeter

Towards the end of July 1549, Russell managed to defeat a force of rebels who had been bold enough to advance to Fenny Bridges, just a couple of miles from his base at Honiton. Soon afterwards, the royal commander moved over to the offensive, marching towards Exeter with his army, and defeating the rebels in a savage battle fought at Clyst Heath on 5 August. That night, the surviving rebels stole away from their positions around Exeter and abandoned the siege of the city.

When Russell's victorious army finally appeared before the town walls early the next day, there was great rejoicing among the citizens — or, at least, among those of them who had opposed the insurgents — and 6 August would, for many years afterwards, be kept as an annual day of thanksgiving in Exeter.

## Beyond Exeter

Exeter may have been relieved, but the rebellion was by no means over. Despite the heavy casualties which they had suffered, the rebels were still determined to resist the royal forces. The insurgents now regrouped at Sampford Courtenay, where the insurrection had originally begun, and soon the king's commanders received the worrying news that Arundell was



Rebel leaders were executed at Tyburn, London, where today a stone marks the spot of the 'Tyburn Tree' gallows

## Further reading



Fletcher, A. and MacCulloch, D. (2016, 6th edn) *Tudor Rebellions*, Routledge, Chapter 5.

Stoyle, M. (1997) 'Cornish Rebellions, 1497–1648', *History Today*, Vol. 47. Available at: [www.historytoday.com](http://www.historytoday.com).

Stoyle, M. and Hodgman, C. (December 2010) 'The Prayer Book Rebellion', *BBC History Magazine*, Vol. 11, No. 12. Available at: [www.historyextra.com](http://www.historyextra.com).

## The aftermath

While many of the insurgents were punished on the spot, the surviving rebel leaders were sent up to London. Here, four of them — including Arundell — were tried for treason in Westminster Hall, and, after having been pronounced guilty, were hanged, drawn and quartered at the place of public execution at Tyburn. It was a bloody end to a bloody episode: an episode in which — according to the most reliable contemporary commentator — some 4,000 protestors lost their lives.

Few events do more than 'the Commotion in the West Parts' to illustrate the remarkable determination which ordinary Tudor men and women so often displayed when it came to defending their religious faith. This determination also helped to fuel several of the other great rebellions of the sixteenth century, including the **Pilgrimage of Grace** in 1536 and the **Northern Rising** in 1569.

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**Pilgrimage of Grace (1536)** A protest in Yorkshire (although there were other locally related rebellions) against the religious policies of Henry VIII.

**Northern Rising (1569)** An unsuccessful attempt by Catholic noblemen in the north of England to depose Elizabeth I and replace her with Mary, Queen of Scots.

gathering more men in Cornwall. Russell realised that he had no time to lose. Summoning up his army — which had by this time swelled to some 8,000 men — he marched out from Exeter and, in another bloody battle, fought in and around Sampford, completely routed the insurgents. Underhill was slain on the field, while Arundell fled to Launceston in Cornwall, where he was captured the following day.

Russell's troops now spread out across much of Devon and Cornwall, plundering the countryside wherever they came and imprisoning — and sometimes executing — those who had helped the insurgents. The vicar of the rebellious Cornish parish of St Keverne was hanged there on 26 August, for example, together with the vicar of nearby Mannacan, who was later described as one of the 'principal stirrers' of the insurrection.

# Using this article in your exam



How could this article be useful in your exam?

Despite recent trends focusing on skills development at A-level, it is apparent that students still enjoy a well-told story. Mark Stoyle's article on the Western Rebellion of 1549 brings the event alive. It is detailed and thorough in its coverage and highlights the pivotal role of the rebellion (in the context of social unrest in the mid-Tudor period). The article illustrates perfectly how a narrative approach to history can be adopted without masking key concepts such as cause and consequence.