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# A History of Britain - Volume 1: At the Edge of the World? 3000 BC-AD 1603

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## 4 Highlight(s) | 0 Note(s)

Yellow highlight | Location: 3,141

> It could have been worse. And for the Jews of England it was. In 1290 England acquired the distinction of becoming the first country in Christian Europe – or anywhere else for that matter – to expel its Jews as if they were a contagious disease. It is sometimes supposed that this enormity was perpetrated as a financial expedient to meet the huge bills falling due as a result of the Welsh wars. Indeed, the costs of empire were staggering – probably a third of a million pounds or ten times the annual revenue of the treasury – and Edward certainly wished to avoid the imposition of heavy taxes, which might provoke the same kind of opposition in and out of parliament that had been his father's and his grandfather's ruin. But he also had the banking house of the Riccardi from Lucca ready and willing to advance substantial sums, albeit at equally substantial rates of interest. The three thousand Jews, on the other hand, had been so exhaustively bled by earlier forced loans and penal taxes that they were in no condition to yield much at all to Edward's needy coffers. Throughout their history in England they had always been treated as property rather than humanity; something to be used and disposed of once that usefulness had been exhausted. Prodded by the Church, Edward had already abolished usury in his kingdom, immediately depriving the Jews of the only form of livelihood to which they had been allowed access. At the same time he required that they wear yellow badges of identification, the better to be recognized as the subspecies of humanity he undoubtedly believed they were. In 1285 he took the further disingenuous step of requiring them to abandon money-lending for other pursuits while doing nothing to make those alternative occupations available. Five years thence he was able to ask the Church and parliament for an enormous grant of taxes, the quid pro quo for which would be the expulsion. The measure, as Edward well knew, was immensely popular, as attacks on the Jews always were. Edward's mother, Queen Eleanor of Provence, had been an enthusiastic anti-Semite and piously believed (along with countless

> others) the obscenities of the blood libel that claimed that, because Jews needed blood to bake their Passover matzo (unleavened bread),

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> Edward's modern biographer, Michael Prestwich, describes this ethnic cleansing – the violent uprooting of entire communities in York, Lincoln and London – as an 'operation [that] went surprisingly smoothly', congratulating the king and his officers on carrying it out without unseemly massacres. But there were ways to avoid the messiness of public bloodshed and still see the Jews off with a satisfying degree of loathing for the crucifiers of the Saviour. One ship's captain devised a method that doubtless gave him, his crew and all those who heard about it enormous amusement. When the ship was beached at low tide in the Thames estuary at Queenborough, he suggested that his Jewish passengers might like to stretch their legs. When the tide came in they were barred from re-embarking. Vastly entertained, the captain told them to beseech their God to part the waters as he had done for their ancestors in the Exodus. But there was no miracle this time. The Jews drowned.

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> The immediate provocation for the revolt was, naturally, a new tax, the poll tax of 1380, the pretext for which was the defence of the realm against another threatened French invasion. But John of Gaunt's government made the serious mistake of imposing a tax that, for the first time, took no account of wealth and was levied at the flat rate of three groats (a shilling a head) per household. The response was predictable: fury and mass evasion, as entire families, sometimes entire villages, disappeared on to the roads or into the woods, where temporary encampments of tax-fugitives established themselves while they waited for the levy-men to go away. The usual corrective, of course, was to beef up the enforcers and collectors and to recruit local sergeants-at-arms, who knew the alehouses where they could winkle out the frauds and the runaways. But it was those men who went down to the woods who were in for a really big surprise. In south Essex in the spring of 1381 the tax

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would be on its way in the spring. But Elizabeth's government now understood the gravity of the situation and that another act of the English wars of religion was being played out. Mary was moved, in the nick of time, from Tutbury, where a flying squad of the northerners was coming to get her, and taken instead to the massively defended Coventry. After some initial chaos, a formidable, overwhelmingly southern army of 12,000 men was mobilized, adding more to its numbers once it reached the north. The rebellion was brutally crushed, the earls fleeing over the border to Scotland. With those who were caught, Elizabeth was disinclined to be lenient. Norfolk, who luckily for him was in the Tower when the rising peaked, was spared, but the queen's directives for reprisal and punishment were so savage that local justices of the peace decided on their own account, and to avoid generations of bitter recrimination, not to carry them out to the maximum letter of retribution. Even so, 450 were executed, three times the number Henry VIII had condemned after the much bigger Pilgrimage of Grace. Men of low rank were hanged, cut down while still alive and disembowelled. The terror worked. The rising of the northern earls was the last serious insurrection to disturb Tudor England. Looking at the massive dispossession of rebel estates and the transfer of property to loyalist southerners, the discontented were made to see that there was too much at stake to hazard another attempt to change the regime. For the most passionately Catholic, however, 1570 brought a terrible dilemma. In that year, with poor timing, the pope, Pius V, published a bull excommunicating Elizabeth and calling on the faithful to rise up and depose their heretic queen, if necessary lethally. The Catholics of England now had a choice of betrayals: their Church or their monarch? Some, inevitably, chose the latter. In 1571 a plot

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