

Magna Carta press visit to Kent 3-4 September 2014

Introduction

The Magna Carta 800th celebrations in 2015 create a new focus for the Battlefields Trust, the opportunity to take part in national commemorations and to raise awareness of the crucial nature of military conflicts in gaining new liberties. The Magna Carta Trail is one way of getting more people involved in learning about history and the key role battles have played. The Kent part of the trail extends from Canterbury to Dover, and includes Faversham and also Rochester, with its castle and cathedral. A Daily Telegraph, journalist researching a piece for the travel section was accompanied by MC 800th Project Director, Edward Dawson the two-day tour, in conjunction with the Sinead Hanna PR Manager of the Visit Kent tourist board, and on the first day by Dr Matthew Bennett, Trustee, who provided historical notes.



Canterbury Cathedral

The cathedral at Canterbury is one of the best known ecclesiastical sites in Britain, and one of the oldest. Canterbury has long been a place of pilgrimage, ever since the murder of Thomas à Becket in 1170. That heinous crime shocked medieval Europe, led to his canonisation and the development of a Europe-wide pilgrimage site, although his shrine was destroyed at the Reformation. Archbishop Stephen Langton was to play a pivotal role in the emergence of Magna Carta. He prepared the ground for the great charter and had aligned himself with the rebellious barons, against King John.



In our tour of the building, we looked at the nave, with its English perpendicular style. Different forms and approaches are revealed, if you look closely, from the Norman to the Gothic. Master masons rough cut the stone from quarries in France. We craned our necks at the great west window, which has been shining its bright primary colours onto admiring visitors since 1500. It is one of 1,200 square metres of stained glass here. We slipped through the cloisters and out to the site of monastic structures, including the Necessarium.

In the Chapter House, surrounded by noisy school groups, we gazed at the barrel ceiling made of Irish Bog oak. The throne-like seat in the centre was sat in by Margaret Thatcher and François Mitterrand when they signed the Channel Tunnel accord in 1981.

Magna Carta maestro Stephen Langton was Archbishop until 1228. He was buried and re-buried inside the cathedral. This did not ultimately serve his memory, since a chapel addition was later sited over his tomb. The Lady Mary Holland window and chapel was built leaving half the tomb outside under grass. For all his piety and belief in the free spirit of man, Langton is unseen, and unremembered, his feet ignominiously projecting outwards without a marker, or even a public notice. Our guide suggested a campaign to alert the public and perhaps result in a fitting memorial to this great clerical figure. We then saw the site of Becket's shrine and the effigies of Henry IV and the Black Prince. Becket's four assassins fled after the deed, and were later banished by the Pope to Jerusalem to serve out their penance. Henry VIII finally destroyed all the shrines in 1538 and the age of pilgrimage had passed.



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Canterbury Cathedral Archives

After the tour, we were welcomed to the Cathedral Archives by cathedral archivist Cressida Williams. We heard that the cathedral had been awarded £12m of lottery funding for its *Cathedral Journey* project, to improve its presentation and resource for the public. A new Welcome Centre, facing onto the busy Buttermarket, will bring the Cathedral into the heart of the city, offering better access and facilities to pilgrims. New exhibitions with the theme *Canterbury in the Age of Magna Carta* will be set up soon, and it will be complemented with one at the Beane Museum as part of the visitor trail. The Cathedral Archive has a wealth of manuscripts, maps and other records dating from the 8th century, and is a rich resource. There are 740 documents dating from before the conquest, as well as some 8,000 charters.

Professor Louise Wilkinson then gave a short talk about the documents on display. There was a register of charters, bound in calfskin. This included a copy of Magna Carta, and a number of charters for the city, which contained 63 clauses



across five pages, including crown pleas. She emphasised that the development of democratic ideals under Magna Carta had been a gradual process. She was currently researching Lady Nicholaa de la Haye, castellan of Lincoln Castle, heroine of the 1217 siege, and other women of the medieval era, including Eleanor de Montfort. She will be giving a lecture in November at Odiham village in Hampshire.



Mention was made of Professor James Holt's book on Magna Carta. This gave an evaluation of the different elements of the charter, and the growing appetite for democracy. It highlighted that widows should not be forced to remarry to safeguard their property. The regulation of fish traps in the rivers also had its importance, as they were a hindrance to river navigation. Holt concluded that King John had been a bad king with few redeeming aspects, and a disregard for the law. In sealing the charter he was already thinking about ways of getting around it. This meant asking the Pope

Innocent III to set it aside. The Cathedral Library and the University of Kent's Centre for Medieval and Early Modern Studies are cooperating on charter studies.

The Cinque Ports

The link of the five main Cinque Ports to Magna Carta was mentioned. They were originally the narrowest crossing points to the continent, being Hastings, New Romney, Hythe, Dover and Sandwich. All Freemen of the ports were deemed to be barons, and entitled to attend the king's parliament. They reflected an early concept that military service at sea constituted land tenure. A 13th century charter stated that the Barons of the Cinque Ports held precedence above representatives of the shires and boroughs.



Sandwich provided an important route for trading. It was close to the most important sites of church and government power, being Canterbury and Dover. The port played an important role in the Magna Carta wars, and the naval battle fought offshore in August 1217, led to the final defeat of the French invasion.

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Dover Castle

Though built in the reign of Henry II, the castle peaked in its notoriety in 1216, when a group of rebel barons invited Louis VIII of France to take the English crown. He had some success breaching the walls but was unable ultimately to take the castle. This was in the first Barons' War. He brought forces to enable a march to Winchester, and a siege of Windsor. It was August when the barons and the French began a siege of Dover castle. They battered the walls, and miners dug beneath them. They captured the barbican and undermined the gate behind it.



We walked along the spur and saw the magnificent vistas of the castle. We later saw the remarkable tunnels beneath the castle, and wondered if funds might be found to develop the visitor potential of this massive and spectacular site.

Beane Museum and Library

Opposite the Abode Hotel is the Beane Gallery and Museum, recently refurbished and reopened. Named after its original benefactor, the museum houses a series of galleries with local exhibits and collections, as well as special exhibitions. Before it was built, the Canterbury Archaeological Trust found evidence of past occupation. The Beane had been constructed over a Roman Forum and main road. Besides a paved road, there were remains of masonry and a large Roman building.



The Beane is now seen as a part of the future Magna Carta Trail, with a new exhibition of achieves and documents mainly loaned by Canterbury cathedral. We took an informal visit, but found it most absorbing and well worth the time spent there.

Faversham

We convened at the Alexander Centre in Preston Street. Sally Wookey, Tourism Officer at Faversham Town Council and Jackie Westlake, Town Clerk; Councillor David Simmons, Chairman, Magna Carta Committee of the Town Council; and Clive Foreman, Vice Chairman, The Faversham Society and Faversham Society representative on the Town Council Magna Carta Committee were present.

The link of Magna Carta to the Cinque Ports was confirmed in 1300. The four engrossments (copies) are at Lincoln, Salisbury and at the British Library. The Town Council is very proud of its 1300 confirmation Great Charter, which we saw; they will be mounting a major exhibition entitled *Magna Carta Rediscovered*. They have received a lottery grant, and are working with Visit Kent to promote the exhibition on tour, to include the Beane, Maidstone and Rochester Cathedral. The centrepiece will be the Magna Carta itself; another theme would be *Protest, Democracy and the Law*.

Town visit

Having also seen Henry III's 1252 Charter, the Faversham Society kindly led a tour of the town, starting with their own *Fleur de Lis Heritage Centre* and museum. We walked past the ancient brewery of Shepherd Neame, and down to the creek at Standard Quay and also visited the site of the former priory and parts of the attractive Conservation Area.



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We were invited for lunch at *Macknade Fine Foods* farm shop and food hall, an alternative to the superstores that dominate food and drink. It is a family business providing local and world quality products. Finn Dunlop, the manager joined us and introduced platters of local cheeses and cold meats, but Rochester beckoned.

Rochester Cathedral



The cathedral's Romanesque style gives it a spacious feel. A painting of the 'wheel of fortune' is visible on one wall, and was discovered when a pulpit was repositioned. Rochester diocese has close links with Saint Augustine of Canterbury. The cathedral was sacked in 1264 by Simon de Montfort's troops, during sieges of the city and castle. Knights rode into the church and dragged out refugees. Gold and silver items were taken and valuable documents destroyed. They even stabled their horses inside the cathedral. It proved a short lived victory, and the following year de Montfort fell at the Battle of Evesham to the forces of the King, Edward I.

The next precious object to see was the *Textus Roffensis*. The medieval manuscript is of two books (coronation charter of Henry I and cathedral registers) bound as a single volume about 1300. We looked at and were able to handle a facsimile, of which only three others exist. It bore the marks of water emersion, apparently having been dropped in the Thames at some point in its history.

Rochester Castle

The mighty siege of Rochester began in October 1215. King John attacked the rebel position on the River Medway, where cathedral and castle stand close by. It was strategically important and a matter of reputation for the king to take it rapidly and assert his authority. John arrived and his army swiftly drove off the baronial forces and destroyed the bridge. This left a rebel garrison in the great stone keep. He brought in miners who dug a tunnel under the south west tower. This excavation was propped up by timbers then set alight, the fire famously fed by the fat of forty porkers. Evidence of the siege has been preserved, including the tunnel dug under the tower, and exposed by archaeological excavation. The collapsed tower itself was rebuilt as a round tower, in contrast to the other three, square Norman towers.



We saw the magnificent high towers and the deep storehouses. We climbed to the top, and discussed the massive battle that had taken place with arrows raining down from all sides. The building remains impressive, and one can see how it was able to withstand such a fierce attack. However, the following year, the castle did fall quickly in the face of overwhelming French strength and the barons regained it. Such was the fate of these battles that might easily go one way or the other.

Conclusions

These important historic sites all now form part of the Magna Carta Trail, and illustrate its story so dramatically. For the Battlefields Trust, it is a matter of ensuring that these military conflicts are better understood and not forgotten. Magna Carta provides such a distinctive narrative, and the elements of historic events, imposing buildings and treasured documents must be woven together in Kent to explain its significance to a growing interested public.