Historic Briefing Notes from the Battlefields Trust

Kent and the Magna Carta Wars

Background

King John (1199-1216) is perhaps best known to history for agreeing to the clauses of Magna Carta at Runnymede, on the River Thames near Windsor (15 June 1215). He was forced into concessions by a group of rebellious barons which seriously reduced royal power. John had proved a disappointment as king, notably by losing Normandy and other English possessions in France in 1204. His attempts to recover these territories were finally defeated in the summer of 1214, (battle of Bouvines) but at huge financial cost; the taxation he imposed to raise these funds, together with his abuses of the law caused the baronial opposition. John immediately renounced the Charter making a civil war inevitable. Few participants at the time can have expected that the conflict would last over two years and include a major French invasion.

Events in Kent

In the early thirteenth century the county of Kent was crucial to the wealth and power of the English Crown. Its position facing the Continent made its ports, especially Sandwich, the conduits of a rich trade. It also contained the two most important sites of religious and secular power, respectively Canterbury and Dover. The cathedral city of Canterbury drew its authority from Augustine, whose mission in 597 was the foundation of the English Church, and its archbishop was the senior in the country.

Since the martyrdom of Archbishop Thomas à Becket in 1170, it had also become one of the most important pilgrimage sites, not only in England, but in Europe, bringing wealth and status. Dover Castle, already a strong fortification at the time of the Norman Conquest, had become a huge modern fortress owing to its development by Henry II and Richard the Lionheart towards the end of the twelfth century. Matthew Paris, the monastic chronicler of St. Albans, and the most influential historian of his era, called it the 'Key to the Kingdom'. John began his campaign against the rebels there in September, 1215.

The Siege of Rochester October-November, 1215

His first move was against the rebel position at Rochester, on the River Medway, where the cathedral and castle face each other across the bridge. It was both strategically important and a matter of reputation to the king that he should reduce it rapidly and assert his authority. John arrived there in mid-October; his army swiftly drove off the baronial forces and destroyed the bridge. This left a rebel garrison in the great stone keep, which still stands today, of 95 knights and 45 sergeants (probably crossbowmen) sufficient to defy the king. For the next seven weeks the king conducted the siege in person. He gathered carpenters and labourers from all over the country to construct three siege engines, and also miners who dug a tunnel under the south-west tower. This excavation was propped up by timbers then set alight, the fire being fed by the fat of 40 pigs!

The tower's collapse did not end the siege, as the defenders withdrew behind a dividing wall in the keep and kept up a desperate fight, until they were eventually forced to surrender on 30th November. John wanted to have the castle's commander William d'Aubigny and his knights hanged, but he was dissuaded by his mercenary captain for fear of retaliation. So the noblemen were taken for ransom and only ordinary soldiers were killed (as was the custom at the time). This display of royal power almost knocked the stuffing out of the opposition, although rebel victories in the north ensured its continuation. (In the following year, the castle fell swiftly in the face of overwhelming French strength and the barons regained it.)

Rochester today

Evidence of the siege is still visible today, including the tunnel that was dug under the south west tower and exposed by archaeological excavation, and the tower itself, which was rebuilt as a round tower, contrasting with the other three, square Norman towers.

(The 2011 film '*Ironclad*' presented a violent and bloody fictionalised – i.e. completely inaccurate -version of the events of 1215, featuring a suitably hideous King John, played with verve by Paul Giamatti.)

The Siege of Dover

Despite this success, the rebels still held London, and in May 1216, Prince Louis of France, sent by his father King Philip II, invaded England and was recognized as king by the baronial party. He brought with him substantial forces, enabling a march as far west as Winchester, a siege of Windsor and a visit north to London. In mid-August the barons and their French allies began a siege of Dover castle. Using torsion artillery to batter the walls, and miners to dig beneath them, the attackers achieved some success, capturing the barbican and undermining the gate behind it. Attempts at assault failed, though, and the besiegers were harassed by the guerrilla activities of a local loyalist known as Willikin of the Weald (the large area of untamed forest in the centre of Kent).

By mid-October, Louis was forced into a truce. Within a few days, King John died, probably of dysentery, at Newark (Notts.); but instead of making the French position stronger this event made it weaker. It was now possible for the English barons to make their peace with the newly-crowned 9-year old, King Henry III. During the truce, Louis returned to France for eight weeks (February to April 1217) for reinforcements, allowing the royalists to get men and supplies into Dover. Louis revived the siege on his return, but the defeat of his field army at Lincoln (20th May), obliged him to lift it and seek refuge in London. The castle was subjected to siege and blockade for the best part of a year, but owing to the immense strength of its fortifications and determination of its defenders, it withstood all that was thrown at it.

(The Incident at Rye: A much less well known military event than the two great sieges was the fighting which took place on the south coast around Winchelsea and Rye, in February 1217. Prince Louis intended to return to France; but he found that the English fleet was blockading his exit port at Rye. For several days he was trapped, his men facing starvation, as they were pinned between the sea and the royalist guerrilla forces of 'Wicken of the Weald' inland. Meanwhile a large royal army was collected and advanced to offer battle. Louis was only rescued by a French fleet and escaped in its ships, just in time to avoid this threat.)

The War at Sea and the naval battle off Sandwich

Unlike later eras, there was no assumed superiority at sea for English fleets in the early thirteenth century. King Richard had built a galley fleet based at Rouen, but this facility had been lost by the time of the civil war. King John could call upon the resources of the Cinque Ports (Hastings, Rye, Hythe, Romney and Sandwich) which provided some 50 ships, and had another 50 built. In 1213, Philip II had gathered a fleet to invade England with papal blessing against the excommunicate John. The English king outmanoeuvred his opponent by submitting to papal authority, leading to the invasion being cancelled. Then, in conjunction with the Flemings, in an expedition worthy of Sir Francis Drake, the allies surprised the French fleet at anchor, allegedly capturing 300 vessels, and stripping and burning 100 more!

Three years later when the French again moved against England, they had restored their naval forces to equality with the English. Clearly, these were essential for the Cross-Channel operations which Prince Louis was adopting. Even after his troops' defeat at Lincoln, Louis gathered another fleet at Calais in August 1217. In the initial actions the French had the advantage, but the decisive and final battle of the war was fought off Sandwich on 24th August. The English proved the better sailors, not for the first time, and totally defeated a much larger enemy fleet after a hard fight, capturing and executing its admiral, a renegade religious pirate called 'Eustace the Mad Monk'. The war was finally over. A month later, the Treaty of Lambeth meant that Louis and his men left England, never to return.

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