



Magna Carta Trails launch 25 September 2014

Introduction

This note provides some background to the Magna Carta Trails, and the role of the Battlefields Trust and its Magna Carta 800th Battlefields Project. It outlines the Project, and the contribution it is making to the Magna Carta Trails. It also explains how numerous military conflicts are interwoven with the story of the Great Charter. A few key battle locations are set out, and it looks in some detail at the Kent Trail.

The Battlefields Trust

The Battlefields Trust's connection to the Magna Carta story is that the charter was granted as the result of a period of military upheaval across England and France, and only secured by the end of the Second Barons' War in the reign of Henry III. It uniquely offers stories of action and adventure across the country and beyond on sites where the rights of Magna Carta were won or disputed. These are tales of battles and sieges, skirmishes and massacres populated by heroes, heroines and villains: Knights Templar and monks, mercenaries, pirates, sheriffs, foresters and outlaws.

The Trust offers interpretation, educational material and guided walks by local experts with a passion for their local history across the country, some of which are in proximity to other Magna Carta destinations. Many of the other battlefields across the country were associated with fights for the freedoms established by Magna Carta, in particular the heritage of the World Wars. It also provides ways to become personally involved with a programme of preservation, interpretation and presentation via membership.

Magna Carta 800th Anniversary Battlefields Project

The Battlefields Trust was pleased to be awarded a grant to set up its Magna Carta 800th Project. The grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund has enabled the appointment of a full time member of staff as Project Director, and the Trust is very pleased that Edward Dawson has accepted the post. Edward has a background in countryside campaigning and heritage protection, and was formerly Regional Director of the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England.

The Project centres on the interpretation, presentation and development of Magna Carta battlefields and siege sites for the purposes of heritage protection and public education. The project will concentrate on the Barons' Wars before and after 1215, as well as the 1264 period involving Simon de Montfort. One important aim is to bring together the Trust's work at a regional level, to recruit new volunteers and boost membership. There will be many special events held, and the project would like to hear from any local groups who may wish to contribute to the programme of walks and talks.

Magna Carta Trails

The idea of the Magna Carta Trails is to bring together the main elements of this remarkable story. These include the cathedrals, large and small towns, castles and battles that played such a decisive part. A website www.magnacartatrails.com covers the six trail routes including, London to Windsor; Kent and East Sussex; Salisbury and Wiltshire; East of England; Heart of England and the cathedral cities of the north. The locations of relevant medieval documents are included.



Magna Carta 800th military Locations

The granting of Magna Carta came after military encounters, known as the Barons' Wars. This period of English history extended from 1214 to 1267. The conflicts included battles and sieges. Over 200 castles and fortifications are thought to be involved in some way. The large number results from King John's relentless drive northwards in 1215-16. A list of key sites is on the Battlefields Trust website: www.battlefieldstrust.com and also on the Magna Carta website: magnacarta800th.com

Battle of Bouvines

In the pre-Magna Carta era the most important conflict occurred not in England, but in France, and no English forces were involved. The attack was led by the Holy Roman Emperor, Otto IV. King John was his uncle, but the hoped for family alliance never materialised. Otto had been unable to support John's unsuccessful invasion of France in 1213 and John was then unable to support Otto's in 1214. The river Marque and the fateful bridge remain in place today. It was a battle that defined the future of France, and also gave the barons confidence to confront their king. In July 2014, the Battlefields Trust led a delegation to the site of the Battle of Bouvines, near Lille.

Kent the key to the Kingdom

Thirteenth century Kent was crucial to the wealth and power of the English Crown. Its position facing the Continent made its ports, like Sandwich, the conduits of a rich trade. It also contained the two most important sites of religious and secular power, at Canterbury and Dover. The cathedral city of Canterbury drew its authority from St Augustine, whose mission was the foundation of the English Church.

Since the martyrdom of Archbishop Thomas à Becket in 1170, it had also become one of the most important pilgrimage sites, bringing wealth and status. Dover Castle, already a strong fortification at the time of the Norman Conquest, was now a huge modern fortress owing to its enlargement 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'.

Rochester rebel Stronghold

John arrived in October 1215 and his army swiftly destroyed the bridge over the Medway. A rebel garrison in the castle keep, which still stands today, had many crossbowmen and was able to defy the king. For weeks the king conducted the siege in person. He gathered carpenters and labourers to construct siege engines, and also miners who dug a tunnel under a tower. This excavation was propped up by timbers, which were then set alight, the fire fed by the fat of 40 pigs. The tower's collapse did not end the siege, as the defenders kept up a desperate fight, until forced to surrender.

Dover resists the French

In May 1216, Prince Louis of France, sent by his father King Philip II, invaded England and was recognized as king by the barons. His forces were able to lay siege to the castle at Windsor, and in August the barons and their French allies began a siege of Dover castle. They used artillery to batter the walls, and miners to dig beneath them, the attackers captured the barbican and undermined the main gate. But all attempts at assault failed, and an uneasy truce resulted. The death of King John in October 1216 changed the political landscape and Magna Carta remained safe for the present.