

# MAGNA CARTA AND THE BARONS' WARS



Magna Carta is the world's oldest constitutional document. It has been seen as the cornerstone of liberty throughout the English-speaking world. But the story of how it came to be accepted is long and complicated. Both King John, (reigned 1199–1216) and his successor Henry III, (reigned 1216–72), opposed attempts to limit their power and this led to a series of conflicts popularly known as the Barons' Wars.

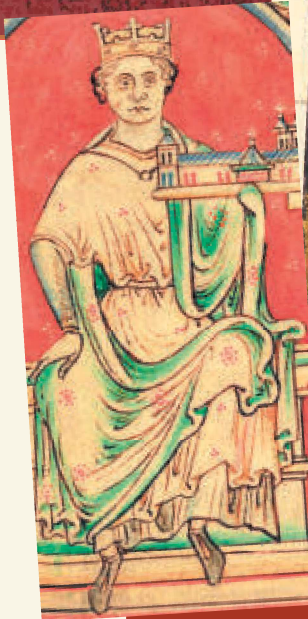


# King John & Magna Carta

**John was the son of King Henry II, one of Europe's most powerful monarchs. As well as king of England Henry was also ruler of several provinces in France, from Flanders to the Pyrenees. Historians call these various territories the 'Angevin Empire'.**

As Henry's youngest son, John was not expected to inherit significant lands, but his father went to great lengths to ensure that he would receive a suitable inheritance. Despite this, John eventually betrayed his father by joining a rebellion against him as he lay dying in 1189. Because three of Henry's sons had died young, John became heir to the throne during the reign of his childless elder brother King Richard I. He unsuccessfully tried to seize the throne while Richard was absent on the Third Crusade, but on his return his brother forgave him. When Richard was fatally wounded during a siege of a castle in France in 1199 John became king.

John's accession was greeted with little enthusiasm. Few people trusted him while many of his French subjects believed that the rightful king was Prince Arthur of Brittany, the son of John's older brother Geoffrey. In 1202 John captured Arthur and in April 1203 he is believed to have had him murdered, an event which shocked people across Europe. John's great rival, Philip II Augustus, king of France, took advantage of the situation to invade John's French territories and by 1204 he had conquered both Normandy and Anjou. This disaster cast a dark shadow over John's reign and earned him the mocking nickname 'Softsword'. Determined to raise the money and resources he needed to reconquer his lost provinces, John bullied and threatened his barons, raising new taxes and finding excuses to seize their lands and property. At the same time John was in conflict with the Church and confiscated part of its wealth. As a result, in 1209, Pope Innocent III, excommunicated John. All this eventually resulted in John becoming one England's the most detested kings.



King John (left) from Matthew Paris *Historia Anglorum*. (British Library, MS Royal 14 C VII f.9)

King John hunting. (From *Statutes of England* (14th C), f.116 - BL Cotton MS Claudius D II)



Prince Louis of France (right). (British Library, Royal 16 G VI f. 385)

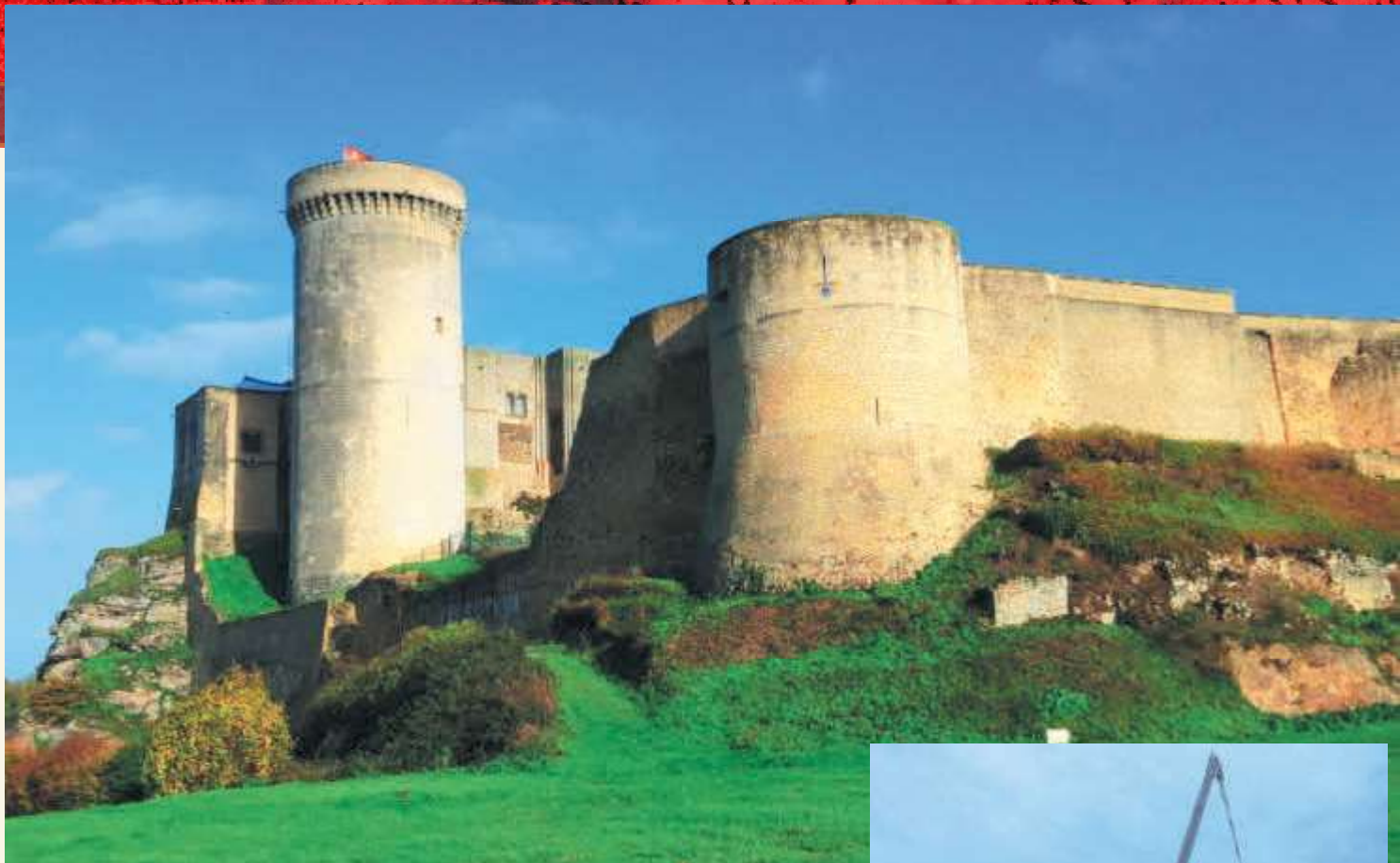
## The Battle of Damme, May 1213

In 1213 King Philip of France planned to follow up his conquest of John's French territories by invading England itself. However, whatever else we may say about John, he was a first-rate organiser and ever since the loss of Normandy he had been busy assembling an effective fleet. Most of John's ships were placed in the so-called Cinque Ports, a confederation of Kent and Sussex ports which received a variety of privileges in exchange for providing ships when the king needed them. Dockyards were also built at Portsmouth. By the end of 1204 John had amassed around fifty large galleys and a further fifty-four vessels were built between 1209 and 1212. William of Wrotham, the archdeacon of Taunton and a capable administrator, was appointed 'keeper of the galleys', effectively John's chief admiral, and he

fused John's galleys, the ships of the Cinque Ports and pressed merchant vessels into a single operational fleet.

John was also active on the diplomatic front. Making a complete and abject submission to the papacy, he presented himself as a repentant sinner eager to be accepted back into the bosom of the Church. A delighted Pope instructed the French king to halt his invasion preparations. Philip took no notice, but before he could invade England, he first had to deal with a rebellion by Count Ferrand of Flanders. The French marched into Flanders with their fleet sailing along the coast in support before anchoring in the small harbour of Damme near Bruges. Meanwhile John had sent a fleet to Flanders under the command of his half-brother William Longespee (or Longsword), earl of Salisbury. Contemporary claims that the English had over 500 ships whilst the French had





*Falaise Castle in Normandy. John's nephew, Arthur, was held prisoner here before being moved to Rouen where he was murdered. (J Humphrys)*



*The tomb in Salisbury Cathedral of William Longespee, commander of English forces at Damme. (Photo: Bernard Gagnon CC BY-SA 3.0)*



*Replica of a trebuchet in Fougères Castle. Louis used a catapult like this during his invasion of England.*

assembled an invasion fleet of 1,700 vessels need to be treated with caution, but there's little doubt that both sides boasted exceptionally large fleets. On 30 May the English spotted the French fleet off Damme. Most of the French ships were only manned by skeleton crews as many of the sailors had gone ashore

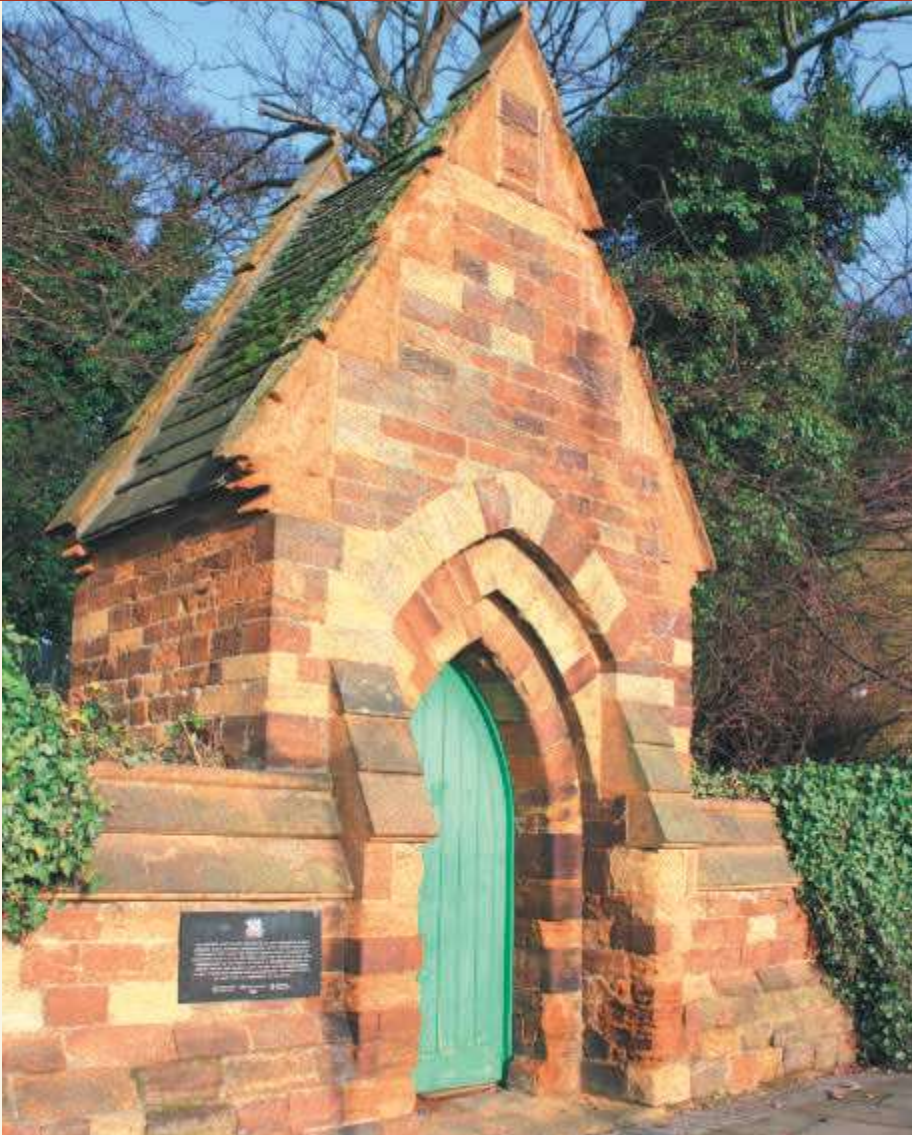
looking for loot and plunder. The result was a very one-sided battle with hundreds of French ships being captured or burnt after the English had looted them. The next day encouraged by their success, the English, recklessly attacked Damme itself, but by now French soldiers were returning from the main army and

Longespee's men were driven back to their ships. The chronicles record that Philip ordered his surviving ships to be burnt to prevent them from being captured by the English. Damme is regarded as the first decisive naval victory in English history.





The Battle of Bouvines depicted in a 19th century window in the Church of St Martin de Montmorency, Val d'Oise. (Photo: Marie-Lan Nguyen CC BY-4.0)



Northampton castle's postern gate rebuilt into the station boundary wall (Photo: Cj1340 CC BY-SA 3.0)

## The Battle of Bouvines, July 1214

The battle of Bouvines has been described as one of the most important battles in English history, but one which most English people have never heard of. It marked the climax of John's attempts to regain his lost lands in France. While John landed at La Rochelle and advanced from the south-west, his nephew and ally, the Holy Roman Emperor, Otto IV, attacked Philip from the north in Flanders with a large German army, together with a small English contingent led by the earl of Salisbury. Although he was outnumbered, on 27 July 1214, Philip defeated Otto at Bouvines near Lille. It was one of the most decisive battles of the Middle Ages. Otto was deposed and replaced by Frederick II while John returned to England empty-handed, to face a full-scale rebellion by his angry barons.

## The Barons' Rebellion, 1215

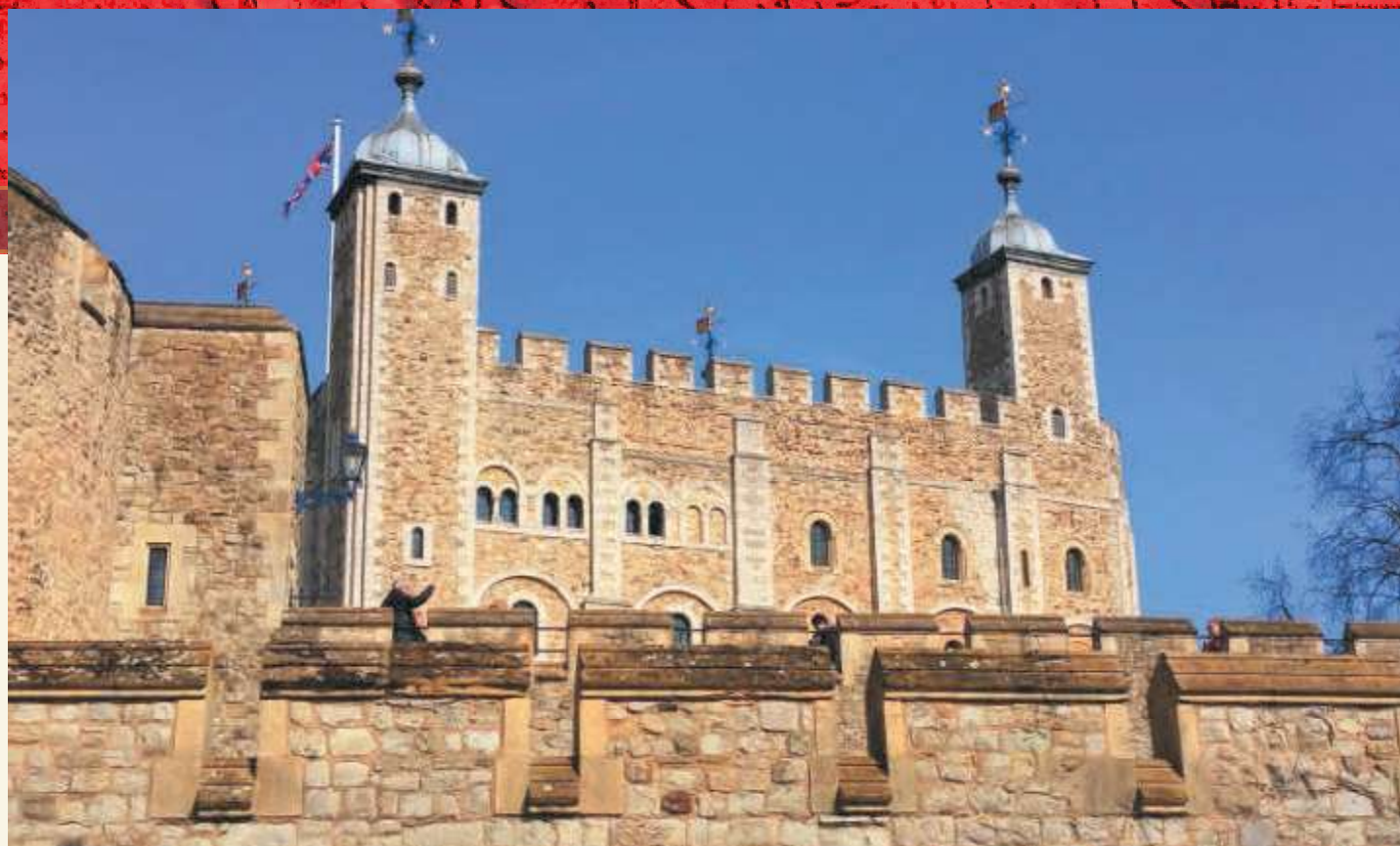
Baronial discontent with John's rule and opposition to his arbitrary style of government had been growing for years and the dismal failure of his 1214 campaign seems to have been the final straw. In April 1215 a group of northern barons gathered at Stamford in Lincolnshire. Their leader was Robert fitz Walter who proclaimed himself to be 'Marshal of the host of God and the Holy Church'. When attempts to negotiate a settlement failed, the rebel barons renounced their feudal obligations to John and marched on Northampton in a bid to capture the castle.

## The Siege of Northampton Castle, May 1215

Northampton was one John's favourite castles. He visited it on at least thirty occasions, spent many feast days there, and moved the Royal Treasury to the castle in 1205. The rebels besieged the castle for two weeks, but lacking siege engines made no progress and is recorded that a crossbowman shot and killed fitz Walter's standard bearer. Eventually the rebels abandoned the siege and marched to Bedford where William de Beauchamp let them into its castle. Soon after the rebel army left, the townspeople attacked the castle, killing several of the garrison who retaliated by burning part of the town.

*Little of the castle now remains because of urban development, but the Friends of Northampton Castle have produced an excellent film about the site and campaign for its protection and enhancement.*





*The Tower of London. (J Humphrys)*

## The capture of London, May 1215

After their failure at Northampton the rebels desperately needed a success. So when the rebels were approached by envoys from London who offered to surrender the city to them they immediately set off for the capital. An army of John's mercenaries under the earl of Salisbury tried to beat them to it, but they were too late. The rebels reached the capital on the morning of Sunday 17 May. Many inhabitants were loyal to the King, for he had recently granted them a charter of liberty. But while most Londoners were hearing mass the rebel advance guard reached the city and discovered that they could scale the walls using scaffolding erected for maintenance work. Once inside the city they seized the gates and allowed in the rest of the rebel army. The Tower of London held out against the rebels, but the loss of London was a disastrous blow to the king. Many people who had previously been wavering now came out in support of the rebellion. John, who took shelter in Windsor Castle, realised that he had no choice but to accept the Barons' demands... or at least pretend to do so.

## Runnymede, June 1215

Halfway between Windsor and Staines, as you follow the A308, you will drive through an attractive green meadow. It's a pleasant spot with the Thames flowing

lazily past on one side and some thickly wooded high ground on the other. This is Runnymede, a site which has been variously described as 'the birthplace of British democracy', 'freedom's field' and even 'the very soul of England'. The reason for this fame is, of course, the event which took place here on 15 June 1215, when King John met a group of rebel barons and agreed to what became known as 'the Great Charter', or, in Latin, 'Magna Carta'.

The real architect of Magna Carta was probably Stephen Langton, the much-respected archbishop of Canterbury. He persuaded John, who was at Windsor, and the rebel barons, whose headquarters was at Staines, to meet at Runnymede. It is impossible to identify the exact spot where the meeting took place. Local legend suggests that the actual site was on a small, muddy island in the middle of the Thames, but this is a most unlikely location and, in any case, the concluding words of the Great Charter are: 'Given under our hand on the Meadow of Runnymede, 15th June, 1215'. Contrary to popular belief John never actually signed Magna Carta with his hand; he agreed to it by having the Royal Seal fixed to the copies of the Charter.

Despite Magna Carta's fame as the foundation stone of English liberty it contains no sweeping statements of principle; there is no general declaration

on the rights of all men. It contains sixty-three clauses but the majority of these deal with specific grievances which the barons wanted addressed. However, mixed up with these specific complaints there were some general principles of law which became the foundation stones of English liberty. Magna Carta makes it clear that the king is not above the law. He could not raise unauthorised taxes and he had to promise that 'to no-one will we sell, deny or delay right or justice' No-one could be imprisoned, exiled, executed or have his lands and goods confiscated unless he had been properly charged with breaking the law, given a fair trial and found guilty by a jury of his peers. Perhaps the most revolutionary clause in the Charter was the so-called 'Security Clause' which called for the establishment of a council of twenty-five barons to ensure John kept to the terms of the Charter and authorised them to seize his lands and property if he failed to do so.

*Copies of the Charter were sent around the country and four of these original copies still exist, two in the British Library, one in Lincoln Cathedral and one in Salisbury Cathedral. The stone monument at Runnymede to the sealing of Magna Carta was erected in 1957. Funded by the American Bar Association, it was designed by English architect Sir Edward Maufe who had also designed the nearby Air Forces Memorial.*



to no-one will we sell, deny or delay right or justice'



The Magna Carta Memorial at Runnymede(c). (Photo: Andrew Bowden CC By-SA 2.0 <https://www.flickr.com/photos/bods14860278869/>)



# The First Barons' War

Ironically, at the time, Magna Carta was regarded as a complete failure. John had no intention of keeping his promises and within weeks he had persuaded the Pope to annul the Charter. The Pope denounced it as "not only shameful and demeaning but also illegal and unjust". Civil war immediately broke out again and soon the rebel barons concluded that the only way to deal with John was to depose him. They invited Prince Louis, the son of King Philip of France, to become king of England. Louis was the natural choice for his wife, Blanche of Castile, was a granddaughter of Henry II and he might actually have inherited the Angevin lands legally had John died without children. Louis accepted the offer of the crown and promised help.

## The Siege of Norham Castle, October 1215

Situated on a rocky outcrop above the river Tweed in Northumberland, Norham Castle was a mighty stronghold which had originally been built by Bishop Flambard of Durham in the early 12th century. Its location, just half the river's width away from the Scottish border, led Walter Scott to call it 'the most dangerous place in England'. King John had strengthened the castle, and this helped it withstand a forty-day siege by Alexander II of Scotland, who had invaded northern England in support of the rebels.

*Norham Castle is in the care of English Heritage. Its 12th century keep still stands.*

## The Siege of Rochester Castle, October 1215

Between October and December 1215 King John besieged Rochester Castle in Kent in a bid to retake it from rebels and open the road to London. The rebel garrison was commanded by William d'Albini, the lord of Belvoir. John's forces destroyed Rochester bridge to stop reinforcements from London coming to the rebels' aid and captured the castle



Norham Castle, Northumberland. (J Humphrys)



Rochester Castle. The keep's round tower was built after the original square one was brought down by King John's miners. (J Humphrys)





bailey. The royal army then used siege engines to bombard the rebels, who had retreated inside the keep, with stones. It is thought that King John's five siege engines were sited on Boley Hill, a small rise not far from the castle now graced by a large white house. Meanwhile John's engineers undermined the building's south-east turret. Burning the fat from 'forty pigs too fat to eat' they set fire to the timber props they had used to support the undermined masonry and the corner of the keep collapsed. The rebels fell back into the northern half of the interior, but starvation soon forced them to surrender. According to one chronicler, John 'ordered all the nobles to be hung', but was persuaded against this by a military adviser, probably Savaric de Mauléon, one of his mercenary commanders, who warned him of potential reprisals.

*Rochester Castle's imposing tower keep stands 113ft high and is one of the best-preserved in England. The corner tower destroyed in the siege was later rebuilt and is identifiable by the fact that it is round whereas the other three are square.*

### The destruction of Hanslope Castle, Autumn 1215

Robert Mauduit, the owner of Hanslope Castle in Buckinghamshire, sided with the barons. In the autumn of 1215 Falkes de Breauté, one of John's mercenary captains, attacked the castle and destroyed it, also taking the manor of Hanslope. Mauduit eventually regained the manor, but the castle was never rebuilt.

*The manor of Hanslope later became the village of Castlethorpe the name meaning 'farm or secondary settlement of the castle'. Extensive earthworks remain today indicating the site of the castle.*

### The capture of Bedford Castle, December 1215

In December 1215 John's mercenary commander Falkes de Breauté captured Bedford Castle from the rebels. In return John gave Falkes the Honour of Bedford and the castle as well, though it is unclear

whether he gave Falkes the role of castellan. As the war continued, Falkes also took Carisbrooke Castle on the Isle of Wight.

*Today only the base of the castle motte survives.*

### The surrender of Belvoir Castle, December 1215

After capturing Rochester, John and his forces moved north of London, reaching St Albans on 20 December where he divided his forces into four. Each force then moved off to harry the lands of the rebel barons. John's column went north to Nottingham, where he spent Christmas, before moving off on Boxing Day. His first stop after leaving Nottingham was Belvoir Castle in Leicestershire. Its garrison was still loyal to its lord, William d'Albini, who, after his capture at Rochester, was now a prisoner of the King. John threatened the garrison that unless they capitulated, he would starve William to death so, to save their lord, they surrendered.

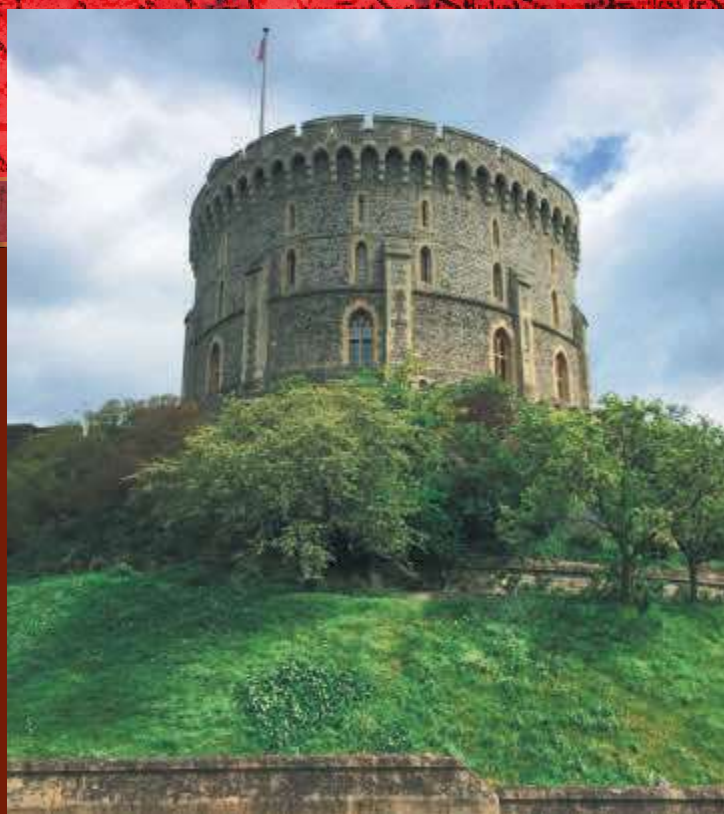
*A succession of castles has stood on the site. The current building dates from the 19th century.*

### The Siege of Berwick Castle, January 1216

On 14 January 1216 John's army reached Berwick. Situated on the banks of the river Tweed, it stood on the border between England and Scotland and would change hands many times during the Anglo-Scottish conflicts. After capturing Berwick John ventured further north, possibly as far as the Firth of Forth, laying waste to the lands of King Alexander II of Scotland before turning south again.

*Berwick Castle was founded in the twelfth century by King David I of Scotland, but very little of the original castle now survives above ground.*





*Windsor Castle held out for John throughout the war. Its motte and round tower were extended upwards in the 19th century. (Photo: Baggiegord CC BY-SA 4.0)*



*Ely Cathedral. (J Humphrys)*



## The French Invasion 1216-17

In November 1215 Prince Louis sent a small advance guard of French soldiers to help the rebel barons hold London, though according to contemporary chroniclers all they did was complain that the lack of decent wine meant that they had to drink English beer. On 21 May 1216, a French fleet commanded by Eustace 'the Monk' landed Louis on the Isle of Thanet in Kent. Eustace was a colourful figure who is said to have been a Benedictine monk in France before running off to sea and becoming a pirate. He had served King John between 1205 and 1212 but then changed sides, fighting for the French, and becoming one of King Philip's leading naval commanders.

When Louis landed in Kent John wisely avoided meeting him in open battle, (it was a battle that John would probably have lost) and instead retreated to the west. Louis quickly retook Rochester Castle, which was still badly battered from the 1215 siege, and moved onto London where he was proclaimed king of England. Louis soon had control of most of south-eastern England. It seemed that, exactly 150 years after the Norman conquest of 1066, England was once again about to be conquered.

### The siege of Windsor Castle, Summer 1216

Held for King John by one of his foreign advisers, Engelard de Cigogne, Windsor Castle was one of the few southern strongholds to resist Louis. It was besieged by Louis and his English supporters from June to September 1216 but never submitted and remained in Royalist hands for the rest of the war.

*Windsor Castle is notable for its good condition, and its long association with the English, and later British monarchy.*

### The Siege of Barnard Castle, August 1216

In 1216 Barnard Castle in County Durham was successfully held for King John by Hugh de Balliol against the rebel barons and their invading Scots allies. The siege came to an abrupt end when Eustace de Vesci, one of the leading rebels, ventured too near to the castle walls and was shot in the head by a crossbowman.

*Barnard Castle is in the care of English Heritage. Even though much of its masonry was used for building at the nearby Raby Castle, substantial parts of the original castle remain, including the outer wall and the 12th century cylindrical tower.*

### The Siege of Ely Castle, 1216

In John's relentless drive against the barons' lands in early 1216, a column of his mercenaries under the Earl of Salisbury and Falkes de Breauté, went into East Anglia attacking, amongst other sites, Ely Castle in Cambridgeshire. The castle was captured and was largely destroyed while Ely itself was sacked.

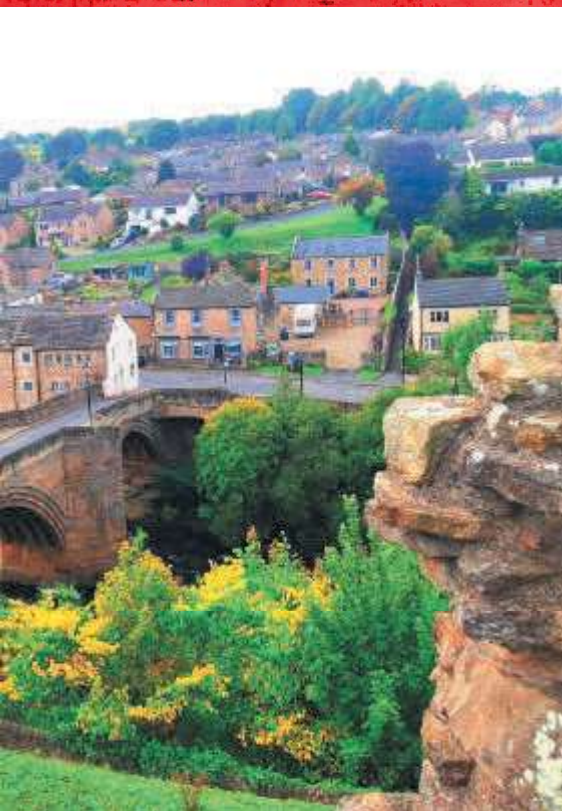
*Today nothing remains of the castle built at Ely. The motte is in a tree-lined park, Cherry Hill Park, just south of the Cathedral.*

### The Siege of Colchester Castle, March 1216

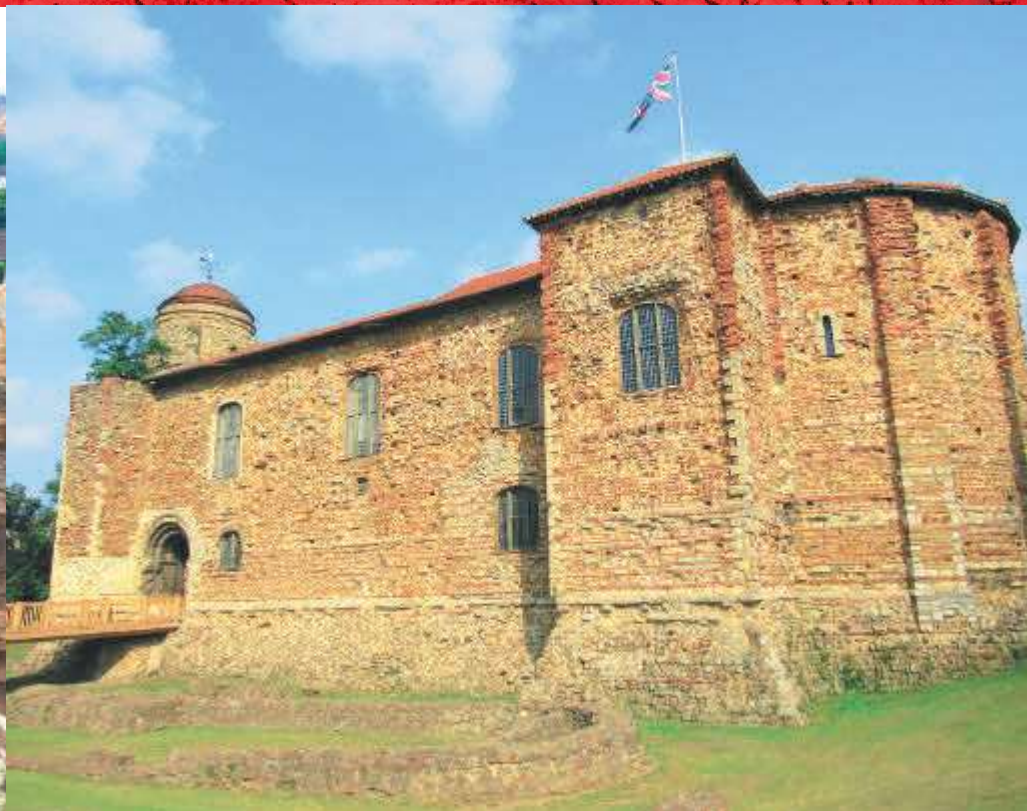
After ravaging the rebel barons' lands in the north, King John returned to Bedford Castle in late February 1216. Meanwhile, one of his mercenary captains, Savari de Mauléon, had laid siege to Colchester Castle in Essex. On 14 March, King John arrived outside the walls and although French troops had reinforced the garrison in January 1216, the castle surrendered ten days later. However, early in 1217 the castle was surrendered back to the French and their English associates in return for a truce.

*The most notable surviving building of Colchester Castle is its Norman keep, the largest in England. It was built on the foundations of a Roman temple and*





*Barnard Castle commands an important crossing of the River Tees. (J Humphrys)*



*Colchester Castle keep. (Photo: Alex Lilvet CCO 1.0)*

*materials such as Roman bricks and clay tiles, taken from the Roman town, were reused in its construction, and can easily be seen.*

### **The Siege of Hedingham Castle, March 1216**

Hedingham Castle in Essex was owned by Robert de Vere, third earl of Oxford, one of the leading rebel barons. On 28 March 1216, it surrendered to John after a three-day siege. The castle was recaptured by the French in January 1217 and later returned to de Vere.

*The castle is now in a fine state of repair, and flourishes as a family home. It is amongst the finest examples of a tower keep still standing to its original height.*

### **The Sieges of Winchester's Castles 1216 & 1217**

England's second capital city and a seat of royal government, Winchester in Hampshire was defended by extensive walls and boasted two castles, the Royal castle to the west and Wolvesey Castle to the east. On 6 June 1216 Louis left London to seek out John at Winchester, but he was too late for John had gone, leaving the city

under the command of Savari de Mauléon who accidentally burned down part of the city while preparing its defences. The French marched into the city unopposed, and the two castles surrendered after a ten-day siege.

In March 1217 William Marshal took advantage of Prince Louis' temporary absence from England to recapture Winchester for the royalists. Wolvesey Castle surrendered on 12 March. The Royal castle held out for longer but eventually submitted as well. The sieges left the city defences in a poor state with walls collapsed through mining and bombardment. When Louis returned to Winchester in April the royalists had left, but before they went they had destroyed more of the surviving defences.

*Only the Great Hall survives of Winchester Castle. It was built by Henry III and houses Winchester's famous Round Table. Wolvesey Castle is largely ruined but the city walls near it are in a good state of repair.*

### **The Sieges of Portchester Castle, 1216 & 1217**

Portchester Castle in Hampshire was originally built in the late eleventh century within the walls of a large Roman fort. John often stayed at the castle when he hunted in the Forest of



*Wolvesey Castle, Winchester. ((Photo: Johan Backer CC BY-SA 3.0)*



*Views from the keep of Portchester Castle showing Portsmouth harbour and the church of the Augustinian Priory that was established within its Roman outer walls in 1128.  
(J Humphrys)*



*The remains of Odiham Castle in Hampshire. (J Humphrys)*

Bere. He was there when he heard of the loss of Normandy in 1204 and it was from here that his army left England in attempts to recover Normandy in 1205 and again in 1214.

Portchester was besieged and captured by the French in June 1216, but in the following spring Philip d'Albini, (a cousin of William d'Albini who was loyal to the crown) was sent to recapture it by William Marshal. It fell on 27 April after a month-long siege. However, it was soon retaken by the French, along with the ports of Portsmouth and Southampton.

*Portchester Castle was built in the corner of a large Roman fort, the walls of which still stand. There are fine views from the roof of the castle tower keep.*

### **The Siege of Odiham Castle, July 1216**

Odiham Castle was built to enable King John to enjoy hunting in the nearby Royal deer park. John visited on 4 June 1215 and again on 9 June, meeting the bishop of Winchester before proceeding to Windsor and Runnymede the following day. Prince Louis laid siege to the castle in July 1216 and he was surprised to find when the garrison surrendered after holding out for two weeks that it consisted only of three knights and perhaps no more than ten men-at-arms.

*The remains of Odiham Castle's shell keep stand on a site to the north west of*

*the town. In 1792 the Basingstoke Canal was built through the southern corner of the bailey.*

### **The Siege of Carlisle Castle, August 1216**

Alexander II of Scotland captured the town of Carlisle on 9 August 1216, but its castle held out longer. Once it fell, Alexander refortified the town which remained in Scottish hands until the following year, when it was returned to the English.

*The castle was originally built for William Rufus. The keep and city walls date from about 1135. Carlisle Castle claims to be the most frequently besieged site in England.*

*The lion at the feet of John's effigy in Worcester Cathedral is depicted biting the King's sword.*







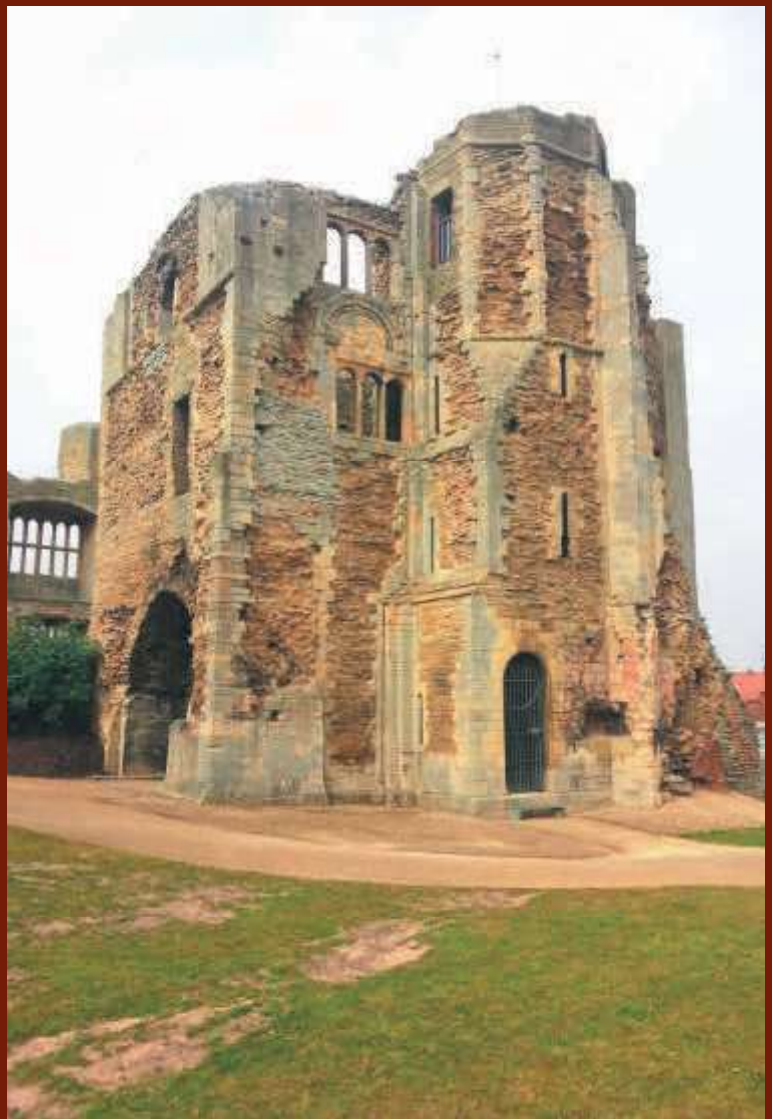
Carlsle Castle. (J Humphrys)

## The last days of King John

During September and October 1216 John and his army again marched northwards. He continued to avoid a major battle and again laid waste to the land and possessions of the rebel barons. However, on 10 October he fell seriously ill at Kings Lynn with dysentery. Nevertheless, he set out on the morning of 11 October to cross the estuary of the Wellstream, (now the Nene), in the Wash at low tide. According to legend all of John's treasure and crown jewels were lost in the crossing. Some historians are sceptical and believe that his belongings were probably looted on his death a few days later.

John struggled on for a few days but in Newark Castle on the night of 18/19 October 1216 he finally died. The chronicles record that on the same night a wind blew so fiercely that it threatened to blow down nearby houses. The superstitious believed that the storm was caused by the devil coming for John's soul.

*John died in the great Norman gatehouse of Newark Castle which still stands today. He was buried in Worcester Cathedral where his tomb can still be seen.*



The gatehouse of Newark Castle. It is here that John probably died.



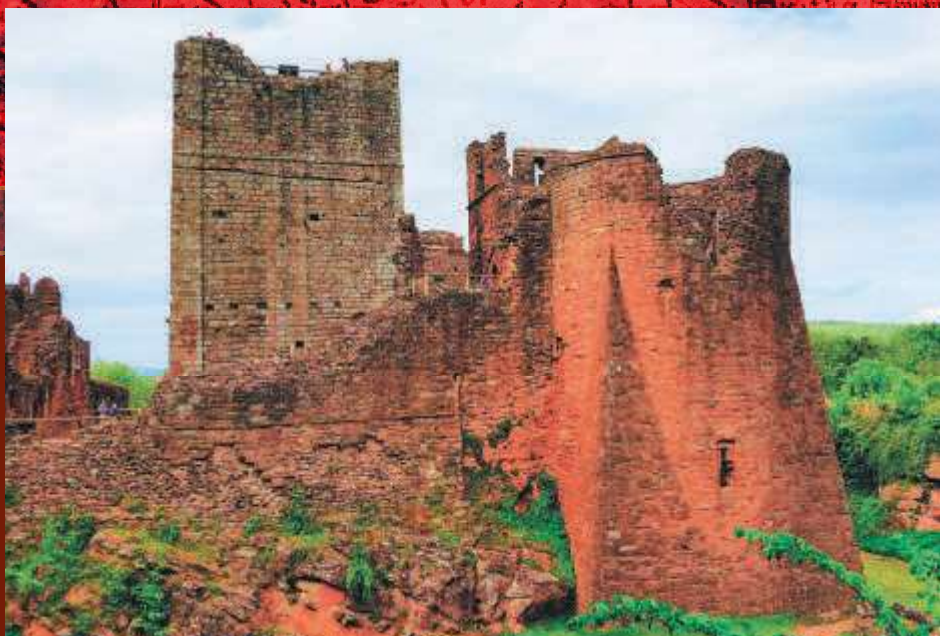
## Henry III

On 28 October 1216 John's nine-year-old son was crowned King Henry III in Gloucester Cathedral. John's crown was missing, and the new king was crowned with a band of gold made from a necklace. The coronation was a tense, emotional affair with news arriving in the middle of the ceremony that Goodrich Castle, only eighteen miles away from Gloucester, was under attack from enemy forces. Rarely has any English king succeeded to the throne in such difficult circumstances as Henry III in 1216. A foreign claimant to the throne was established securely in London, over half the barons were in open rebellion, the treasury was empty so there was no money to pay for an army, and the country was overrun with bands of unpaid mercenaries.

Henry was fortunate in having the loyalty and support of some quite remarkable men. They were William Marshal, earl of Pembroke; Hubert de Burgh, earl of Kent; Peter des Roches, Bishop of Winchester; Ranulf de Blondville, earl of Chester; Guala, the Papal legate. Described by contemporaries as, 'the greatest knight', William Marshal had a reputation for being both honest and honourable. Although he was seventy at the time, (a very great age by medieval standards), he was chosen to be regent of the kingdom until Henry came of age. On 12 November 1216, William Marshal and the Papal Legate Guala, reissued under their own seals, a slightly modified Magna Carta in young King Henry III's name. This was a crucial turning point. Marshal promised that the new regime would respect the terms of the revised Magna Carta and appealed to the barons not to blame an innocent child for his father's misdeeds.

### The Siege of Goodrich Castle, October 1216

In October 1216 Goodrich Castle in Herefordshire was attacked by the Welsh, who had allied themselves with Louis, and the rebel barons. William Marshal, who owned the castle, was forced to send men to relieve it during the coronation of Henry III.



Goodrich Castle. Marshal's keep is on the left. (J Humphrys)

*Only the keep now remains of Marshal's original castle; the walls are of a later date.*

### The Siege of Hertford Castle, November 1216

After capturing the Tower of London on 6 November, Louis advanced north up the old Roman road of Ermine Street. On 12 November 1216 he laid siege to Hertford Castle which he needed to capture to protect his lines of communication. The castle was held for the royalists by one of Falkes de Breauté's household knights, Walter de Godarville. After using siege engines to batter the walls of the castle Louis offered the defenders generous terms of surrender. With no prospect of relief, they yielded on 6 December and were allowed to go free with their horses and arms.

*Little remains of the castle, although the motte is still clearly visible.*

### The Siege of Berkhamsted Castle, December 1216

Berkhamsted Castle in Hertfordshire was initially besieged in December 1216 by William de Mandeville, one of the rebel barons. The castle was held for the royalists by Waleran 'the German', a mercenary captain. As de Mandeville was setting up camp, Waleran launched a sortie, capturing supply carts, baggage and de Mandeville's standard which he later used in an attempt to confuse the besiegers. Eventually Prince Louis arrived after capturing Hertford and set up his siege engines which battered the castle.

Realising the hopeless situation that the castle was in, William Marshal negotiated a Christmas truce in exchange for the castle and the defenders were ordered to surrender on 20 December.

*Although largely ruined, Berkhamsted's curtain walls still stand, as does the Norman motte, which is said to be a very good example.*

### The Siege of Dover Castle, 1216-17

The defence of Dover Castle was one of the most important events of the First Barons' War and one of the most momentous sieges in English history. The castle was held for the royalists by Hubert de Burgh, earl of Kent, and King Philip of France urged Louis to capture it at all costs, describing it as 'the Key to England.'

Louis began his attempt to capture Dover in mid-July 1216. The timber palisade of the castle barbican was soon undermined and captured. Louis' miners then turned their attention to the castle's main gate and succeeded in bringing down one of its massive stone towers. But the castle's defenders were ready. They built a barricade using timbers which had been stripped from the castle's interior and although the French tried to storm through the breach in the wall they were driven back in desperate hand-to-hand fighting. Louis abandoned the siege in October and a truce was agreed with the defiant garrison. In May 1217 Louis tried again. This time a giant catapult called a trebuchet was employed. Matthew Paris referred to this formidable piece of medieval artillery, calling it 'Malvoisin'



(bad neighbour). But the castle still held out. The besiegers' supply lines were being constantly harassed by a guerrilla force under William of Cassingham which operated out of the Weald, an area of dense forest covering much of Kent and Sussex, and when news of the defeat at Lincoln arrived (see below) Louis abandoned his siege for a second time.

*One of the largest castles in England, Dover is in a good state of preservation having been constantly maintained over the years. It was massively refortified during the Napoleonic Wars and in the Second World War the evacuation from Dunkirk was directed from the network of tunnels under the castle.*

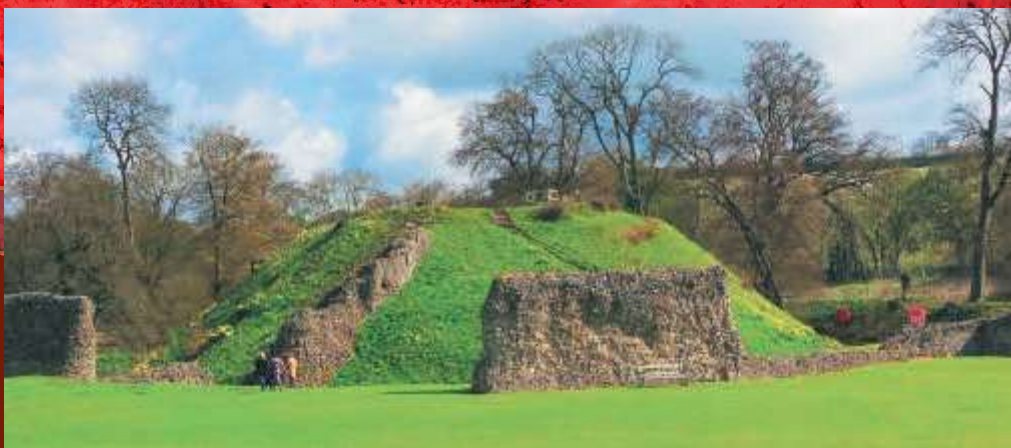
## The Siege of Winchelsea, February 1217

Early in 1217 Louis attempted to return to France to gather reinforcements. Not completely trusting him, his English supporters made him swear a solemn oath to return. Louis marched to Winchelsea, harassed all the way by the men of William of Cassingham. The townspeople of Winchelsea fled by ship after first smashing the mill stones in their town so that the French would be unable to grind the corn for flour to bake bread. Relief forces by land and sea tried to reach Louis, but to no avail, although one ship, under 'Eustace the Monk,' did manage to slip through the blockade.

Once in Winchelsea Eustace set about constructing a huge 'castle' on one ship while Louis set up stone throwers on the shore. The plan was to attack Rye. However, the English raided the harbour and destroyed Eustace's ships. Louis was said to be furious over the carelessness of the French sentries and when they argued that they couldn't be expected to be alert when they were starving with hunger, he tried to rally morale by offering to keep watch himself.

The following day a French relief fleet from Dover broke the blockade, swelling the French numbers to 3,000. Louis then captured Rye and with it some much-needed supplies. At the end of February Louis sailed to France, returning to England in April 1217.

*The original town of Winchelsea was engulfed by the sea in the late 13th century and a new town was built on its present site.*



*The motte of Berkhamsted Castle. (J Humphrys)*



*The solid Norfolk Towers at the northern end of Dover Castle cover the site of the castle's original gatehouse which was undermined by the besieging French. (J Humphrys)*



*Part of the outer wall of Dover Castle. (J Humphrys)*



*The Great Tower and Inner Ward of Dover Castle. (J Humphrys)*





**The Battle of Lincoln.** A royalist crossbowman shoots at the retreating French while the Comte de Perche is stabbed to death through his helmet. (From Matthew Paris (1200-1259) Chronica Maiora @The Master and Fellows of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge.)

## The Sieges of Farnham Castle, 1217

In March 1217 William Marshal took advantage of Prince Louis' absence from England to besiege both Farnham Castle in Surrey and the two castles at Winchester. He sent his son William and the earl of Salisbury (both of whom had recently switched their allegiance from the rebel cause) to Winchester while he turned his attentions on Farnham which surrendered on 12 March. On his return from France in April 1217 Louis marched on Farnham Castle. Although he quickly stormed the outer bailey, he was unable to capture the keep, which implies that it had suffered little damage during the royalist attack.

*Farnham Castle has received many additions over the years, but its impressive motte and shell keep still survive.*

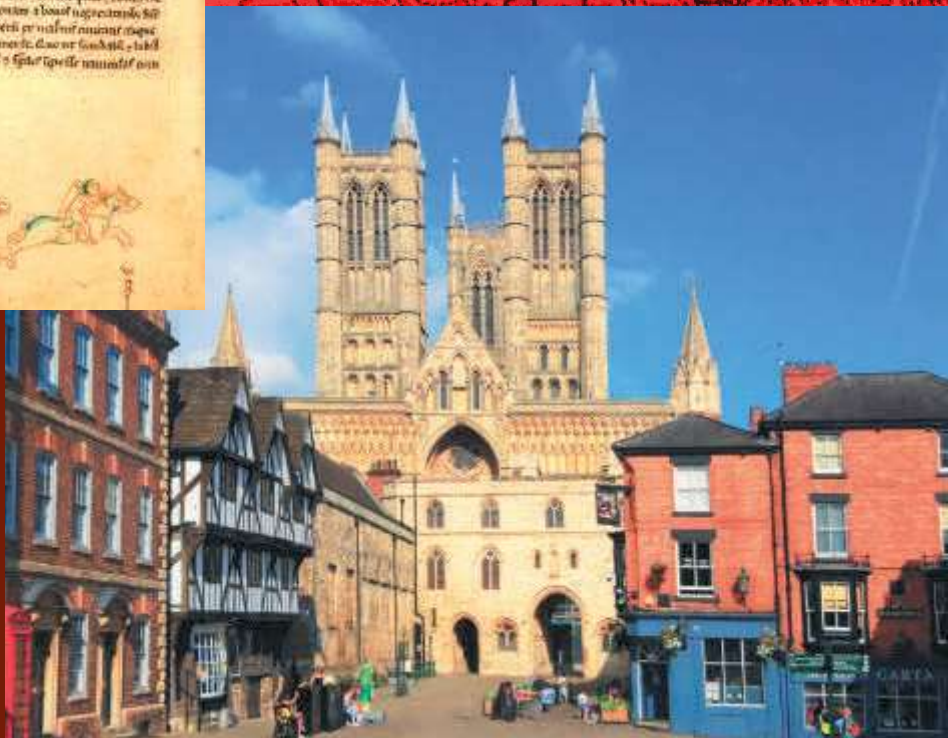
## The Siege of Marlborough Castle, April 1217

On the last day of March 1217 William Marshal the younger was sent by his father to lay siege to Marlborough Castle in Wiltshire. This was rather fitting, as the older William had probably been born at Marlborough, where his father, John Marshal, had commanded the castle. Despite the family connection, the castle did not fall easily. It held out for three weeks before surrendering.

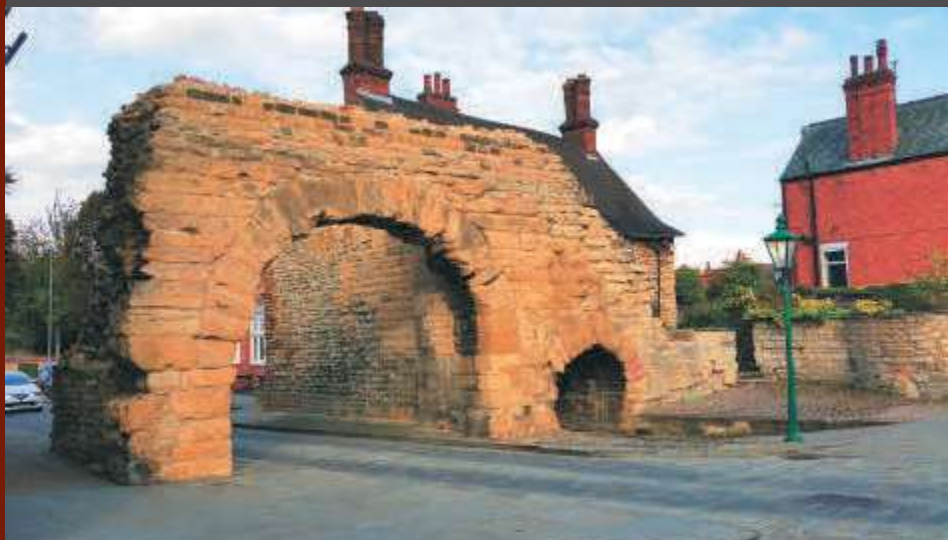
*All that remains of Marlborough Castle today is the mound of the motte (built on a prehistoric burial mound) in the grounds of Marlborough College.*

## The Siege of Mountsorrel Castle, April 1217

Mountsorrel Castle in Leicestershire belonged to Saer de Quinci, earl of Winchester, one of the leading rebel barons. Its garrison was under the command of Henry de Braybrooke. In early April 1217 it was besieged by a royalist force under the earl of Chester. Saer de Quinci, who was with Prince Louis in Dover, urged the Prince to send a relief force to lift the siege of his castle and reinforce the rebel army that was



*Sandwiched between the castle and the cathedral, Lincoln's Castle Square was the scene of heavy fighting during the battle of May 1217. (J Humphrys)*



*Newport Arch, Lincoln. Part of the royalist army entered the city via this old Roman gate during the battle of May 1217. (J Humphrys)*



*Lincoln Castle. Royalist crossbowmen lined the walls and shot down into the French and rebels below. (J Humphrys)*



**The Battle of Sandwich. English sailors shoot pots of lime (l) and board the French ships.**  
(From Matthew Paris (1200–59) *Chronica maiora*,  
© The Master and Fellows of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge)



besieging Lincoln. De Quinci arrived at Mountsorrel with the relief force to find that the royalists had lifted their siege and retreated to Nottingham. After re-provisioning the castle and repairing the damage, the relief force continued on to Lincoln where it joined the siege.

*After the war ended the castle was destroyed by the king's men, being 'branded a nest of the Devil and den of thieves and robbers'. All that remains today is the imposing granite crag standing above the village of Mountsorrel.*

## The Battle of Lincoln, May 1217

Fought on 20 May 1217, the Battle of Lincoln was the turning point in the First Barons' War. Built on a hill, with a castle at the top and the river Witham at the bottom, Lincoln was one of the largest and wealthiest cities in England. The city had been occupied by a joint French and rebel army under the Comte de Perche, but its castle still held out for Henry III under the stewardship of Dame Nicola de la Haye, the hereditary castellan, who was then in her late sixties.

William Marshal was determined that such a strategically important stronghold should not fall into enemy hands, and he gathered a relief force at nearby Newark. The royalist army reached Lincoln early on the morning of the 20th. A reconnaissance force from the French and rebel army apparently became confused by the number of standards in the royalist army and overestimated its strength and as a result, the Comte de Perche decided to stay within the city walls.

The royalist army attacked and whilst the earl of Chester's men entered the city through the north gate William Marshal and his men forced their way through the west gate. Meanwhile a group of some 300 crossbowmen slipped into the castle via a postern gate which opened outside the city walls. There was some fierce fighting in the narrow streets, with men on horseback too close together to mount a proper charge. Meanwhile the royalist crossbowmen on the castle ramparts unleashed deadly volleys of bolts onto the packed ranks of their enemies in the streets below.

The Comte de Perche was killed outside the castle when a lance was thrust through the eye slit of his helmet and the French were forced down the hill. The royalists now had the significant advantage of fighting downhill in the steep streets, and many of the French and rebels were captured as they struggled to flee the city by its south gate. After the battle, the city was looted by the victorious army on the pretext that the citizens had collaborated with the enemy, and the cathedral too was plundered. So much booty was gained by the royalist army that the battle was sometimes called 'Lincoln fair'. The battle was a major blow to Louis as many of his leading supporters were taken prisoner.

*The castle is an impressive sight. Standing high above the local countryside, it contains two mottes, each with a stone tower, a substantial circuit wall and two great gateways. Lincoln's copy of Magna Carta is displayed in a custom-built vault.*

## The Battle of Sandwich, August 1217

On 24 August 1217 the war reached a dramatic climax with an epic battle in the Channel. Some historians claim that this momentous sea fight ranks with the defeat of the Spanish Armada as one of the most important naval victories in English history.

After the disastrous defeat at Lincoln, Louis withdrew to London and sent urgent appeals to France for reinforcements. A fleet of eighty-one transports was gathered under the command of Robert of Courtenay with Eustace the Monk as his second-in-command. The English realised that it was better to attack the heavily laden transports at sea rather than wait for the French army to land and a force of forty English ships was put under the command of Hubert de Burgh, the former defender of Dover. As the French fleet sailed towards the Thames estuary the English fleet issued out of Sandwich, but

the English seemed to be in no hurry to close with the French and at first they continued sailing eastward.

In medieval times naval battles were crude affairs with opposing ships running alongside each other and the crews fighting hand-to-hand across the decks. At first the French were amused by the antics of the English who, they assumed, were intimidated by the size of the French fleet. Too late they realised that the English had gained the 'weather gauge' - they were upwind of the French and could attack the French rear, whilst the ships in the French van were unable to sail against the wind and go to their aid.

Not only could the English choose when and where to attack, but the English arrows, sailing with the wind, plunged in among the French crews long before the French arrows could reach the English. Worst of all for the French, the English released sacks of powdered lime, which drifted down in clouds before the attacking ships, blinding the sailors and blistering their skins. One by one the French ships were either sunk by ramming or boarded and captured. Eustace the Monk was a particularly hated figure and the fighting around his flagship was fierce. When he realised all was lost, Eustace tried to hide in the hold, but he was discovered and dragged on deck. He pleaded for his life, promising a fantastic treasure in exchange for his life but his words were ignored and he was beheaded on the deck of his own ship.

## The End of the First Barons' War

When Louis heard the news of the battle of Sandwich, he quickly realised that his cause was lost. He immediately opened negotiations to drop all claims to the English throne and hand over London in exchange for 10,000 marks and an amnesty for his rebel supporters. On 12 September 1217 the Treaty of Kingston (or Lambeth) ended the war and Louis left England never to return.



# Baronial Discontent

The tone of the treaty which brought the First Barons' War to an end was largely one of reconciliation and there were no widespread recriminations against the rebels. Even so there was still discontent amongst a number of the barons, which manifested itself in acts of defiance and regional rebellions over the next few years and at times the country seemed to be only one step away from another civil war.

As King Henry III was still a minor at the beginning of his reign country was ruled by a series of regencies until 1234. During this period, the main aims of the government were to reassert royal authority, to increase funds coming in to the exchequer and to regain control of the king's castles and lands. This caused some friction with barons and magnates who had held royal castles during the war but now looked upon them as being theirs by right rather than places they held for the king.

## The Siege of Rockingham Castle, June 1220

William de Forz, third earl of Aumâle, had been one of the council of twenty-five barons in the 'security clause' of Magna Carta, and he was the first of the rebel barons to return to the royalist cause. However, he subsequently changed sides a number of times, leading a later historian to describe him as 'a feudal adventurer of the worst kind'.

In June 1220, Aumâle refused to hand back Rockingham Castle in Northamptonshire to the crown. On 26 June government forces surprised the garrison at Rockingham while Aumâle was away, and two days later it surrendered. At the same time the government also obtained possession of nearby Sauvey Castle, which Aumâle had also been holding and had refused to surrender.

Aumâle was treated leniently after the surrender of Rockingham, but he still refused to give up his possession of the castle at Bytham in Lincolnshire. The king and the court spent Christmas 1220 at Oxford, but Aumâle left the festivities early in the middle of the

*Effigy of William Marshal 'the greatest knight' in London's Temple Church.  
(Photo: Michel Wal CC BY-SA 3.0)*



night without the king's permission. He made his way to Bytham where he strengthened the castle and despoiled the neighbouring villages of Edenham and Deeping. He then attacked the castles of Newark and Sleaford but was unsuccessful and so turned his attention to Kimbolton Castle to the south, but was again repulsed. These outrages caused the papal legate Pandulf to excommunicate Aumâle, but avenues of compromise were left open in an attempt to resolve the situation.

*Little of the early 13th century Rockingham Castle remains; the twin-towered gatehouse was built in the reign of Edward I.*

### **The seizure of Fotheringhay Castle, January 1221**

The situation changed when Aumâle finally succeeded in taking a castle. In late January Aumâle attacked Fotheringhay Castle and with the aid of an iced-over moat he was able to capture it. As a royal letter put it, he 'furtively and seditiously seized the castle of Fotheringhay ... devastating and plundering our land and violently disturbing and infringing our peace and that part of our kingdom.'

The royal army gathered at Northampton on 2 February, but by then Fotheringhay had already been abandoned by Aumâle who was now fleeing to his castle at Skipton in Craven. The government directed the northern magnates to lay siege to Skipton as well as Aumâle's castles at Skipsea and Cockermouth.

*The earthworks of Fotheringhay still overlook the river Nene but only a small piece of its stone walls remain.*

### **The Siege of Bytham Castle, February 1221**

The royal army invested Bytham Castle on 6 February. Siege engines, some of which were provided by Falkes de Breauté and Philip Mark, two of John's old mercenary captains, were set up to bombard the castle. The garrison, some thirteen strong, resisted for a few days,

but eventually came out of the castle and surrendered to the king. Aumâle, who had taken refuge at Fountains Abbey was brought south under conduct of the archbishop of York.

Some of Bytham's garrison were imprisoned or sent into exile but Aumâle escaped very lightly by providing security that he would in future obey orders with a number of magnates agreeing to provide pledges of one hundred marks if Aumâle was disobedient again

*The earthwork remains of Bytham are ringed by a public footpath but the castle itself is on private land.*

### **The Siege of Bedford Castle, 1224**

At the end of 1223, the government ordered the existing custodians of the royal castles to surrender them to the king. This was seen as a way to remove those custodians who had been placed in positions by King John, and who were often 'aliens', ie not born in England, and were in the main the mercenary captains that John had employed in the war. One of these men was Falkes de Breauté.

In some cases, the new custodies were handed back to the existing holders, but Falkes de Breauté fared particularly badly, losing the sheriffdoms he held and going from being the custodian of eight castles to just two. In April 1224 a charge relating to an event some eight years earlier was made against Falkes, accusing him of the capital crime of a breach of the king's peace; if found guilty Falkes could be executed and his holdings forfeit.

Backed into a corner, Falkes responded by provisioning his two remaining castles - Plympton, in Devon, and Bedford, as well as Stogursey Castle in Somerset, which was part of the inheritance of his wife. At Bedford he installed a garrison of some eighty knights and serjeants under the command of his brother William de Breauté.

In June 1224 the king summoned his barons to a council at Northampton on the same day as the case against Falkes was to be heard. As Henry de Braybrooke, the justice who was hearing the case (and who was also a personal enemy of the de Breautés) was making his way there he was seized by William de Breauté and carried off to Bedford.



*Model of Bedford Castle on display near the remains of the castle mound.  
(Photo: Simon Speed of 3 dimensional model on permanent public display in the UK.)*





▲ Grosmont Castle. (J Humphrys) Remains of the entrance to Grosmont Castle. (J Humphrys) ▼



Falkes fled north, while the king and the army that had gathered at Northampton moved to Bedford, arriving there on 20 June. William refused to hand over Henry de Braybrooke and the castle unless he was ordered to do so by Falkes. Falkes did no such thing. He had earlier appealed to the pope, Honorius III, over his treatment and was hoping that Bedford could hold out until the pope intervened.

The castle was surrounded and the besiegers built two high siege towers

which overlooked the castle and could shoot projectiles into it, forcing the garrison to go everywhere in armour. In all, four assaults were made on the castle. Its barbican was captured first followed by the outer bailey. Then the wall of the inner bailey was undermined and taken, forcing the defenders back into the keep. This too was undermined, and fires set on 14 August which filled the keep with smoke and caused a great crack in the masonry. Realising the game was up, the garrison sent out Falkes's wife and her women along with Henry de Braybrooke

and, after spending one final night in the keep, they surrendered, throwing themselves on the king's mercy. That mercy was not forthcoming. William and all but three of the garrison were hanged.

Falkes submitted to the king and placed himself at his mercy. He resigned all his possessions, including Plympton and Stogursey castles, which had held out until after the fall of Bedford Castle. The remains of Bedford Castle were restored to William de Beauchamp. Falkes had been humiliated and was now a broken





*Ruins of the 12th century castle at Monmouth. (Photo: Richard Croft / Monmouth Castle / CC BY-SA 2.0)*

man. In October 1224 he left England and for a while became a prisoner of the King of France. On his release he went to Rome to seek the pope's support for restitution of his lands. It was there that he died in 1226, according to the chronicler Matthew Paris after eating a poisoned fish.

### **The seizure of Goodrich Castle, 1233**

When he led the baronial opposition against the government of Henry III and Peter de Roches, Bishop of Winchester, Richard Marshal, the son of William Marshal, was declared a traitor by the king. After Richard allied himself with the Welsh and captured Cardiff and Newport, the king ordered the seizure of his castle at Goodrich.

### **The Siege of Usk Castle, 1233**

In 1233 Baldwin of Guînes, a Flemish supporter of Peter des Roches, attacked Richard Marshal's castle at Usk. It soon surrendered as it was short of supplies, but Marshal later recaptured it after a lengthy siege.

*Usk Castle stands on a hill overlooking the town; its stone defences were originally built by William Marshal.*

### **The battle of Grosmont Castle, November 1233**

When the royal army camped outside their castle at Grosmont in Monmouthshire in November 1233, Richard Marshal carried out a night attack on their encampment and, while not taking the castle itself, forced the rest of the king's army to flee in confusion.

*One of the chain of fortifications built to control the Anglo-Welsh border, Grosmont was substantially rebuilt by Hubert de Burgh at the start of the 13th century.*

### **The Siege of Carmarthen Castle, November 1233**

In November 1233 Marshal began a three-month siege of the castle, building a temporary bridge across the river Towy. In March 1234, Henry de Turberville sailed with a fleet from Bristol and destroyed the improvised bridge, slaughtered its defenders, and resupplied the garrison.

*Carmarthen Castle was largely demolished in the mid-17th century but the gatehouse survives and the castle motte is accessible to the public.*

### **The Battle of Monmouth, November 1233**

After investing Carmarthen, Marshal and his knights rode to Monmouth on 25 November to reconnoitre the town before besieging it. They were spotted by Baldwin, Count of Guînes, who was holding the town for the king with a mixed force of Flemings and Poitevins. Wrongly thinking that Marshal had only a few followers with him, Baldwin rode out to attack him and was soundly defeated.

*Monmouth Castle was later remodelled by the Lancastrians but the remains of its great tower date to the first half of the twelfth century.*

### **The Siege of Shrewsbury Castle, January 1234**

In January 1234 Richard Marshal and his ally Prince Llewelyn of Wales burned Shrewsbury and laid siege to its castle. After agreeing a truce with Henry in March he crossed to Ireland to rally his supporters there but in April he was defeated in battle, taken prisoner, and later died of his wounds.

*One tower of Shrewsbury's circuit of walls still survives. The castle's great hall (which now houses a military museum) was built in the reign of Henry III. Its motte is now covered by trees and topped with an 18th century folly.*



# The Second Barons' War

The reign of Henry III (1216-72) was a largely peaceful one, both at home and abroad. Relations between king and barons, in the age of Magna Carta, were far improved from the days of King John, as were relations with France. Henry was also known as a devout king, rebuilding Westminster Abbey in honour of his patron saint, Edward the Confessor. By the 1250s, however, his rule was blighted by financial difficulties and unpopular policies, particularly his expensive ambition of conquering the Kingdom of Sicily, and his patronage of his unpopular half-brothers, the Lusignans. Things came to a head in 1258, when a cadre of barons marched on the king's hall at Westminster and seized power. They set up a council to govern with the help of parliament, henceforth to be held three times a year come what may. The new regime implemented a series of central and local reforms that came to be known as the Provisions of Oxford. But when Henry recovered power in the early 1260s and set aside the Provisions, Simon de Montfort, earl of Leicester, led a violent campaign to reimpose them by force.

Although the period is commonly referred to as the Second Barons' War, the principles at stake were very different to those of 1215-17, with de Montfort and his supporters seeking to overhaul the very system of government in a way that was utterly radical. The conflict also involved men and women of every status across the kingdom: not only barons but queens and countesses, knights and peasants – as well as the many bishops, monks and friars who supported the Montfortian cause.

## Violence at Shere, April 1258

On 1 April 1258 a dispute between John fitz Geoffrey, lord of the manor of Shere in Surrey and the Lusignan Aymer de Valence, bishop-elect of Winchester over the appointment of the parish priest at Shere ended in violence. Aymer's forces attacked his rival's men in the village,

Henry III (left) in battle against Simon de Montfort (right). (Detail from the 14th century *Grand Chroniques de France*. British Library Royal 16 G VI f. 427v)

killing one of them. Henry III's subsequent failure to hold Aymer to account was seen by many as evidence of his partiality and fuelled demands for sweeping governmental reform.

*St James's Church, Shere, dates from the late 12th century and occupies a picturesque setting in the centre of the village.*

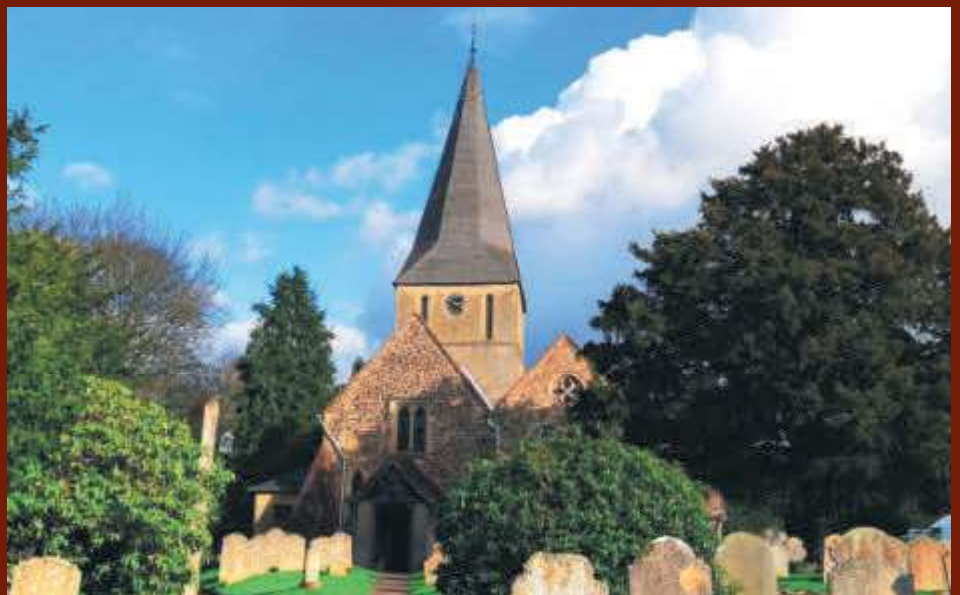
## The sack of Northampton, April 1264

When conflict broke out in 1264 Northampton was held for the rebels by de Montfort's son, also called Simon. On 5 April, while royal forces attacked the town from the south, Henry's son Edward led troops to break in through the northern wall. The town was sacked, and

its castle surrendered on the following day. Because the students in the town had supported de Montfort, Henry later decreed '...no University should ever after be attempted to be removed to, or founded, in Northampton'.

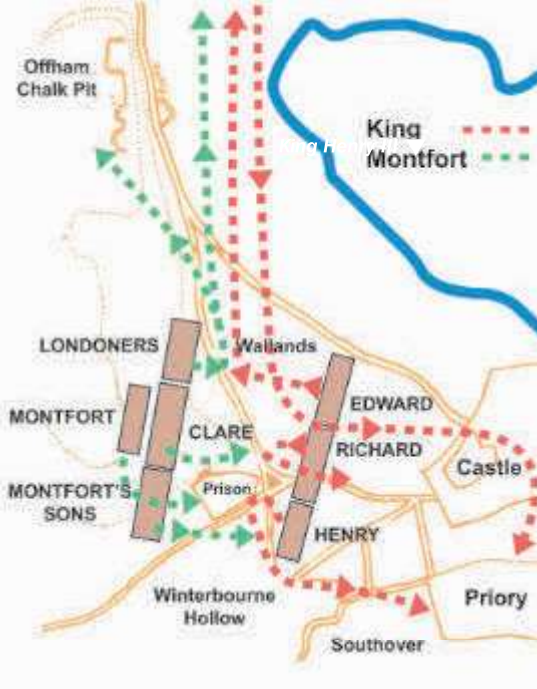
## The siege of Rochester Castle, April 1264

Roger de Leybourne, the royal constable, held Rochester in support of Henry III. Rebel armies led by Simon de Montfort and Gilbert de Clare entered the city and set about trying to capture the castle. Although it was unsuccessful the attack drew the royalist forces south where they would be defeated at Lewes. The castle suffered extensive damage which was not restored until the next century.



*St James's Church, Shere. Henry III's failure to administer impartial justice following the attack on the church by Aymer de Valence's men was a major cause of the political crisis of 1258. (J Humphrys)*

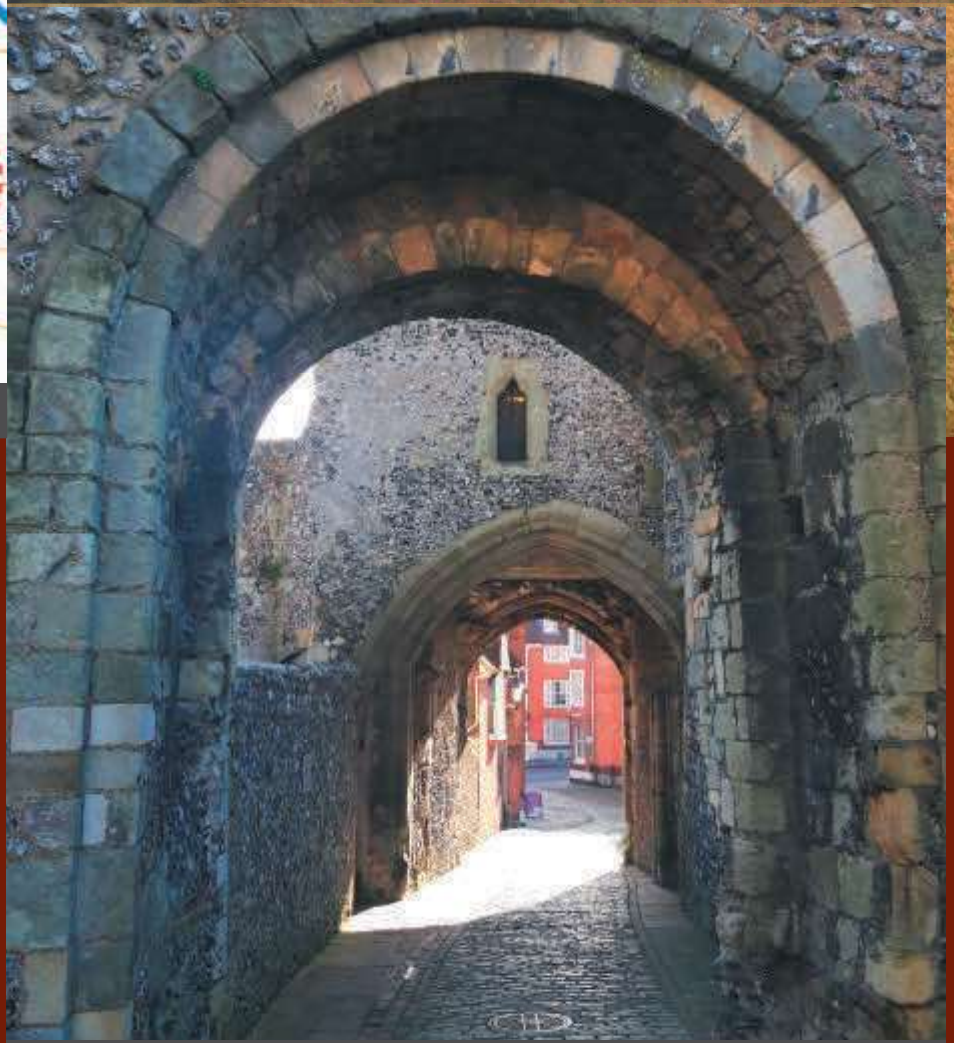




*The Battle of Lewes*



*Lewes battlefield from the downs*



*The gate of Lewes Castle. Prince Edward's troops were based here at the start of the battle of Lewes. (J Humphrys)*



*Henry III from Matthew Paris Historia Anglorum. (British Library, MS Royal 14 C VII f.9)*

## The Battle of Lewes, May 1264

When the royalists moved from Rochester to Tonbridge, Battle and then Winchelsea, threatening the Montfortian garrison at Dover, Simon de Montfort sought to draw the royalists away from Dover by heading into Sussex. By 13 May, the king's forces were camped at Lewes, with those under his eldest son, Edward, at the castle, and those with the king at Lewes Priory, a little to the south of the town; meanwhile de Montfort's men were camped in woodland to the north of Lewes. When a last attempt at negotiation broke down both sides prepared for battle.

Early on 14 May, Simon de Montfort led his army to the crest of the hill west of Lewes, where he had them signed with the cross as crusaders. The king's forces significantly outnumbered those of de Montfort, though it is impossible to be

certain of the numbers involved: Henry perhaps had as many as 1,500 mounted knights, with perhaps 2-3,000 foot soldiers. On seeing de Montfort's army arrayed on the hillside above the town offering battle, the royalists hastily assembled into three divisions: the king commanded the left, with the right led by Edward, and the centre by the king's brother, Richard earl of Cornwall.

Prince Edward's division was the first into battle, clashing with the Londoners on de Montfort's left. Despite being obliged to attack uphill they rapidly put them to flight but then unwisely left the battlefield to pursue the fleeing Londoners, perhaps as far as four miles. At this point, Simon de Montfort brought in his reserves and his men were able to drive the rest of the royal army back down the hill to the town, where fighting continued in the streets. With his army in retreat Henry took refuge in the priory, where Edward was

eventually able to join him. Negotiations continued throughout the night, and ended with Henry, Edward, and Richard of Cornwall surrendering themselves as prisoners. The victory allowed de Montfort



*Simon de Montfort. Drawing on stained glass window of Chartres Cathedral.*





The charge of Prince Edward's cavalry routs the Londoners.  
(Illustration by Graham Turner, copyright Osprey Publishing)



Re-enactment of the Battle of Evesham

and his supporters to establish a new revolutionary government, with a council of nine ruling the kingdom, aided by parliament. Because the parliament he summoned in December 1264, and which assembled in the following month included representatives from counties, cities and towns it has been described as the earliest forerunner of today's House of Commons.

*Lewes Castle is still in excellent repair and offers a magnificent view of the surrounding countryside from its keep. Although the lower parts of the battlefield have been built upon the top of hill where de Montfort deployed and the slopes to the south and south-west remain as agricultural land. Information posts explain the battle and a battlefield walk leaflet, which the Battlefields Trust helped to produce, is available from the town's Tourist Information Centre.*

## Muster at Barham Down, July 1264

Faced with a threat from abroad led by Henry III's queen, Simon de Montfort called for men drawn from every town, city, and village to assemble at Barham Down, near Canterbury. Described at the time as a 'huge army' the force was never actually tested in action because inclement weather kept the invasion force at bay.

## Siege of Pevensey Castle, 1264-5

Pevensey Castle was of key strategic importance and a formidable fortress on the south coast of England. After de Montfort's victory at Lewes a royalist garrison held out there for a year, raiding the surrounding countryside and being resupplied by sea. The siege, which proved costly and ineffective, was

eventually lifted in July 1265.

*Originally a Roman 'Saxon Shore' fort, its outer walls and the bailey built within it are still in reasonable repair. Owing to some later land reclamation, the site is some way distant from the sea, but it overlooks Pevensey Bay, where William, Duke of Normandy beached his fleet in 1066.*



Catapult stones in the bailey of Pevensey Castle. (J Humphrys)





**Battle of Evesham: Late 13th century depiction of the death and mutilation of Simon de Montfort at Evesham (British Library Cotton MS Nero D ii, f. 177)**

## Battle at Kenilworth, August 1265

In May 1265 Prince Edward escaped from his captors at Hereford and joined up with Gilbert de Clare, earl of Gloucester, at Ludlow. Clare had formerly been a leading rebel commander and his desertion was a major blow to the Montfortian cause. After seizing Worcester and capturing Gloucester, Edward and Clare moved into central England where they launched a surprise attack on the forces of Simon de Montfort's son who were camped outside the walls of Kenilworth Castle. The younger de Montfort's forces were badly cut up and he himself only escaped by swimming across one of the lakes surrounding the castle.

## The Battle of Evesham, August 1265

Determined to destroy Simon de Montfort's army before it could be reinforced by his son's remaining troops, Prince Edward brought him to battle at Evesham on the morning of 4 August 1265. The army of Simon de Montfort had probably not long entered Evesham when, from lookouts on the tower of the Abbey, news came of the approach of the royal army under Prince Edward. Taking the captive king Henry III with him, and

despite being outnumbered more than three to one, de Montfort rode out with his cavalry, with his infantry in support, to engage the enemy.

Less than a mile to the north of the town, de Montfort found the royal forces deployed in three divisions. He appears to have made a bold cavalry attack, perhaps in the hope of breaking through. At first some of the royal forces retreated, but Edward rapidly counter-attacked and de Montfort's army, or at least his knights, were soon encircled. Unusually for a medieval battle, no quarter was to be given and de Montfort and most of his main supporters were cut down. It appears likely that the infantry had already broken and begun to flee, but if not then they were soon routed. The rebel forces were pursued mercilessly back into the town, the killing continuing right through the streets and even in the abbey itself. Though peace was not finally restored across the country for another two years, the battle of Evesham had completely broken the rebellion, for most of its major supporters had been intentionally killed on the field.

*The battlefield is privately owned, but a permissive footpath leads through the site.*

## Confrontation at Peatling Magna, August 1265

A few days after Simon de Montfort's defeat at Evesham in August 1265, a group of peasants in the Leicestershire village of Peatling Magna confronted a party of royalists, declaring that they were acting 'against the welfare of the community of the realm'. It was a significant moment for it came at a time when common villages are not considered to have had political opinions.

## Capture of the Isle of Axholme, summer 1266

After Evesham, some of the rebels sought refuge at Axholme in the Lincolnshire Fens. Prince Edward had wooden bridges built so that the forces he had levied in Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire could advance on the rebels who quickly came to terms.

*Much of the marshland at the Isle was later drained by Dutch engineers, but it still retains its distinctive geography.*

## Capture of Winchelsea, 1266 and 1267

After Evesham, Simon de Montfort the Younger was pursued by Prince Edward





to Winchelsea. The town which had been a notable supporter of de Montfort's rebellion was the last stronghold of the rebels on the south coast. After a combined land and sea assault by a force that included 577 Welsh archers it finally fell to the royal army. A second rebellion at Winchelsea in the following year was quickly repressed by local royalist forces

*Old Winchelsea was always at risk of flooding, and it was destroyed in February 1287 when a ferocious storm surge hit the south coast and took with it the old town and much of Hastings and New Romney.*

### **The Siege of Duffield Castle, Spring 1266**

Duffield Castle in Derbyshire was attacked by Henry III in 1266, in the search for pockets of resistance. It is thought that much of the structure was

destroyed at that time although the castle may have been severely damaged by the royalists two years earlier.

*Although the Norman castle had the third biggest 13th century keep in the country, all that remains today are the foundations and a spectacular view.*

### **The Battle of Chesterfield, May 1266**

On 15 May 1266 a royal army, led by Henry II's nephew, Henry of Almain, nephew of Henry III, defeated some of the remaining rebels in a night attack upon Chesterfield and captured their leader Robert de Ferrers, earl of Derby. Chronicles mention the use of covered wagons by the attackers and the fact that the earl was suffering from gout. It was said that during the fighting, the men of the nearby village of Brampton retreated

to that part of the churchyard wall which it was their duty to maintain in normal times, and refused to give way.

### **The siege of Kenilworth Castle, June to December 1266**

A hard core of de Montfort's supporters fought on after his death with many retreating to Kenilworth Castle in Warwickshire where they held out, mainly in the hope of forcing the king to restore their confiscated estates to them. One of the largest fortifications in the kingdom, Kenilworth had been a royal castle, and its defences had been extensively strengthened during the reign of King John. In 1253 Henry III had given it to Simon de Montfort for life.

Although de Montfort's son, who had been captured after Evesham, agreed to hand Kenilworth back to the king, his late





*The Keep of Kenilworth Castle. (J Humphrys)*

father's supporters inside the castle saw things differently. When in March 1266 Henry sent a messenger to them to demand the surrender of the castle, they returned him to the king minus a hand. Realising that he would have to take the castle by force, the king surrounded the castle and ordered huge quantities of weapons, supplies and military equipment to be delivered to his besieging forces. These included thousands of wooden 'hurdles' (screens to protect his soldiers from missiles), 60,000 crossbow bolts and nine siege engines.

But the garrison (which a contemporary chronicle claims to have consisted of 1,000 men, 160 women and an unknown number of servants) was also well-equipped, with copious stocks of food of its own and some stone-throwing catapults. The siege began in earnest on 25 June 1266. The king's catapults began a full-scale bombardment of the castle,

but this seems to have been largely ineffective. Indeed, the defenders hit back, with one of their catapults destroying a large siege tower that the besiegers had erected. Because much of the castle was surrounded by water it was virtually impossible to undermine its walls, so the besiegers even had barges hauled overland from Chester for a waterborne assault. But this too was repelled.

On 31 October, after Henry had held a parliament at Kenilworth, a series of peace terms were issued known as the Dictum of Kenilworth. This allowed the rebels to regain their lands on the payment of fines whose severity varied according to their involvement in the rebellion. But the garrison rejected these conditions and fought on for a further six weeks. Finally disease and starvation forced their surrender on the terms they had been offered in October and on 14 December they left the castle unmolested with their arms, horses, and equipment.

Even then a few rebels continued to hold out at Ely until the following summer when the earl of Gloucester, who considered the terms of the Dictum to be too harsh, occupied London and forced an improvement in its terms. The siege of Kenilworth had been ruinously expensive – not only for the king, who was obliged to pawn jewels from King Edward the Confessor's shrine in Westminster Abbey, but also for ten Midlands counties, which had spent so much in their attempts to supply the royal army, that they were unable to contribute anything to the royal exchequer in the following year.

*Although it was slighted after the English Civil War, the remains of Kenilworth Castle are some of the most impressive in the country. Some of the great stones used in the siege can be seen in the castle grounds.*