

January

"HUBERT DE BURGH"

A talk by Phil Wyborn-Brown - Reported by Jack Woolford

Although a commoner, probably born in 1175 in Norfolk, by 1198 Hubert De Burgh was Court Chamberlain to the future King John, probably having already served John's brother, King Richard I. In 1200 he was appointed Custodian of Dover Castle, amongst many other signs of royal favour, and two years later Warden of the Cinque Ports. King John was confronted by rebellious barons and by his nephew Arthur of Brittany who were allied to Philip Augustus, king of France. King John won the battle of Falaise and captured Arthur (whose claim to the throne was better than his) who was later murdered. Willy-nilly Hubert was, perhaps innocently, involved and his fortunes fluctuated wildly as he rose and fell in the king's favour. However, when after the Battle of Bouvines in 1214, which Philip Augustus won, John was forced to submit to the Barons to sign Magna Carta at Runnymede in 1215, it was Hubert who emerged as Justiciar, the king's deputy.

At the invitation of some barons Prince Louis of France invaded England and twice besieged Dover Castle ("the key to the kingdom") in 1216/17 and despite siege engines, a mine under the gate, siege towers and crossbowmen, Hubert not only defeated them on land but also at sea in the Battle of Sandwich. On the death of the Earl Marshall in 1219 he became Vice Regent to the young king Henry III and married the daughter of the



Coat of Arms (window)

king of Scotland. His power naturally generated opposition and in 1222 the pope intervened to give the Great Seal to the king. Although he was defeated by a Welsh rebellion and in an invasion of France he nevertheless became Earl of Kent, Justiciar of England and was endowed with castles galore in 1227/28. In 1232, however, rivals with baronial support supplanted him as Justiciar and he lost the Earldom of Kent, became a prisoner in the Tower

of London and his wealth was confiscated. Further imprisoned in Devizes, whence he escaped, he found sanctuary in a church from which he was rescued. Papal intervention caused Henry III to pardon him and he was restored as Earl of Kent and Constable of Dover Castle in 1234. He did not, however, live happily ever after because his daughter secretly married his wealthy ward Richard de

Clair. He pacified the king with money but the charges against him were revived in 1239. He was successfully defended but still had to forfeit castles in Wales. He died in 1243 aged 68.

Concluding this most remarkable story, Mr Wyborn-Brown contended that Hubert De Burgh should rank as an English national hero alongside Henry V, Nelson and Winston Churchill. But for his defence of Dover England would have fallen again to French conquest as in 1066. If not wholly convincing, this argument has some plausibility.



Hubert de Burgh