

King John's Call to the Troops

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Just over eight hundred years ago King John, at the Maison Dieu in Dover, commanded his earls, knights, barons and military tenants to parade in the town. The king's fear was about a build-up of forces in and around Boulogne under the command of the king of France. "I call you to Dover for the defence of our kingdom and the preservation of lives and property," stated the king's writ.

Even the king must have been surprised as a result of his call. The summons brought together at Dover such a multitude that there were not sufficient provisions and weapons for them. So the king sent many of them back to their homes.

Even so, according to ancient documents, more than 60,000 "well appointed" troops remained in the Dover area ready to defend their country. The threatened invasion never came and eventually most of the army was allowed to go home.

This was just one of the dramas in Dover during the reign of King John (1199-1216) who has been described by historians as the worst man known in British history.

He is said to have been profligate, profane, tyrannical, false and shameless, crafty and cunning in home and foreign policy, without insight or wisdom. But he was very



able in war.

As a result of his foreign and religious policies, at one stage, Dover was occupied by mercenaries under the command of the French who were trying, but who failed, to capture Dover Castle.

John succeeded King Richard I, known as the Coeur de Lion, after Richard was killed by an arrow wound while fighting in France at the castle of Chaluz near Limoges.

One of John's dirtiest tricks was to dump his first wife, Avise (Isabella)

of Gloucester, without cause in order to marry Isabella of Angouleme who he pinched off a French noble to whom she was engaged. Nice fellow!

But one of John's biggest mistakes was having a row with Pope Innocent III over who was to be Archbishop of Canterbury. John put forward his choice only to be stymied by the monks of Canterbury who came up with another nominee. So the two factions went to the Pope to decide between the two.

The Pope had other ideas and ensured the Canterbury monks selected a third nominee, Stephen Langton. This angered John who banished the Canterbury monks and refused to receive Stephen Langton. Instead he decided to get his own back by

plundering the Church. The Pope was not having that and in 1208 put England under an interdict ordering all church services to cease and ordered that no one could receive the sacraments, except when dying.

Still John would not yield and so in 1209 Rome decided to excommunicate the king which left him bereft of friends at home and abroad.

Life in England was now on the slide with John lashing out at the Jews, the Catholic clergy and even the barons who began appealing for help from abroad.

Diplomatic relations between England and Rome got so bad that Pope Innocent threatened to ensure that the crown of England should be transferred to Philip of France.

It was at this time, with the French preparing for an invasion with the Pope's blessing, that John at Dover's Maison Dieu called his warriors to East Kent to defend England.

By now John, with few remaining friends, was getting worried and he decided to make up with the Pope and the Church.

And here again Dover comes into the drama with the Pope sending a representative, Pandulf, to England to receive the king's apology.

Pandulf and King John met at Dover where he knelt before Rome's representative, paying the Pope homage and agreeing to pay an annual tribute of one thousands marks.

Where, in and around Dover, this unusual ceremony took place is unknown. Some believe it was at the "Templar" church (the outline of which is still to be seen) on the

Western Heights, others say it was on the hills above Temple Ewell while a few suggest it was at the St John chapel at Swingfield.

This ceremony, naturally, angered the English nobles who considered it a slight on the English nation. And who had to contribute to the annual tribute to Rome.

One of the clauses in the agreement was that Stephen Langton should be the Archbishop of Canterbury who at a grand meeting at St Paul's produced a charter of Henry I and called on John to keep to the previous promises made.

Ganging together the barons, headed by Stephen Langton, in June 1215 forced John at Runnymede near Windsor to agree to the Magna Carta.

This important document, with 63 clauses, ruled that the king could not impose special taxes without the barons' consent, freemen could not be imprisoned except by law of the land and that everyone had the right to justice.

Once again King John failed to keep his Magna Carta promise and this led to the 1215-16 war with the barons who invited Louis, eldest son of Philip of France, to arrive with an army to fight John and become king of England.

Louis, the Dauphin, agreed, and in May 1216 he invaded and fought his way to Dover where, after a long siege, failed to capture Dover Castle.

He and his sappers tried and were partially successful in undermining parts of the castle walls and they might have been successful but for the fact that King John was taken ill and conveniently died at Newark Castle in October 1216.