

Rochester's pivotal role in the XII Century, and why it matters today

Sir Robert Worcester¹

The Dean of Rochester, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I hope you will forgive me for diverting from the title of my talk at its very start, but given where we are, in the very crypt of this cathedral, in light of the news the Dean gave us last October about the HLF grant for the restoration and development of this wonderful crypt where we are meeting this evening, I thought some relevant earlier history would be appropriate.

My talk starts in the VIIth Century around the time this Cathedral was built.

As Chancellor of the University of Kent, with a campus in Medway, I have the honour to hold graduation ceremonies in the nave of this church – and we robe in this crypt, so I know it well. When the then Dean, Adrian Newman, told me about the *Textus Roffensis*, the XIIth Century book (written in the early 1120s), the '*First Code of English Law*', the laws of King Aethelbert in around 600 AD, I promised him that I would do my best to make it famous.

As I stand in my robes at the top of the nave above us to welcome the University of Kent graduands, as I will again in July, I say to those students whose hard work and diligence have earned them their degrees, and their parents and friends, in my welcome:

"It is a great pleasure to welcome you to this historic Cathedral, Britain's second oldest, consecrated in 603 AD, some 14 Centuries ago. Then the Kent folk were called the "Cantware", the people of Kent. The Romans called Rochester "Durobrivis", from the British words 'dour' (which then meant 'water', not a description of a Scot) and 'briva', a passage over a river.

The Medway was then called Madus. Later it was called 'Medwig', now modernised into Medway. The main road was known then, and still is, as Watling Street, going from Dover through Canterbury and Rochester and north to London, which made Rochester's bridge and its Castle pivotal at the time of Magna Carta.

Did you know that the beginning of the spread of English started here, in Kent, just after this Cathedral was being consecrated? Not many do. And democracy as well. And Christianity.

*By King Aethelberht of Kent in c. 604 AD. Proof is in a wonderful book called the *Textus Roffensis*, held for the Dean and Chapter of Rochester Cathedral in the Medway Archives at Strood.*

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The Textus contains the first record of the English language, in the form of the Laws of Ethelbert.

The Old English texts contained in the Textus Roffensis also represent the creation of a new alphabet, possibly the first vernacular alphabet after Greek and Latin. Several years ago the British Library's competition for 'Britain's Hidden Treasures' awarded the Textus first prize, it is digitised and available to view at www.BL.com.

The Laws of Ethelbert and the other Kentish laws of the seventh and eighth centuries are the earliest of their kind to survive and are the earliest law codes to be recorded in the vernacular, as against the Latin usage of the Roman Empire.

The Textus records an important stage in nation-building, that influenced the Magna Carta of 1215 (we will be celebrating the 800th anniversary in just two years), the unwritten constitutions of England, Great Britain, then United Kingdom, and the American Declaration of Independence in 1775, and the Constitution of the United States of America in 1789, and subsequently in many Commonwealth countries."

Give a guess, how many of the British people say they've heard of the *Textus*? In my day job, I was asked to conduct a base-line questionnaire in anticipation of the 800th anniversary commemoration of the Magna Carta coming up on 15 June 2015. Knowing (and often saying) that 'you can't measure public opinion in a vacuum', I naturally had to come up with some other documents, famous – such as the American Declaration of Independence and the Domesday Book – and some not so famous such as the *Codex Sinaiticus* in order to measure awareness of the Great Charter, and so I included the *Textus Roffensis* in my list. To my surprise, I found one person in twenty said they knew about it or at least had heard of it.

I'll confess that I hadn't before Adrian told me about it, and shortly thereafter the curator at the Medway Archives at Strood showed it to me, indeed, let me actually hold it in my hands. Neil Davies (chief executive at Medway Council) will remember that day for a long time to come, as I ran into him leaving the archive and being as overcome as I was, insisted that he come into the Archive's reception just to see it. He became as excited as I did.

Not only was King Aethelbert on the cusp between retributive justice and codified justice, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth then, but in his legal code if I were a noble (an 'earl'), and John caused me the loss of my property and – here comes democracy of a sort – the King's advisors (for even then Kings only acted with 'advice and consent', even if they were not elected) found John guilty of the offense to my property – he would be required to pay 12 shillings restitution; if I were a commoner, 6. In short, as Patrick Wormold says in his little booklet, in *The First Code of English Law*, some people's blood (or property) was more valuable than someone else.

Sure, the advisors were not elected, but even today recall that our British laws are made by 'the Queen in Parliament'. Wormold speculated that Aethelbert's Code may have influenced a Code probably issued by a council at Paris in 617, chaired by Aethelberht's cousin-by-marriage, as it was attended by the Bishop of Rochester, according to Bede. Wormold speculates that "Aethelbert's Code is a first step in the prolonged evolution of English criminal jurisprudence."

Of utmost importance, it was written in English, by an Englishman, meant to be read in Old English by Englishmen. Almost all legislation from then until 1066 was written in Old English, as were the writs, orders sent by the King to shire courts, which were in English also.

Not only was King Aethelbert responsible for the first code of laws, in English for the English, he was responsible for the spread of Christianity in his country (sic) of Kent. Having earlier married the Frankish Queen Bertha, a Christian, while Aethelbert and his people were for the most part still pagans, she persuaded her husband to allow Augustine and his 40 monks into Kent, and eventually the King and the people of Kent (the 'Cantware') became Christians. It was about 596 that he became a Christian and in about 600 that the building of Rochester Cathedral began, dedicated to St. Andrew, and was made into a Bishop's See. According to "Baeda", two bishops were ordained by Augustine, Archbishop of the Britons, Mellitus who was sent to London, and Justus, here in Rochester.

In the year 597 Canterbury Cathedral was consecrated on land provided by the King and he gave the land upon which this Cathedral was consecrated in 604, the first and second to be built in what is now England.

Why do I tell you this?

Because you have here, in ownership by the Dean and Chapter, this rare treasure, and for years have had to neglect it, to hide it deep in an archive across the Medway, out of sight and out of reach of people who would, as I did, pause in awe in the presence of a nine hundred year old book. The *Textus*, by the way, in the 18th century was dropped in the Thames and searched for for four hours, but because it was tightly bound, had only the minor effects of discolouring on the edges of the pages.

Later, when we had a meeting of the symposium's committee I took my team of real experts, from the British Library, Glasgow University, UCL and Washington, D.C. and Kent University, we were taken down into the bowels of the Archive and shown the *Textus*. It was wonderful to see the Glasgow Old English language scholar's excitement when she discovered there were two scribes who'd worked on it, one left handed and one right, and the illustrated manuscript expert at the British Library exclaim that the *Textus's* illustration had been touched up in later centuries as when it was first bound the precise purple ink or dye wasn't invented until much later.

We had about 60 early medieval scholars in attendance at the academic part of the symposium, and an open lecture by Michael Wood on the Monday evening at the Kent campus in the Chatham dockyards. Another highlight, still vivid in people's memories, was the high church Evensong on the Sunday afternoon here at the Cathedral to give the symposium a wonderful start. But the highlight for me was the email I received from a lady, an emeritus professor from the University of Texas, who wrote that the *Textus* symposium was the highlight of her academic career.

And now, thanks to the Heritage Lottery Fund and the team who worked both hard and effectively, to get the grant that will make it possible for the *Textus* and other precious artifacts, books, manuscripts, silver and gold plate and cups and other precious items to reside here in this crypt (and have central heating here as well, and I'm just as glad we weren't here last week when the thermometer hovered around zero).

The Castle and the battles

You'll know that during the ninth and tenth centuries and even into the eleventh that Rochester was besieged by the Vikings, and from 1018 until 1066 was under Danish rule, at the time of Canute.

The Norman invader William the Conqueror, from 25 December 1066 William I (1066 -1087) the country prospered under Norman rule. He gave Rochester the same (generous) terms as the rest of the country, so it was said. For the next 150 years, things went from pretty good to bad to worse, as the Castle was fought over by William's son, William II (Rufus) (1087-1100), and his Uncle Odo, Henry I (1100-1135), whose coronation oath presaged the Magna Carta over a century later. But back to my story...

During the First Barons' War (1215–1217) in King John's reign, baronial forces captured the castle from Archbishop Stephen Langton and held it against the king, who then besieged it.

John met the rebel barons at Runnymede, and on 19 June 1215 they renewed their vows of fealty.^[20] A peace treaty, which later became known as *Magna Carta*, was sealed.^[23] Shortly after the treaty the agreement between John and Langton to appoint a royal constable in charge of Rochester Castle was dissolved, returning control to the archbishop.^[17] The peace did not last and the First Barons' War broke out. A group of rebels headed to Rochester to hold the city against John. The events surrounding the rebels' takeover of the castle are unclear, but contemporary chronicler Ralph of Coggeshall recorded that the king demanded Langton hand over the castle to royal control and the archbishop refused. Although Langton held out against the king's demands, the rebels feared he would eventually cave to pressure from the king and seized control of Rochester Castle for themselves. According to Ralph of Coggeshall, this was done with the consent of the castle's constable, Reginald de Cornhill, who seems to have switched allegiance from the king to the archbishop after John appointed him as royal constable of the castle. Langton left the country that same month, leaving the castle in the hands of the king's enemies. In a letter that year to justiciar Hubert de Burgh John expressed his anger towards Langton, calling him "a notorious traitor to us, since he did not render our castle of Rochester to us in our so great need." After this point, Rochester Castle was no longer considered to be in the perpetual custody of the archbishops of Canterbury.

At the time, John was in south-east England recruiting mercenaries in preparation for his war with the barons. Rochester blocked the direct route to London, which was also held by the rebels. According to Roger of Wendover, the rebels at Rochester were led by William d'Aubigny, lord of Belvoir. Estimates of the size of Rochester's garrison vary, with the chroniclers' figures ranging from 95 to 140 knights, supported by crossbowmen, sergeants, and others. Hearing the news that the city was in enemy hands, John immediately rode to Rochester and arrived on 13 October. Royal forces had arrived ahead of John and entered the city on 11 October, taking it by surprise and laying siege to the castle. Rochester bridge was pulled down to prevent the arrival of a relief force from London. The siege that followed was the largest in England up to that point, and would take nearly two months.^[25]

Boley Hill to the south of the castle may have been used as John's headquarters during the siege. According to the Barnwell chronicler, five siege engines hurled a barrage of stones at the castle's wall day and night. These were supported by missiles from smaller bows and crossbows. Though the Barnwell chronicler claimed they smashed a hole in the castle's outer walls, Roger of Wendover asserted they were ineffective and that John turned to other methods to breach the defences. A letter dated 14 October indicates John was preparing to undermine the castle's walls. He wrote to Canterbury, asking for the production "by day and night of as many picks as

you are able" and that they be sent to Rochester. On 26 October a relief force of 700 horse was sent from London. They turned back before arriving, perhaps because they heard the king was advancing to meet them.

Of the siege the Barnwell chronicler wrote, "Our age has not known a siege so hard pressed nor so strongly resisted ... Afterwards few cared to put their trust in castles".^[29] Prince Louis of France, son of Philip II, was invited by the barons to become the new leader of the rebellion and become king in the event of their victory. In 1216 he arrived in England and captured Rochester Castle; it is not known how, however, as no documentary evidence recording the event survives.

John died in 1216 and was succeeded by his nine-year-old son, Henry, with the support of the barons. With no prospect of becoming King of England, Louis returned to France. Rochester Castle was returned to royal control in 1217. Later in the decade further attention was paid to the castle's defences, possibly ever changes...

With that (brief) history, let me conclude with a brief (really) summary of where we are with the Magna Carta 800th anniversary commemoration.

Why Commemorate Magna Carta?

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CARTA

Magna Carta matters:

- It is a foundation stone of the freedoms enjoyed by hundreds of millions of people in more than 100 countries
- It enshrined the rule of law in English society '*due process*'
- It limited the power of authoritarian rule '*no one is above the law*'
- It paved the way for trial by jury
- It proclaimed certain religious liberties
- It defined limits on taxation '*no taxation without representation*'

It has influenced constitutional thinking worldwide including USA, Europe, Commonwealth and in over 100 countries; + UN Declaration of Human Rights

Denials of Magna Carta's basic principles have led to a loss of liberties and human rights and even genocide in many countries for centuries.

The 800th anniversary of Magna Carta is an occasion to deepen the understanding of the crucial role it has played in our development. It is a time to commemorate the individual rights we enjoy today. It is an opportunity to strengthen human rights around the world.

Key Achievements To Date



- HM The Queen announced as Patron
- Advisory Board, MC800th Committee and Sub-Committees established
- PR/marketing advisors appointed
- Dedicated website established - www.magnacarta800th.com
- Communications plan and core message agreed
- UK Parliament All-Party Parliamentary Group established
- £2 coin commemorative coin agreed; edition on commemorative stamps expected April '13
- Magna Carta Evensong at Temple Inn in 2011, 2013 and 2015
- Academic symposiums agreed so far: USA, UK, Poland
- Magna Carta towns planning well advanced for 2013 (St Albans), 2014 (Bury St Edmunds), 2015 (Lincoln, Salisbury, London, Canterbury)
- Major book contracted, planning political novel, histories, Horrible History
- Telegraph as a media partner and the planning of a range of activities with BBC
- "The Great Charter" playscript written
- Baseline survey of the British public's understanding of Magna Carta completed
- Wide range of stakeholders developing plans, including British Library, British Council, UK Parliament, Library of Congress and the ABA

And finally, let me leave you with this: when asked recently if King John was really a bad king, Professor Nicholas Vincent replied: Oh, he was much worse than that.

www.magnacarta800th.com