

Rotary Club; South Foreland
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Dover Castle: On the Road from Runnymede

Sir Robert Worcester¹ KBE DL

Good evening.

I'd hope to cover three things in my talk tonight:

- **Why me, why now?**
- **Why are you here this evening? You know Dover better than I do**
- **But do you know about the role that Dover played in the Barons' War in 1216, and why and we are commemorating Magna Carta in the coming year?**

Why me?

Growing up in America I had a pretty thorough schooling in English history, English literature and not least English cinema (that was before television), which began with the Angles, Saxons and Jutes, then 1066 and all that, in 1215, the Great Charter, later *Magna Carta*.

From an early age it was “Good” King Richard the Lionhearted, “Bad” King John “Lackland” (and Robin Hood and his merry men, Little John, Friar Tuck, Will Scarlet and all), Henry VIII and Elizabeth the Virgin Queen, Shakespeare, 18th C. Georgian elegance in costume, in architecture and music.

I grew up with the belief that 'the sun never sets on the British Empire'. And did I collect stamps from all over the British Empire! Boy, did I.

All Americans knew then that George Washington, John and Sam Adams, John Jay, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, James Otis and nearly all the Founding Fathers were Englishmen (Alexander Hamilton was a Scot).

As President Obama observed recently in a speech to the British Parliament: “*our system of justice, customs, and values stemmed from our British forefathers*”.

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With the name Worcester, that's my heritage, for sure. My colonial ancestor left England for the new world in 1638.

Somewhat more recently, that is in 1957, on my first visit to Britain, I was a serving officer in the US Army Corps of Engineers, returning to America to be discharged after serving in Korea, my tour of duty completed.

On my first day in London on my first outing, I went to the British Museum to see two things: the Magna Carta and the Rosetta Stone. To me they represented the two icons of civilised society: the rule of law and communication outside the village.

I became a Trustee of the Magna Carta Trust 21 years ago (when I became Chairman of the Pilgrims Society), the Chairman of the Trust, by Charter was the Master of the Rolls, first the late great Tom Bingham, Lord Bingham, then Lords (Harry) Woolf, (Nicholas) Phillips, (Anthony) Clarke, (David) Neuberger and now (John) Dyson, all distinguished jurists. First under Lord Neuberger and now Lord Dyson, I now serve as Deputy Chairman of the Trust. It was Tony Clarke and David Neuberger who ganged up on me and gave me responsibility for organising the 800th Anniversary Commemorations.

How could I refuse?

So that's why I'm here, and why now.

This is also largely the reason for the existence of the 'Special Relationship' that bonds my two countries, Britain and America.

As President Obama said at Parliament in 2011:

"Our relationship is special because of the values and beliefs that have united our people throughout the ages. Centuries ago, when kings, emperors, and warlords reigned over much of the world, it was the English who first spelled out the rights and liberties on man in Magna Carta."

Why are you here tonight?

You're interested, and that's a good start. When I mention Magna Carta to lawyers anywhere in the world, eyes light up, but while this is not my first Rotary Club, it is my first talk to a Rotary Club on the Magna Carta. So that will test Rotarians level of interest.

There are many myths which surround the Magna Carta. That it was only a fight between the barons and the King. It certainly was, but not only that.

It was the beginning of the spread of modern democracy. Magna Carta was the overturning for the first time of 'divine rule' (King John, and somewhat later, King George III's power over the American colonialists), the beginning of representative democracy, and as Lord Judge, the

former Lord Chief Justice of the United Kingdom recently quoted^[2]: “*Nullum scutagium vel auxilium ponatur in regno nostro, nisi per commune consilium regni nostri*”, which very roughly translated into American means ‘No taxation without representation’. Now which of you hasn’t heard that phrase before?

And it was the foundation of human rights, under threat now at home and abroad, as we consider how to cope with the threats which face us in the 21st Century.

Magna Carta matters still today. It is the foundation stone supporting the freedoms enjoyed today by hundreds of millions of people in more than 100 countries.

Magna Carta enshrined the Rule of Law. It limited the power of authoritarian rule. It paved the way for trial by jury, modified through the ages as the franchise was extended. It led to ‘due process’ and to ‘justice delayed is justice denied’.

It proclaimed certain religious liberties, “*The English Church shall be free*”.

Magna Carta defined limits on taxation; everyone remembers “*no taxation without representation*” was the cry of American colonists petitioning the King for their rights as free men which led to the United States of America.

For centuries it has influenced constitutional thinking worldwide including in many Commonwealth countries, even in France, Germany, and the rest of Europe, and Japan, throughout Asia, Latin America and Africa.

Over the past 800 years, denials of Magna Carta’s basic principles have led to a loss of liberties, of human rights and even genocide taking place yesterday, this morning, today and tomorrow.

It is an exceptional document on which all democratic society has been constructed, described by the former German Ambassador to me as “The Foundation of Democracy”.

The Siege of Dover Castle

Now I’m no expert on battlefields, but I know a man who is, Matthew Bennett¹, one of the leaders of the Battlefield Trust, which is closely allied to the Magna Carta 800th Anniversary Commemoration Committee and a man who was extremely informative recently when I joined the Battlefield Trust tour to Bouvines, the battle which in 1214 lost King John most of the French possessions which his father, Henry II, that great and terrible King, had hard won on the battles that occupied much of his life. Matthew’s knowledge is what I’m able to share with you this evening, and if you want to know more about the work of the Battlefield Trust, he’d be happy to hear from you.

King John (1199-1216) is perhaps best known to history for agreeing to the clauses of Magna Carta at Runnymede, on the River Thames near Windsor (15 June 1215) and affixing his seal to the Great Charter. He was forced into concessions by a group of rebellious barons (and bishops)

which seriously reduced royal power. John had proved a disappointment as King, notably by losing Normandy and other English possessions in France in 1204.

His attempts to recover these territories were finally defeated in the summer of 1214, (battle of Bouvines) but at huge financial cost; the taxation he imposed to raise these funds, together with his abuses of the law caused the baronial opposition.

John immediately renounced the Charter making a civil war inevitable. Few participants at the time can have expected that the conflict would last over two years and include a major French invasion.

Events in Kent

In the early thirteenth century the county of Kent was crucial to the wealth and power of the English Crown. Its position facing the Continent made its ports, especially Sandwich, the conduits of a rich trade. It also contained the two most important sites of religious and secular power, respectively Canterbury and Dover. The cathedral city of Canterbury drew its authority from Augustine, whose mission in 696 was the foundation of the English Church, and its archbishop was the senior in the country.

[Since the martyrdom of Archbishop Thomas à Becket in 1170, it had also become one of the most important pilgrimage sites, not only in England, but in Europe, bringing wealth and status to Canterbury and the County.]

Dover Castle, already a strong fortification at the time of the Norman Conquest, had become a huge modern fortress owing to its development by Henry II and Richard the Lionheart towards the end of the twelfth century. Matthew Paris, the monastic chronicler of St. Albans, and the most influential historian of his era, called it the 'Key to the Kingdom'.

John began his campaign against the rebels from there in September, 1215.

[The Siege of Rochester October-November, 1215

His first move was against the rebel position at Rochester, on the River Medway, where the cathedral and castle face each other across the bridge. It was both strategically important and a matter of reputation to the king that he should reduce it rapidly and assert his authority. John arrived there in mid-October; his army swiftly drove off the baronial forces and destroyed the bridge.

This left a rebel garrison in the great stone keep, which still stands today, of 95 knights and 45 sergeants (probably crossbowmen) sufficient to defy the king. For the next seven weeks the king conducted the siege in person. He gathered carpenters and labourers from all over the country to construct three siege engines, and also miners who dug a tunnel under the south-west tower.

This excavation was propped up by timbers then set alight, the fire being fed by the fat of 40 pigs!

The tower's collapse did not end the siege, as the defenders withdrew behind a dividing wall in the keep and kept up a desperate fight, until they were eventually forced to surrender on 30th November.

John wanted to have the castle's commander William d'Aubigny and his knights hanged, but he was dissuaded by his mercenary captain for fear of retaliation. So the noblemen were taken for ransom and only ordinary soldiers were killed (as was the custom at the time). This display of royal power almost knocked the stuffing out of the opposition, although rebel victories in the north ensured its continuation. (In the following year, the castle fell swiftly in the face of overwhelming French strength and the barons regained it.)

Rochester today

Evidence of the siege is still visible today, including the tunnel that was dug under the south west tower and exposed by archaeological excavation, and the tower itself, which was rebuilt as a round tower, contrasting with the other three, square Norman towers.

(The 2011 film *'Ironclad'* presented a violent and bloody fictionalised – i.e. completely inaccurate -version of the events of 1215, featuring a suitably hideous King John, played with verve by Paul Giamatti.)]

The Siege of Dover

Despite his success in taking Rochester Castle in 1215 (In the following year, the castle fell swiftly in the face of overwhelming French strength and the barons regained it.), the rebels still held London, and in May 1216, Prince Louis of France, sent by his father King Philip II, invaded England and was recognized as King by the baronial party.

He brought with him substantial forces, enabling a march as far west as Winchester, a siege of Windsor and a visit north to London. In mid-August the barons and their French allies began a siege of Dover castle. Using torsion artillery to batter the walls, and miners to dig beneath them, the attackers achieved some success, capturing the barbican and undermining the gate behind it. Attempts at assault failed, though, and the besiegers were harassed by the guerrilla activities of a local loyalist known as Willikin of the Weald (the large area of untamed forest in the centre of Kent).

By mid-October, Louis was forced into a truce. Within a few days, King John died, probably of dysentery, at Newark (Notts.) after losing his wealth in the Wash, but instead of making the French position stronger this event made it weaker.

It was now possible for the English barons to make their peace with the newly-crowned 9-year old, King Henry III, whose guardian was William Marshall, Earl of Pembroke, who immediately under his seal as representing the King, reissued the Great Charter. During the truce, Louis returned to France for eight weeks (February to April 1217) for reinforcements, allowing the royalists to get men and supplies into Dover.

Louis revived the siege on his return, but the defeat of his field army at Lincoln (20th May), obliged him to lift it and seek refuge in London. The castle was subjected to siege and blockade for the best part of a year, but owing to the immense strength of its fortifications and determination of its defenders, it withstood all that was thrown at it.

(The Incident at Rye: A much less well known military event than the two great sieges was the fighting which took place on the south coast around Winchelsea and Rye, in February 1217. Prince Louis intended to return to France; but he found that the English fleet was blockading his exit port at Rye. For several days he was trapped, his men facing starvation, as they were pinned between the sea and the royalist guerrilla forces of Willikin of the Weald inland. Meanwhile a large royal army was collected and advanced to offer battle. Louis was only rescued by a French fleet and escaped in its ships, just in time to avoid this threat.)

The War at Sea and the naval battle off Sandwich

Unlike later eras, there was no assumed superiority at sea for English fleets in the early thirteenth century. King Richard had built a galley fleet based at Rouen, but this facility had been lost by the time of the civil war. King John could call upon the resources of the Cinque Ports (Hastings, Rye, Hythe, Romney and Sandwich) which provided some 50 ships, and had another 50 built. In 1213, Philip II had gathered a fleet to invade England with papal blessing against the excommunicate John. The English king outmanoeuvred his opponent by submitting to papal authority, leading to the invasion being cancelled. Then, in conjunction with the Flemings, in an expedition worthy of Sir Francis Drake, the allies surprised the French fleet at anchor, allegedly capturing 300 vessels, and stripping and burning 100 more!

Three years later when the French again moved against England, they had restored their naval forces to equality with the English. Clearly, these were essential for the Cross-Channel operations which Prince Louis was adopting. Even after his troops' defeat at Lincoln, Louis gathered another fleet at Calais in August 1217. In the initial actions the French had the advantage, but the decisive and final battle of the war was fought off Sandwich on 24th August. The English proved the better sailors, not for the first time, and totally defeated a much larger enemy fleet after a hard fight, capturing and executing its admiral, a renegade religious pirate called Eustace the Monk. The war was finally over. A month later, the Treaty of Lambeth meant that Louis and his men left England, never to return.

And finally, I'll close with mentioning a few of our plans for the 800th Anniversary.

The biggest exhibition the British Library has ever mounted, events and exhibitions at all the Magna Carta Towns and Cathedrals, including Canterbury, Rochester and Faversham, at the National Archives, in Parliament, at Guildhall in the City of London, and on 15 June next year, at Runnymede, on the 800th anniversary, the Queen and other members of the Royal Family will gather to commemorate the anniversary, rededicate the American Bar Association Memorial, and pay tribute to the barons and bishops who sued for peace, which failed by the way as you'd expect Bad King John reneged on his promises, and that of course led to the battles in Kent and elsewhere.

Thirty-eight years ago in all its splendour the House of Common's Speaker and House of Lords Lord Speaker, MPs and Peers, Law Lords, Ambassadors and High Commissioners, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, met with the senior members of the American Congress and Senate assembled in the 1,000 year old Palace of Westminster's Westminster Hall to hand over the Lincoln 1215 Magna Carta to the Library of Congress in the Autumn of 2014, to be displayed in the Rotunda of the Congress of the United States. I was there.

This time the plan is to have a Supreme Court organised 'mock trial' with judges, jury and advocates, mainly from Commonwealth countries, judging barons and bishops in the dock on the charge of treason, telecast and broadcast on BBC World.

This will be on 31 July, the night before the Supreme Court Magna Carta Exhibition opens for August and September next year.

You can follow the commemoration of the 800th by signing up to the MC Newsletter at our website and tell us if you'd like to get involved, at www.magnacarta800th.com. And I hope, some of you will be with us with the Queen, and some as well in Westminster Hall for the mock trial at the end of July, or at least watching it on television and enjoying the spectacle.

Thank you.

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