

Our

Battle of Lewes



RICHARD, THE KING'S BROTHER'S STORY



I am Richard, Earl of Cornwall, also known as Richard of Almaine or King of the Germans and King of the Romans. I am brother to our righteous King, Henry, and father to the brave knight Prince Henry.

On the 14th of May 1264 I was with my brother and his army at the Priory of St Pancras, Lewes when that traitor, Simon de Montfort, and his band of disloyal barons attacked us and inflicted a humiliating defeat upon the rightful rulers of this country of ours.

It has always been accepted that the King's word is law. A King is in complete charge of his country - all the lands, people, buildings - and he should be able to use these as he pleases. This has always been the case. What is wrong with a King giving land, money and favours to his family and friends? These are his gifts to give. But that traitor Simon de Montfort and his band of barons can't accept this. They want a say in all the important decisions. They want to stop Henry spending his money as he chooses.

They caught my brother the King at a weak moment and got him to sign a pledge - the Provisions of Oxford - saying that he had to get their agreement to anything he wanted to do. The humiliation of it! But we soon put a stop to that and even got the agreement overturned by King Louis IX of France, no less. That showed those upstart barons that they couldn't hope to boss this king around.

But the barons didn't give up, did they? The traitors raised an army against us and we chased each other throughout the land until on May 11th 1264 we arrived in Lewes and rested at the Priory of St Pancras in preparation for taking the battle to Simon de Montfort and his treacherous supporters.

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You would have thought that the monks at the Priory would have been pleased to have a visit from such a distinguished guest as the king but oh no. The Prior did not seem the least pleased to see us and the priory was packed already with guests. The feast day of St Pancras was to take place on the 12th of May and it seemed as if everyone important had come to the Priory to celebrate it. Still, the monks had plenty of provisions so we spent a happy time eating and drinking all they had prepared for the feast day. I'm not sure that the monks approved but as they have to stay silent for most of the day they couldn't complain!

We knew de Montfort's army was camped outside Lewes but our forces were twice the size of his. We had over 2000 knights on horse-back, some staying at the castle with Prince Edward and my son Prince Henry. True, de Montfort had 2000 foot soldiers but we matched this and more. He had the cheek to send the Bishops of Chichester, London and Winchester to plead peace with us at the Priory. They even offered us £30 000 to buy us off! What impertinence! We sent them off with a flea in their ear! The barons were not offering real peace - they still insisted on the King giving up his powers under the Provisions of Oxford. I told my brother that there was no chance of that!

De Montfort was sneaky, assembling his army by dead of night so that he took us by surprise on the morning of the 14th of May. We marched from the Priory under the royal banner of the red dragon and our sons joined us from the castle with their men. We divided our troops into three divisions - the right under the command of Prince Edward, the King in charge of the left division and the centre under my command with the help of my son Prince Henry. De Montfort was crafty, he had the advantage. He was on top of the ridge and some of his knights began to charge down to attack Prince Edward's division on the right. The Prince was too hasty, sensing his advantage, and took off up the slope to join the fight. They fought long and hard but the royal army was winning, forcing de Montfort's men to flee towards the River Ouse. Prince Edward set off in pursuit and there were reports that 60 of de Montfort's precious knights were drowned trying to cross the river and several more were captured and taken to the castle.

It seemed as if the royal army was winning but with Prince Edward now absent from the battlefield de Montfort sent his central division charging down to attack my men. The noise was deafening - the pounding of hooves, the clashing of lances, the sound of metal on metal, the cries of the wounded and dying. Shouts of, "Traitor!" rang out from both sides. We fought hard and valiantly but de Montfort's men had the advantage.

Suddenly I found myself separated from my men with only a few foot soldiers to protect me. Now don't get me wrong, I'm as brave as the next man but I'm not yet ready to die. Across the open land I could see a windmill and so ran to it as fast as I could, my men following on behind. I could hear the cries from de Montfort's foot soldiers as I ran up the steps and slammed the door. I only meant to stay in the windmill to get my breath back and then rejoin the fight but the angry clamour of the soldiers outside stopped me leaving. I could not risk my life by venturing out and so stayed in the windmill, surrounded by the enemy. I could hear their rude taunting, 'Come down, come down, you wretched miller! Come out of your mill - come out!'

And then it was evening time, the sounds of the battle had died down and I was still held captive in the windmill. I needed to rejoin my brother, the King, to see how the battle had progressed and so, with great reluctance, I opened the door to the mill. Do you know what those vile traitors did? They placed me in chains and carried me off, their prisoner, and threatened to execute me unless my brother and Prince Edward gave up the fight. How dare they? And worse, the next day they made my brother surrender and sign a document, the Mise of Lewes, restricting his powers, as they had wished. We were defeated, for now. I was their prisoner along with Prince Edward, but this will not be the end.

For an interesting film on how knights fought at the Battle of Lewes see:
Horses and weapons « Battle of Lewes :
<http://battleoflewes.wordpress.com/horses-and-weapons>

MONK'S STORY



My name is Brother Thomas and I am a monk at the glorious Priory of St Pancras in Lewes. We owe our allegiance firstly to God, then to our blessed Abbot in Cluny in France - for we are Cluniac monks who come under the direct control of the Abbot in Cluny - and here at the Priory our duty is to our Prior William.

The life of a monk is a strict but rewarding one. I joined the Priory as a young man of 14 and spent two years training in the ways of the Priory under Hugh, the Novice Master. He taught us how to read and write Latin, how to process in silence to the church - which we do at least 8 times during the day and night - and how to obey the strict rules of the Priory. We learnt the words and music

to the beautiful chants we sing in the church and when the two years were up I took my vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and became a full member of the Cluniac order of monks. I wear my black robes - the uniform of a Cluniac monk - with great pride.

Our beautiful Priory is dedicated to St Pancras so he is special to us here. St Pancras is the patron saint of children, as he was beheaded long ago at the age of 14 for refusing to give up his Christian beliefs. He is also the patron saint of keeping your promises - something our King Henry seems to find hard to do. As St Pancras was beheaded people also ask him for help against headaches and I'm sure Prior William had plenty of these when the King and much of his army descended on us before the Battle of Lewes!

It was the evening before the feast of St Pancras- the most important feast day for the Priory. Every year, on the 12th of May important people, including our benefactors, come to the Priory to celebrate this day dedicated to our patron saint. So when a messenger arrived telling Prior William that the king was on his way with many knights

and foot soldiers we were not best pleased. True we had lots of provisions in store for all our guests but these soldiers were not religious men and their demands would be great. However this was the king arriving and so Prior William had no choice but to welcome him and his followers and furnish them with food, drink and lodging as they wished.

What a terrible time that was! For three nights the King's men ate, drank and took over our beautiful and sacred Priory without a thought for anything but their own entertainment. Many were drunk, most were badly behaved and all the while we were powerless to stop them; our vows of silence making even verbal reprimands impossible.

We knew that a fight was brewing between the King and some of his barons, led by Simon de Montfort who was camped, with his men, outside Lewes. De Montfort sent the Bishops of Chichester, London and Worcester to the Priory to negotiate for peace but King Henry and his arrogant brother Richard were having none of it and sent them away.

The King's army were enjoying the hospitality of the Priory and we began to despair that they would ever leave but early on the morning of the 14th of May a messenger from Prince Edward, who was stationed at the castle, came running to say de Montfort's troops were assembled on a ridge outside the town and to make haste to prepare for the battle. Pandemonium broke out! Soldiers who were snoring off the effects of the alcohol they had drunk the night before were shaken awake. Knights struggled into their armour and foot soldiers dressed hastily. Finally all assembled at the great gate of the Priory. The King and his brother Richard led the army out into the streets of Southover under their fluttering banner of the red dragon.

Prior William ordered the great gates to be firmly closed, quiet descended and we went about the business of clearing up and resuming our religious duties. The quiet didn't last though. Sounds of the battle could soon be heard and we wondered which side would be victorious.

Suddenly there was the sound of a great commotion outside the Priory gates. Cries of, "Make way for the King!" followed by loud thumping on the wooden gates. The gates were thrown open and the King entered together with some of his men. He made a sorry sight - muddy and bloodied from the battle - and without his horse. Prior William ushered him in and ordered the gates to be locked shut. We tended to the King and his men as best we could, all the while hearing the sounds of battle close outside our walls. We could see fires raging in the rooftops of the town and began to fear the Priory would be the next target. We were not wrong. Flaming arrows caught in the roof of our church and we rushed for water to stop the fire spreading. Our beautiful building was under attack! Whilst the King and his followers were under our roof, the Priory was in great danger.

Prior William went to the King and begged him to surrender so that the Priory - a place of God - could be saved. After much argument the King agreed and a messenger was sent to the archers outside telling them of the surrender and imploring them to stop. The great Priory gate was once again flung open and the King's brother, Richard was delivered to us, captive and in chains, by de Montfort's men. Later Prince Edward also returned as a prisoner of the barons and the royal party spent the evening in great discussions about the terms of surrender.

On the following day the barons arrived at the Priory amidst great shouts of victory. The King knelt before Gilbert de Clare and surrendered his sword. He was made to sign a document, the Mise of Lewes but this has little meaning for us here in the Priory as we live by our own rules, separated from the day-to-day life of the people of England.

JOHN FITZ-JOHN'S STORY



I am John Fitz-John, knight faithful to my lord Simon de Montfort. I was with him during the fierce and hard-fought Battle at Lewes where we were, rightly, victorious, teaching our arrogant King Henry, his proud son Edward and his conceited brother Richard that they cannot just do as they please.

Henry has been such a wasteful and extravagant king. He has massive debts because he has spent so much money on expensive clothes and jewellery. He even keeps exotic animals - leopards, an elephant and a polar bear - in the gardens of his palace at the Tower of London. All the time he spends money that is not his to spend while the country gets poorer. What's worse is that

he gives away lands and favours to his French relatives. Not that I have anything against the French personally, I mean my lord Simon de Montfort was born in France. Simon is also King Henry's brother-in-law as he is married to the King's sister Eleanor. The King and de Montfort have been close, but the King has gone too far in promoting his friends. Henry thinks he is above the law, that a King can do whatever he wants. It's not good for the country.

We tried to reason with him, to stop his foolish ways and get him to obey the law. We even got him to agree that he needed to consult with 12 barons before making any big decisions but he soon gave up on that. And so my lord de Montfort knew the only way to make the King see sense was by defeating him in battle.

That's why we found ourselves, early on the morning of the 14th of May 1264, on a ridge just outside Lewes, preparing for battle. We had given the King one last chance. On the 11th of May de Montfort had sent the Bishops of Chichester, London and Worcester to the King to

try to negotiate a peaceful settlement, restricting the King's powers. The King and his brother Richard were staying at the Priory of St Pancras - Prince Edward and Richard's son Prince Henry were at the castle. The answer came back, "No!" and so we prepared to fight. We started out very early on the 14th of May. Our lord de Montfort stopped only to knight his loyal follower Gilbert de Clare, to encourage us all to confess our sins to the priests who accompanied us and to sew white crosses to our tunics. This we did willingly so that we could recognise our fellow knights in the heat of battle and show that we were on the side of the righteous.

Simon de Montfort is a great military leader. That morning he divided his men into 4 divisions. The division on the right was commanded by his sons, Henry, Simon and Guy de Montfort; the middle division by Gilbert de Clare and myself: the division on the left - made up mostly of foot soldiers from London - was commanded by Nicholas Seagrave. Simon de Montfort himself commanded the reserves who were kept as reinforcements. My lord de Montfort had recently suffered a broken leg from a fall from a horse and so would oversee the battle from a chariot that could be moved into position. He had a great vantage point, on the ridge, to see the whole battle and make the best decisions.

The King's army approached us, the red dragon banner fluttering arrogantly. The knights on horseback numbered over 2000 compared to our mere 400 but they were no match for us. Our brave knights charged down the hill to attack followed by our faithful foot soldiers, who numbered 2000 in total. The clash of the lances carried by the knights on horseback made a terrible sound. Prince Edward attacked the left division and despite fighting bravely our men were overpowered and retreated towards the River Ouse with Prince Edward and his knights in hot pursuit. Sadly 60 of our brave knights were drowned trying to escape across the river. In his haste Edward continued to chase them and this gave us our chance as so many of the King's army had now left the battle ground.

The knights and foot soldiers in my division fought bravely against those led by Richard of Almaine - the King's brother. Many foot soldiers on both sides were killed but we tried to capture the knights

alive so that we could demand a ransom for their release. My lord de Montfort commanded his reserve division to join the fight and his faithful standard-bearer, William le Blund, was killed. This caused de Montfort great sorrow. But we were winning the fight. The King himself was much beaten by swords and maces and two horses were killed under him. He gathered what was left of his army and retreated to the safety of the Priory.

It was still before noon and we entered the town. The streets were littered with dead and wounded and turmoil was all around. Our archers fired flaming arrows at the castle - stronghold of the King's men - and the fighting continued. In the confusion many buildings in the town were set alight. We moved on to the Priory where the cowardly King was now hiding and our flaming arrows set fire to the roofs of the holy buildings. Victory was ours and the King surrendered.

On the 15th of May the King knelt before Gilbert de Clare and surrendered his sword. He was made to sign the Mise of Lewes and we kept Prince Edward and Richard's son Prince Henry as our hostages. The barons were victorious!

THE CHEESE-MAKER'S STORY



My name is Isabella Hardcastle, merchant of Lewes. I recently suffered great hardship this past 14th of May 1264 during the bloody and brutal Battle of Lewes when the town was set ablaze in the fierce fighting.

Lewes is a goodly and prosperous place. I have resided here, near the castle, for the past 35 years trading at the daily market. I am a cheese maker- learnt the trade from my mother and her mother before her. It is hard but happy work and people come from far and wide to buy our wares. Making good cheese is a matter of patience. Firstly the milk is delivered early. The milk is collected from the cows and goats which

graze in the fields outside the town. It is important that the milk is fresh as we need to make the best cheese we can to satisfy our customers. I take the milk and pour it into a huge wooden trough that runs the length of the back of my dwelling. I take a piece from a calf's stomach, soak this overnight in vinegar and salt water and then stir the liquid into the milk. The liquid is known as rennet - our magic ingredient. It causes the milk to curdle and separate out into thick lumps (which are called the curd) and a watery liquid (called the whey). When the curdling is done I scoop out the lumps of curd and put them in my big black cooking pot, set over a small fire in the hearth. The curds are gently heated and I add salt which will make the cheese taste good. Then I take out the heated curds and press them between wooden boards to remove all the watery whey. The cheese can now be eaten fresh, but I take some of it and press it into moulds. Some I seal with hot wax to allow the cheese to harden without going mouldy. Others I send to my neighbour who will smoke the cheese over an open fire. The watery whey I give to my children to quench their thirst.

As I live close by the market I can be making my cheeses and taking them to my stall during the morning. My eldest girl, Eleanor, will be at the stall from 7 o'clock in the morning and it is she who smiles at the men from the castle who come to buy the cheeses for our Lord de Warenne. She looks on shyly as the servants from the Priory come to buy cheese for the monks to eat. The monks are particularly fond of a soup made with my cheese, eggs and pepper and so we make sure to have a good supply. We have good trade from the Priory so, although we rarely see the Black Brothers (this is our name for the monks in their black robes) we are grateful that they bring such prosperity to the townsfolk of Lewes.

I had been working all hours of the day and night - or so it seemed - from the beginning of May. A great deal of my cheese was in demand because the monks at the Priory were preparing for their great Feast Day- May the 12th the Feast of St Pancras, Patron Saint of the Priory. All people in Lewes loved this time of year. Although the work was hard, demand was high and the money was good. If I worked all through the night I could make enough cheese, and so enough money, to buy linen to make new clothes for me and my children come the middle of May. The only problem I had was getting enough milk and I had to buy milk that had travelled further and was not as fresh in order to keep up with the demand.

Everyone I knew was working themselves into a frenzy in order to supply the Prior with all he needed for his important guests. It was late in the afternoon before the Feast that I began to hear rumours that a large number of mounted knights, foot soldiers and the King himself were approaching the town. The farmers who brought me my milk had told me that a great army was being assembled outside Lewes but I had paid no attention to this as I was so busy with my work. There had certainly been no mention of the King, in fact I had been told it was a barons' army led by one called Simon de Montfort. But now there was much noise and commotion in the town as men on horseback, with banners flying, approached the castle led by a fine young man I was told was Prince Edward. The castle gates were thrown open and the army entered.

“What’s happening?” “Will there be war?” “What about the Feast?” All around me the clamour of townsfolk. “I hear the King, himself, has gone to the Priory”, my neighbour shouted. “He’ll enjoy eating your cheese!” Amidst all the uproar I had lost sight of my youngest children and so ran through the streets, dodging horses and soldiers, until I had found them and had them safely shut up inside.

For the next couple of days a heavy air of anticipation hung over the town. All appeared quiet, except for the rowdy behaviour of soldiers now stationed at the castle, but we knew something big was about to happen. And sure enough, on the morning of the 14th of May we were woken early to the sounds of horses hooves clattering through the High Street as Prince Edward’s men set off to battle. It seemed as if the town of Lewes held its breath as the sounds of metal on metal, the cries of the wounded and the screaming of the horses filled the air. Several times gilded knights escorted captured nobles back to the castle to be imprisoned. Horribly injured soldiers staggered into the town looking for help but we were all too scared to venture out of our houses.

Then at lunch time a shout went up, “The barons are winning!” and with a great clamour the King’s soldiers and horses clattered into town making haste to the safety of the castle gates. They were followed by scores of the barons’ archers shooting fire arrows at the fleeing soldiers and into the roof of the castle. We crouched inside our houses and saw with horror that the lighted tips fell short of their intended mark and drifted into the thatched roofs of our cottages. The weather had been dry and the straw of the roofs was ripe for catching fire. I could smell the burning almost immediately and grabbed my children to run outside.

The streets were now filled with townsfolk running this way and that - any way to escape the flames that were leaping from roof to roof. I looked back at our cottage to see that the whole top part was now ablaze and with no thought for all my cheese making equipment, my livelihood that took up the downstairs area, I urged my children to run down towards the river. The heat from the fire was scorching and the noise of crackling wood, deafening. Sparks rained down on us and it

seemed as if the whole sky was on fire. On the river bank we stood with our fellow townspeople and watched the burning roofs of Lewes light up the sky. Even the roof of the great Priory Church had been set alight. The men gathered buckets and made a human chain from the river to move water and douse the flames.

I don’t know how long we stood there watching our town burn. All I know is that when the fire was out we walked back up the High Street to find our cottage all but razed to the ground. Nothing was left of my precious cheese making equipment. They say that the battle was a great victory for the barons, and so for the people, as the King can’t now do just as he chooses. Well, it was no victory for me and my family. I have nowhere to live and no way of making a living. I don’t suppose Simon de Montfort will think about me when he is celebrating.

GHOST'S STORY



I do not have a name. If I ever had one it is long forgotten together with the reasons I was fighting on May the 14th 1264. I am what you would call a ghost, a spirit, who, after 750 years still stalks the streets of Lewes trying to understand what happened to me all those centuries ago.

I know I was not of noble birth - just a humble foot soldier who followed orders. I did not have the fancy armour of the knights whose limbs were protected with strong chain mail and whose heads were secure under metal helmets. My protection was a quilted linen waistcoat - now long since rotted away - and a small, round wooden shield. I recall that many of my fellow foot soldiers carried pikes - long wooden poles with a sharp metal tip - but I had only a dagger with which to defend myself.

I can also remember the noises and smells of that terrible day. Men shouting orders and screaming in pain as metal cut into skin. The snorts and squeals of horses and the heavy pounding of hooves. All around me was a whirling mass of the glinting metal of armour and weapons and the smell of fear. There was colour too - the bright banners of the knights. I saw the red dragon of the King and the lion of Simon de Montfort. There were more riches, more colours here than I had ever seen in my life.

I was not sure what I was fighting for. The ways of the King and of the barons did not have much to do with my life spent trying to earn enough money to keep myself and my family alive. But in the heat of the battle all thoughts of right and wrong are forgotten and it's all about trying to keep yourself alive. I obviously wasn't much good at that. I had managed to dodge the pounding hooves of the charging horses, forced my dagger into the necks of two attackers on foot and deflected several lance blows with my shield when I stopped to catch my breath. Suddenly in front of me stood a tall man, sturdy in

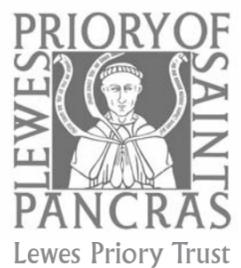
build like myself. My eyes darted to his chest and noted, with dismay, he was wearing the colours of the other side. His huge, double-edged sword was raised above his head and, in that instant, I saw a slight smile curl the corner of his lips. This was it. It was him or me.

In that moment I turned my head quickly to the right as he raised his arms and brought the sword crashing down glancing a terrible blow on the side of my head. For a moment everything went black but then exploded into light. I had survived! Summoning all my strength I turned my head. Again the heavy metal of the sword struck my skull. The sound of metal on bone was deafening, the pain overwhelming. My only thought was to remain upright, to try to run to safety. Using all my remaining strength I took a step forward but the swordsman was too quick for me and I felt my legs buckle under me as he slashed the back of my legs. I fell to the ground unconscious. It was a welcome release.

My spirit left my battered earthly body. The battle continued to rage around me. I saw many of my fellow foot soldiers hacked down with swords or speared by the lances of the mounted knights. Many were drowned trying to flee to safety across the River Ouse. By lunch time the streets of Lewes, now ablaze from the lighted arrows fired by the barons' men, were crammed with the bodies of the dead and dying.

No-one stopped to count the number of dead. Foot soldiers had fared the worst as knights and nobles were captured and held for ransom. The grim task of clearing the streets of the dead began in earnest on the day after the battle and the townsfolk of Lewes dug huge burial pits into which they piled the bloodied corpses. Centuries later people would find these pits. Three were discovered near what is now the prison when the Lewes to Brighton road was under construction and a further pit was found near the Priory when the cutting was being dug for the railway line. The scale of destruction was clear - each pit contained at least 500 skeletons. Perhaps one of them was mine.

For a BBC film looking at a skull that may have been from the Battle of Lewes see:
BBC - Sussex - Last of the Lewes warriors
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/local/sussex>



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