

## LIONEL GREEN sets out Merton Priory's connections to the stirring events of 1066 and all that: TO RUNNYMEDE VIA MERTON

In medieval times monasteries acted as the news media by recording national events of their time. Such annals provide narrative historians with details not recorded elsewhere. The Annals of Merton Priory still exist at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge (MS No 59 ff 151b-173a), with details of events to 1242. The most important section of the Annals refers to those of 1216 and 1217<sup>1</sup>, which covers the period following the signing of Magna Carta, the death of King John and the Peace Conference at Kingston and Merton.

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On 13 July 1205 Hubert Walter, archbishop of Canterbury and canon of Merton Priory, died. The king was triumphant, for the primate had prevented him from launching an expedition to recover his lost lands on the continent. He chose the bishop of Norwich to be the new archbishop and assembled an army at Portsmouth. But the pope's choice as archbishop was Stephen Langton. King John was outraged that his choice had been rejected and refused Langton entry into England as well as seizing church property. In 1207 England was laid under interdict by Innocent III and subsequently the king was excommunicated. For seven years the churches in England were closed and silent. Philip Augustus of France denounced the English king and threatened to invade. In 1213 John repented, accepted the pope's desires and was absolved at Winchester. On 1 August Stephen Langton, the new primate, arrived at Merton Priory accompanied by the bishops of London, Ely and Lincoln.<sup>2</sup> In the following year the interdict was lifted and John surrendered the kingdom to the pope and received it back as a papal fief.

The king now wished to reclaim lost lands in France, but the barons in England and his Poitevin vassals had no wish to fight against the French king. German and English armies were defeated by the French at Bouvines in July 1214. The barons then sought guarantees that the king would govern more moderately and predictably. On 17 May 1215 the rebel barons took control of London, and the king found himself restricted mainly to territory south of the Thames. He based the court at Windsor, and on 28 May safely received the royal regalia at Odiham. This had been in the custody of the Templars in London. On 5 June the king made a royal progress through friendly communities from Windsor to Winchester, returning via Merton. John arrived at the priory on Monday 8 June,<sup>3</sup> and issued letters of safe conduct for a baronial deputation to "make and secure" peace. These were for a limited period until midnight on the 11th, which anticipated an early settlement.<sup>4</sup> The king left Merton the next day and travelled to Odiham and thence to Windsor by nightfall for a conference with Langton. The king's first business on the morning of the 10th was to dictate letters to his military agents in the southern counties informing them that the truce had been extended to 15 June.

The barons were based at Staines, and between the two towns was the island of Runnymede with an access from each direction. A meeting with the baronial deputation went ahead and draft heads of agreement were drawn up. This was the *Magna Carta* and dated 15 June, but this was because the truce would have ended and the baronial garrison in London was to give up control on this date.

On 19 June the contracting parties pledged oaths of agreement, and all renewed their homage to the king. Between 19 and 24 June 40 copies of the charter were prepared and sent out from Windsor. The Merton chronicler records the accord as 23 June, which is also the day that the king finally left Runnymede for Windsor.<sup>3</sup>

Innocent III thought he was supporting John by annulling the charter, and in France the court announced that John had been deposed. John himself was now contemplating a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the following year<sup>5</sup> and began accumulating articles which he had deposited at various monasteries. On 27 June Adam the cellarer of Merton travelled to Winchester to return to the king three ceremonial staffs - one with 45 rubies, another 22 sapphires, and the third 27 sapphires. Seven silver cups (weighing 20 marks and 8 ounces) had also been deposited at the priory.<sup>6</sup> Similar items were lodged by others in the Treasury at Marlborough on 4 July, and at Woodstock on 25 July 1215.<sup>7</sup>

In France the king finally decided to send the dauphin Louis to claim the throne of England. Some of the Anglo-Norman barons backed the French dauphin when he landed in Kent on 2 June 1216. Louis captured Rochester on 6 June and entered London, where he was received by William Hardel, mayor of London, Robert fitzWalter and others. There were "ceremonial acts of homage, first at Westminster and later in St Paul's churchyard".<sup>8</sup> Louis captured Reigate castle on 18 June and moved on to Guildford the next day.

John spent the summer and autumn leading an army of mercenaries marching and counter-marching the rest of the country. In October 1216 he succumbed to sickness and died at Newark.

Henry III was only nine when he ascended the English throne. Some of the more chivalrous of the barons supported the young king, and the pope found himself guardian of a child. Louis was defeated at the Battle of Lincoln which he was besieging in May 1217, and was unable to advance far from London. Reinforcements were denied with the defeat in August of Eustace the Monk.<sup>9</sup> Through the mediation of the pope's legate, Gualo, a peace conference was called for 12 September 1217 and took place on an island on the Thames near Kingston. The Queen mother and the young king, together with the legate and William the Marshal arrived first on the Middlesex shore and rowed out to the island, whilst Louis's men were on the Surrey shore.

The dauphin was offered generous terms for the cessation of fighting. All debts due to him were to be paid together with an indemnity of 10,000 marks<sup>10</sup> to finance his withdrawal from England. Even the barons who supported Louis were to receive back their lands. In return the Channel Islands, which had been annexed to France (with Normandy) in 1204, were restored to the English crown. Gualo stayed at Merton priory from 17 to 23 September and was joined by Louis, the Queen mother and many nobles of England and France.<sup>11</sup> All was settled by 18 September, and on the 22nd the dauphin returned to Merton to hear the injunctions re his penance. He was escorted from Merton to Dover and thence to France. London had still to be won over, and according to the chronicles of Merton it was not until 29 October 1217 that the king entered the city.<sup>12</sup>

1. *Surrey Archaeological Collections* 36 (1925) p43 The article compares the Annals of Southwark and Merton.
2. *Annals of Merton SAC* 36 (1925) pp42, 48. They were William of London, Eustace of Ely and Hugh of Lincoln.
3. Hardy, T D *Itinerary of King John from the Patent Rolls* 1835 (Record Commission) p108
4. Patent Rolls (Rot. Litt. 1201-16) 17 John m.24, p142b-3
5. Hardy 1835 *Ibid.* p149
6. Patent Rolls *Ibid.* p145
7. Hardy 1835 *Ibid.* p149
8. *Annals Ibid.* p50
9. *Annals Ibid.* p52 "*Eustachius falsus monachus*"
10. The Annals of Merton record 7,000 marks, p51
11. *Annals Ibid.* p53
12. *Annals Ibid.* p53