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The mysterious blocked gateway of 1217

The recently published *Lincoln Castle Revealed* book reviewed in last month's issue gives many interesting insights into Lincoln Castle and to the wider history of the city, but seemingly unknown to the authors, one of their discoveries may solve a puzzling feature of a battle that took place in Lincoln in 1217.¹ The archaeologists found evidence of a forgotten southern gateway to Lincoln Castle and this may have been the 'blocked gateway' that the Bishop of Winchester is reported to have spotted at the start of that incredibly important battle.

1217 Battle of Lincoln

First readers might need reminding of the background to that battle. Despite the best efforts of those in 1215 who negotiated Magna Carta hoping that it would heal a divided nation, a civil war broke out between King John's supporters and the rebels; the latter invited the French prince Louis to become king. The conflict continued when John died the following year and his young son Henry was declared his successor. The decisive encounter in this conflict, the 1217 Battle of Lincoln, was fought in and around the city, with Lincoln Castle held by troops under the command of Nicola de la Haye loyal to Henry while the city was held by a mixture of English rebels and French troops that supported Louis under the command of the Comte de Perche.² A relieving army under William Marshal, young Henry the Third's regent, attacked from the west, relieved the Castle and put their enemy to flight. The defeated troops have variously been described as rebels or French and the victors as royalist or the English, but these terms are probably unhelpful; rebels are only rebels if they lose and both sides contained troops born either side of the Channel. Calling them Henry's or Louis' armies can equally be confusing as neither was there: Henry was too young to be risked and Louis was busy fighting in the south of the country.

Written sources for the battle

There are many accounts of the battle, but most are quite terse. According to Roger of Wendover in his 1235 *Flores Historiarum* some of Marshal's army entered the Castle by a postern gate, presumably the West Gate of the Castle, which opened up to the countryside without having to go through the (enemy held) city. The biography of William Marshal however gives a much more complex version of events and it is this account that may relate to the newly discovered southern gate.

L'Histoire de Guillaume le Marechal or 'The Life of William Marshal' is a biography of William Marshal written a few years after his death (in 1219) by a French poet known only as 'John'. It is worth examining this account in detail before trying to match the words to the archaeology. Firstly, the poem records a member of the Castle garrison, Sir Geoffrey de Serlant, riding out of the Castle to link up with and give intelligence to Marshal's army (if he was on horseback, presumably it was through the rather large West Gate rather than any lost smaller postern gate). Then one of Marshal's commanders, Peter des Roches (the Bishop of Winchester and one of many Frenchmen in the so-called 'English' army of Marshal) decided to scout out the situation before the main attack. Leaving his troops outside, des Roches with just one other soldier entered the Castle where they met Sir Geoffrey. The bishop witnessed the pounding the Castle was taking from the enemy siege engines and met the lady who was bravely defending it (in most of the sources Nicole de la Haye is referred to but not actually

named). The following lines are the ones that have caused confusion (lines 16499-16507). Peter des Roches then entered the town through a postern gate and as he looked around saw an old door of great antiquity that joined the walls of the city to the walls of the Castle, but in antiquity (or ‘anciently’) it had been blocked with stone and cement. He had this door knocked out to give ‘better protection’ to the Castle and so William Marshal’s army could see this gate, it was here that the bishop thought the army should enter. The bishop then made his way back to Marshal’s army (though we are tantalisingly not told by which route), but Marshal rejects the bishop’s advice and send his troops into the city via other gates. So where was the postern gate he used to enter the town, what was this ancient gate blocked in antiquity, how could he do some DIY in the middle of a siege without being noticed or stopped and how did opening a gate give better protection to the Castle? Unfortunately, none of the other primary sources for the battle (Ralph of Coggeshall, the Annals of Dunstable, the Chronicle of Melrose, Walter of Coventry, the Barnwell Chronicle, Nicholas Trevet, the ‘Taking of Lincoln’ and others) give us further clues so we are left to ponder if this poem can be trusted.

Confusion about the gate

Historians who have studied the battle like Richard Brooks, Sean McGlynn and David Crouch have been rather bemused by the bishop’s story.³ They have tended to think it was at best embellished and if it was not fabricated rather tied themselves in knots trying to work out which gate it was. They have all ended up presuming it is the west gate to the upper city which lay just to the north of Lincoln Castle (see plan). This gate was built to replace the Roman gateway that had been buried under the banks of the Castle in the late eleventh century. This ‘new’ gateway to the upper city was probably just over a century old and if it had been blocked by Comte de Perche’s ‘rebel’ army, it was hardly done in antiquity. If this was the gate referred to in the poem it would mean Peter de Roches left the Castle by some side gate and entered the rebel-held city, made his way through his enemies to the gate that faced where William Marshal’s army was approaching (the west gate of the upper city) and knocked out the blocking stones all without realising that the blocking rubble had only recently been put there; all in front of the besieging enemy army. As Marshal’s troops were heading towards that very gate, it seems incredibly unlikely that it would not have been guarded by somebody who would surely have challenged the bishop and his accomplice. Plus the poem implies that Marshal ignored the advice of Peter des Roches to enter the city via this newly unblocked gateway yet the description of where Marshal actually entered the upper city suggests that the west gate of the upper city *was* the gate he chose so they cannot be the same entrance.

The confused nature of the reconnaissance makes it easy to dismiss the bishop’s story as fantasy (as this author has done in the past). The author of *L’Histoire* in the opening of his poem admits that accounts of some of the events he described were confused and people did not always agree so he included everything. Perhaps Roger of Wendover was correct to omit this story, perhaps the only contact was Geoffrey de Serlant riding out of the Castle and Peter des Roches has exaggerated his role (or even told a bare faced lie). Roches was an ex-Precentor of the Cathedral and therefore quite knowledgeable of the city so if he was going to make up a story about Lincoln, presumably he would have made it accurate so even if the story is fake, the gateway was presumably real.

Southern gateway rediscovered

The new Castle entrance that may solve this mystery was rediscovered during the Lincoln Castle Revealed project, which ran from 2009 until 2015, though the fact that a small gateway can be seen on the same spot in John Speed's 1609 map should have given us a clue (it was wrongly presumed that the map was inaccurate). Originally the Castle utilised the Roman walls that lay to the south and west (uniquely among Roman cities in Britain, Lincoln had an upper and lower enclosure with a wall separating the two, part of this wall originally formed the south wall of the castle's bailey). The archaeologists estimated that the rediscovered gateway was probably built around 1105-15 when a new southern wall was built slightly to the north of the Roman one. The construction of this new gateway is possibly linked to a document from around the same time that gave licence for Bishop Robert Bloet to insert a new gate, unless that refers to the small postern estimated to be of the same date that was inserted into the southern wall just west of the Observatory Tower. The Castle now had two walls on its southern side and the insertion of a new southern gate to the west of the Lucy Tower and the postern gate by the Observatory Tower gave access to an enclosure formed by these walls. Presumably another gateway gave access from this enclosure into the lower city; the new *Lincoln Castle Revealed* book includes an attractive reconstruction showing such a gate, but this is conjecture as the presumed location is now covered by the nineteenth century Castle Moat House. Did the Castle builders insert a new gate in the Roman wall or refurbish a Roman one?

Perhaps the newly discovered southern gate is the one Peter des Roches used to enter the city or, if he left the Castle by a different postern gate (perhaps the one just to the west of the Observatory Tower), the southern gate was the 'ancient gate blocked in antiquity' that he claimed to have reopened. Perhaps the gate blocked in antiquity was a Roman gateway that formed the south edge of the southern enclosure. The walls of the southern enclosure did lie where the western walls of the lower city joined with the castle walls which matches the description in the poem and knocking out a gateway in this southern enclosure (if the besieging troops had not yet penetrated it) seems far more plausible than the bishop opening the west gate of the upper city in front of enemy troops. The ground on the southern side of the Castle drops steeply so presumably the enemy siege weapons were unlikely to be located here especially as they would suffer the disadvantage of firing uphill so this side of the Castle would be less heavily invested and the bishop less likely to be spotted. How opening such a gateway gave the Castle 'better protection' seems less obvious, unless having another way of allowing Marshal's army to enter the Castle was what the poet meant. It could have been yet another undiscovered gateway, perhaps a Roman postern that gave access from the southern enclosure westward through the city walls, unblocking such a gateway would have offered Marshal another way in and allowed them to better protect the Castle, but here maybe we have speculated a gate too far. Perhaps historians (myself included) owe Peter des Roches an apology for doubting his story and we should remember that if a written description does not match the topography of a site, it could be that lost archaeological features lay awaiting discovery.

Caption for map:

Simplified map of Lincoln Castle 1217 (not to scale) showing the various gates.

¹ Clarke, Jonathan, et al. 2021, *Lincoln Castle revealed*, Oxford, Oxbow Books, especially pp. 52-54.

² The battle of 1217 is often referred to as the Fair of Lincoln, though the author has argued previously in the pages of this journal that it is better translated as the Tournament of Lincoln. To avoid confusion with the 1141 Battle of Lincoln, in this article it will be called the 1217 Battle of Lincoln. Grigg, Erik, 2017, 'The name of the Battle (Battle of Lincoln 1217)' in *Lincolnshire Past and Present* Vol. 108. p.3.

³ Crouch, David, 2002, *William Marshal, Knighthood, War and Chivalry, 1147-1219*, Harlow, Pearson Education, pp. 131-32.

Brooks, Richard, 2014, *The Knight who saved England*, Oxford, Osprey Publishing, pp. 222-23.

McGlynn, Sean, 2015, *Blood cries afar, the Magna Carta War and the Invasion of England 1215-1217*, Stroud, The History Press, pp. 211.