

EDITORS' NOTE

When the French captured Winchester, twice

The years 1216 and 1217 are in many ways a footnote in English history, following the momentous events of 1215 and the Magna Carta. Yet they were turbulent when rebellious barons invited the French to invade and drive King John off the throne. At this time, the Bishop of Winchester, Peter des Roche (1205-1238) was at the side of the unloved king and the city was twice captured and held by the French. Somehow the cathedral, as in the Siege of Winchester in 1141, escaped damage.

After the Magna Carta was agreed between the king and the barons at Runnymede in June 1215, John quickly repudiated it. Bishop des Roches, who had served as justiciar (governor) of England during John's absence in France, was one of the king's main advisers. The barons, infuriated by John's behaviour, turned against him. They invited Prince Louis of France, son of King Philip II,¹ to be the new king of England. At this time, the barons were members of an Anglo-Norman cross-channel polity and so turning to the French king for support would have been a drastic but not unexpected action.

In May 1216, Louis landed at the Isle of Thanet in Kent with a large army, which required around 700 ships to transport it. On the advice of William Marshal, King John withdrew to Winchester. After taking London and being acclaimed as the king of England at the old St Paul's Cathedral, Louis led his forces towards the south and west on June 6.



He quickly took castles at Reigate, Guildford and Farnham, before heading to Winchester. John, accompanied by Bishop des Roches, had quit Winchester on June 5 and went to the stronghold of Corfe castle in Dorset.² Winchester was to be the royalists' defensive line to halt

¹ Louis would become Louis VIII of France in 1223. See separate *Editors' Note* on 'Louis 'Le Lion' in this edition.

² Nicholas Vincent, *Peter des Roches, An alien in English politics, 1205-1238*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 126.

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Louis' progress towards the south-west and John had appointed Savary de Mauléon³ as the local commander.

It was here, on June 14, that Louis' forces met their first resistance.⁴ De Mauléon set the suburbs of Winchester ablaze to deny resources and shelter to the invaders, perhaps razing up to half. However, the 'citizens rushed to extinguish the flames and to admit the king's enemies'.⁵ Louis was thus able to enter the city but faced resistance from the royal castle and the fortified Wolvesey Palace, which belonged to the Bishops of Winchester.



The French prince wanted the two garrisons to be brought under control so that they did not sally forth to fire the rest of the city or attack his camp.⁶ Following two weeks of bombardment by siege engines, both garrisons surrendered on June 24 and were allowed to withdraw. Louis took full possession of the castle which some reports say had been undermined and its walls breached.⁷ [This 19th century lithograph by Delpech portrays him as Louis VIII].

There was greater economic damage on the bishop's estates, which is recorded in Winchester diocese's pipe rolls.⁸ The contemporary chronicler Roger of Wendover wrote that Louis reduced Winchester 'to subjection, together with the castle and the whole countryside around'.⁹ The depredations in Hampshire were the most severe with Wolvesey, Bishops Waltham and Bitterne losing most of their livestock and grain while rental income from the bishop's landholdings was paid to Louis' lieutenant and not to the bishop's chamberlain.

³ Savary de Mauléon was the Seneschal of Poitou and would be a member of the council of regency for Henry III.

⁴ Sean McGlynn, *Blood Cries Afar – The Magna Carta War and the Invasion of England, 1215-1217*, Stroud: Spellmount, 2015, 170.

⁵ Vincent, *Peter des Roches*, 127.

⁶ McGlynn, *Blood Cries Afar*, 171.

⁷ Mike Osborne, *Defending Hampshire*, Stroud: The History Press, 2011, 38.

⁸ Vincent, *Peter des Roches*, 128.

⁹ Roger of Wendover, *Flowers of History*, Vol II, Translated by J.A. Giles. London: Henry G. Bohn, 1849, pp. 366.

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The turning point of the civil war came in October 1216 when John died of dysentery at Newark and was succeeded by his nine-year-old son Henry III, who was born at Winchester castle and baptised in the cathedral in 1207. It was Bishop des Roches who placed the crown on the young king's head in the coronation ceremony at Gloucester Cathedral. With John's death the point of the war was lost, and many barons returned to the royal cause.¹⁰

The diocese of Winchester was the 'principal theatre of military activity in the spring of 1217'.¹¹ After the royalists recaptured Farnham castle in March that year, they moved on to Winchester where a siege had been started. As in the previous year, those within the wall supported the king but the suburbs sided with the rebels and inflicted damage on the royalist camp that had been set up at Hyde Abbey. Wolvesey Palace fell within a few days, but the castle held out until late April when the French defenders surrendered and were allowed to leave for London.¹² The gain was short-lived and Louis, who had returned from France, retook Farnham and Winchester quickly.

The civil war, which had been 'an affair of skirmishes, sieges and tactical withdrawals'¹³ and little bloodshed, was transformed when William Marshal, regent for Henry III, put aside the caution of medieval warfare and engaged the French in a full-scale battle at Lincoln. It was here that Peter des Roches, the warrior-bishop, found a gap in the French siege of that cathedral city, and led royalist forces into combat. The French were driven from Lincoln and after a further loss in the sea battle of Sandwich when a reinforcing fleet was defeated, Louis agreed the Treaty of Lambeth and returned to France.

Early in summer 1217, Hampshire and Winchester were again taken from rebel control and des Roches was granted custody of the county as sheriff on June 29. The bishop continued to build the retrochoir, which had been started by his predecessor Godfrey de Lucy, and managed the repairs to the castle and the construction of Great Hall, which still stands.

¹⁰ McGlynn, *Blood Cries Afar*, 187.

¹¹ Vincent, *Peter des Roches*, 136.

¹² *Ibid.*, 136.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 126.

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Winchester had been 'twice put to the torch, the city walls and royal castle undermined and Hyde Abbey used as a barracks'.¹⁴ Fortunately, the cathedral appears not to have been damaged or despoiled. Peter des Roches would continue as bishop of Winchester, always surrounded by controversy, until his death in 1238.



The tomb of Bishop Peter des Roche in the Cathedral's retrochoir (Simon Newman)

TOM WATSON

Images

- 1) Prince Louis arrives in Thanet. Unknown artist (Wikimedia Commons)
- 2) Portrait by Francois-S raphine Delpech of Louis VIII (Wikimedia Commons)
- 3) Tomb of Bishop Peter des Roches (Simon Newman)

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 146.