

Rochester Castle

The sieges

A siege is what happens when an attacking army attempts to cut off a castle from all sources of water and food. Sieges were very common during the middle ages; pitched battles were extremely rare. They were usually solved or lifted through a period of complicated negotiations in which the inhabitants of the castle bargained for their lives, their land and their freedom.

The castles at Rochester were involved in a number of major sieges, most of them stemming from the tactical importance of their position guarding the approach to London. The siege which took place in 1215 became one of the most famous of the entire middle ages.



A model of Rochester Castle under siege displayed at the Guildhall Museum

1088

When William the Conqueror died, he split his substantial legacy among his sons. He left Normandy to his eldest son Robert, but the kingdom of England went to William 'Rufus', who thus became William II. This arrangement created lots of bad feeling and it wasn't long before there was trouble. Odo, the Conqueror's half-brother and both Bishop of Bayeux and Earl of Kent, joined Robert's cause and started a rebellion in England in support of his claim to the English throne.

As Earl of Kent, Odo was in charge of the first (timber) version of Rochester Castle. He was captured at Pevensey in 1088 after declaring for Robert and taken to Rochester so that he could order the garrison there to surrender to the king. In fact he was rescued and seems to have been taken into the castle for safety. When William II heard of these events he laid siege to Rochester, forcing Odo and the other nobles involved eventually to come to a deal with him whereby they were allowed to go free but lost all their English lands.

1215

Magna Carta, a document that to a certain extent outlined the limits to the power of the English king, was agreed to between King John and his barons in the summer of 1215. John repudiated its assertions shortly afterwards and a civil war began. Rochester, a royal castle, was at this time under the control of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton, according to an agreement that dated back to the reign of Henry I. Langton was no friend of the king and he seems to have let the castle pass into the hands of rebels. It was occupied in September 1215 by William de Albini and a small company of knights.

A furious King John commanded the subsequent siege himself. His attacking army breached the bailey wall and set up stone-throwing machines to destroy or damage the keep. At the same time, or perhaps because these machines were ineffective, a mine was dug.

Undisturbed building material in the south-eastern corner of the castle basement, up to the ground floor, would suggest that this mine was not in fact underground. It was instead aimed at removing a section of wall from the tower above ground level.

As the breach in the wall grew, it would have been temporarily stabilised with wooden props. We know that John sent a writ ordering the delivery of barrels full of the fat from forty pigs to fuel a fire under the tower. The props were burnt, and the whole corner of the keep came crashing down.



The (rebuilt) corner of the keep and bailey wall attacked by King John

Still, the rebels did not surrender. They retreated behind the cross-wall that divides the keep in two, and continued their resistance until starved out on 30 November. The keep was left ruined. In fact it was occupied briefly the following year by Prince Louis of France, who had invaded at the invitation of King John's enemies. When John died shortly afterwards, and the country united behind his son, the young Henry III, Louis left. It was Henry's government that repaired the keep in the 1220s, rebuilding the missing tower in the distinctive rounded style we can still see today.

1264

There was a further rebellion in 1264, this time led by Simon de Montfort against Henry III and his son, the future Edward I. The action at Rochester began in April, when de Montfort's allies approached the city, prompting the royal constable to set fire to the suburbs and outlying buildings, in case they provided cover to the attackers. When de Montfort himself arrived he managed to cross Rochester Bridge and take the city and the castle bailey, forcing the defenders to withdraw into the keep. A siege began, but was lifted after just a week, on the approach of Henry and Edward with a large army.

The castle seems again to have been badly damaged. This time, however, little was done to repair it and its condition deteriorated. It wasn't until the 1360s that any significant money was spent.

1381

The castle's final military action came during the Peasants' Revolt, when a band of rebels successfully besieged it and freed some prisoners.