



Take One Castle

Gloucester Castle in the Second Barons War

At the start of the Second Baron's War, Gloucester was held for the King by Mathias Bezill, a French knight, who had been appointed constable of Gloucester Castle in 1251, and sheriff of Gloucestershire in 1261. At this time, the castle garrison was small, consisting of just six crossbowmen on foot. In 1262, the opening move in the conflict that was subsequently known as the Second Baron's War took place when a group of barons and knights marched into Gloucester and arrested Bezill. The barons installed their own man, William Tracy, but Bezill evaded his captors and returned with an armed force, retaking control and imprisoning Tracy. The king subsequently awarded Bezill 60 marks in compensation for his expenses - equivalent to £21,309 today!

In early 1263, another attempt to evict Bezill took place when the rebel barons Roger de Clifford and John Gifford attacked the castle. Bezill refused to yield and so the attackers began a siege. After a four days, the barons were able to gain entry to the castle when some prisoners - who had been somewhat foolishly been released from the dungeon to help defend the castle - set fire to the castle's main gate (which faced the town) allowing the attackers to successfully break it down and gain entry to the bailey! Bezill and his men retreated to the keep and although they held out for a few more days, the rebels eventually broke the keep's door. Despite this, the defenders held out for another day or so before they surrendered. Bezill was praised for his stout defence, though he was then taken to Herefordshire and imprisoned in de Clifford's castle at Eardisley. He was luckier than the castle's carpenter however, for this man had taken up a crossbow in the defence and had been seen firing at the barons from the top of the keep. In an act of pure vengeance, his captors subsequently dragged him to the top of the keep and forced him to jump off to his death. The barons put Roger de Clifford in charge as constable of the castle, but it did not remain in their hands for long as in December, after being visited by Prince Edward, Clifford defected back to the king's side.

In February 1264 De Montfort's sons, Henry And Simon, were en route to join with Llewellyn, Prince of Wales, when they decided to try and take Gloucester. Two of their knights, John Gifford and John Balun, disguised themselves as Welsh wool traders and came up to the city's West gate, asking for admittance. Upon being let in, they took off their disguise and forced the porter to open the main gates, allowing Henry de Montfort and



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his men to enter. Although the rebels raced towards the castle, the alarm was raised and the castle gates closed in the nick of time. This left the castle being held for the king while the city was in the hands of the barons.

Prince Edward was at Oxford and when news reached him on 5 March, he immediately assembled a force and marched to the castle's relief. On arrival, his forces attempted to take the city's west gate, but they were repulsed, despite the castle's defenders making a sally to try to assist. Edward then moved some of his force to Castlemeads (the water meadows across the river to the west of Gloucester), while others kept the city's defenders occupied. Some of Edward's troops seized a ship belonging to the Abbot of Gloucester and this was used to ferry the royal force men across the Severn to the castle's riverside west gate, which was opened to admit the Prince. With Edward ensconced in the castle and using its siege engines to bombard the city, the barons continued their siege but time was not on their side. When baronial reinforcements failed to have an effect, Henry de Montfort accepted an offer by Prince Edward to a truce followed by negotiations. These were successful and Henry de Montfort accepted the terms and left Gloucester – whereupon Edward immediately reneged on the deal. As punishment for co-operating with the enemy, Edward arrested the city's officials, made them pay a ransom and then was said to have destroyed various parts of the town. In the meantime de Clifford promptly sought out the porters who had opened the west gate to the rebels and hanged them as an example!

The 'destruction' undertaken by Edward was actually improvements to the castle's defences. Before he left, the Prince appears to have undertaken an inspection of the defences of the castle and town and subsequently ordered various alterations to improve them. Firstly, de Clifford was tasked with making repairs to the castle fabric and its weapons, which is recorded in the castle accounts roll. Secondly, Edward ordered the destruction of houses and building in front of the castle to create a better fire zone for the archers, crossbowmen and the siege engines. Finally he also ordered that a new ditch was to be dug around the castle.

It is not known exactly how many houses and other buildings were pulled down or burnt by Edward's troops but in creating a 'bareland' in front of the castle, but it must have been a fair number. In 1267, a royal inquisition recorded that one property owner, Llanthony Priory, suffered a loss of rent amounting to 31s 10d (£847) caused by '*the levelling of houses and buildings in front of the castle*' plus a loss of £8 6s 8d (£4440)



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for the demolition of houses near the castle's bridge over the Severn and lastly a loss of 42s 4d (£1128) of rents from houses destroyed by the castle's new defensive ditch. This amounted to a loss of income of £12 1s 10d (£6,441) but despite the clear responsibility, the Crown did not actually pay these amounts until the reign of Henry VII – 200 years later!

Edward also ordered that the castle's garrison was to be increased and from this time, it usually consisted of two to three knights, 21 horse soldiers, 14 crossbowmen and 60 foot soldiers (typically 40 Welsh foot and 20 English foot). After de Montfort's victory at the Battle of Lewes, an uneasy peace came to England, but Gloucester Castle was still held firmly in the King's name, as was Bristol Castle. It wasn't until December 1264 that the rebels took control of Gloucester Castle after de Clifford was persuaded by Gilbert de Clare and Simon de Montfort to surrender the castle and go into exile in Ireland.

After Prince Edward's escape, Gloucester Castle was sent reinforcements by de Montfort, consisting of two extra knights and 300 troops. These men arrived a day or so before the Royal army arrived at the town on 10th June 1265. Edward's troops began their assault on Gloucester in the north, storming the wall of the town between St. Oswald's Gate and the North Gate. This portion of the wall was not well protected and Edward's men were soon able to breach the breastworks to gain entry. After heavy fighting, the town fell to royal troops two days later, although the rebel forces, led by Grimbald Pauncefoot and Geoffrey de Lacy, had been able to retreat to the castle and secure its gates and drawbridges.

Edward immediately began a siege and the royal troops surrounded the castle while sappers (engineers) erected barricades and prepared firing stands for siege engines, including mangonel catapults and, on the Castlemeads meadows across the Severn, large trebuchet catapults. Edwards' new defences however proved stubborn and for the next 3 weeks, the royalist forces besieged the castle, firing heavy stones into the walls and fire-bombs into the interior. The latter caused especially severe damage to the keep which caught fire and was partially destroyed. In the third week, Edward decided the softening up had done enough and began an all-out assault on the castle walls. Towards the end of the week, the attackers had bridged the gate moat and then were able to set fire to the main gate. The defenders were unable to extinguish the blaze and the attackers subsequently brought a battering ram to bear, break the gate. By this time, conditions inside the castle were dire and, finally realising that no help was coming, surrendered. Edward granted the defenders



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their freedom on condition that none would bear arms against him for 40 days. Strangely, Edward awarded Grimbald Pauncefoot with a knighthood and when he later became king, appointed Pauncefoot as the Keeper of the Forest of dean and constable of St.Briavel's castle.

The capture of Gloucester essentially prevented de Montfort from quickly joining forces with his son Simon. Instead he first headed south to try and cross the Severn Estuary, but found that there were no available boats (de Clare had was forced on a longer, more complicated route. Edward left Gloucester Castle a few days later, heading for Kenilworth where he was able to attack and destroy Simon de Montfort's son's army. Edward left a full strength garrison at Gloucester, comprising of 3 knights (Sir William Cheney, Sir Hugo de Troia and one other unnamed knight), 20 horsemen, 14 crossbowmen and 70 foot (50 Welsh and 20 English foot soldiers). On the 3rd August, the knights received orders to join Edward at Evesham with the garrison. The following day Edward defeated de Montfort at the Battle of Evesham, heralding the beginning of the end of the Second Baron's War. It is not known what role Gloucester Castle's forces played, but in all likelihood they were part of the force under Roger Mortimer that Edward ordered to approach Evesham from the west to seal off de Montfort's only potential escape route; the bridge over the River Avon at Evesham.

After Evesham the war dragged on for another two years, as the royal forces mopped up pockets of resistance. During this time Edward ordered repairs to be made to Gloucester Castle and in April 1266, de Clifford was awarded the sum of £110 16s 7d (£59,000) for his expenses in connection with repairing the castle fortifications. The city walls of Gloucester were also ordered to be repaired, although the cost of this fell to the city bailiffs, as was the bridge over the Severn. Mathis Bezill, whose expulsion from Gloucester Castle marked the start of the war, was re-appointed constable in 1286 (after a spell as constable of Dover castle) but before he could take up his position, the French knight died. The anniversary of his death was later being kept by St Peter's Abbey in Gloucester.