

King Richard I and his times

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The earliest royal charter granted to Doncaster, was issued by King Richard I - 'Richard the Lionheart' - and is dated Ascension Day (22 May) 1194. It came into being at a turbulent period of English history, for there was little about Richard's reign which was not turbulent. Nor was it only a turbulent period in English history alone. The text of the charter shows that it was granted not in England but in France. To understand why, we need to look at the troubled history of the 1190s.

At that time, the kings of England were also lords of a large area of France, rulers of a domain which stretched from the Pennines to the Pyrenees. Keeping this very extensive domain - the Angevin Empire - under control was an unending task. But there is a very specific reason for King Richard to be in Normandy in 1194.

This was a difficult year for King Richard I. In February, he returned from captivity in Germany. Returning overland from the crusade to recapture Jerusalem, he had fallen into hostile hands and held to ransom. (A local man, Roger of Howden, had become an important government official, and had been in the king's retinue for the outward journey as far as Cyprus. When, a few years later he retired, and returned to live in Howden, a dozen miles north-east of Doncaster, he settled down to write a 'chronicle' - a history of his times - which is still a very important source for the history of these years.)

On his return to England in March 1194, the first task to face King Richard was to reclaim his kingdom from his treacherous brother John. This struggle between the brothers had a local impact, for John's supporters had seized Tickhill castle. Tickhill Castle was the heart of the great estate - or 'honor' - of Tickhill. In 1189, John had been granted the honour of Tickhill by his brother. The castle, however, had been withheld by the king, as he was suspicious of John's intentions. Since castles were medieval status symbols, the loss of Tickhill castle rankled. In Richard's absence, John seized it for himself in 1192. His triumph was short-lived for the castle surrendered as soon as its defenders heard of Richard's return. Other castles held by John were not so ready to give in. Nottingham castle surrendered only after a two-day siege.

At the same time as the regaining of Tickhill and Nottingham castles was happening, Richard heard that King Philip of France was taking advantage of his difficulties in England by invading Richard's province of Normandy. Richard immediately headed south, sailing from Portsmouth to Normandy on 12 May 1194, on his way to meet the French army. Even in wartime, government business has to continue to be done and so in the course of the Normandy campaign, Richard agreed to grant a charter to the townsmen of Doncaster, at a small village called Tubuef. The village lies on the River Iton in Normandy, a few miles south of Rouen. The contents of the charter are explained on another webpage.

King Richard died as he had lived: fighting. In 1199, at the siege of Charlus, in the south of France, he was struck by an arrow and fatally wounded. He was taken for burial at the Abbey of Fontevreaux, where his father, King Henry II had been buried. A few years later, his mother, the formidable Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine, was buried close by. All three were provided with elaborate effigies. The tombs survive, although the remains of their occupants were removed during the French Revolution.

