

The "Key to England":
King Henry II and Dover Castle

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HIST 299
November 20, 2023

I hereby declare upon my word of honor,
I have neither given nor received
unauthorized help on this assignment.

Abstract

King Henry II of England spent an exorbitant amount of money on the construction of a Great Tower and curtain wall at the port of Dover in southeast England. This paper investigates the king's motivations for expending such resources on the building project by examining the wider context of Henry's reign. It challenges the view demonstrated in older historical writing that castles were exclusively military in purpose by discussing the role that Dover played as a tangible symbol of power during Henry's struggle to reassert royal authority in the aftermath of King Stephen's reign, and as a residence for important pilgrims drawn to England to visit the shrine of Thomas Becket, the martyred Archbishop of Canterbury

Places can hold a wealth of stories, and the study of historical sites can reveal a wealth of information about the people and events that populated them. Dover Castle is one such site that deserves special attention, not only for its sheer size and imposing grandeur, but also for the long and rich history that it has accrued across its centuries of use. The castle played an important strategic role from the Iron Age through the Second World War, and was actively garrisoned until the late 1950s, meaning there were troops stationed there for more than seven hundred years, longer than any other military base in England.¹ An especially important stage in the site's evolution was its rebuilding in the late twelfth century by King Henry II. In this enormous endeavor, whatever old fortifications presumably had stood on the cliffside overlooking the Strait of Dover were replaced with a massive fortified stone tower and surrounding curtain wall.² The scale of this building project was far beyond any other Henry undertook during his reign, with expenses totaling nearly £7000, more than three times the cost of the next largest castle.³ The uniquely extravagant expenditure over the nine years of the Great Tower's construction naturally raises the question of why Henry was willing to pour so much time and resources into this particular building. Answering this question requires delving into the historical context of Angevin England and considering a variety of influences and pressures that shaped Henry's

¹ John Newman, *North East and East Kent* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1983). 289-300.

² Today, the central fortified building of a castle is often referred to as a "keep." However, this term does not appear in historical documents from the period. They most often use the term *magna turris*, great tower, or in the case of Dover, *turris fortissima*, the strongest tower. Another term that is sometimes used is "donjon," clearly related to the modern "dungeon." This paper refers to the structure with the period term "Great Tower." See Christopher Philpotts, "The Donjon and the Documents: Dover Castle from the 12th to the 14th Centuries" in *The Great Tower of Dover Castle: History, Architecture, and Context*, ed. Paul Pattinson, Steven Brindle, and David M. Robinson (Swindon, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2020).

³ John Gillingham, "King Henry, Thomas Becket, and the Building of Dover Castle," in *The Great Tower of Dover Castle: History, Architecture, and Context*, ed. Paul Pattinson, Steven Brindle, and David M. Robinson (Swindon, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2020). 15-25.

reign, from external military threats to tensions surrounding religious authority within his kingdom. This wide pool of historical influences can be divided into three main factors. Henry's investment in the fortification of Dover Castle can be explained by the site's strategic importance, the need to assert royal authority, and the conflict with Thomas Becket and its aftermath. Unsurprisingly, the divisions between these three areas are far from definite, and they bleed together to form a complete picture of the military, political, and social conditions of England during Henry's reign.

Historians traditionally tend to consider castles as exclusively military artifacts, and are reluctant to accept other interpretations. However, this tendency has been challenged in recent years, with many modern historians advocating for examining the castle as a multifaceted social artifact, which would have fulfilled many purposes in the period of its use.⁴ While a more holistic approach is generally favored now, the military purpose of a castle can not be ignored or underestimated. The Great Tower certainly seems to have been designed with defensibility in mind. The rings of concentric curtain walls, triple barred doors, and obscenely thick walls of the tower itself all lend themselves to this interpretation.⁵ The tower was even fitted out with a well, burrowing four hundred feet down through the cliffs, to provide water should the defenders find themselves trapped inside.⁶

⁴ Lise Hull, "Changing Conceptions of English Castles" *MHQ: The Quarterly Journal of Military History* V. 20 (2008): 60-75.

⁵ A. Hamilton Thompson, *Military Architecture in Medieval England* (East Ardsley, UK: EP Publications, 1912). 110-59.

⁶ Steven Brindle and Philip Dixon, "The Great Tower: Context, Design, and Realization," in *The Great Tower of Dover Castle: History, Architecture, and Context*, ed. Paul Pattinson, Steven Brindle, and David M. Robinson (Swindon, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2020). 150-80.

Another factor central to Dover Castle's significance to military history is the strategic importance of Dover itself. The port's position overlooking the shortest sea crossing from the British Isles to the Continent meant that Dover was, as medieval chronicler Matthew Paris famously put, the "key to England."⁷ It sat directly on the road towards Canterbury and London, meaning any invaders making for England's capital would necessarily pass through the port. Additionally, the mouth of the river Dour, the only gap in the cliffs that line the coast, provides easy inland access. The ability to cross over to France with ease and speed was absolutely essential for Henry, as his dominion included lands on both sides of the Channel. At the height of his power, Henry ruled more of France than the French king did, his lands mainly acquired through inheritance and marriage alliances.⁸ However, records of Henry's itinerary show that, at least in the early part of his reign, he hardly ever made his crossings from Dover, preferring to embark from the ports at Southampton or Portsmouth, further to the south and west. The reason for this is twofold. First, the prevailing southwesterly winds in the English Channel meant that ships would tend to drift farther north and east than intended, which could be dangerous if they managed to miss the coast of Normandy entirely. Starting from a port farther to the west would alleviate this problem somewhat.⁹ Second, the French ports that were easily accessible from Dover were within the territories of Henry's enemies, Boulogne and Flanders. While this made

⁷ Matthew Paris, *Matthew Paris's English History from the Year 1235 to 1273* (London: H. G. Bohn, 1852).

⁸ Richard Mortimer, "Background to Government" in *Angevin England, 1154-1258* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994). 3-36.

⁹ Nicholas Vincent, "In the Shadow of the Castle Wall; King Henry II and Dover 1154-79," in *The Great Tower of Dover Castle: History, Architecture, and Context*, ed. by Paul Pattinson, Steven Brindle, and David M. Robinson (Swindon, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2020). 26-46.

crossing to France from Dover hazardous, it also contributed to the city's importance from a military angle.

Henry made his first documented expenditures on Dover in 1167, which was also the year in which tensions with his French rivals became an immediate concern. That year, hostilities broke out between Henry and King Louis VII of France.¹⁰ The counts of two French provinces that were dangerously close to the Dover crossing sided with Louis, posing an imminent threat to the port. Count Philip of Flanders, who came to power that year, was one of Henry's most bitter enemies, and his proximity to Dover was motivation enough to desire further fortifications. Also in 1167, Count Matthew of Boulogne, who was already on bad terms with Henry, issued a direct threat of invasion.¹¹ While Matthew never followed through on the threat, it is clear that Henry took it seriously enough to warrant fortifying the most likely landing point for a potential invasion. The next spree of spending on Dover occurred directly before (and perhaps in preparation for) the greatest crisis of Henry's reign: the Young King's revolt of 1173-74. During this period, three of the king's sons, as well as his queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine, openly rebelled against him, enlisting the support of many of Henry's enemies including Louis VII, the Counts of Flanders and Boulogne, and King William of Scotland. Most of the conflict on the French front took place in Normandy, and the rebels' eventual point of entry into England was well to the north of Dover, meaning that the castle never actually saw any fighting.¹² Although neither of these threats to the port ultimately came to fruition, the fact that Henry's spending on castles, and especially on Dover, increased during both periods of potential danger demonstrates the important role that the castle played in defensive tactics of the twelfth century.

¹⁰ W. L. Warren, *Henry II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 105-08.

¹¹ Gillingham, "King Henry, Thomas Becket, and the Building of Dover Castle."

¹² Warren, *Henry II*, 121-36.

During the reign of Henry II's predecessor, King Stephen, royal power in England lapsed significantly. When Henry took the throne in 1154, he quickly began working toward reestablishing the crown's authority over his kingdom. Evidence of this can be seen in the numerous laws and charters published during his reign, which began to reform and centralize legal power. The Assize of Clarendon was the most influential, establishing for the first time a kingdom-wide standardized procedure for the trying of criminals.¹³ Henry was determined to make his presence felt in every corner of his massive dominion, both through his laws and through physical expressions of power. He was known for traveling almost constantly, from castle to town to royal forest across the kingdom, leaving his retinue little time to rest in one place.¹⁴ When the king himself was not physically present in a county, his castles would serve as a stand-in. Funded by royal money and managed by the king's agents, these imposing structures would be a permanent symbol of the crown's power over the region, as well as an administrative center from which the sheriff could enforce the king's laws.¹⁵ Even the work of construction became more centralized during the Angevin period, with Henry often placing stonemasons and other professional artisans in his personal employ over important projects such as Dover.¹⁶ Given the uncertain beginning to Henry's reign, it was essential that he establish a strong network of

¹³ William Stubbs and H. W. Carless Davis, eds, "Assize of Clarendon," in *Select Charters and Other Illustrations of English Constitutional History, from the Earliest Times to the Reign of Edward the First*, 9th ed. rev. by H. W. Carless Davis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913). 161-73.

¹⁴ Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium*, translated by Montague R. James, ed. E. Sidney Hartland (London, UK: Honorable Society of Cymmrodorion, 1923). 260-70.

¹⁵ Howard Montagu Colvin, *The History of the King's Works*, vol. 1 (London: H.M. Stationery Off., 1963). 51-91.

¹⁶ Colvin, *The King's Works*.

castles across England and the parts of France that were under his control, in order to make a statement about what kind of king he would be moving forward.

Given the importance that Henry placed on exerting control through castles, it is no wonder that the existence of castles owned and administered by others in his kingdom was generally not tolerated. From the very beginning of his reign, he began a campaign of seizing some baronial castles and destroying others.¹⁷ After taking possession of Scarborough castle, Henry demolished the original tower and erected a Great Tower similar to the one at Dover. The placement of the tower in the inner bailey was unusual— it was constructed at the very highest point of the mound on which the castle sat. This resulted in it being awkwardly close to the curtain wall at the main gate, but also meant that it cut an impressive figure from miles away.¹⁸ Dover has a similar quirk in construction that indicates an eye toward the visual impact of the structure. One of the walls of the Great Tower is 2° off of perpendicular with the others, a detail which is unlikely to be accidental in a project undertaken with the level of care and precision that Dover was. This feature allowed the wall and forebuilding to line up perfectly with the inner curtain wall and its towers. Travelers approaching from the northeast would therefore get an impressive view of four layers of parallel walls layered over each other.¹⁹ These design choices clearly demonstrate the designers' interest in projecting power and strength through the architecture of the castles.²⁰

¹⁷ Thompson, *Military Architecture*.

¹⁸ Brindle and Dixon, "The Great Tower."

¹⁹ Brindle and Dixon, "The Great Tower."

²⁰ Henry certainly would have had some influence over the design choices of the buildings he sponsored, but it is unclear exactly how many decisions on each castle were made by him and how many were made by the engineers and artisans who worked on the construction. See Lindy Grant, "Dover Castle and Henry II as a Patron of Architecture," in *The Great Tower of*

Another aspect of the design of Dover castle that warrants discussion is the choice of rectangular towers rather than the cylindrical model which had become common both on the Continent and in England. Early historians who studied Dover condemned this choice as outdated and the castle as a whole as obsolete,²¹ but this assertion would only stand if the castle is being examined from an exclusively military standpoint. Symbolically, the choice makes much more sense. On multiple occasions, Henry demonstrated a desire to be associated with the legacy of his grandfather, King Henry I, frequently referencing the “laws of King Henry, his grandfather” in his policies.²² He also took guidance from the reign of William the Conqueror, as the circumstances surrounding their accessions were quite similar. The rectangular Great Tower was an instantly recognizable characteristic of nearly all castles in England built in the aftermath of the Norman invasion, so by using this model for his work at Dover, Henry was making reference to the historical period that he wished to emulate, and to the ancestors whose legacies he claimed to be continuing.²³ This is not to say that Henry never used cylindrical towers— they appear frequently in his castles in France, particularly in his ancestral land of Anjou. There, the architectural style claims association with a different set of ancestors, and a different history.²⁴

Dover Castle: History, Architecture, and Context, ed. Paul Pattinson, Steven Brindle, and David M. Robinson (Swindon, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2020).

²¹ Colvin, *The King's Works*.

²² Roger of Hovedon, *The Annals of Roger de Hoveden, comprising the history of England and of other countries of Europe from A.D. 732 to A.D. 1201* (New York: AMS Press, 1968), 259.

²³ Grant, “Henry II as a Patron of Architecture.”

²⁴ Henry was not the only monarch to use the shapes of their towers to make a statement. After he died at Chinon castle in Anjou in 1189, the land was conquered by King Philip Augustus of France, who added round towers to the castle soon after. This symbolic claiming of Henry’s fortress was a celebration of his victory over the English. See Brindle and Dixon, “The Great Tower.”

Dover Castle's function as a visible symbol of power and a tangible connection to the kings of England's past cannot be entirely divorced from its military use. Any expression of power on the part of a medieval monarch would come with an implicit assumption that the power could be backed up with force if required. However, it is clear that the castle was intended to defer violence as much as to weather it.²⁵

A final explanation for the vast expenditures on Dover Castle in the 1180s is related to an unlikely series of events surrounding the conflict between Henry and Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury. The construction of the Great Tower coincides with the construction of the new chapel at Canterbury Cathedral in honor of Becket, and scholars have theorized that the castle may have been constructed as a response to the growing power of the cult that had grown up around Becket after his martyrdom.²⁶ To understand how these events came about, it is best to first look at the relationship Henry had with the Church, particularly in the county of Kent, which contains both Dover and Canterbury. Being the domain of the Archbishop, the proportion of land in Kent that was under Church control was higher than any other county. The fact that the clergy held so much freedom and autonomy from secular authority when Henry came to the throne was a source of concern for him, and he quickly began attempting to walk back the privileges that Stephen had allowed the Archbishop.²⁷

The event that initiated the conflict with Becket took place in 1163, when Henry attempted to assert that clergymen who committed crimes should be tried by secular courts, and be held to the same Common Law that he was working toward establishing. Becket refused to

²⁵ Richard Eales, "Dover Castle and the Politics of twelfth-century Kent," in *The Great Tower of Dover Castle: History, Architecture, and Context*, ed. Paul Pattinson, Steven Brindle, and David M. Robinson (Swindon, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2020). 59-71.

²⁶ Gillingham, "King Henry, Thomas Becket, and the Building of Dover Castle."

²⁷ Eales, "Politics of Twelfth-century Kent."

agree to this requirement, and he continued to disagree with the king on various measures meant to limit the powers of the Church for the next seven years, part of which he spent in exile, hosted by the French king Louis VII.²⁸ In December of 1170, he was assassinated in Canterbury Cathedral by a group of knights.²⁹ While the conspirators were not working under Henry's direct orders, they considered themselves to have killed the Archbishop on his behalf, and the king therefore shouldered much of the public blame for the murder. Given Becket's immense popularity at the time of his death, being on the bad side of his supporters was a dangerous position for Henry. In an attempt to prove that he was on the same side as the Becket cult, he made an extremely theatrical public apology, doing penance at Becket's tomb by being publicly flogged. Going forward, he would stop to pray at the tomb nearly every time he passed through Kent, especially when planning to make the dangerous Channel crossing.³⁰

Becket's popularity was not limited to the English, and his cult following would continue to make themselves inconvenient to Henry. In the years after the Archbishop's death, pilgrims began to flood into Canterbury from across Europe. Travelers from the Continent would nearly always pass through the port at Dover along the way. The first important pilgrim was, interestingly enough, Count Philip of Flanders. Just before Easter in 1175, after making peace with Henry, he came to pray at Becket's tomb before going on Crusade. Henry met him at Dover, and the two lords spent the night at the castle there, which at this point did not yet include the

²⁸ Roger of Hovedon, *The Annals of Roger of Hovedon*.

²⁹ The details of the murder were the subject of a vast number of biographies by Becket's contemporaries, but perhaps the most valuable was the account of Edward Grim, as it is the only written eyewitness account. In fact, Grim was wounded during the struggle when he attempted to shield Becket from the conspirators' blades. See Michael Staunton, ed., *The Lives of Thomas Becket* (Manchester, UK ; Manchester University Press, 2001) 195-203.

³⁰ Gillingham, "King Henry, Thomas Becket, and the Building of Dover Castle."

Great Tower. After the Count departed, Henry took his retinue to the nearby town of Wye to celebrate Easter,³¹ showing that the castle at Dover was not yet developed enough to host the king's court for any length of time. If more important pilgrims with retinues of their own were to be hosted on their way to Canterbury without embarrassment or offense, the accommodations would need to be developed further. And more pilgrims did come— in 1179 King Louis of France came to visit the shrine. No French king had ever officially visited England before, making Louis' visit as a momentous opportunity for Henry, one that would have a massive influence on England's reputation on a wider stage.³² This visit may have been the catalyzing incident for work beginning on the Great Tower. In the years that followed, visitors would include papal legates and ambassadors from numerous European states.³³

The design of the Great Tower is reflective of its aim to be an impressive and spacious residence to provide accommodations for the king's guests. The outer design of the structure was austere, clearly made to give an impression of strength and powerful grandeur.³⁴ The forebuilding, which provided access to the main structure, contained an extremely complicated and lengthy path to the hall on the second storey. Guests would have to pass up numerous flights of stairs, across a drawbridge, through multiple sets of double doors, and past an ornate chapel where travelers could pray before entering or leaving. This design was set up to house choreographed, ceremonial parades of entry and exit. There is even evidence of a since-destroyed balcony from which the king could look on as the processions passed up the

³¹ Gillingham, "King Henry, Thomas Becket, and the Building of Dover Castle."

³² Gillingham, "King Henry, Thomas Becket, and the Building of Dover Castle."

³³ Vincent, "In the Shadow of the Castle Wall."

³⁴ Brindle and Dixon, "The Great Tower."

stairs.³⁵ Inside, the tower is divided into four large chambers, two on each of the main floors. Modern interpreters have theorized that the rear chamber on each floor would have been a private suite, making the interior suitable for hosting the king in one and an especially important guest in the other.³⁶ While early on in his reign Henry avoided Dover for the most part, toward the end he began to take the slightly longer route through the city for his Channel crossings when escorting people he wanted to impress, in order to display to them the masterwork that was Dover Castle.

The fortifications at Dover Castle were the largest and most expensive project that King Henry II undertook during his reign by a wide margin. Investigating the king's motivations for this massive spending is not as simple as historians used to believe. In addition to the castle's military use, it was also intended as an expression of royal power and as a residence for pilgrims drawn to England to visit the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket. By considering Dover as a multifaceted artifact, much of the character of early Angevin England and the struggles and priorities of Henry's reign become clear. The construction of the Great Tower was only one phase in Dover's long and storied history, but it was the one that most changed the face of the site. Henry's fortifications have endured into the present day, still fulfilling their purpose as a symbol of English national pride and identity.

³⁵ Brindle and Dixon, "The Great Tower."

³⁶ Steven Brindle and Paul Pattinson, "The Great Tower Project: An Evocation of the Angevin Royal Palace at Dover," in *The Great Tower of Dover Castle: History, Architecture, and Context*, ed. Paul Pattinson, Steven Brindle, and David M. Robinson (Swindon, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2020) 234-59.

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