

The Strategic Importance of Mont Orgueil and Jersey

Until the King of England/Duke of Normandy lost mainland Normandy in the early 1200s the Channel Islands were a peaceful backwater on the periphery of international events. When the armies of Philippe Auguste of France gained Normandy the islanders were faced with a difficult choice - should they remain loyal to the Duke as feudal overlord or should their allegiance be to the King of France as their ultimate feudal overlord.

For the mass of the population it would make no difference at all if their feudal overlord was Philippe of France or John of England; however, for those landholders or seigneurs the decision to go one way or the other was difficult and, in all probability, the ultimate choice was made on the basis of the value of landholdings elsewhere. The Paisnells had more land in mainland Normandy and so were pro-French - they were forced to leave the island and their Jersey possessions while the de Carterets held more lands in England and Jersey so they tended to be pro-English and as a result they stayed and became pre-eminent



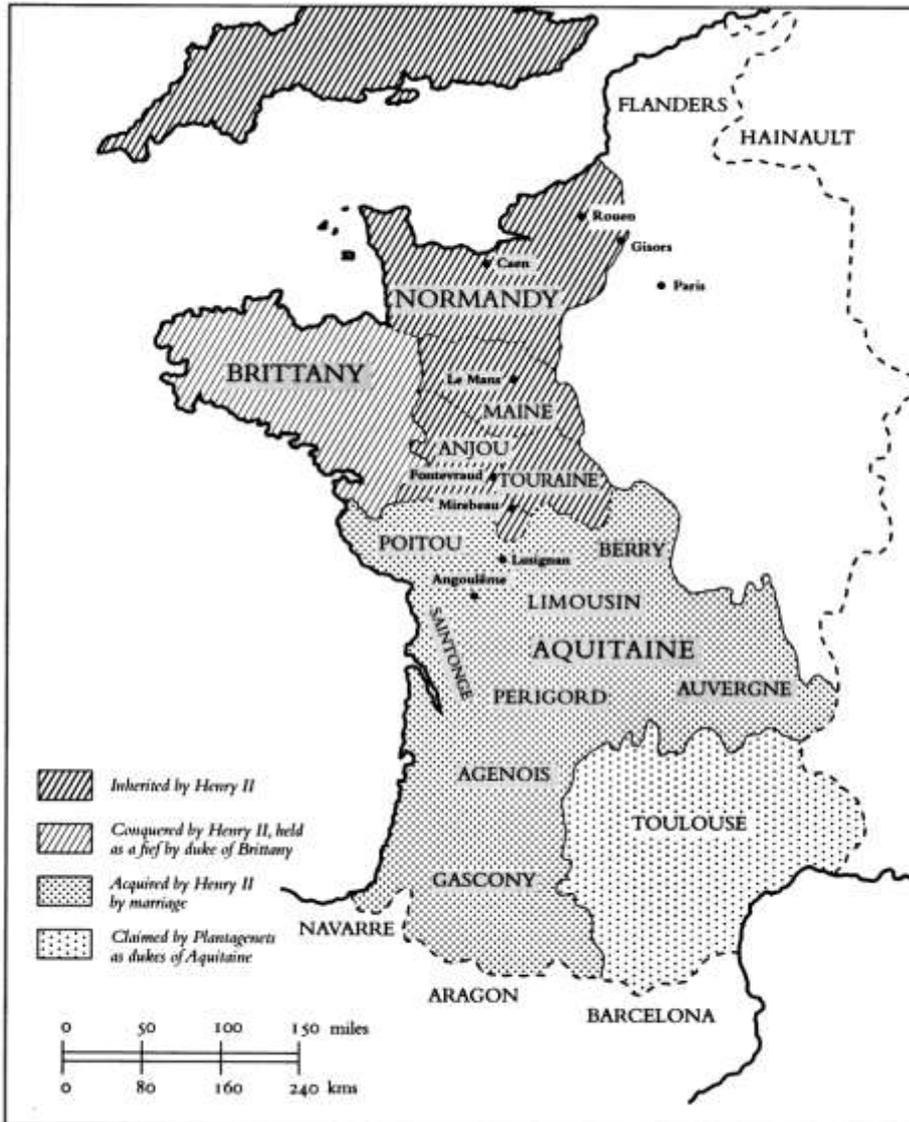
King John from his tomb in Worcester Cathedral.

As early as 1201 King John (Duke John) ordered Pierre de Préaux, Lord of the Isles, to raise money to maintain the garrisons and castles in the islands. In 1204 mainland Normandy was lost, Brittany was in revolt against John over the "disappearance" of his nephew Arthur of Brittany - the Channel Islands were thrust into a prominent role - a frontier post on the edge of a war-zone. They would remain so for the next six centuries during which time Mont Orgueil would develop and adapt its role many times. The situation became confused, the Channel Islands were attacked by both sides: John took hostages to ensure loyalty, Philippe-Auguste allowed a mercenary force led by Eustace Le Moine (supposedly a renegade monk) to pillage the islands in an attempt to convince islanders that they stood a better chance of being defended by the pro-French faction. Le Moine was captured in about 1216 in a sea-battle off Sandwich and executed on the spot.

While this was going on the building of the castle was hardly interrupted. In Jersey, Mont Orgueil was chosen because it was in a prime position.

- It was built on a promontory so the sea and cliffs protected it on three sides.
- The granite outcrop gave the castle firm foundations and made it impossible to undermine the walls.
- the technology of warfare in 1204 ensured that an attacking enemy could only approach the castle from one direction - the north.

- It dominated the Bay of Grouville - with its shallow, gently shelving beach sheltered from the prevailing westerly winds it was best landing beach for an invasion force in the island.
- It commanded a good view of the nearby coast of Normandy and so intimidated the French with its bulk and political statement - "I'm here and strong, come over and try me!"



The Plantagenet lands in France, c. 1200

At its height the Henry II's Angevin empire stretched from the Cheviots in the North to the Pyrenees in the South. In effect The English Channel became an Anglo-Norman waterway.

England was bankrupted by King Richard I's (the Lionheart) crusade and in the absence of a strong king the barons took the chance to take on more power for themselves. Any attempt by the King's regents at curbing their excesses was seen as an attempt on liberty. When Richard I died in

1199 without an heir his youngest brother, John, succeeded him and when he tried to reduce the barons power the barons revolted and forced him to sign the Magna Carta in 1215. John could have done without this domestic dispute while France was being ruled by a strong king determined to consolidate his royal authority over the various and disparate counties, duchies, baronies that made up his kingdom. This is the background to the development of the Channel Island castles.

Why did John value the Channel Islands?

Despite the general supposition that the family had its origins in Normandy it is important to remember that John was essentially the first of the Plantagenet kings to consider himself an Englishman. His mother's family was from Aquitaine and she brought with her the enormous wine revenues; his father was from Anjou and as King of England he held not only status but potential wealth from one of the wealthiest countries in Europe. This meant that John needed England for personal status and long term wealth, he needed Aquitaine for its wine revenues which would support him financially in his struggles against his rebellious barons, ambitious neighbours and a rapacious church. Normandy was the least valuable part of his domains therefore he could sacrifice it in order to retain the other two.



The Channel Islands held a strategic value far beyond their size and relative populations.

- The Channel Islands were a useful toe-hold in the region as by retaining them he was poised to re-establish his authority in Normandy and so tied down French troops which could otherwise be used in the Aquitaine border areas or threatening England.
- The harbour in St Peter Port was also a useful staging point to gather the wine convoy before starting on the most dangerous leg of the journey from Bordeaux to Southampton.

- The Channel Islands harbours provided a southern base from which English ships could patrol the English Channel.

For the rest of the mediaeval period whenever the English kings controlled mainland Normandy then the islands became a peaceful backwater and whenever they lost it then the fortunes of the castle picked up when further spending on updating the defences took place. In the 1450s/1460s the Channel Islands were used as collateral for the loan of French arms.

The Castle's position as the pre-eminent fortress in the island was lost with the advent of gunpowder which meant that the technology of offence surpassed that of defence and the castle became obsolete. Attempts were made to upgrade the defences but the technology of offence always outstripped that of defence and the focus of the island switched to St Aubin's Bay.