

Thirteenth Century England Podcast

Episode one – The Evolution of Parliament

- Hello there, this is 13th century England, a new podcast that's going to be dedicated to logically enough England in the 13th century.
- My name is Darren Baker and I'm going to be taking a look at the people, places and events that made this century an intense period of English history.
- And we can see that right at the beginning and end of it, because the 13th century starts with the loss of Normandy and ends with the Scottish war of independence, two catastrophic events that changed the kingdom forever.
- In between we've got all kinds of things going on like Magna Carta, the conquest of Wales and the various crusades.
- The plan is not to go in any kind of chronological order and you may get the impression you're getting a mixed bag of episodes, but I'll be sure to project forwards and backwards so you can get an idea of just how interconnected all these things were.
- I'll also be looking at the new work coming out that focuses on this century.
- Just to name a few at the outset, we have a biography of Joan of Wales and books on the Disinherited and Ladies of Magna Carta. Later this spring should see the release of a biography of Henry III that has been more than thirty years in the making. Asd that's just volume one!
- For now, to give you a basic framework of England in the thirteenth century, it was an age of three kings.
- There was King John, who rules from 1199 until 1216.
- He was succeeded by his son the Henry III we have just mentioned, who rules until 1272.
- And it closes with Henry's son Edward, who takes it into the next century, dying in 1307.
- John is best known for Magna Carta, Henry for the building of Westminster Abbey, and Edward for hammering the Scots, but all

three kings were very complicated individuals who had to deal with different circumstances.

- In some they succeeded, in others they failed, all of which means there's lots to go over, so let's get right to it.
- For this inaugural podcast, we're going to look at one of the most profound developments in the history of England, which is to say we are still living with its effects today, and that is the establishment of that peculiar institution known as parliament.
- Now for starters, the summoning of large political assemblies for the big issues of the day is as old as government itself.
- For example, you go back to ancient Egypt and the pharaoh, he wants to build a pyramid but he can't do it all by himself, so he summons his deputies, engineers, astrologers, and together they talk about how they're going to manage it, what resources and manpower they need, maybe one of them will be brave enough to ask, "Does it gotta be that big?" but the thing eventually gets built because they're all working as a team.
- And it was the same in the British Isles.
- The Anglo-Saxons had these assemblies, and after they got swept away, the Normans summoned their own.
- One of the most famous occurred in 1215 when the barons and clergy of the realm met at Runnymede to force King John to accept a charter of liberties.
- Ten years after that, in 1225, everybody gathered again in Westminster for the Christmas feast, but the regent for young King Henry III used the occasion to ask them for a national tax to save Gascony, which was the last English possession on the continent.
- So these earls, barons and bishops look up from their mutton and they grumble and growl but they decide that yes, they will approve the tax, but only if Henry confirms the charter of liberties, which by now is called Magna Carta.
- Basically, they were offering the king a trade. You can have our money but only in return for something, and what we want is your guarantee of our liberties.

- So Henry accepted, he really had no choice, and Gascony was saved, but the upshot was:
- The days of King Arthur and the roundtable were over.
- Henry and the monarchs who followed him could forget about any all for one and one for all as the motto of their relationship with the barons.
- From now on it would be quid pro quo.
- Money wasn't always the agenda of these meetings. In January of 1236, Henry and his leading men met with judges and clerks at a priory that stood next to where Wimbledon is today in order to codify what became the first statute law of the land.
- After that these assemblies, which now go by the name of parliament, usually met to coincide with law terms and sometimes they even sat in judgement for major trials.
- For example, in 1251, Parliament heard the case of justice Henry of Bath, who was charged with corruption, and a year after that, Simon de Montfort was put on trial by the king for his heavy-handed rule as the governor of Gascony.
- Perhaps not surprisingly, both men were exonerated by their peers.
- In 1253, the king went to Gascony to clean up the mess left behind there by de Montfort.
- Henry named his wife, Eleanor of Provence, as his regent and she summoned Parliament early the next year to ask for a special aid for her husband because war looked imminent.
- The great lords said they would like to help, but they could not speak for the knights of the counties because they had a say in taxation too.
- So the queen dispatched letters to the sheriffs, ordering them to have two knights elected from their respective counties to come to Westminster to talk about the aid with her and her council.
- And so it was here, for the first time on record, that democracy has entered the evolutionary picture of Parliament.
- What this tells us is that Parliament is still something of an ad hoc affair.

- It remained a crown prerogative, so it only met when the king or queen summoned it.
- It also had no fixed location. Usually it met at Westminster Palace, but sometimes at the New Temple or St Paul's Cathedral.
- During one particularly contentious time, Henry wanted to meet at the Tower of London, but the barons didn't go because they were afraid he would start yelling at them.
- In the spring of 1257, Parliament met at the newly built chapter house at Westminster Abbey.
- Henry had undertaken the reconstruction of the abbey and had purposefully designed the chapter house as a home more or less for parliament in the future, but events soon overtook him and the rest of the realm.
- Because by 1258, the kingdom was under enormous pressure.
- There was famine brought on by poor weather and harvests, Wales was in constant revolt, and Henry's court was bankrupt and full of intrigue.
- He had no money to fund a scheme his barons and clergy never liked, namely to put his youngest son Edmund on the throne of Sicily.
- But the barons agreed to lobby for a tax for him in return for the king taking them into partnership to enact various political and judicial reforms.
- Henry had avoided going down this road for the past quarter of a century because it went against his whole idea of kingship.
- At Parliament in 1247 the barons asked him for more powers and he responded with a lecture on feudalism.
- He told them they could no more expect to tell him what to do and not get the same treatment from their own vassals.
- But he was desperate by this point in 1258 and so agreed to their condition.
- Together they named a committee of 24, 12 for the king and 12 for the barons, who drew up reforms to be discussed in six weeks' time in Oxford, one those prorogations of Parliament that was lately in the news.

- Now the reason why Oxford was chosen is because the plan was to move on to Wales after that, but they never got there.
- Because what came out of Oxford was a series of provisions that gave England a whole new, some would say revolutionary, framework of government, and of these Provisions of Oxford, as they were called, decreed that Parliament should meet three times a year at established intervals and have a standing committee representing the realm working in unison with the king's council.
- So in other words, what we see here is the birth of the parliamentary state.
- Parliament was no longer a royal prerogative, rather it had become an institution of government.
- Because the Oxford assembly launched one of the most radical and turbulent periods in English history, it would become known over time as the 'Mad Parliament'.
- It certainly was a haphazard affair.
- They didn't even write the new constitution down, just passed around memoranda suggesting this provision or that provision for it.
- Later tradition tells us that Oxford was the first occasion for having a speaker of Parliament, but there is absolutely no evidence for this.
- If you go to the website for Parliament UK they identify this speaker as Peter de Montfort, he was a Warwickshire baron who was no relation of Simon de Montfort, just a close friend and ally of his.
- Where this myth about Peter and the speakership arose is anyone's guess, but it's not until well into the fourteenth century before Parliament gets its first presiding officer.
- Parliament was now an arm of government and the reforms went well for the first few months, but Henry soon became disillusioned.
- The barons not only reneged on their promise for his tax, but some of them began to treat him as if he were of no consequence.
- Who needs a king when you've got power sanctioned by a constitution.
- This was particularly true of the king's own brother-in-law Simon de Montfort. He saw the reform period as his chance to get back at

Henry for his trial and also to score a big payday for the money he claimed the crown owed him and his wife, who was Henry's sister.

- De Montfort was not yet the idealist he eventually became, but the battle lines were already drawn early on between his supporters and those of the king.
- In February of 1260, Parliament was supposed to meet as per the new constitution, but Henry at that time was in France concluding a peace treaty and he told his regent to delay the summons until he returned.
- There is going to be Parliament, it's just going to be a little late, that's all.
- De Montfort wasn't having any of it.
- He saw it as Henry trying to undermine the provisions of Oxford.
- He and his party demanded that Parliament meet even without the head of state.
- Priority should be given to the constitution, they insisted, not to the monarch.
- These Montfortians as we shall call them even brought armed men to London to force Parliament to meet, one of them even being the king's son Edward, but they backed down when the king arrived with a bigger army.
- Henry was now convinced that the Provisions of Oxford had to go and he arranged to have them quashed in the summer of 1261.
- De Montfort was furious and left for exile in France, but the king did not roll back the reforms in their entirety and Parliament still met on a regular basis, even without him in October 1262 because he was again in France.
- The hardcore Montfortians were nevertheless determined to subjugate the king, and in the spring of 1263 Simon returns and raises rebellion. He traps Henry in London and forces the king to again accept the Provisions of Oxford with an even more diminished role for the monarchy than before.
- De Montfort sets himself up as the prime minister, but before he could get any programme going, Henry and his son Edward, who was

back on his father's side, quickly turned the tables and had the Montfortians on the run.

- To avoid all-out war, both parties agreed to arbitration by the king of France, Louis IX, who perhaps not surprisingly came out completely on Henry's side. His ruling inevitably then led to war, which the Montfortians won at the battle of Lewes in May of 1264.
- De Montfort took the royal family captive and in June of 1264 he summoned Parliament to rubberstamp an ordinance that turned England into a constitutional monarchy.
- Now the king has no role other than figurehead while a council under de Montfort's personal direction runs the government.
- In January of 1265, he summoned Parliament again, this time to deal with the terms for releasing Edward and other royal captives.
- But by this point, de Montfort had lost virtually all support from among the barons. They didn't like his arrogance, his accumulation of wealth and power, and this bold new world he was creating.
- His greatest supporters were churchmen, who had long opposed Henry because the king relentlessly interfered in their affairs and treated them like a herd of cash cows by always milking them of money.
- These churchmen were the majority of de Montfort's Parliament, but he also summoned the knights of the counties as Eleanor of Provence had done before him, and, for the first time, representatives of the towns.
- That's the official record anyway.
- Two of the chroniclers of that era reported that Henry's parliament of 1237 had the attendance of the towns and quite significantly the people too.
- Neither chronicler provided any details nor was actually there, so we'll just leave it at that.
- In any event, it was this representation of the towns and counties at one gathering that earned Simon de Montfort his later recognition as the founder of the House of Commons, if not Parliament itself.

- Of course, Parliament had been in existence for decades already, and unlike Eleanor of Provence's Parliament of 1254, there was nothing democratic about de Montfort's in 1265.
- The men who arrived from the towns were not elected, rather they were local oligarchs looking after their own interests.
- They were there because de Montfort needed their support and money, but apparently he didn't get very much because he didn't include them in his next invitation.
- But that Parliament never met anyway.
- Because Edward escaped from his custody, raised an army, and defeated and killed de Montfort at the battle of Evesham in August of 1265.
- So the constitutional monarchy was dead and Parliament went back to being the king's prerogative.
- But the power of taxation would remain forever beyond the reach of the monarchy.
- Edward found that out for himself when late in his own reign he tried to impose taxation without the consent of Parliament.
- He was forced to beat a hasty retreat and confirm Magna Carta.
- So there you have it.
- The English Parliament was not the creation of any high-minded individuals beholden to democracy.
- It evolved as a result of the circumstances of the early thirteenth century, in particular two points.
- There was Magna Carta, which became the first line of defence against royal tyranny, the enshrinement of liberty and justice for all.
- And there was the minority of Henry III, which lasted for 10 years, it was a decade of cementing the principles of advice and consent and quid pro quo into the foundations of good and proper kingship.
- That's all for this inaugural podcast of 13th century England, hope you enjoyed it.
- Next time I'll go into more about these two special circumstances that led to the formation of Parliament.
- The first one up will be Magna Carta and the road that leads us to it.

- Till then, I'll leave you as we began, with Antonin Dvorak and a snippet from his Ninth Symphony.
- It's the one commonly known as the New World Symphony, which may seem like an odd choice for 13th century England, but there's something about the melody and tone that just strikes me as medieval. Enjoy.