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The Second Baron's War, 1264-1267

The crowning of 9-year old King Henry III after the death of his father, King John, essentially heralded the end of the First Baron's War (1215-1217) but Henry's long reign prompted discontent among the English barons and, who wanted more of a say in running the country and disliked the king's favour towards foreign relatives.

By the late 1250s, the barons began to call for the *Magna Carta* – the charter that had triggered the First Baron's War in King John's reign - to be reasserted, so forcing Henry to surrender more of his power to the baronial council. The man who emerged as leader of the baronial faction was the Earl of Leicester Simon de Montfort, who was Henry's brother-in-law and had once been one of Henry's most trusted advisors. In 1258, de Montfort and six of the leading barons forced Henry to agree to the *Provisions of Oxford* – a set of reforms that essentially created a new form of government. This placed power into the hands of a council of twenty-four members, twelve selected by the crown, twelve by the barons. The council was monitor all governmental decisions, and would appoint two nominees to supervise ministerial appointments, handle local administration and ensure the custody of royal castles.

Henry found himself with no option but to take part in the swearing of a collective oath to the *Provisions of Oxford* and in 1259, he was also forced to agree to the *Provisions of Westminster*, a new set of reforms that had been drawn up by the council of barons. This strained the relationship between the king and his barons even further, but then internal divisions amongst the barons gave Henry some breathing space. In 1261, Henry was able to obtain a papal bull that exempted him from his oath, thus allowing him to repudiate the provisions. At this point, both sides began to raise armies, the Royalists under Henry's eldest son Prince Edward (already nicknamed 'Longshanks' due to his height), while the barons looked to de Montfort. The war that ultimately followed took place at a unique point in English history, before the longbow had earned its predominance and when cavalry was still the most lethal weapon in the English arsenal.

Open conflict between the king and the barons first broke out in 1262, when a group of barons attacked Gloucester and tried and failed to expel the king's appointed representative. There then followed a strange period of uneasy peace as both sides tried to secure their own powerbases and at the same time gain support from the opposition. An attempt at arbitration was also undertaken but when the arbitrator (the French king Louis IX) rejected all of the barons' claims, tensions erupted once more and war broke out. The first move was made by de Montfort, who in February 1264 ordered his sons (Simon and Henry) to move into Wales to join with Llewelyn the Prince of Wales, to attack the castles on the Welsh border belonging to Roger Mortimer, a staunch royal supporter. This triggered another rash of skirmishing between the various factions, but although several towns exchanged hands after raids and sieges, there were no major clashes between the opposing forces. De Montfort however seemed aware that a long war of attrition would ultimately favour Henry and so in April, he decided

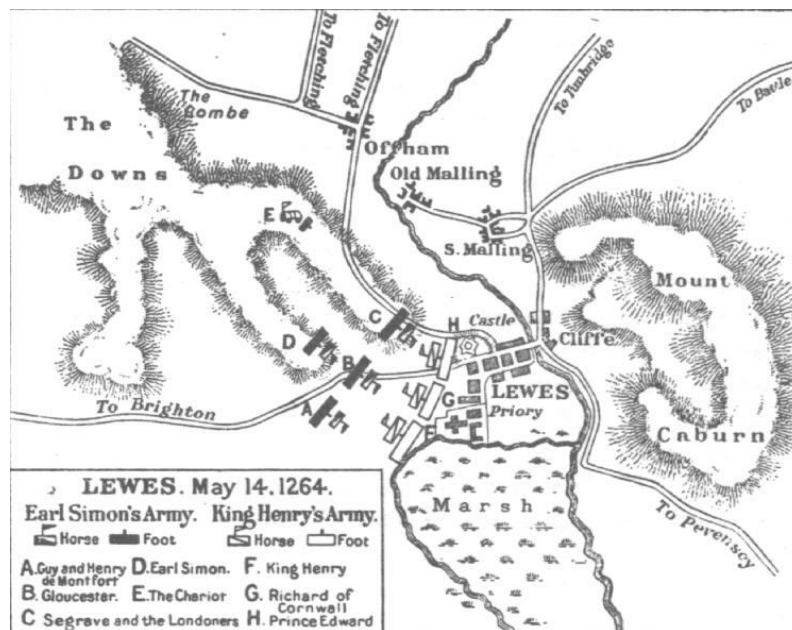


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to change tactics. Rather than waste time with long-winded sieges, he took the offensive by deciding to strike at the heart of royal control; the king's army.

The Battle of Lewes

In May 1264, having collected every available man and arming a great body of Londoners, the barons marched across Surrey to intercept the king's forces which were at Lewes, resting and awaiting reinforcements. De Montfort was determined not to let this happen and if unable to negotiate a truce, wanted to force a battle. Arriving at Fletching, a village 9 miles north of Lewes, de Montfort sent representatives to Henry with proposals for peace, but they were promptly rejected. The royal army, which was encamped in and around Lewes, were seemingly unaware of the proximity of the baronial army and hadn't posted any outlying patrols or sentries. Knowing his forces were outnumbered (possibly by as much as two to one), de Montfort had to gain an advantage and undertook a rapid night march to occupy the high ground to the west of the town. As dawn broke on the 14th May, the King's army were taken almost completely by surprise, waking to the sight of the baronial army advancing down towards them. Henry's troops poured out of the town, but were only just able to form up into fighting order before the barons' forces were upon them.



Plan of the Battle of Lewes from *The Art of War in the Middle Ages* by Sir Charles Oman, 1898

Fighting broke out all along the front line but despite initial pressure from the barons' troops, it was Prince Edward on the royalist right flank that made the first breakthrough, forcing the barons' cavalry back onto their own left flank. This wing of the baronial army was largely made up of the inexperienced Londoners, who immediately gave way and then began to flee the field. Edward and the royalist cavalry continued their charge and gave chase, killing a good many of their enemy in their pursuit, but ultimately they ended up



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almost 3 miles from the battlefield and out of sight, as well as leaving the royalist centre exposed.

Edward's absence tipped the balance. After severe fighting, the baronial centre (commanded by the Earl of Gloucester) was able to force the Royalist centre (led by the King's brother, Richard of Cornwall) backwards and then break the royalist line. De Montfort then committed his reserves into the fray, attacking the now exposed flank of the royalist centre which was pushed back into the royalist left wing. In the confusion, the royalist left wing to break and suddenly what remained of Henry's army disintegrated. As the baronial forces pursued the fleeing royalists, the king (whose horse was killed under him) was dragged away by his bodyguard to the safety of Lewes Priory, about a mile to the east, where they made a stand. Many royalist troops, fleeing southwards, found themselves trapped in the tidal marshes that lay to the south of the town and were drowned.

Soon afterwards Prince Edward returned to the field and immediately realised the error he had made. As he approached, de Montfort was able to gather troops to face the threat, which was enough to cause the majority of Edward's horse to turnabout and flee. The Prince and his most faithful knights charged the enemy however and somehow were able to cut their through to the priory, where the Prince was reunited with his father. As night began to fall it was clear that the royal position was hopeless so Henry sent Edward to sue for peace. The outcome of the negotiations were that the King signed the 'Mise of Lewes', an agreement whereby he laid down his arms, handed his son over to de Montfort as a hostage and agreed to abide by terms to be settled by arbitration.

While Henry was reduced to a figurehead king, de Montfort continued the work he had started, broadening parliamentary representation to include groups beyond the nobility, members from each county of England and many important towns. While Henry and Edward continued under house arrest, many of the barons who had initially supported de Montfort began to suspect that de Montfort had gone too far with his reforms. Edward remained in captivity in Kenilworth Castle until March but was released, albeit under strict surveillance to Hereford Castle. On 28 May, while de Montfort was marching into Wales to embark on a campaign fighting barons that had turned against him in the Welsh marches, Edward escaped his custodians.

Edward was assisted by Thomas de Clare, the brother of Gilbert de Clare, the Earl of Gloucester, who had recently defected to the royalist camp after quarrelling with de Montfort. The manner of Edward's escape was simple – in the day he was given permission to try out three new horses and once he mounted the third, he rode away as quickly as the horse could, leaving his escort on exhausted horses behind. Edward rode straight to Wigmore Castle, the seat of an ally Roger Mortimer. Barons were now starting to abandon de Montfort en masse and Edward was soon in command of a large royal army. The first action of Edward and his new allies was to act to cut de Montfort off from his other forces in England. The prince took Worcester without a struggle and after a short siege was able to take Gloucester, thus securing the Severn passages. When hearing of this de Montfort decided to head south to Monmouth and try to cross the Severn Estuary to Bristol, but he found that all



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the available boats had been destroyed by Gilbert de Clare and so he once more forced to look northwards, moving to Hereford.

Soon afterwards Edward received news that de Montfort's son Simon was heading west from London to try to join forces with his father. The younger de Montfort advanced slowly however and Edward was able to head north to intercept him. When de Montfort reached Kenilworth, Edward launched a surprise attack that decimated de Montfort's troops, forcing the survivors to take refuge inside the castle. Edward then marched towards Hereford, only to hear that the older de Montfort had heading toward Kenilworth, after crossing the Severn below Worcester. Edward knew that if de Montfort reached the castle and joined forces with his son, he could hold out for months and so the Prince undertook a forced night march back south-east. At dawn on the 4th August 1265, the opposing armies finally met at Evesham.

The Battle of Evesham

The army of de Montfort had not long entered Evesham when, from lookouts on the tower of the Evesham Abbey, news came of the approach of an army from the north. At first, it was thought that this was de Montfort's son, but then it was realised that it was Edward and the royal army – flying banners captured at Kenilworth at their head. Surrounded by the River Avon on three sides and the only bridges being in the ends of Royalist troops, de Montfort realised he'd been caught in a trap. Taking the captive King Henry III with him, and despite being outnumbered more than three to one, de Montfort immediately chose to attack and rode out with his cavalry to engage the enemy, leaving his infantry in support.

De Montfort found Edward's forces deployed in three divisions and he appears to have made a cavalry attack first, in the hope of breaking through and escaping. Initially some of the royal forces did retreat, but then Edward launched a counter attack and de Montfort's army, or at least his knights, were soon encircled. Strangely for a medieval battle, no quarter was to be given and de Montfort and most of his supporters were cut down without mercy. It appears that by this time the infantry had already broken and had begun to flee, but this then turned into a rout. The rebel forces were pursued mercilessly back into the town, with the killing continuing through the streets and even into the grounds of Evesham Abbey. A contemporary source described the battle as the "murder of Evesham, for battle it was none".





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De Montfort's body was cut up where he had fallen and different parts were sent to the lords who had achieved the most in his downfall. His head was sent to Wigmore Castle by Roger de Mortimer, as a gift to his wife, Maud! Such remains as could be later found were buried by the monks under the altar of Evesham Abbey but were then lost at the Dissolution of the Monasteries.

Though peace was not finally restored across the country for another two years, the battle of Evesham had completely broken the rebellion, for almost all of its major supporters had been intentionally killed on the field. Following this victory, savage retribution was exacted on the rebels until full authority was restored to King Henry.