

## Visit to Bouvines in France 25-27 July 2014

### Introduction

The Battlefields Trust has organised many trips and visits to sites of past conflicts in England and abroad. Bouvines had a particular poignancy, both for the historic events that unfolded, and for the Trust in its mission to encapsulate the Magna Carta story. The trip became a delegation from the UK. Together with the Magna Carta 800 Committee, the Trust played a key role representing the county, and stressing the importance of the events to the UK.



The delegation of eight was led by trustees, Dr Matthew Bennett and James Dinsdale, with Edward Dawson, MC800 Project Director, as group leader. The other members were Chris May, Stephen Morley and Sandra Roe, and accompanying Sir Robert and Lady Worcester. We travelled in private cars, and stayed in Lille, at the Ibis Styles Hotel, eating in local restaurants that were quite easy to find.

### Battlefield site

The visit was over the weekend of 25-27 July 2014, and Matthew Bennett led the delegation from the Battlefields Trust to attend the commemorations at Bouvines, in France, near the modern city of Lille. The first act was to visit the actual site of the battle. This marked the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the battle, a decisive victory by Philip II, King of France over King John's continental allies, led by the Holy Roman Emperor, Otto IV. The river Marque and the fateful bridge are still in place today. It was a battle that defined the future of France. There is little left of the decisive conflict, and the woodland and swamp areas have been drained. It was good to see a small roadside chapel surrounded by trees as a marker of the event.

### Eglise de Saint Pierre

It was important to see the parish church at Bouvines, with its famed stained glass windows. It is a late 19<sup>th</sup> century building, which was rebuilt in 1915 to mark the seventh centenary. The windows mark the history of the battle in great detail, from the sitting of the war council to the fleeing of Otto. While there, we were met by Benjamin Dumortier, the Mayor de Cysoing, who kindly explained the arrangements.

### Museum of Mons-en-Pévèle

We then visited the Museum of Mons-en-Pévèle, which contains a new interactive display on the Battle of Mons-en-Pévèle fought in August 1304 between the French and the Flemish, which the Flemings did not win. There are also displays on the Battle of Bouvines. It is a funded scheme through the regional council, and is keen to bring in visitors. It was quiet, but the displays were effective and had a lot of clear useful interpretation and visuals. We much enjoyed the visit and displays.

### Fort de Seclin



Next we came to the Fort de Seclin, a fortification in both world wars, and first built in 1875. It was used variously as a munitions store, prison for French resistance fighters, and now preserved as a museum and social venue. We paused at the memorial to 69 male prisoners executed by firing squad. After the war it continued as an ammunition depot until the French Army abandoned it. Many such sites have been lost to development, but this one is being preserved. Sophie Boniface, our guide showed us around the exhibits and she proved a most effective and knowledgeable host.

## Visit to Bouvines in France 25-27 July 2014

### Commemorations

The Sunday marked the day of commemorations for the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the battle. It began with mass in the church, which we did not attend due to lack of space. We queued in the growing heat, as the local gendarmerie stood by. We had to dress in formal manner, and waited for the official procession. These acts of remembrance and commemoration are very important to the French, and the memorial to the battle occupies a prominent position. It was also important that we take our place in the official party, as representatives of the United Kingdom.

### Wreath laying and speeches



As the officials arrived, we were pleased to note a Union flag being waved among the tricolours. Then there was the release of pigeons and doves, which swiftly disappeared over the crowd. The Mayor of Bouvines and the Secretary General of the Regional Council gave their speeches. Then it was the turn of Sir Robert Worcester, the Chairman of MC800, who apologised for speaking in English but gained a spirited response for his humorous presentation.

His speech from the podium was also well-received by a large and enthusiastic gathering of local people. Sir Robert was also interviewed by regional television.

### Reception in the grounds of the monastery

After the formal ceremonies, we were invited to attend a reception in the grounds of the Dominican Monastery of Bouvines, formerly of the Communauté Chemin Neuf, and still active. We were joined by speakers, including Prince Louis Alphonse de Bourbon, duc d'Anjou. He is the royalist dauphine, French and Spanish speaking, and would be King Louis XX of France. We met others, including his Secretary, Col Jacques Hogard. Champagne and beautiful canapés were served, and our English party was well-received and warmly welcomed by local people.

### Concert of choirs at the monastery

In front of the monastery, a concert bowl had been erected. We found seating under an apple tree, and enjoyed the singing. We listened to the choirs, including the 50-strong Piaristenchor from Vienna. They sang excerpts from well-known pieces, such as the finale of Beethoven's Choral Symphony. Towards the end, the sunny weather began to change, and rain turned into a storm with thunder. We all had to find shelter and Felix and Madame Dehau kindly served tea in the monastery. It was time to find our way back, and begin our journey home to England. We first gave fulsome thanks to our gracious hosts, for their hospitality.



### Conclusions

This was an important event for the Battlefields Trust to attend and join. Despite the small party, it made its presence felt, and achieved a high profile. The French were pleased and impressed by such attendance. For France, Bouvines is a pivotal battle, and it is also for the UK, where the victory led directly to the Barons convincing King John of the need for Magna Carta. It was a precursor to the Barons' Wars and to all the ensuing events. The Trust achieved its aims for the Magna Carta 800 Project, and created a memorable event. It was a satisfying and inspiring occasion, and the Trust was right to attach the highest importance to it.