

Battle of Lewes, May 14, 1264.

from *The Art of war in the Middle Ages* by Sir Charles Oman

Down to the day of battle the operations which led up to the fight of Lewes show all the characteristic incoherence and inconsequence of a medieval campaign, and do no credit to either of the parties concerned, King Henry had raised a considerable army in the Midlands, while the baronial party had made itself strong in London, but had also seized and garrisoned the important towns of Northampton, Leicester, and Nottingham. The king resolved to subdue the three midland centres of revolt before undertaking any further operations. Northampton fell with unexpected ease, owing to the treachery of the monks of St Andrew's Priory, who admitted the royal troops through a passage into their garden. This was a severe blow to the barons, for some of their chief leaders were made prisoners, including Simon the Younger, the second son of the great Earl Simon, his comrade Peter de Montfort, and fifteen barons and bannerets more.

A few days later (April 11th) Leicester was sacked, and Nottingham, the spirit of whose defenders was shaken by the disaster at Northampton, surrendered at the king's summons (April 13th). Having thus cleared the eastern Midlands of enemies, Henry should at once have marched on London with his victorious army. The fall of the capital would have settled the fate of the war, and, in spite of all the efforts of De Montfort, the spirits of his followers were sinking low. Simon himself had started to relieve Northampton, and had reached St. Albans when the news of disaster reached him. He immediately fell back and prepared to defend the city. Finding, however, that the king showed no signs of striking at London, and had marched northward, the earl resolved to make a rapid stroke at Rochester, the one Royalist stronghold in the neighbourhood of the capital. He stormed the bridge, penetrated into the town, and drove the garrison within the walls of the castle (April 18th). He captured its outworks, but the massive strength of its great Norman keep was too much for such siege appliances as the earl could employ. The garrison, under John de Warenne, the Earl of Surrey, held their own without difficulty.

Meanwhile, the king had received news of the siege, and left the Midlands. He should undoubtedly have risked all other objects, and thrown himself upon London. The mere news of his having turned southward was enough to draw Simon and his host back from Rochester to defend the capital (April 26th). The earl merely left a few hundred men stockaded in front of the gate of the keep to hold the garrison in check—a thing easily done, because the narrowness of the exits of a Norman castle rendered sallies very difficult.

But, instead of striking at London, King Henry merely sent forward his son, Prince Edward, with a small cavalry force, to see if the city was in a state of defence,¹ and then committed the extraordinary error of coasting round it by a vast circular march. Returning down the Watling Street, he struck off it by St. Albans, passed the Thames at Kingston, hastily rushed across Surrey by way of Croydon, and arrived at Rochester on April 28th.

The blockading force was easily driven off, and the few prisoners made were cruelly mutilated.

This huge flank march had no merit but its swiftness. Prince Edward and the mounted part of the royal army marched from Nottingham to Rochester-a hundred and fifty miles in five days,² and the infantry were not very far behind. The pace, however, had told heavily on the Royalists: many of the horses were ruined when the prince arrived at Rochester, and the foot-soldiery had left thousands of stragglers on the way.

As it turned out, the king's hurried movement had no adequate object. Having relieved Rochester, he might again have turned towards London, though with less advantage, since he was now separated from it by the broad reaches of the Lower Thames. But this did not enter into his plan of operations. he marched instead against Tunbridge, a great castle of the Earl of Gloucester, and when it fell with unexpected ease (May 1st) moved still farther from London, with the object of overawing the coast-towns.³ But the barons of the Cinque Ports had sent their fleet and their armed force to sea, and Henry obtained nothing but a few hostages from Winchelsea and Romney. His next move was still more inexplicable, he pushed westward between the Weald and the sea, and marched by Battle and Hurstmonceaux to Lewes. No object seems to have been served by this turn, save that of placing himself in the midst of the estates of his brother-in-law and firm supporter, De Warenne. It had the disadvantage of putting the almost trackless forest of the Weald between himself and London, and of causing his army much discomfort as they threaded their way through the wood-tracks-for the men of Kent and Sussex cut off his stragglers and plundered his baggage, and a detachment of Welsh archers, whom Montfort had sent forward from London, are said to have molested the rear of the host.⁴ The king's object is impossible to fathom, more especially as we are told that he feared that his enemies would strike at Tunbridge when he had marched off, and therefore garrisoned that castle with a very large force; no less than twenty bannerets and many of his foreign men-at-arms are said to have been left there.

De Montfort and the barons, however, had no intention of wasting their time in sieges when they could strike at the main objective, the king's army. Having collected every available man, and armed a great body of the citizens of London, they marched across Surrey, plunged into the paths of the Weald, and did not halt till they had reached Fletching, a village and clearing nine miles north of Lewes (May 6th-10th). From thence they addressed proposals for peace to the king, dated with prudent vagueness 'in bosco juxta Lewes.' They must have known well enough that Henry would refuse them, after his late successes at Northampton and Tunbridge, and on receiving his angry reply prepared for instant action. Although he had the smaller force, Simon was resolved to take the initiative, trusting to his own skill, the greater enthusiasm of his supporters, and the king's well-tried incapacity in war.

The town and castle of Lewes lie at a point where the line of the South Downs is cut through by the river Ouse. To the east of the place the steep sides of Mount Caburn rise directly above the water, hardly leaving room for the suburb of Cliffe along the river-bank. To the west of the Ouse there lies a mile and a half of gently-undulating ground

before the ascent of the Downs begins. In this comparatively level spot lies the town of Lewes, flanked to the north by De Warenne 's castle on its lofty mound, to the south by the great Cluniac Priory of St. Pancras, including within its precinct-wall some twenty acres of ground. The Ouse in the thirteenth century was still a tidal river as far north as Lewes, and at high water the south wall of the priory and the southern houses of the town looked out on a stretch of mingled pools and mud-banks which formed an impassable obstacle.

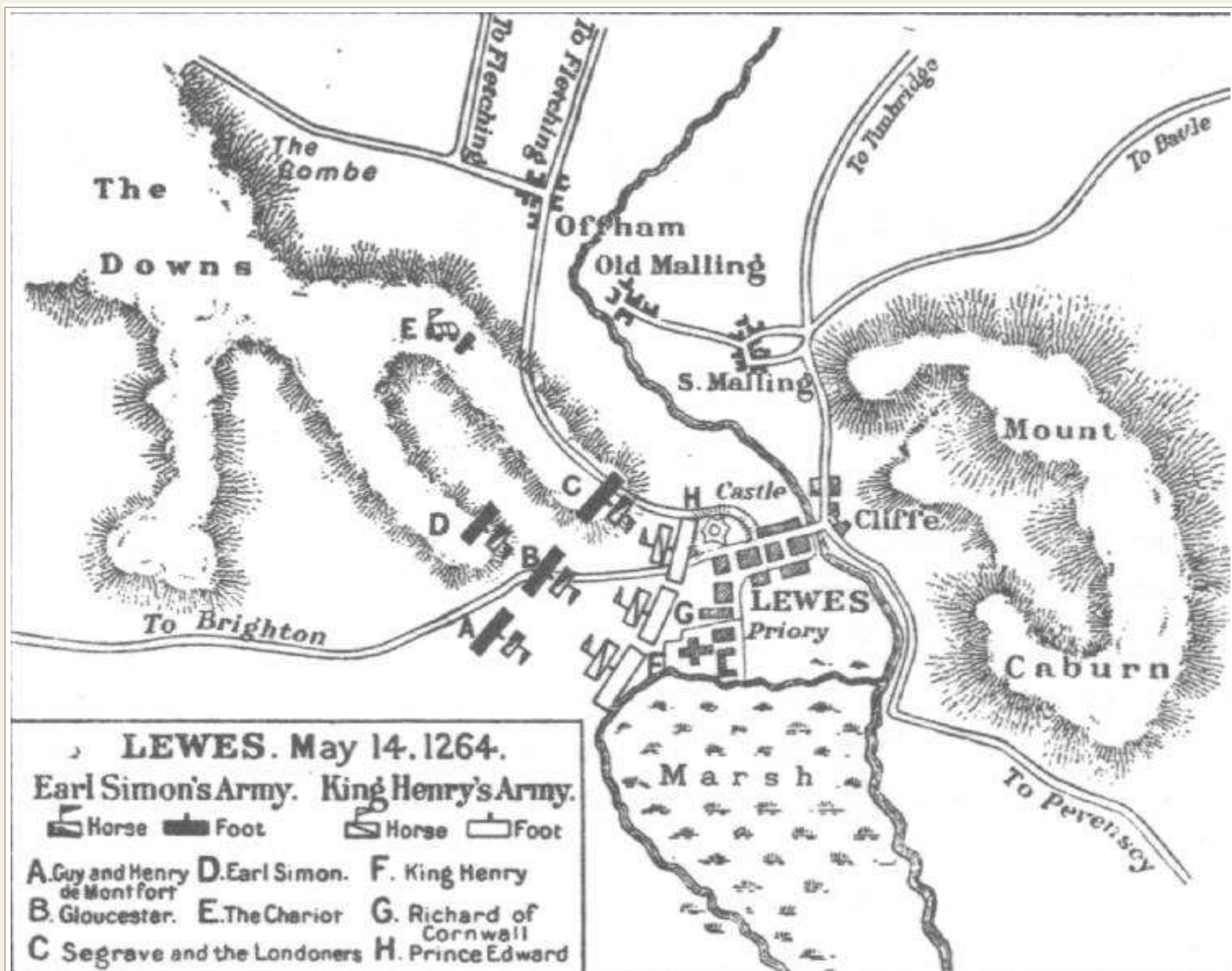
North and east, therefore, Lewes is protected by the river, and on the south by this tidal marsh, but to the west it had no protection but the castle and the priory wall. If an enemy approached from that side, the king's army would have either to defend the streets, or to retire behind the Ouse, or to come out and fight at the foot of the hills.

On this side the main range of the Downs descends rather gently towards the river, not with a uniform slope, but in three spurs separated by slight valleys. The road from Fletching to Lewes passes over the easternmost of these spurs by the hamlet of Offham, and by this path would have been the shortest approach from the barons' camp. But Simon had wisely resolved not to come down a road cramped between the hills and the river. Marching at early dawn on May 14, he turned off the road north of the Downs, and ascended them at a hollow slope called the Combe, four miles from Lewes.⁵ This he was able to do quite unmolested, as King Henry had made no proper arrangements for keeping an eye on his adversaries. He had not sent out any reconnaissance towards Fletching, and the sole precaution that he had taken was to place on the previous day a small party on a high point of the Downs to keep watch. No measures had been taken to relieve the watchers on the 13th, and, being tired and hungry, they slipped back into Lewes to rest themselves, leaving a single man on guard. This individual lay down under a gorse-bush, and was caught sound asleep by the first of De Montfort's men who climbed the slope. Thus the earl was able to put his whole force in array on the ridge of the Downs before the Royalists had the least idea that he was within two miles of them. Simon had spent the previous day and night in distributing his men into corps, and assigning the position of each on the march and in battle-line-a task which, as the chroniclers tell us, no other man in his raw army was competent to discharge.⁶ Now he had full leisure to see that his exact intentions were carried out, and to settle the smallest details of the marshalling.

Owing to the disasters at Northampton and Nottingham, the barons' army was much smaller than might have been raised by the full levy of the party, for many of their most important leaders were prisoners in the king's hands.⁷ The estimate of forty thousand men given by several chroniclers as Simon's force is one of the hopeless and habitual exaggerations of the mediaeval scribe. But, small though the army was, it was divided not into the usual three battles, but into four. There is no doubt that the fourth, which was led by the earl himself was a reserve corps placed behind the others, but none of the chroniclers expressly state this fact. It can be inferred, without any danger of doubt, from the circumstance that the three first-named battles of Simon's army each engaged with one of the three bodies which formed the king's left, right, and centre, and that the earl's division came later into the fight than the other three.

As arrayed on the Downs before descending to battle, the baronial army was drawn up as follows -On the right or southernmost wing were Humphrey de Bohun, the eldest son of the Earl of Hereford, John de Burgh (the grandson of the great Justiciar, Hubert de Burgh), and De Montfort's two sons, Henry and Guy. In the centre was Gilbert de Clare, the young Earl of Gloucester, with John Fitz-John and William de Montchensy, two of the most vigorous members of the baronial party. The third or northern wing was composed of the numerous infantry of the Londoners, and of a body of knights commanded by Nicholas de Segrave, Henry de Hastings, John Giffard, and Hervey of Borham. The earl's reserve corps lay behind the centre; the horsemen in it consisted of his own personal retainers, the foot were probably Londoners, as they were commanded by Thomas of Pevelsdon, an alderman of the city, who had always been one of Simon's most sturdy adherents.

Deployed in this order, and probably with the knights of each division in front and the infantry behind, Simon's forces halted just as the bell-tower of Lewes Priory came in sight, to engage for a moment in prayer, after a short address from their leaders. Scattered over the slope of the Downs were small parties of the grooms of the Royalists, grazing their lords' horses, for forage had failed in Lewes. They caught sight of the baronial host as it came down the hill, and fled back to the town to rouse their masters. Simon's host followed close at their heels, leaving on the upper ridge of the hill such small impedimenta as they had brought with them, the chief of which was the earl's chariot,⁸ to which he had bound his great banner, after the manner of the Milanese at Legnano or the Yorkshire-men at our own Battle of the Standard. Inside the carriage were three (or four) citizens of London whom Simon had arrested for opposing him, and was determined to keep in safe custody. The banner and baggage were left in charge of a guard of infantry, under William le Blound, one of the signatories of the agreement for arbitration which had ended so unhappily at Amiens.⁹



A plan of the battle from, *The Art of War in the Middle Ages* by Sir C. Oman

The king and his followers had barely mounted and armed and issued from the town of Lewes, when they saw the baronial army coming down upon them. But they had just time to form up in three "battles" before the conflict began. Knighton informs us that the king had originally organised his troops into four corps (like Earl Simon), but that the whole of the fourth division had been left behind to garrison Tunbridge, so that the Royalists had no reserve.¹⁰ Perhaps Henry might have told off other troops to play that part had he been granted time to think. But he was completely taken by surprise, and considered himself lucky to be able to form any battle-order at all. His right division was led by his heir, Prince Edward, who was accompanied by his foreign half-uncles, William de Valence and Guy de Lusignan, as also by the Earl of Warenne and Hugh Bigot the Justiciar. The centre was under the command of Richard of Cornwall, King of the Romans, brother to

King Henry; with him was his son Edmund, and three great Anglo-Scottish barons, Robert de Bruce, John Baliol, and John Comyn, who had come to join the Royalists with a large body of light-armed infantry from north of Tweed. In this division also were John Fitz-Alan and Henry de Percy. The left or southern wing was commanded by the King of England himself under his dragon-standard¹¹ in his company was the Earl of Hereford, whose eldest son was serving in the very division of the baronial host which was about to bear down upon his father. All accounts agree that the Royalists outnumbered the forces of Simon, especially in their array of fully-armed knights, though we cannot believe the exaggerated statement that the king had fifteen hundred men-at-arms on barded horses (*destrarii coperti*) and the barons only six hundred.

When the Royalists had got into order, the castle lay behind Prince Edward, the exit from the town of Lewes behind Richard of Cornwall, and the priory at the back of the king's own wing. Before they had advanced more than a few hundred yards from the town, the baronial army charged down upon them. There seems to have been little or no preliminary skirmishing, the battle commencing with a sharp shock all along the line, starting from the northern wings of each host, who met the first. This came from the fact that the Londoners on the baronial left had a shorter space to cover before contact took place: some of the chroniclers observe that they were so much in advance that the Royalists supposed that they were trying to outflank the castle and the division of Prince Edward. There is at any rate no doubt that the first clash of arms started on this wing. It was unfavourable to the baronial party: the knights who followed Segrave, Hastings, and Giffard were broken by the furious charge of the prince. Giffard was taken prisoner; Hastings turned his rein too soon for his own good repute.¹² Their horsemen were flung back on the Londoners, and threw them into woeful disorder even before Edward's knights dashed into the wavering mass. A moment later the whole left wing of Simon's host broke up and dispersed, the knights flying northward between the river and the Downs, the infantry north-westward up the steep slope, where they thought that the Royalist horsemen would find it hard to follow. Prince Edward had an old grievance to settle against the Londoners, for the insults which they had heaped on his mother in the preceding year. He urged the pursuit furiously, and forgot entirely the battle that was raging behind him in the centre and left of his father's army. The fugitives suffered fearfully from his fierce chase: sixty horsemen are said to have perished in striving to ford the Ouse; hundreds of the men of London were cut down as they fled along the slopes, and then towards Offham and the woods behind. The prince did not stay his hand till he was three miles from the battlefield, and quite out of sight of Lewes, which was hidden from him by the corner of the Downs. Then, at last rallying his men, he remounted the slope to return to his father; but on his way he caught sight of Earl Simon's chariot and its great banner, standing isolated at the head of the slope, under the protection of Le Blound and the baggage-guard. The Royalists jumped to the conclusion that Simon was still in his chariot, not knowing that his broken leg was long since healed, and that he was fighting hard on his horse in the valley below. They therefore wheeled aside and furiously attacked the baggage-guard. Le Blound and his men made a gallant resistance, but were at last overwhelmed and cut down. Then shouting, "Come out, Simon, thou devil,"¹³ the prince's knights broke open the chariot and hewed to pieces the unhappy hostages who were confined in it, before they could explain that they were the

earl's foes and not his friends.¹⁴ Disappointed of their prey, Prince Edward and his men at last set forth to return to their main body.

But meanwhile complete victory had crowned the arms of Earl Simon in the southern part of the field. The Earl of Gloucester in the baronial centre had after severe fighting broken the line of Richard of Cornwall's division, captured most of its leaders,-including Percy, Baliol, Comyn, and Bruce,-and forced Richard himself to take refuge with a few followers in a windmill, where he defended himself for a space while the tide of battle rolled past him towards the town. It is probable that Earl Simon threw his reserve into action against the northern flank of the king's own corps, when he saw that the line was giving way: at any rate, the Royalist left broke up soon after the centre had failed. The king's horse was killed under him, but he was dragged off by his household and carried into the priory, where all who could, followed him. But the greater part of his centre and left wing had been thrust southward by the successful advance of the barons, and found themselves with the marshy ground, half covered by water at the full tide, behind them. Some tried to escape by swimming over, but the mud sucked them in, and next day scores were found at the ebb, drowned in their saddles, with their drowned horses still between their legs, lodged fast in the slime.¹⁵ Others slipped through the streets of Lewes and got over the bridge; a good many took refuge with the king in the priory; a certain number were slain, but the majority laid down their arms and were granted quarter by the victorious barons. These prisoners were soon joined by King Richard, who, after being blockaded in his mill for some time, and much scoffed at by his besiegers, had to come out and surrender himself to a young knight named Sir John Beavs.

While the barons were battering at the castle gate, and shooting arrows tipped with burning tow against the priory to set it on fire, Prince Edward and the victorious Royalist right wing came into sight on the slopes of the Downs. They' rode hastily on to the field at about two o'clock in the afternoon, and the prince resolved to recommence the fight. But when the baronial host came swarming out of the town against them, the large majority of Edward's followers lost heart: the two Lusignans, Earl Warenne, and Bigot the Justiciar, with five hundred knights at their back, turned their reins and rode off. The prince himself with a few faithful followers, charged and cut his way as far as the priory, which he entered and so was able to join his father. But it was clear by nightfall that they would be unable to make a long defence, and with great wisdom Henry and his son sent to ask for peace from the barons. Thus came about the celebrated "Mise of Lewes," by which the king laid down his arms, gave up his son as hostage, and agreed to abide by terms to be settled by arbitration.

The battle had not been so bloody as many medieval fights: the estimate of the losses runs from twenty-seven hundred to four thousand, the better authorities inclining to the smaller figure. The captives were far more numerous than the slain: among the latter are named only two men of importance on each side; on that of the king, William de Wilton was slain, and Fulk Fitzwarren drowned in the marsh: the barons had to lament a Kentish banneret named Ralph Heringot, and William le Blound, the commander of the baggage-guard.

It will be observed from the above narration that Lewes was essentially a cavalry battle: the infantry seem to have had little or no influence on its fate; we only hear of them as suffering, not as inflicting losses. It is especially curious that we have no mention whatever of the employment of archery on either side. One chronicler praises the slingers in the baronial army, another mentions crossbowmen, but of archery there is no word, though the Assize of Arms of 1252 had named the bow as the yeoman's special weapon. In the whole campaign we only once hear of the use of that arm-when the king on his march to Lewes was molested in the woods by Simon's Welsh bowmen, and drove them off with some loss. It is obvious that the supremacy of cavalry was still well-nigh unchecked, and that the proper use of infantry armed with missile weapons was not yet understood.

The main interest of the fight is tactical: Simon won because he chose his ground well, because he surprised his enemy and forced him to fight in disorder before he could get his host completely arrayed, and still more, because he kept his victorious troops in hand, and employed his reserve at the proper moment and in the proper place. Henry lost, partly because he was surprised, and forced to fight in an unfavourable position, but far more because the victorious part of his army threw away its advantage, and was absent from the field during the critical hour that settled its fortune. Rash adventure and hot-headed eagerness in pursuit cost the Royalists the day. But neither discipline nor self-restraint were likely to be prominent in any army over which the imbecile Henry Plantagenet bore rule.

Notes on *The Battle of Lewes* by Sir Charles Oman

1. See Annals of Dunstable.
2. Wykes. 1264
3. Knighton
4. Wykes 1264
5. Blaaw and Prothero seem undoubtedly right on this point of topography.
6. Rishanger, p.3'.
7. Including Simon de Montfort the Younger, Peter de Montfort and his sons Peter and William, Adam of Newmarch, one of the greatest of the barons of the Welsh border, Baldwin Wake, William de Furnival, all captured at Northampton, William Bardolf, captured at Nottingham, and the young Earl of Derby, who had been taken in his own castle of Tutbury
- 8 Simon had broken his leg in the previous year, and was forced to use this carriage for many months.

9 Of the twenty-four laymen who signed for the barons' party in 1263, the following were at Lewes -Earl Simon, Ralph Basset, William le Blound, Humphrey de Bohun, John de Burgh, Hugh Despenser, John Fitz-John, Henry de Hastings, Henry de Montfort, William de Montchensy, Nicholas de Segrave, Robert de Ros, Geoffrey de Lucy, John de Vesey, Richard de Vipont-fifteen in all. Simon junior de Montfort, Peter de Montfort, Adam of Newmarch, Baldwin Wake, William Marshall, had been captured at Northampton; William Bardolf at Nottingham. Richard de Grey was holding Dover Castle. Nothing is known as to the whereabouts of Walter de Colville and Robert de Toeny.

10 H. Knighton, p.247 of Rolls Series edition.

11 There are some difficulties in the array of the Royalists, as in that of the baronial host. On the whole I am compelled to conclude that Earl Richard led the
centre, and the king the southern wing. I imagine that the position of the king on the left must have been due merely to the hurry and haste of the muster. Being encamped in the priory, he drew up in front of it. For by all medieval military etiquette he should have led the right or centre, and not taken the post of least honour. But there was no time to rearrange the host, and each body fell into line as best it could.

12 "Paene primus H. de Hastings, audaciae formidinem anteponens, e proelio fugit" (Wykes. 1264).

13 Chronicle. de Mailros, 1264

14. Some of the Royalist chroniclers call the chariot a "vas dolositatis," and say that Simon hung his banner on it and placed it on the height specially to distract the enemy from the main battle. This is most improbable; he would certainly not have exposed to certain death Le Blound, one of his most trusted followers, and the whole affair was (no doubt) a mere chance,

15. Chronicle of Lanercost. This authority has some graphic touches given on the authority of an eye-witness, but is often vague and erroneous e.g. it says that the barons formed only three battles, and that one of them was led by Hugh le Despenser.