

The city and citizens of Rochester: the keepers of the city and castle of Rochester, 1280--1419

John de Cobham was made keeper of the city and castle of Rochester in June 1280. The appointment was not without precedent. Over the previous twenty years, more than once, the king had appointed a keeper of the city and castle.* On those occasions, however, the appointment had been a temporary one -- "for as long as it shall please the king", *quamdiu regi placuerit* -- justified by some emergency,† and not expected to last for very long; it was tacitly understood that the city would be given back to the citizens as soon as the emergency was over. This time the appointment was intended to be permanent: Cobham was appointed "for the whole of his life", *ad totam vitam eius*.

* For the details see ccr-farm.pdf.

† When this happened for the first time, in Nov 1261, the king wrote to the citizens to tell them why he had done it -- partly at their own request, but mainly because he needed to be able to rely on their obedience "during the trouble which has arisen in the realm". This seems to be the only occasion when the king thought it necessary to explain himself. On other occasions he just did it.

When the king made an appointment of this kind, temporary or permanent, the effect of it was to turn Rochester into an enclave with the same sort of status as one of the cinque ports. The sheriff of Kent was shut out. Just as the men of (say) Dover were answerable to the warden of the cinque ports (who was also the constable of Dover castle), so the men of Rochester were answerable to the keeper of the city (who was also the constable of Rochester castle).* And the keeper of the city,† like the warden of the cinque ports, was answerable only to the king.

* At ground level this meant that the bailiffs of the city -- i.e. the two bailiffs elected by the citizens from among themselves -- were answerable to the bailiff appointed by the keeper. (Henry de Cobham paid his bailiffs a salary of 10 marks (in some cases even 10 pounds) a year, plus an allowance for clothing; and therefore "they had no necessity for extortion". That was the finding of a jury convened at Dartford in May 1331: the citizens saw things differently (CIM 2:307--8).)

† I have got into the habit of calling him the keeper, but possibly "warden" would be better. In Latin the word is the same: *custos quinque portuum, custos civitatis et castris Roff'*.

The citizens had a charter from Henry III, dated 6 Feb 1266 (RCA_C1_01_02b), which granted them the city in return for a fee-farm rent of £12. That charter was disregarded. Though the citizens did not lose their other privileges, they were placed in a subordinate position, cut off from direct communication with the king. They remained in this position for the next hundred years and more, as one keeper was succeeded by another -- always "for life", never "during pleasure".* No book about Rochester that I

have seen shows any awareness of this long chapter in the city's history. I summarized the relevant facts in a footnote in my book about the bridge (Flight 1997:29n11). Here I expand on that footnote.

* Their letters of appointment are listed in the appendix. All the citizens got was a writ "de intendendo" -- a letter ordering them to be obedient to the new keeper.

This is the list of keepers:

John de Cobham -- appointed 5 Jun 1280 (CFR 1272-1307 128, cf CPR 1272-81 376) -- died (14 Jan x 28 Mar) 1300

Richard de Gravesend bishop of London -- appointed 28 Mar 1300 (CFR 1272-1307 426) -- died 9 Dec 1303

Henry de Cobham -- appointed 14 Jan 1304 (CFR 1272-1307 486) -- reappointed 24 Sep 1334 jointly with his son (CFR 1327-37 416) -- d 25 Aug 1339

John de Cobham -- appointed 24 Sep 1334 jointly with his father (CFR 1327-37 416) -- sole keeper after his father's death -- resigned (with effect from 15 Mar) 1354

William de Clinton earl of Huntingdon -- appointed 15 Mar 1354 (CPR 1354-8 22) -- died 31 Aug 1354

Geoffrey de Say -- appointed 1 Sep 1354 (CFR 1347-56 401) -- died 26 Jun 1359

John de Grey of Codnor -- appointed 1 Jul 1359 (CFR 1356-68 97) -- resigned (with effect from 14 Apr) 1370

Simon de Burgh -- appointed 14 Apr 1370 (CPR 1367-70 394) -- resigned (with effect from 29 Sep) 1379

John de Newenton -- appointed (with effect from 29 Sep) 25 Oct 1379 (CPR 1377-81 395) -- died (before 12 Feb 1394)

William de Arundel -- appointed 12 Feb 1394 (CPR 1391-6 367) -- appointment confirmed 31 Oct 1399 (CPR 1399-1401 265-6) -- died (1 Aug x 4 Sep) 1400

Richard de Arundel -- appointed 4 Sep 1400 (CPR 1399-401 357) -- reappointed 23 Aug 1412 (CPR 1408-13 425-6) -- died 3 Jun 1419

Farm of the city

The financial side of things remains to be worked out. I have looked at some of the exchequer rolls, but not in any systematic way. As far as I understand it, the story goes like this.

For the farm of the city (paid to him by the citizens, in two equal instalments, at Easter and Michaelmas) the keeper was expected to forward a payment of £12 a year; for the castle-guard rents (paid to him all at once on 30 Nov) he was expected to forward a payment of £36 4s (CPR 1292-1301 314-15). In 1304 an "increment" or surcharge of 36s was imposed (CFR 1272-1307 486), which brought the total to a round £50 a year, £12 for the city and £38 for the castle (CFR 1347-56 401). A further surcharge of 10 marks (£6 13s 4d) was imposed in 1359 (CFR 1356-68 97). It was remitted for life to the keeper in 1376 (CPR 1374-7 395), remitted to his successor in 1379 (CPR 1377-81 395), and not mentioned again after that.

The keeper was answerable for these sums at the exchequer, but that does not mean that the money went into the king's treasury. If the king needed to repay a loan, he might think of making a temporary grant of the money due from Rochester. A grant of this kind was made to the keeper himself in 1297 (CPR 1292-1301 314-15), another to the prior and convent of Merton in 1305 (CPR 1301-7 446-7).

In 1331 the payment of £50 from Rochester was one of the assets assigned for life to the king's mother, queen Isabella (CPR 1330-4 226), and the money seems to have been paid to her regularly from then onwards, until she died in Aug 1358. Some months later, the king granted this same payment to his daughter, also named Isabella (CPR 1358-61 200), and the money seems to have been paid to her from then onwards, until she lost all her possessions in 1377, "on account of the surrender of the homage of her husband, Ingelram de Coucy, and his adhesion to the king of France". Though they were mostly given back (not to her, but to trustees acting in her interest), the new king, her nephew, kept some of them in his own hands; and one of the assets he held onto was the £50 from Rochester (CPR 1377-81 174).

In 1381 the keeper was allowed a rebate of 40 marks, £26 13s 4d (CPR 1381-5 18): from now on he would only need to pay £23 6s 8d and the exchequer would write off the rest. In 1412, when Richard de Arundel was reappointed, even that reduced payment was remitted: whatever income he got from Rochester was his, and the king expected no share of it (CPR 1408-13 425-6). In theory, however, a payment of £50 was still due -- or so the exchequer assumed.

When Richard died, in Jun 1419, no new keeper was appointed. By default, I suppose, the sheriff of Kent became responsible for forwarding the money from Rochester to the treasury, and he did not benefit from the discounts which had been allowed to the keepers of the city. The exchequer expected payment of the whole sum of £50; in fact it seems to have imposed a further surcharge of £5, because shortly afterwards the value of the revenue from Rochester is reported to be £55.

If there was ever any thought of appointing another keeper, that thought had evaporated by Nov 1422, when the castle and town of Rochester were among the assets assigned in dower to Henry V's widow, queen Catherine (CPR 1422-9 17, cf Rot parl 4:184). This letter is where we find the revenue valued at £55. That is the income which the king stood to lose: the queen mother might hope to get more. In fact it is clear, from a revised version of this letter issued in Oct 1423 (CPR 1422-9 166, cf Rot parl 4:203), that her financial officers were intending to squeeze money out of these assets in excess of their nominal value. Before they started squeezing, they wanted there to be a clause in the letter saying that they did not have to account for any surplus; the revised version says that they do not.

Queen Catherine died in Jan 1437, and the citizens finally saw their chance to regain control of the city. Their efforts paid off. They obtained a new charter from Henry VI, dated 14 Jul 1438, which revalidated the charter of 1266 and restored the city to the citizens, "to be held from the king as their ancestors held it, as though it had never been taken into the hands of the present king or any of his ancestors after the said grant from King Henry III, but had always remained in the hands of the citizens" (RCA_C1_01_04, cf CChR 6:2-4). They were to pay a farm of £12 a year, as stipulated in that charter, but nothing more than that.

Appendix

These are the letters of appointment, as they are summarized in the PRO calendars. Unless there is some indication to the contrary, they are dated at Westminster.

4 Jun 1280 - Appointment, for life, of John de Cobeham to hold the city of Rochester at farm, at the same rent as the citizens, late farmers, rendered; also to the custody of the castle, so that he answer for the castle guards due thereto, like other constables before. - Mandate to Ralph de Sandwyco, king's steward, to deliver them. (CPR 1272-81 376) <superseded by the next letter>

5 Jun 1280 - Commitment for life to John de Cobeham of the city of Rochester at the farm which the citizens, late farmers thereof, used to render, and of the castle of Rochester, so that he answer for the wards due thereto, as other constables have answered. (CFR 1272-1307 128)

28 Mar 1300 - Commitment for life to R<ichard de Gravesend> bishop of London of the keeping of the castle and town of Rochester, at the rent which John de Cobeham, late constable and keeper, used to render. - By K. on the information of the bishop of Coventry and Lichfield. - Order to the executors of the will of John to deliver the castle and town to him.<*> (CFR 1272-1307 426)

<* The handover hit a snag. An inventory of the "tools, weapons and other things" was drawn up, but Cobham's executors refused to put their seals to it. Losing patience, the bishop wrote to the king's chancellor, asking him to apply some further pressure, or else to order the sheriff to intervene. The letter is dated 22 Apr 1300. It was printed, from the original (National Archives, SC 1/27/7), by Larking (1861:234-5).>

14 Jan 1304 - Dunfermline - Commitment for life to Henry de Cobeham of the city of Rochester and the castle of that city, at the rent of 12l. for the city and 36l. 4s. for the keeping of the castle and for the wards pertaining thereto, as John de Cobeham, his father, and Richard, late bishop of London, late farmers and keepers, used to render yearly, and 36s. beyond of increment for the said keeping. - By K. on the information of W<alter> bishop of Coventry and Lichfield. - Order to the bailiffs and good men of Rochester and the tenants of the castle to be intendant to Henry as farmer and keeper. - Order to the executors of the will of the said bishop to deliver the city and castle to Henry. - Order to the same executors to deliver to Henry all issues received by them therefrom since the bishop's death. (CFR 1272-1307 486)

5 Jul 1334 - Sherburn - Grant for life to John de Cobham of the keeping of the castle of Rochester, at the yearly rent at the Exchequer of as much as Henry de Cobham, his father, used to render, in moieties at Michaelmas and Easter. - By p.s. [7935.] - Order to the sheriff of Kent to deliver the same to him. - By the same writ. Vacated because otherwise below. (CFR 1327-37 408)

5 Jul 1334 - Sherburn - Commitment for life to John de Cobeham of the city and castle of Rochester, at the rent of 12l. a year at the Exchequer for the city, and for the keeping of the castle and the wards appurtenant 36l. 4s. and 36s. yearly beyond of increment, as Henry de Cobham, his father, late farmer of the city and keeper of the castle, used to render to Edward I, Edward II and the king. - By p.s. [7935.] Vacated because surrendered. (CFR 1327-37 412-13)

5 Aug (sic) 1334 - Sherburn - Commitment for life to John de Cobeham, son of Henry de Cobeham, of the keeping of the city and castle of Rochester after the death of his father, who holds the same by letters patent of Edward I [Calendar of Fine Rolls, 1272-1307, p. 486], to hold at the same rent. - By p.s. [7935.] Vacated because otherwise below. (CFR 1327-37 414)

24 Sep 1334 - Commitment to Henry de Cobeham and John his son in survivorship of the keeping of the city and castle of Rochester to hold as Henry held the same by letters patent of Edward I [Calendar of Fine Rolls, 1272-1307, p. 486], surrendered. - By K. (CFR 1327-37 416)

2 May 1351 - Grant to William de Clynton, earl of Huntingdon, of the keeping of the king's castle and town of Rochester for life, after the death of John de Cobham, who now has the keeping for

life of the king's grant by letters patent. - By bill of p.s.
(CFR 1347-56 294)

15 Mar 1354 - Whereas Edward I committed for life to Henry de Cobeham the city of Rochester and the keeping of the castle, he rendering yearly at the exchequer for the city 12l. and for the keeping of the castle and for the castle guards 36l. 4s. as John de Cobeham, father of the said Henry, and Richard, late bishop of London, farmers of the said king of the said city and keepers of the castle for him, used to render, and 36s. yearly of increment beyond the said 48l. 4s. for the keeping; and whereas the present king afterwards, on surrender by the said Henry of the letters patent thereof of Edward I. committed the premises to him and John, his son, for life, they rendering at the exchequer the said sums as Henry had done to the king's grandfather and father, and John, who survived the said Henry, his father, after the death of the latter, surrendered the city and castle and the letters patent thereof; the king has committed the city and castle to William de Clynton, earl of Huntingdon, for life, he rendering at the exchequer the said rents and increment, as John used to do. - By K. (CPR 1354-8 22)

1 Sep 1354 - Clipstone - Commitment to Geoffrey de Say of the keeping of the king's castle of Rochester, to hold the same for life, rendering 38l. yearly at the Exchequer for the said keeping and the guards pertaining to the castle, as William de Clynton, late earl of Huntingdon, rendered during his life. - By letter of secret seal. Vacated because otherwise below. (CFR 1347-56 401)

1 Sep 1354 - Clipstone - Commitment to Geoffrey de Say of the city of Rochester to hold at farm for life, and of the king's castle there to be kept by him for life, rendering yearly at the Exchequer 12l. for the city and 38l. for the keeping of the castle and for the guards pertaining thereto, as William de Clynton, late earl of Huntingdon, and other farmers of the city and keepers of the castle have been wont to render. - By letter of secret seal. (CFR 1347-56 401)

1 Jul 1359 - Commitment at farm to John de Gray of Codenore of the city of Rochester and the keeping of the king's castle there, to hold the same for life, rendering yearly at the Exchequer 12l. for the city and 38l. for the keeping of the castle and the guards pertaining thereto, as Geoffrey de Say, deceased, and other farmers of the city and keepers of the castle have been wont to render, and 10 marks of increment. - By K. - Order to the executors of the will of the said Geoffrey to deliver the city and castle to John by indenture. - By K. (CFR 1356-68 97)

14 Apr 1370 - Whereas the king lately committed at farm the city of Rochester for life to John de Gray of Codenore, and also the keeping of the castle there, he rendering the king 12l. yearly for the city and 38l. for the castle and the guards (wardis) pertaining thereto, as Geoffrey de Say and other farmers and

keepers thereof were wont to render, and 10 marks of increment; he has now, with the assent of the said John and on surrender by him of his letters patent, committed the premises on like terms to his esquire, Simon de Burgh. - By p.s. (CPR 1367-70 394)

25 Oct 1379 - Appointment, for life, of John de Newenton, knight, to the custody of the city and castle of Rochester from Michaelmas last, at the yearly rent of 12l. for the city and 38l. for the castle and wards thereto belonging, and 10 marks in addition, as Simon de Burgh had by letters patent dated 14 April, <1370>, and 15 December, <1376>, which latter sum, however, he is to receive by his own hands to his own use, as did the said Simon. - By p.s. (CPR 1377-81 395)

12 Feb 1394 - Grant, for life, to the king's knight William Darundell of the custody of the city and castle of Rochester, to hold the same in person or by deputy, rendering therefor and for the wards belonging to the castle 23l. 6s. 8d. a year at the Exchequer; and release to him both of the 40 marks a year and the additional 10 marks due to the king, as remitted to John de Newenton, knight, deceased, who was heretofore granted the custody, and which Simon de Burgh was wont to pay in the late reign for the same. - By p.s. (CPR 1391-6 367)

4 Sep 1400 - Durham - Grant for life to the king's knight Richard de Arundell of the office of constable of the castle of Rochester with the profits and commodities pertaining to it as William de Arundell, knight, deceased, his brother had. - By K. (CPR 1399-401 357)

23 Aug 1412 - Commission for life to the king's knight Richard de Arundell, brother of William Arundell, 'chivaler,' of the city and castle of Rochester without rendering anything to the king; in lieu of a like commission. to him at a rent of 23l. 6s. 8d. yearly by letters patent dated 4 September, <1400>, surrendered. - By p.s. (CPR 1408-13 425-6)

References

CFR Calendar of the fine rolls preserved in the Public Record Office.

CIM Calendar of inquisitions miscellaneous (Chancery) preserved in the Public Record Office.

CPR Calendar of the patent rolls preserved in the Public Record Office.

Flight 1997 C. Flight, *The earliest recorded bridge at Rochester* (BAR British Series 252, 1997).

Larking 1861 L. B. Larking, 'Miscellanea', *Archaeologia*

Cantiana, 4 (1861), 220--40.

Rot parl Rotuli parliamentorum, 6 vols. (London, 1767-77).

C.F. Nov 2014 -- last revised Feb 2017

Larking 1861 L. B. Larking, 'Miscellanea', Archaeologia Cantiana, 4 (1861), 220--40.

COLLECTIONS FOR ROCHESTER CASTLE.

The following, from the Royal Letters preserved among the Public Records, is worthy a place in "Collections" for the History of Rochester Castle. It is a letter from Richard de Gravesend, Bishop of London, to Sir John de Langeton, Chancellor, desiring that the Executors of Sir John de Cobeham, deceased, be ordered to deliver over Rochester Castle and its arms and stores, to the said Bishop, by indenture, in obedience to a Commission which they have received from the King. The Letter complains that the said Executors refuse to seal the Inventory which has been prepared, on the ground that very few stores, and they of small value, have been found in the Castle. It is therefore further requested that, if they still refuse obedience to the King's commission, letters be written to the Sheriff of Kent, that the stores in the Castle be, under his view and attestation, delivered over to the Bishop, to secure him against

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being hereafter charged with a larger quantity and greater value than he has received.

The letter is dated at Crondon, 22nd April, 28 Ed. I., A.D. 1300, and is in these words: --

"Venerande discrecionis viro domino Johanni de Langeton, domini Regis Cancellario.

"R., permissione divina Londonensi<s> Episcop<us>, salutem, cum omni promptitudine complacendi.

"Licet executores domini Johannis de Cobeham, defuncti, commissionem domini nostri Regis de Castro Roffensi nobis liberando, et eciam de utensilibus armis et aliis in eodem Castro inventis, nobis, per dividendam tradendis, receperint: Quia, tamen, pauca in ipso Castro et valoris modici sunt inventa, iidem executores cuidam littere quam inter nos de hujusmodi inventis fieri fecimus juxta ordinacionem domini Regis, et preceptum, sigilla sua apponere nunc recusant: vos affectuosis precibus exoramus quatinus ut dicti executores domini Regis Commissioni, que penes eos residet, pareant, iterum jubeantur; vel saltem scribatur Vicecomiti Kancie, ut ea que sunt in Castro nobis tradantur, sub ejus testimonio atque visu: processu enim temporis, plura nobis possent impingi recepta, et estimacionis forsan majoris. Et ideo in hoc caucius est agendum. Quid autem facere decreveritis nobis intimare velitis, si placeat, per presencium portitorem. Bene in domino valeatis. Datum apud Crondon x Kalendis Maii, anno domini Mccc^omo."

Reference: SC 1/27/7

Description: Richard de Gravesend, bishop of London, to John de Langton, chancellor: his dispute with the executors of John de Cobham over an inventory of Rochester castle, Kent. Dated at Croydon

Date: 1300 Apr 22

Held by: The National Archives, Kew

Language: French <???

Publication note: Archaeologica Cantiana, IV, p.235