



Medieval master masons: a Battle connection.

During Medieval times there was no uniform protocol for allocating a surname to an individual. The surnames we tend to see in the records for the general population at this time are based on various factors, including occupation, patronymics, physical appearance and place of habitation, and initially these were not hereditary. The aspect that is relevant in this article is that, if someone moved away from their home, they would often take the name of the locality from whence they came.

In the historical records we find repeated mentions of two noteworthy individuals - John of Battle and Thomas of Battle. Because both of these individuals had 'Battle' in their surname, the assumption throughout this article is that their name came from an association with the town of Battle. (But, as will be seen later, this link is not always straightforward.)

Both of these individuals were Master Masons working in the late 13th and early 14th Centuries. They were both actively involved in the construction of some of the grandest buildings of this period and during their involvement they would have witnessed some key events in British history. So it seems worthwhile detailing as much as possible about the work and life of these former residents of the town and compiling this information into one document.

But first, what was a Medieval Master Mason?

MASTER MASONS

After the Norman Conquest of England there was a rapid growth in the construction of stone buildings and consequently there was a need for people who could produce and work this stone. But, stone building at the time was still almost exclusively for palaces, castles and churches and was therefore the domain of the royalty and senior religious clerics, plus a few powerful barons. They were the only ones who could command the great resources necessary for obtaining the huge quantities of stone necessary, and for providing the associated timber, tiles, lime, iron, lead and glass, and for paying the wages of the workmen (which would often number in the hundreds for an individual project).

The Master masons were the master craftsmen of the building trade^{5,9}. They would originally have had practical training as masons (or sometimes in allied construction trades, such as carpenters, carvers, glaziers, etc.) but, because of their additional skills, they were promoted above the ordinary craftsmen to roles akin to today's architects and the presumption is that they had a knowledge of geometry and would have prepared some kind of working drawings.

They must also have had some capacity to estimate quantities and costs, skill in directing and managing the simultaneous labours of numbers of men, as well as supervising the production and supply of stone, lime, sand, and bricks, and their carriage to the site.



Indeed, they must have been impressive characters as they would have a range of knowledge and expertise, and at least be aware of all of the associated working trades on the site (Figure 1). Because of this, the Master masons were evidently held in high esteem. They would have been extremely well paid, typically with money or property. And there were often additional perks from their patrons. For instance, it was traditional to receive a cloak/robe each year. But we also hear of other gifts: board and lodging for the rest of their life, and even such diverse gifts as the provision of a barber, a laundry and even pasture for a cow⁵!

So, who was JOHN OF BATTLE?

The bulk of the new recruits to a stone construction site in Medieval times must certainly have come from the country districts and particularly from locations where there were major stone buildings, such as cathedrals or monasteries. If it was a royal building being constructed then the method in the thirteenth century was to instruct via 'letters patent' (i.e. royal proclamation) the sheriffs of particular counties to choose a stated number of masons, carpenters, smiths or other workmen and send them to a particular building operation where they were needed. That this occurred on a grand scale can be demonstrated by the large number of employees listed in the records bearing names from their original (and often distant) dwelling places.

John of Battle commonly appears in the records as *Johan de Bataile* in Norman French and *Johan de Bello* in Latin. The assumption here is that he originally came from the town of Battle. Presumably he started his mason's trade in the Battle area before later moving elsewhere. It is tempting to think that he gained his experience from construction work at the Abbey or in its local stone quarries, at a time when a major expansion in building work was taking place here. He must have gained quite a lot of experience because during his first employment at Vale Royal Abbey (see below) he is listed as an 'under mason' assisting the master, rather than just a simple mason. Unfortunately, there appears to be no record of the craftsmen involved in the construction work at Battle Abbey; the surviving, albeit fragmentary, Battle Abbey records of the mid 1200s do mention several '*cementarius*' (i.e. mason, in Latin) living in Battle, but there is no John.

VALE ROYAL ABBEY

Vale Royal Abbey in Cheshire was initially a Medieval abbey and later a Tudor country house. It was founded in 1270 by Edward I for monks of the austere Cistercian order. Its formation arose because in 1263 the then Prince Edward vowed to establish a grand religious house after he survived a perilous sea crossing from France. The King intended the abbey to be on the grandest scale, with at least 100 monks¹. Excavations have shown that the Abbey ground plan was c. 120m long, comparable to the length of Westminster Abbey (at 161m).

There is lots of surviving information on the workers and finances in the early years of Vale Royal Abbey construction¹⁰. Available records show that John of Battle arrived at the site on the 17th of July 1278 and was engaged as an under mason (i.e. principal assistant) to Walter of Hereford. As Master Mason, Walter earned 2 shillings per day; John received 3 shillings (36 pence) a week, substantially less than Walter, but certainly more than the other craftsmen, who generally earned a

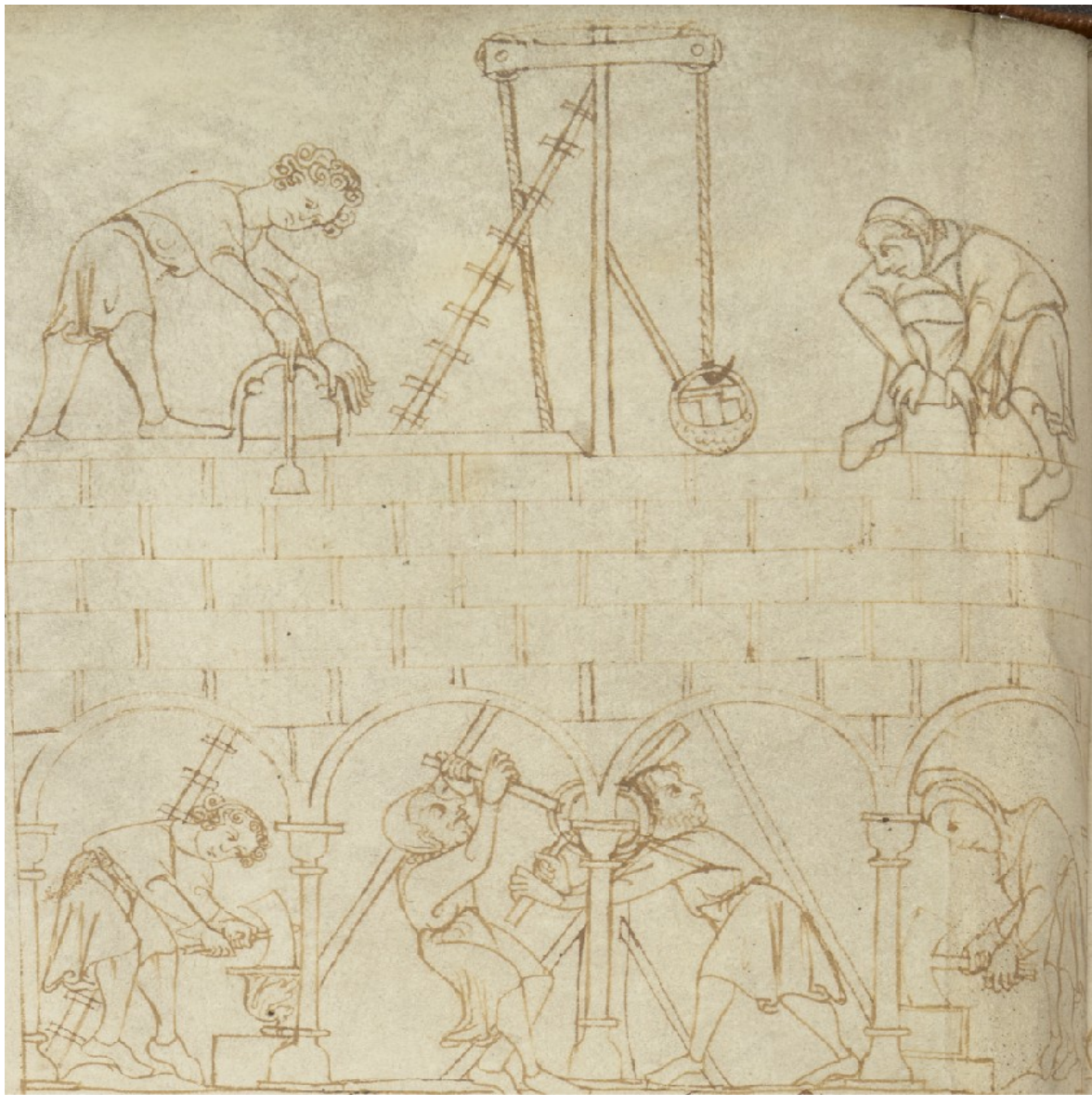


Figure 1. Medieval masons at work; a mid 13th Century image by Matthew Paris.
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maximum of 30 pence a week, and other labourers mostly between 12 and 28 pence per week. So John was clearly already skilled in the mason's trade but he must also have demonstrated some management skills as presumably he would have been given a fair amount of responsibility for supervising various aspects of the building work, the quarrying and the transport of materials. An idea of the scale of the operation can be gauged from the fact that in those early years at Vale Royal Abbey there were at least 90 masons working under Walter and John, and around 100-200 workers overall.



For the first few years the building proceeded with great energy. However, financial difficulties meant that the initial grand ambitions could not be fulfilled and the final building was considerably smaller than planned. The project ran into problems in other ways too; the abbey was frequently grossly mismanaged, relations with the local population were so poor as to result in large scale violence on a number of occasions and internal discipline was frequently bad. In the end the king lost interest and gave no more money; a rather mysterious decision, possibly brought about by the monks' mismanagement, together with the king's distraction by the need to fund his military incursions into Wales. Construction did continue through the 14th and 15th centuries, albeit on a modest scale.

In describing the history of failures in the Vale Royal Abbey building project, Allen Brown et al.¹ commented that it is *'an object lesson in the unreliability of princes and the folly of monks who had allowed themselves to be drawn into grandiose building schemes inconsistent with the architectural simplicity which had once been one of the most cherished principles of their order'*.

As a footnote, Vale Royal was closed in 1538 by Henry VIII as part of the Dissolution of the Monasteries and the property passed to Thomas Holcroft, an important government official of the period. Much of the Abbey, including the church, was demolished and *'nothing now remains above ground of one of the largest works of piety ever undertaken by a Medieval king'*¹. Small bits of associated ecclesiastical buildings (cloisters, refectory and Abbots Hall) were incorporated into the new Elizabethan country house and can still be seen today.

John of Battle next appears in 1293, as a Master mason in charge of constructing the Eleanor crosses.

THE ELEANOR CROSSES

When Eleanor of Castile died in 1290 Edward the first of England was heartbroken. Unusually for a Medieval king and queen, there seemed to have been genuine love and affection between the two; she was his constant companion for the 36 years of their marriage, often on many of his perilous journeys, and also they had 17 children together.

Eleanor died at Harby (Herdeby, Hardby; near Lincoln) and to mark the stages in the funeral journey of his wife's body back to London, at each place where the cortege and body stopped for the night, Edward ordered a stone cross to be built^{6,8,13}. In the erection of these free-standing, stone monuments (known as *Montjoies* or *Mountjoys*) Edward was undoubtedly copying the practice recently used in France along the route of Louis IX's funeral procession to Saint Denis Abbey. There would be twelve crosses in total, constructed between 1291 and 1294. However, only nine seem to be documented and only three survive today.

The Eleanor crosses are among the most famous works of Medieval art in England. They were a potent and readily visible demonstration of Edward's grief at the loss of his wife. But, just as important, they were also lavish symbols of both piety and power and were thus visual imagery to



promote the interests and prestige of the English monarchy in its ongoing personal and political rivalries with the Kings of France. John of Battle was chosen to supervise the production of five of the twelve statues. So, clearly by then his standing must have grown substantially. These five crosses were located at:

Hardingstone, Northampton

Stony Stratford

Woburn

Dunstable

St Albans

The crosses had a polygonal ground-plan and were formed of receding tiers. The lower tiers are decorated with the arms of Ponthieu, Castile, England and León; the upper parts contain large statues of the queen (Figure 2). They were mostly constructed using Caen Stone, Sussex Marble and Purbeck Marble. Further details of the crosses and their design significance can be found elsewhere^{1,4,12}.

John would have been assisted by other masons and at St. Albans and Northampton at least, Simon Pabenham was jointly responsible for some of the work. But the statues themselves were produced separately by William of Ireland and Alexander of Abingdon. All were probably initially constructed in the masons' London workshops.

The programme of statue construction would no doubt have been instituted by the king, and probably to a common plan. Therefore it is very likely that John of Battle would have liaised directly with King Edward (Figure 3) - quite an achievement for a humble mason from Battle! Having said that, it is likely that the Master masons were given a certain amount of freedom of expression when it came to style.

Fortunately the detailed accounts of the payments made to the Masons by Eleanor's executors are available³. For all 5 of John's statues the contract price was at least £90 each, but the total recorded costs for materials and payment amounted to over £100 for each one. Payments were usually in pounds sterling (*li*, short for 'libra', the pound weight of sterling silver). Sometimes the amounts were recorded in marks (a unit only of account).

The following is a selected example of one item of expenditure:

Crux. Item, Johanni de Bello, in partem solutionis pro Crucibus de Sancto Albano, Dunstable, Woburne, Stonistratforde et Norhamtona faciendis, lx.li.

In these records it is interesting to note that John is sometimes recorded as both (*Magistro*) *Johanni de Bello* and *Johanni de la Bataille*.



Figure 2. A drawing of part of the Hardingsstone Cross, presented by Hartshorne in 1848. From left to right the arms are of England, Ponthieu and Leon/Castile.



Figure 3. A Medieval king in discussion with a Master Mason; an image by Matthew Paris. Although the image probably dates from the mid 13th century it can still be considered a symbolic representation of King Edward in conversation with John of Battle. (Note the Master mason's tools of his trade). © British Library Board (Liber additamentorum, Cotton ms, Nero D 1, f23). Reproduced with permission.

The crosses must in their time have been memorials of some beauty. So it is indeed unfortunate that Oliver Cromwell and his Parliamentary Army viewed them as symbols of idolatry and during the 1640s a wave of Protestant zeal led to most of them being destroyed.



A wry contemporary ballad lamented the destruction of one of the crosses¹³:

*The Committee said, that verily
To popery it was bent;
For ought I know, it might be so,
For to church it never went*

However, they were not all completely destroyed and from the early 1700s the three that still remained started to receive some attention¹⁷. The Hardingstone (Northampton) cross is the only one



Figure 4. The Hardingstone cross.
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of John's which stands today and is still visible. Although it has been subjected to a certain amount

of (sometimes rather excessive) restoration and stone replacement, it remains a fine testament to John of Battle and his stoneworking skills (Figure 4).



DEATH

We can assume that John became rich through his profession because he made a will, something that only people of Master masons' standing could manage. When John died he left property in London and St Albans (where one of his crosses would have been sited). His will is undated but appears to have been proved in 1299-1300¹⁶. In the will there is no mention of a wife or children and all is left to his sister:

"Bataille (John de la).—To Isabella his sister his tenements and rents in the town of S. Alban. All his tenements in the City of London and suburbs to be sold, and the proceeds devoted to the fulfilment of this his testament or last will, and the residue, if any, to pious uses."

His wealth at the time of his death is thus demonstrated through property holdings, perhaps in part obtained through his probable role as a Royal craftsman. The extent of his holdings is further demonstrated by the number of ensuing objections to the will:

"Whereupon came Roger—, and put his claim upon the testament of the aforesaid John "de la baylle" as to a messuage and two shops without Newegate. Also came Alice, wife of Ralph de Smechefud, and claimed two shops in the suburbs of London which she held for life by demise of Reginald Canun. Also came Thomas Perceval and put his claim upon the said testament, for that long before the probate of the same he had been seised of a tenement devised therein by feoffment of Cristian le Fundur and Juliana his wife, which Juliana had acquired the same conjointly with John de Stevehach".

And what about THOMAS OF BATTLE?

Not long after we find reference to Thomas of Battle. So what do we know about him?

It has been postulated that Thomas was the son of John of Battle^{7,11}; although a close family connection seems a reasonable supposition (not least because the mason's trade was often passed from father to son), there appears to be no definitive evidence of this relationship (and of course he does not appear in John's will, above).

But Thomas of Battle was certainly also a prominent mason and worked for the king and leading nobles of the time. He does not appear to have reached quite the exalted positions of John but did supervise some important works: for instance, he is known to have supervised work at the Tower of London and (possibly) Westminster Abbey too². During 1324-1325, Thomas de la Bataile had a contract to repair parts of the Tower of London walls. He was contracted to repair and crenellate four towers on the eastern inner wall - those of Salt, Broad Arrow, Constable and Martin. For this he was paid £66 13s 4d.

But perhaps his most notable work was at Caerphilly Castle.

CAERPHILLY CASTLE

Caerphilly Castle is truly a spectacular castle and the biggest in Wales. It was built in the latter half of the 13th century as part of the Anglo-Norman expansion into South Wales and for subduing the local Welsh nobles. It was the family stronghold of the notorious Despenser family.



Hugh Despenser the younger was, from November 1318, Edward the Second's chamberlain, leading adviser and chief favourite. He was ruthless and greedy, even by the standards of Medieval lords and his greed was one of the chief causes of the Baron's revolt and his ultimate downfall. The impressive Great Hall at Caerphilly was expanded in 1326 under the supervision of Thomas of Battle along with the master craftsman William Hurley, who undertook the wood carving and carpentry^{15,19}. So Thomas would most likely have liaised with Hugh Despenser, in effect the second most powerful man in the country. The carved stone columns and window design are features of notable architectural interest. In particular, the heads of the windows and main doorway exhibit the wavy 'ogee' form, typical of this period (Figure 5).



Figure 5. The Great Hall at Caerphilly Castle.

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At almost the same time as this work was proceeding, the Barons revolted (for a second time) but this time successfully forced King Edward and Hugh Despenser to flee westwards. The combined forces of Queen Isabella and Roger Mortimer, and the Barons, drove them backwards to Caerphilly Castle where they briefly stayed before trying to escape. But they were soon captured. Both Despenser senior and junior were executed, the latter in an extremely gruesome fashion. Edward did not last much longer; he was imprisoned in Berkeley castle and died (possibly murdered) in 1327.



A LEEDS CONNECTION?

This relatively straightforward account now gets a bit confusing as we can also find indications of a link between these stonemasons and the village of Leeds in Kent. This link is demonstrated with Thomas, as he is sometimes additionally recorded as '*Thomas de la Bataile cementarius de Ledes*' (Leeds, Kent).

Leeds is best known for its fine Medieval castle. Leeds castle was traditionally the home and property of Medieval queens, but Edward II gave it to Baron Badlesmere, a highly important and wealthy nobleman and one of his close confidants. However, along with several other barons Badlesmere became increasingly angry at some of the king's other confidants, especially the Despencers, and so joined the (first) Baronial revolt in the summer of 1321.

A notable event in the history of Leeds Castle occurred around this time. In October 1321 Queen Isabella was returning from a pilgrimage to Canterbury and wished to stop overnight at the castle to break her journey. Margaret, the wife of Baron Badlesmere, had been left in charge during his absence. She was no friend of Isabella's and refused admittance to the queen; she even ordered her archers to fire upon Isabella's party, six of whom were killed. In consequence, the King besieged the castle and Lady Badlesmere was captured and kept prisoner in the Tower of London (she is the first recorded female prisoner of the Tower). Badlesmere and the other barons were unsuccessful in their revolt and were soon defeated; he was captured and in 1322 was executed. After Edward II died in 1327 Isabella took over Leeds Castle as her primary residence.

The relevance of Leeds to our account is that on the edge of the village and presumably in the (former) grounds of the castle is Battel ('Battle') Hall, a fine 14th Century building (Figure 6) (and of additional architectural importance as it contains a beautiful, original, stone cistern and 'lavatory'¹⁴).

Wallenberg²⁰ reasonably suggests that either the Hall is named after Battle town or the early owners were from Battle. It has been suggested⁷ that Thomas of Battle worked on this building some time around 1330 although there appears to be no firm evidence for this. And of course Thomas had already been recorded as both 'of Battle' and 'of Leeds' several years earlier.

In any case, there are several subsequent references in the Subsidy Rolls for Kent in the 1330s to individuals with the Battle family name ('*de la Bataille*', '*ate Bateyle*', '*ate Batayle*') so presumably they were taking their name from this building and/or the resident family. One additional point relates back to John of Battle. In the 1288 records for building work in the Little Hall at Westminster Abbey we find a reference to a mason called John of Leeds ('*Magistrum Johannem de Ledes*'). And in 1292 this John of Leeds is a '*mainperneur*' for the carpenter Thomas de Houghton, that is he stands surety for him (presumably being admitted to the group working in Westminster Abbey)¹⁸. It has been suggested^{7,11} that this is the same person as John of Battle. If so, his association seems to have now switched to Leeds in Kent. It might seem strange to switch names but there was a Medieval habit to name a Master Mason after the last place with which they had an association, so names could change with new assignments. On the other hand, they might also naturally wish to keep the name which refers to their greatest work⁵.



So, this leaves us with some unanswered questions: Was John also working on Leeds castle, or did he build Battel Hall and give it its name? Did Thomas of Battle



Figure 6. Battel Hall, Leeds, Kent.

build the Hall or was he a member of the family who built it? Did he actually come from the town of Battle? Unfortunately, at present we simply don't know the answers.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we should surely marvel at the achievements of these two individuals, who probably both had humble beginnings in life. It must indeed be considered remarkable that their skills, character and personal attributes enabled them to rise through the ranks, such that they conversed directly with the most powerful men of the time, including the formidable King Edward the First. And it is appropriate to quote from Corrigan⁵ to emphasise once again the nature and status of these two individuals:

"It is very clear that the Master Masons were exceptional men in terms of leadership and, like all the best leaders, they understood that management of manpower and materials was as critical as understanding how to get the project off the ground. They had to keep the motivation going and satisfy the often grandiose ideas of the patrons with their unrealistic timeframes".

And it is particularly gratifying that, in spite of the time that has passed, we can still look at and admire some of the works of these former inhabitants of Battle.



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