

Fact File: Magna Carta

The what, who and why

Glossary

Magna Carta: Latin for Great Charter, the result of an agreement between King John and the Barons about how England was to be governed.

Barons: rich land owners who wanted to manage their own affairs to their advantage.

The significance of Magna Carta

- Magna Carta was issued in June 1215 at Runnymede by King John. It came after the barons had rebelled against the king because they did not like the way he was ruling.
- The main importance of Magna Carta is that it put in writing for the first time the principle that the king was not above the law; in governing the country, the king must stick to the law.
- Magna Carta included a law that said 25 barons could force the king to keep to the rules it set out. Kings had never before been forced to obey the law in this way.
- Magna Carta set out 63 clauses (rights). These included - no one shall be arrested or imprisoned except by the judgement of their equals and according to the law of the land, and that no one will be denied justice.
- Three clauses remain in force today with the best known being that everyone has a right to trial by their equals. This is similar to a trial by jury today and something that affects every person in the United Kingdom.
- Magna Carta influenced the development of democratic rights across the world, including the Bill of Rights in the United States of America.

Key dates

- 1199: John becomes King of England, Duke of Normandy (in France), Duke of Aquitaine (in France), Count of Anjou (in France), and Lord of Ireland.
- 1204: The King of France takes much of John's land, leading John to raise taxes for his wars.
- 1215: June. Magna Carta is sealed at Runnymede. Within months the Pope declares it illegal.
- 1216: October. John dies and his son Henry becomes King. Magna Carta is reissued.

Further Background Information

How did Magna Carta come about?

King John became King of England, Duke of Normandy (in France), Duke of Aquitaine (in France), Count of Anjou (in France), and Lord of Ireland in 1199 on the death of his elder brother, King Richard the Lionheart. John inherited England and most of western France, where he was more powerful than the King of France.

In 1204, the King of France took Normandy and Anjou from John, leaving him with only England and Aquitaine, or Gascony in southwest France. John wanted to regain his lost territories in France, which his family had ruled for hundreds of years. He repeatedly failed to achieve this aim, despite attempts to recapture these lost lands.

John spent years trying to recapture his lost lands and this cost enormous amounts of money, so he constantly raised taxes and seized lands that did not belong to him.

This brought John into conflict with the Barons, especially as he took their children and other relatives as hostages, even starving to death the wife and son of a Baron.

Ultimately John relied on the Barons' money and armies and so he was forced to agree a contract with them – Magna Carta.

Causes of conflict with the barons

John's attempts to recapture his family's lost territory required large sums of money. He raised taxes in England much higher than they had been before, causing officials to become more and more oppressive in the way they collected these taxes.

This made John increasingly unpopular with the English barons, the leading men of the kingdom who owned vast amounts of land and were much richer than anyone else except the king who relied on them to assist him in governing the kingdom.

The barons of England also disliked John because, in order to ensure their obedience, he took their children and other relatives as hostages. He also took the wives of his barons as mistresses, and on one occasion he starved to death the wife and son of a baron, William de Braose, in the dungeons of Windsor Castle.

What happened next?

A few months after he had issued the charter, John persuaded the Pope to declare Magna Carta illegal because it interfered with the rights of the king. The barons would not accept this and a civil war broke out, in which most of the barons fought for Magna Carta against John. They withdrew their allegiance to John and invited Louis, son of the King of France, to be King of England instead. Several of the leading rebel barons had connections in Scotland and they encouraged King Alexander II of Scotland to take control of northern England.

In October 1216 King John died, with most of England under the control of Louis and the rebels, including the king of Scotland. John's few remaining supporters and the Pope's representative, Guala, decided to make his nine-year-old son, Henry, king. King Henry III was knighted and then crowned on 28 October 1216.

Following this John's leading advisers sent out letters to all the rebels in the name of the new king confirming Magna Carta and calling for their loyalty. Many of the barons left Louis of France and gave their loyalty to the young King Henry.

For the remainder of Henry III's childhood, Magna Carta was repeatedly confirmed and reissued and became well known across England, not just among the barons, but also in the counties.

Magna Carta and the Origins of Parliament Timeline

1215 15 June	Magna Carta issued at Runnymede.
1216 October/November	King John dies. His son, aged 9 is chosen as his successor and is crowned King Henry III. England is ruled by a group of ministers while the king is a child.
1234	King Henry III, now in his late twenties, takes charge of the government himself, removing the main ministers, the Justiciar (like a chief minister) and the chancellor (in charge of the government's administration).
1254	The first time each county in England was represented at parliament.
1258 April	While the king is holding a parliament at Westminster, he is confronted by barons unhappy with the way he has been governing and who demand that he reforms.
1258 June	Provisions of Oxford decided at a meeting of the king and barons at Oxford. The king is forced to accept the control of a Council of Fifteen. The offices of Justiciar and Chancellor were to be revived, and parliament was to meet three times a year. The Justiciar was to travel the country and hear people's complaints of injustice. The king and all the barons swear an oath to uphold the Provisions of Oxford.
1259 October	Council of Fifteen carry out further reform, this time of local government, and introduce laws popular among the less important people, including knights, people who lived in towns, and peasants.
1261	King Henry III regains power and the Provisions of Oxford are dropped. Simon de Montfort, earl of Leicester, who is one of the Council of Fifteen, refuses to accept this and still supports the Provisions of Oxford.
1262	Simon de Montfort, earl of Leicester, leaves England for France.
1263 April	Simon de Montfort returns to England and civil war begins between De Montfort and his supporters on one side, and the king and his supporters on the other.
1264 14 May	Battle of Lewes – Simon de Montfort's army defeats the king's and Simon captures King Henry III, his son Edward, and the king's brother, Richard, earl of Cornwall.
1264-1265	Simon de Montfort rules England by controlling the king.
1265 January to March	Called by Simon de Montfort, representatives of the counties and of the towns of England come to parliament for the first time.
1265 4 August	Battle of Evesham – Simon de Montfort defeated by an army led by Edward, the king's son who had escaped from prison in May. Simon de Montfort is killed and his body mutilated. His head is sent home to the wife of one of the royalist leaders.