

How significant has Magna Carta been over time?

Target Year group: 9

Learning Objective: To understand how a major legal document has varied in its significance over time and to explain its role in the development of the “precious liberties enjoyed by the citizens of the United Kingdom”.

Learning outcomes:

Pupils will have analysed key clauses of Magna Carta and evaluated its significance to English people in 1215

Pupils will have debated its relative significance from 1215 to the present by means of living graphs.

Pupils will have debated how criteria for assigning historical significance might be applied to the history of Magna Carta.

Timings given for particular activities are approximations. Activities can be curtailed or extended depending on the nature of particular classes and the content could last for more than one lesson.

Starter 5-10 minutes

Display the image of the 1775 seal of Massachusetts from slide one of the PowerPoint which depicts an American colonist wielding a sword in one hand and a copy of Magna Carta in the other. Without revealing any information about the image, give out a copy for pupils to annotate in pairs. Within a set time limit ask them to identify what they see, write down their inferences or guesses about the image and any further questions they would like answered about it. Take comments from pairs as part of a whole class discussion before revealing the following details about it;

- The colonist represents the inhabitants of the American colony of Massachusetts protesting against the policies of the British king George the third and his Parliament. The Latin inscription surrounding the image which reads “Ense petit placidum sub libertate quietem” roughly translates as “By the sword we seek peace, but peace only under liberty.”
- The sword represents the willingness of the colonists to resist British government policy by force if necessary while Magna Carta represents ancient English laws dating from 1215 which they can use to argue against an unjust and unfair government.
- The Latin words round the edge of the seal “Sigillum coloniae Massachusettensis” translate as “Seal of the Colony of Massachusetts”. Explain that to understand why the American colonists appealed to laws dating back to the Middle Ages they need to understand what Magna Carta was.

Activity One - How significant did Magna Carta seem in 1215? 10-15 minutes

Display the image of King John signing Magna Carta in 1215 at Runnymede from the third slide on the PowerPoint.

(Point out that in fact John set his seal on the document rather than signing it and that this image was drawn by a Victorian artist using his imagination centuries later). Explain that John was a mediaeval English king who was forced by his rebellious barons to agree to a list of laws called Magna Carta or the Great Charter.

Insert the diagram of the feudal system from the link below into the PowerPoint between slide four and five (This cannot be included in the PowerPoint published for use with this lesson for copyright reasons).

<https://drstoney.wikispaces.com/file/view/Feudal.png/372341100/800x442/Feudal.png>

Explain or remind pupils of how the feudal system operated in the Middle Ages and ensure that they are familiar with the titles of various ranks in society such as baron.

Explain that the complete Magna Carta included many laws ranging from those concerned with forests to where fish traps could be placed in rivers. Display the sample laws from the charter (translated from Latin) from the fifth, sixth and seventh slides of the PowerPoint.

Lead a discussion about what the laws suggest about the way that John had governed England so far and the effect that these laws were intended to have on a king.

Explain that the aim of this activity is to gauge how important Magna Carta seemed to people in John's reign. Give out the three statements below for different individuals to stand up and read in role as a baron, churchman, freeman and villein (peasant).

The Baron – We are pleased that King John has agreed to Magna Carta but can we really trust him to rule by it? He has broken his word to us in the past. If Magna Carta works though, we barons will always be able to control the way the king runs the country.

The Churchman- We are pleased that the King has agreed that the English church should be free. We hope that our holy father the Pope in Rome will support Magna Carta because of the rights and freedoms it gives the church. After all the Pope is now the King`s overlord and main supporter.

Freemen including merchants –We are pleased with the freedoms the Magna Carta has given us but will they ever become law? Can we trust the King to rule by Magna Carta? Also can we trust that a document written by barons for barons will really benefit us?

Villeins (peasants)-This doesn't make any difference to us at all. We are not freemen or barons or churchmen!

Take comments about how important Magna Carta might have seemed to these three individuals in 1215 on a scale of 1 to 5 (One being completely unimportant, five being very important)

Then give out the two following statements to two further individuals in role as King John and Pope Innocent III.

King John – I don't believe in Magna Carta. Kings should only be answerable to God. I only set my seal on it because the barons forced me to. I never intend to rule by it. As soon as I can I will appeal to the Pope (the head of the church) and announce that it is against the will of God for the power of kings to be limited by law or any of the people they rule.

The Pope – As King John's overlord and main supporter, I am appalled by Magna Carta. It is against God's will that the power of kings should be limited like this. I will tell the King that he does not have to rule according to Magna Carta.

Ask for comments about how important a baron, churchman, freeman and villein might consider the Magna Carta once they realised what the King and the Pope thought of it.

Activity 2: How significant did Magna Carta seem between 1215 and 1603? 10 minutes

Display a graph with the horizontal axis marked with the following years in chronological order 1215, 1217, 1225, 1258, 1297, 1300, 1300, 1311, 1354, 1387, 1423, 1500, 1509-1547, 1590s. On the vertical axis mark the numbers 1 to 5 labelled one for completely unimportant, three for quite important and five for very important.

Mark a cross over the date 1215 on the graph for what the class agrees might have seemed the overall importance of Magna Carta to people in that year.

Explain that the aim of the activity is to plot the relative importance of Magna Carta after it was sealed by King John in 1215.

Display the slides 8 to 16 from the PowerPoint which give detail about Magna Carta in a particular year.

Display each slide in turn to give pairs an opportunity to discuss the relative importance of Magna Carta in that year from 1 to 5. Then take a vote and plot the agreed number on the graph.

Activity three -How significant did Magna Carta seem between 1603 and 2015? 15-20 minutes

Organise the class into small groups. Copy statements from card sort A below onto a set of cards and give them to half of the groups with a large piece of paper.

1628- King Charles the First tried to run the country more and more by himself, increasing taxes and fines, and throwing people who disagreed with him in prison. His opponents like Sir Edward Coke accused the King of breaking the law and ignoring Magna Carta. They claimed ordinary people were guaranteed certain ancient rights by Magna Carta. If a king tried to take these rights away then Magna Carta showed that his people could resist him (just like people resisted King John). Suddenly Magna Carta was popular again. . In 1642 Charles the First faced a rebellion and after two bitter civil wars was executed in 1649.

1679- The Habeas Corpus Act (a law) strengthened the right of people not be kept in prison unfairly. The new law was based on a law in Magna Carta.

1688-1689- Rebel lords invited the Dutch prince William of Orange to invade Britain and overthrow King James II. Parliament demanded that he accept a “Bill of Rights” (a set of laws) inspired by Magna Carta if they made him king. William agreed. Some people compared these events (sometimes called the “Glorious Revolution”) to the way King John’s barons tried to control him.

1763- Parliament tried to control critics by arresting and imprisoning journalists, writers and others. One writer, Arthur Beardmore arranged to be arrested while teaching about Magna Carta to his son.

1763-1769 The politician John Wilkes criticised Parliament and was arrested. He called Magna Carta a “glorious inheritance” and claimed to be defending it. His supporters wore a blue ribbon in their hats stamped with an image of Magna Carta.

1776 - Americans rebelled against the British declaring a new country called the United States of America, independent of Great Britain. The Declaration of Independence was partly inspired by Magna Carta. The Americans used it to claim that ordinary people had certain rights under the law. If a king (in this case King George the Third) tried to take away these rights, then people could resist him, just as this happened to King John.

1787- The American constitution (basic laws of the United States) was directly inspired by Magna Carta.

1791- A Bill of Rights was added to the American Constitution. The fifth amendment deliberately borrowed wording from Magna Carta *“Nor shall any persons be deprived of life, liberty or property without due process of law”*

1870 -Victorians looked back on Magna Carta as a summary of the ancient laws and rights of England. One writer William Stubbs claimed “The Great Charter (Magna Carta) is then the act of the united nation, the church, the barons and the commons, for the first time thoroughly at one.” Despite this some parts of Magna were repealed (stopped being law) in *the nineteenth century.*

1924 The British Parliament unveiled a large wall painting in one of its corridors showing King John at Runnymede in 1215.

1929 - A rich American bought the meadow at Runnymede and gave it to the National Trust. A monument was built there afterwards commemorating Magna Carta.

1939- a copy of Magna Carta was loaned to the United States. Fourteen million Americans saw it and it was kept in Fort Knox during the Second World War before being returned to Britain in 1945.

Copy the statements from card sort B below onto a set of cards and give them to the remaining groups with a large piece of paper.

1941- American President Franklin Delano Roosevelt claimed "The democratic aspiration is no mere recent phase in human history . . . It was written in Magna Carta."

1948 – The Second World War (1939-1945) had seen terrible things happen to ordinary people. Some governments had thrown people in to prison unfairly, murdered people in concentration camps, used them as slave labour and treated prisoners of war very badly. Afterwards most countries joined a new organisation called the United Nations. In 1948 the United Nations agreed a Universal Declaration of Human Rights, setting out the rights it thought that ordinary people should have under the laws of any country, throughout the world. Eleanor Roosevelt, the wife of a former American president who helped to write the declaration said "*it may well become the international Magna Carta of all men everywhere*".

1957- An association of American lawyers (the American Bar Association) built a monument to Magna Carta at Runnymede.

1969- In the 1960`s the British Parliament repealed more of Magna Carta`s laws.

1971-The American Bar Association unveiled a commemorative plaque at Runnymede.

1985-The American Bar Association unveiled a commemorative plaque at Runnymede

1994- An Indian Prime Minister planted a commemorative oak tree at Runnymede. The plaque next to it reads "*As a tribute to the historic Magna Carta, a source of inspiration throughout the world, and as an affirmation of the values of Freedom, Democracy and the Rule of Law which the People of India cherish and have enshrined in their Constitution. March 16, 1994*"

2007 American millionaire David Rubinstein purchased a copy of Magna Carta and lent it to the US National Archives in Washington. The American Congress paid for a new gallery to display it.

2012 When interviewed on American television British Prime Minister David Cameron did not know that Magna Carta meant Great Charter.

2013 American rap musician Jay Z issued an album called Magna Carta Holy Grail. He later visited Salisbury to view a copy of Magna Carta kept there.

2014 In a speech British Prime Minister David Cameron claimed that Magna Carta is “a great document in our history,” “It is what my favourite book, ‘Our Island Story’, describes as the ‘foundation of all our laws and liberties’. In sealing it, King John had to accept his subjects were citizens – for the first time giving them rights, protections and security.” Mr Cameron also said he wanted to use the 800th anniversary of Magna Carta in 2015 as an opportunity for every child to learn about it and “British values”

2014 Only three laws from Magna Carta remain in force.

2015 A British based committee will lead major commemorations of the 800th anniversary of the sealing of Magna Carta in 1215. One of the campaign slogans is “Celebrating 800 years of democracy”. Events will include the copy of Magna Carta from Lincoln Cathedral touring the USA.

Ask each group to draw a graph on their large piece of paper in the same way that was completed for the years 1215 to 1603. Groups using statements in card sort A should mark on the following dates in chronological order along the horizontal axis of the graph; 1628, 1679, 1688 to 1689, 1763, 1763 to 1769, 1776, 1787, 1791, 1870, 1924, 1929, 1939.

Instruct groups using statements in card sort B to mark the following years in chronological order along the horizontal axis of their graphs: 1941, 1948, 1957, 1969, 1971, 1985, 1994, 2007, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015. The vertical axis of both graphs should be marked with the numbers 1 to 5 labelled one for completely insignificant, three for quite significant and five for very significant.

Within a set time ask groups to carefully read each card in turn and decide where to place it on their graph. (Initially the teacher could take the first card being discussed in both types of group, read it out and lead a discussion about where it might be placed on paper graphs as a way of modelling the completion of the task). Once they have placed all their cards on their graph they can remove their cards and place a cross on the graph in place of the card. Finally they can join crosses together to show their view of the significance of Magna Carta in the period they are considering. Once the activity is complete ask each group in turn to hold up their paper and explain and justify the particular pattern of significance on their graph. Individuals from other groups can challenge the pattern of another group and opinions should be justified by reference to evidence on the cards. Lastly Pupils can contribute to discussion about extending the original whole class graph from 1603 to 2014, if necessary deciding on the final pattern by a vote about on the position of particular cards on the class graph.

Plenary- Why has Magna Carta seemed significant other time? 5-10 minutes

Ask pairs to discuss what reasons they can suggest for why my Magna Carta has appeared significant at particular times. Invite comments from particular pairs and list the reasons for display. Display the criteria for historical significance on the last slide of the Power Point and ensure that pupils understand each one.

Within a set time limit and using information from the PowerPoint and card sorts about Magna Carta's significance through time ask pairs to find examples of dates and events that might exemplify particular characteristics of historical significance listed. Take suggestions from Pairs to lead discussion about which dates and events exemplify particular criteria.