

Background to Magna Carta

The story of Magna Carta is a fascinating one, from the original documents, to the churches and cathedrals, and of course to the development of democratic ideals. Freedom, liberty and democracy all stem from Magna Carta. This toolkit on Magna Carta aims to help local communities become more involved in the discovering its history, and in developing their own ideas for activities and community enhancement.

When John set off from Odiham and Windsor in June 1215, many hoped that granting the Magna Carta at Runnymede would lead to lasting peace in the kingdom. But the king had no intention of honouring it, and asked the Pope in Rome to annul the charter. This he did readily, and it set the country alight.

The barons, especially those in the north of England were now on the march. They asked the French king, Philip Augustus to send an invading force. It was later known as the First Barons' War. The rebels held many castles, and French came in strength with the king's son, Prince Louis commanding sophisticated troops.

Over the coming months, John made it his mission to pursue and take back these strategic strongholds. The legacy of the charter confirmed by King John and the barons at Runnymede 800 years ago is compelling. The original agreement may not have protected rights and freedoms in the way which modern myths may suggest, but it undoubtedly set the country on a road towards non-autocratic government.

John may not have known this at the time, but his determination to take back control of his kingdom took him on a lengthy tour of the country.

Baronial Wars continue

In a sense, the war which began over Magna Carta turned into a dynastic war for the throne of England. The rebel barons, faced with a powerful king, had turned a civil war into an invasion. The Norman invasion had occurred only 150 years before, and the relationship between England and France was not simply adversarial as it was to become. At Runnymede a security council had been formed of 25 barons, to ensure the promises were maintained.

King John's death

In October 1216, King John succumbed to a fever and died at Newark. His tomb can be viewed at Worcester Cathedral. His premature demise meant his young son, Henry III would be crowned, and many rebel barons began to return to their loyalty. For a time, there was regency, with William Marshall as head of the nation. The Magna Carta was suddenly resurrected, and re-issued by the new king, with small amendments. Both Henry and his son, Edward I would re-issue Magna Carta several times, and copies were sent to churches and cathedrals around the country. The 'magic and mystery' of Magna Carta was to live on.

Both Henry and his son, Edward I would re-issue Magna Carta several times, and copies were sent to churches and cathedrals around the country. The 'magic and mystery' of Magna Carta was to live on. An ostensibly failed peace treaty had survived

to become the cornerstone of liberty in the English speaking world. The rebels used this failure against the crown, but it then took on a new mantle when it was used by the crown against the rebels. Magna Carta had become a serious and valuable statement of the law of the realm in England, to be used widely and kept up to date.

End of the invasion

The culmination of the French invasion came with the Battle of Lincoln Fair, in May 1217. While the town was pro-rebel, the castle was with the king. In August, a large relief force coming by sea was soundly defeated off Sandwich, in Kent, resulting in a peace treaty and the withdrawal of Prince Louis, the following month.

Second Barons' War

There was another civil war from 1264 to 1267 between the forces of barons led by Simon de Montfort, a noble of French birth. He was pitted against royalist forces led by Prince Edward in the name of Henry III. The reign of Henry III is remembered for the strife, which was provoked by the king's demands for more money. It was also marked by a more general discontent with Henry's approach to government.

Henry may have been a foolish and overly pious monarch, but he was also a very cultured man, fond of good living, he revived the court and built Westminster Abbey. Both sides were now raising armies. Simon de Montfort became leader of those who wanted to reassert the Magna Carta. They wanted to force the king to surrender more power to a baronial council.