



What is the Magna Carta?

KS2

KS3

Ages 9-14 ⌚ 3 min read

In June 1215, King John of England was in trouble. He had lost most of England's territory in France, imposed enormous taxes to fund failed wars, and alienated virtually every powerful baron in the country. Facing a full-scale rebellion, he was forced to meet the barons at Runnymede, beside the Thames, and put his seal to a document they had drawn up. This was Magna Carta — "Great Charter" in Latin.

What did it say?

The original document had 63 clauses, mostly dealing with very specific medieval grievances — fish weirs in the Thames, debts owed to Jewish moneylenders, the rights of widows. Most of it is entirely irrelevant today. But a few clauses contained principles that proved extraordinarily powerful:

Most famously, clause 39: "No free man shall be seized, imprisoned, dispossessed... except by the lawful judgement of his equals or by the law of the land." And clause 40: "To no one will we sell, to no one deny or delay right or justice."

Before Magna Carta, the king's power in England was essentially unlimited by law — he could imprison, tax, or dispossess anyone he chose, with no legal challenge possible. Magna Carta established, for the first time in English law, that even the king was subject to rules. It was the first crack in the idea that rulers are above the law. That crack widened over centuries into the full framework of constitutional law, habeas corpus, trial by jury, and ultimately democracy. The barons weren't trying to create modern rights — they were protecting their own privileges — but the principle they established proved far more powerful than they intended.

Was it immediately effective?

Not really. King John ignored it almost immediately and died in a civil war the following year. But subsequent kings re-issued it, often as a political concession. Over centuries, lawyers and parliamentarians used it as a foundation for arguments about the rule of law. By the 17th century, during the English Civil War and Parliament's conflicts with Charles I, Magna Carta was invoked constantly as evidence that English liberties were ancient and could not be overridden by royal power.

Its global influence

When the American colonies declared independence, their grievances against the king were partly framed in terms of violations of Magna Carta principles. The US Bill of Rights and Constitution drew directly on English common law traditions that Magna Carta had shaped. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights references similar ideas. A document written in a meadow in 1215 by self-interested medieval barons can legitimately claim to be one of the foundations of the modern world's legal order.