

King John and the Magna Carta

From the very beginning of his reign in 1199 the barons had problems with King John. There were lots of things they were unhappy about, for example:

- They felt he interfered too much with how the country was run. The previous King Richard had let the barons do pretty much what they wanted, but King John often ignored them
- John had an argument with the Pope. This meant church services in England were stopped for five years. People were very scared that they might go to hell
- King John had lost wars with France, which meant that French lands owned by England were lost
- John also raised very high taxes to pay for his expensive wars in France
- There was a rumour that John had his nephew Arthur murdered to stop him from ever becoming king. His body was found floating in a river in France

By 1215, the barons were fed up with John. They had two options:

- 1) Overthrow King John and replace him with someone else. But they couldn't find anyone suitable
- 2) Make him do what they wanted

The barons wanted a charter (a written agreement), signed by John, which would guarantee certain rights and freedoms. But they knew they would have to get him into a position where he had no choice but to sign.

The barons chose Robert Fitz Walter as their leader. Then they put together an army and sent it to occupy London. King John couldn't raise an army without the support of the barons, so he had to negotiate with them.

On 19th of June 1215m after holding out for four days, King John decided to meet the barons at Runnymede, near Windsor. He signed their charter (Magna Carta). In return, the barons agreed to be loyal.

King John didn't like the Magna Carta one little bit! He got the Pope to agree that nothing and no-one could limit the power of a monarch appointed by God. At the time everyone believed that monarchs were appointed by God.

Then suddenly, in 1216, King John died. His successor was his son, 9-year old Henry. Because Henry was so young, William Marshal, the Earl of Pembroke and Henry's guardian, ruled for him. Marshal acted quickly. Together with the most powerful barons, he re-issued Magna Carta, and it was signed by themselves and Henry.

Relationships between barons and their new king seemed settled.

Quick on the draw questions

- 1) When did King John begin his reign of England?
- 2) What was the name of the previous king of England?
- 3) Identify at least 3 reasons why the barons were unhappy with how John ruled England?
- 4) When did the barons finally get fed up with John, and what were their two options?
- 5) Why were the people unhappy about John's argument with the Pope?
- 6) How did the barons force John into negotiating with them?
- 7) How did John try to use the Pope to stop Magna Carta?
- 8) When did King John die?
- 9) Who was his successor? What was his name?
- 10) Who helped his successor rule because he was still a child?