

THE
MAGNA CARTA
800th Anniversary

Lord Denning (1899 -1999) a distinguished British Judge, second only to the Lord Chief Justice as Master of the Rolls, referred to the document as “the greatest constitutional document of all time - the foundation of the freedom of the individual against the arbitrary authority of the despot”. In the lead up to the 800th anniversary celebrations of the Magna Carta, we explore the history of the infamous document and its influence today. Magna Carta, in Latin means ‘Great Charter’; it was the first document forced onto a King of England by a group of his subjects, in an attempt to limit his powers by law and protect their rights - and it was the first time in history that written law challenged the absolute power of a Monarch.

At the time of its creation it:

- ◆ Limited royal abuse
- ◆ Protected property rights
- ◆ Kept the church free from royal interference
- ◆ Ensured that no taxes, other than the regular feudal dues, were to be levied, except by the consent of the Great Council or Parliament
- ◆ Obtained the right to a fair hearing by peers when accused of wrongdoing



Clause 1

guaranteeing the liberties of the English Church

Clause 13

confirmation of the privileges of the City of London and other towns

Clause 39

a right to due process

“ *No free man shall be arrested, or imprisoned, or deprived of his property, or outlawed, or exiled, or in any way destroyed, nor shall we go against him or send against him, unless by legal judgement of his peers, or by the law of the land.* ”

Magna Carta and Bury St Edmunds

It is believed that the Barons of England met in the Abbey Church of Bury St Edmunds in 1214 and swore to force King John to accept the Charter of Liberties, a document which directly influenced the creation of the Magna Carta in Runnymede the following year.

The motto of Bury St Edmunds - ‘**Sacrarium Regis, Cunanbula Legis**’ (*Shrine of the King, cradle of the Law*) - commemorates the town’s treasured connection and pivotal role in the story of the Magna Carta. The motto is believed to date from around the same time as the erection of two memorial plaques on the ruined piers of the crossing of the Abbey Church in Bury St Edmunds in 1847.

There are many events taking place throughout the towns which have contributed to the story of the Magna Carta. For Bury St Edmunds, the town is thrilled to be playing host to an original copy of the charter which is on display at St Edmundsbury Cathedral throughout the month of May. Security for the document is high and it is kept in a humidity and temperature-controlled case with low light levels.

Local school pupils have already started to gain inspiration from an education programme taking place during April and May in order to prepare them for more detailed study during the 2015 celebrations. October will see the borough’s colourful Light and Sound event which will celebrate the Magna Carta by piecing together strands of its history in terms of its past and present connection with Bury St Edmunds.

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A brief history of the Magna Carta's journey to creation

Whilst described as one of the most influential legal documents in British history, the road to its final seal was far from smooth;

- 5.8.1100 ♦ The coronation of Henry I signifies the issue of the Charter of Liberties.
- 27.5.1199 ♦ Following the death of his brother Richard I, John is crowned King of England.
- 24.3.1208 ♦ Pope Innocent III places a papal interdict on England, which bans priests from administering most of the sacraments and forbids Christian burial.
- 1.6.1213 ♦ Stephen Langton becomes Archbishop of Canterbury and absolves John of his excommunication from the Church.
- 21.4.1214 ♦ Pope Innocent III accepts overlordship of England, which displaces King John from the pinnacle of the feudal hierarchy but in return secures much needed papal support for the king.
- 17.5.1215 ♦ Due to the capture of the Tower of London by the Barons, King John finally agrees to meet at Runnymede in June.
- 10 - 24.6.1215 ♦ Negotiations between King John and the Barons lead to the granting of the Magna Carta and peace is restored between the two parties.
- 24.8.1215 ♦ Pope Innocent III issues a papal bull declaring Magna Carta null and void.
- 6.11.1217 ♦ A second, revised Magna Carta is issued through King Henry's regents, William Marshal and Quala.
- 11.2.1225 ♦ Henry III issues a substantially revised version of Magna Carta under his great seal.
- 12.10.1297 ♦ Edward I confirms Henry III's 1225 version of Magna Carta.
- 27.5.1679 ♦ The Habeas Corpus Act is passed by Parliament which protects the people from being detained without legal authority.
- 16.12.1689 ♦ The British Bill of Rights is passed by Parliament which sets out the civil and political rights of the people.
- 15.12.1791 ♦ The American Bill of Rights is added to the U.S. Constitution as the first ten amendments.
- 10.12.1948 ♦ The United Nations adopts the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- 2.10.2000 ♦ The European Convention on Human Rights (1998) becomes enforceable in UK courts.

Such is the local enthusiasm for the document that a number of local businesses have decided to get involved. Greene & Greene are a long established firm of solicitors based in the same town. Recognising the historical significance of an original copy being kept in their home town, the firm held their own private viewing on 1st May at St Edmundsbury Cathedral.