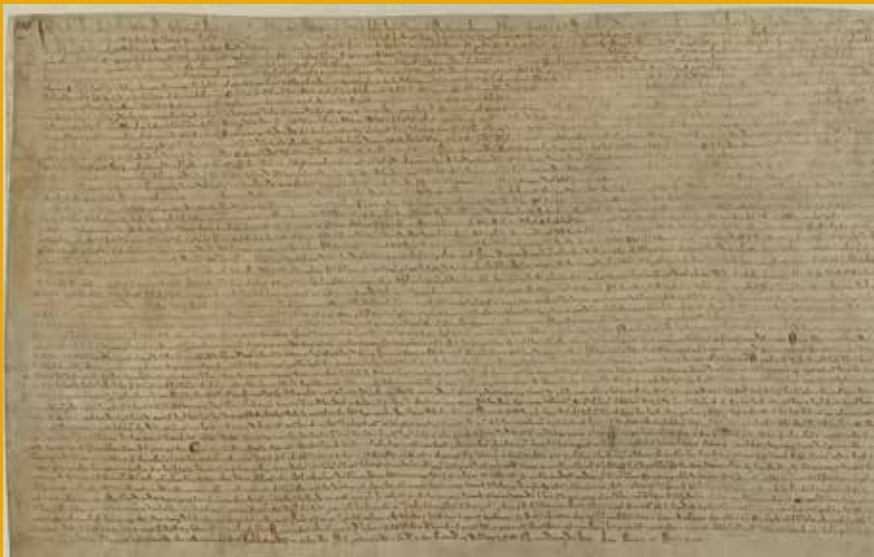# Magna

Magna Carta
History and Legacy

June 2015 marks the 800th anniversary of the sealing of Magna Carta – the 'Great Charter' – by King John at Runnymede near the River Thames in England.

This thirteenth century peace treaty between a defiant English king and his rebellious barons has long been considered one of the most seminal documents in English history.

We invite you to explore this exhibit to learn more about the events that gave rise to Magna Carta and the importance of its most enduring principles which have helped to shape notions of justice, law and democracy for centuries.

Held by British Library

Magna Carta, 1215

© National Portrait Gallery, London

The Seal of King John from Magna Carta
Late eighteenth to early nineteenth century etching by an unknown artist

Did you know?

The name Magna Carta – Latin for 'Great Charter' – was not actually used until 1217, when a second document called the Charter of the Forest was issued to deal specifically with rights relating to the royal forest. The name Magna Carta came into use at this time as a way of distinguishing the more extensive charter.

Carta

The Feudal Origins of
Magna Carta

The death of King Harold II during the Battle of Hastings as depicted in the Bayeux Tapestry

The social and political systems that existed at the time of Magna Carta had their roots in the Norman invasion and conquest of Anglo-Saxon England in 1066 by Duke William II of Normandy, known as William the Conqueror. Following his defeat of King Harold II at the Battle of Hastings on October 14, 1066, William made his way to London where he was crowned King of England at Westminster Abbey on Christmas Day.

The new King William I enhanced his control of the newly conquered land by imposing a Norman variety of feudalism – a social and political system – that featured a distinct hierarchy and set of obligations.

Under feudalism, all land ultimately belonged to the King, but much of it was given to members of the nobility to control in exchange for their loyalty, military service and a variety of customary payments.

The Feudal Hierarchy in the Thirteenth Century

By the thirteenth century, feudalism in England was well established and was comprised of the following social positions:

The King

An absolute ruler given legitimacy by the Pope and Church, the King was at the top of the feudal hierarchy and derived wealth and military power from the tenurial relationships of those below him. While the King could summon 'councils' of high-ranking nobles and clergymen to advise him, he was not bound by custom or law to heed their counsel.

The Noble Barons

Directly below the King in the hierarchy were the barons. Also known as the King's tenants-in-chief, these high-ranking members of the nobility held and controlled land on behalf of the King. The barons owed the King military service in return for land held, which they could avoid by paying a special levy called scutage – one of a number of customary payments the King could collect.

Knights and Other Free Men

Empowered by the King, barons could further divide their lands among sub-tenants, including knights and other free men. These sub-tenants were free to leave their manors, could own and sell goods and had access to the royal courts. While they were not required to make as many customary payments to the King as their baron landlords, knights were expected to provide military service when needed.

Peasants or Villeins

Unfree peasants known as villeins comprised the largest portion of feudal society and were at the bottom of the feudal hierarchy. Each villein was bound to a lord and spent much of their time working the lord's land, largely without pay. Villeins were afforded some degree of protection in exchange for their work and the customary payments they made to their lords, but most could not leave their lords' manors or own goods and none could access the royal courts.

Villeins harvesting wheat