MAGNA CARTA
AT CHRIST CHURCH CATHEDRAL
Magna Carta or ‘The Great Charter’ - one of the most famous documents in the history of the world - was created in June 1215 at a meadow called Runnymede on the river Thames near the royal palace of Windsor. It was a ‘charter’, that is a legal document issued by the king granting liberties to the freemen of his kingdom. Unlike most charters, however, Magna Carta was not granted by King John (king of England, 1199–1216) of his own will. The liberties in Magna Carta were extracted from John by his barons (noblemen), who were rebelling against his unjust rule.

Magna Carta remains important because it enshrined in writing for the first time a fundamental principal; that even kings should be subject to the law of the land. Magna Carta was a check on arbitrary and oppressive rule—in a word, on tyranny.

Why did the English barons rebel against King John?

Magna Carta was intended to check the rule of King John, who was a notoriously bad king. In 1203, he murdered his nephew, Arthur, who had previously been heir to the throne. He lost the ancestral French lands of his dynasty, the Plantagenets, in 1204. He imposed arbitrary taxes and fines on his subjects and his relationship with the church was so bad that the Pope placed England under interdict (a general strike of the church) in 1208. ‘Foul as it is, Hell itself is defouled by the foulness of John’, wrote an English chronicler after John’s death.
The 1215 Magna Carta contains about 3500 words of medieval Latin written out on sheep skin parchment and divided into 63 ‘chapters’ or clauses. In the most famous clauses, the king promised not to levy taxes without consent (from which sprang the idea of parliament and the famous maxim ‘no taxation without representation’). The king also undertook not to imprison, dispossess or outlaw his men except by the lawful judgement of peers — the principles that we now consider the cornerstone of due process of law and trial by jury.

‘to none shall we delay, to none shall we delay or deny justice’
(Clauses 40, Magna Carta 1215)

IRELAND & THE MAKING OF MAGNA CARTA

John becomes Lord of Ireland at the age of nine

John’s father was King Henry II, the first English king to subject Ireland to his rule when he visited Ireland in 1171–2. Henry II controlled vast lands in France as well as England and his conquests in Wales and Ireland. Historians call this collection of lands the ‘Angevin Empire’. No one expected that John, as the fourth son, would one day succeed to the English throne and the Angevin Empire. Instead he was to make his career in Ireland. In 1177, when John was only nine years old, Henry II granted him control over his newly-conquered territory. John became ‘lord of Ireland’.

John’s expeditions to Ireland

John visited Ireland twice. His first expedition, in 1185, was a disaster, during which he reputedly pulled the beards of the Irish lords who came to submit to him.

John came to Ireland on a second expedition in 1210, primarily to punish those who had granted shelter to a former royal favourite, William de Briouze, Lord of Limerick (d. 1211), who had fled here in 1208. De Briouze eventually escaped to France, but his eldest son and wife Matilda were not so lucky. They were captured, imprisoned and starved to death. One chronicler writes that Matilda became so desperate with hunger that she gnawed her own son’s cheeks. Her murder inflamed the anger of the English barons and contributed to the rebellion of 1215.

Saviour of Magna Carta: William Marshal, Lord of Leinster

As soon as John was able to do so, he renounced the promises he had made in Magna Carta, sparking civil war in England. The saviour of Magna Carta was William Marshal (d. 1219), the most important English baron in Ireland, having inherited the lordship of Leinster through his wife, Isabella, daughter of Strongbow (buried here in Christ Church).

After King John’s death in October 1216, leaving a nine-year-old son to succeed him as King Henry III, William Marshal was appointed as Lord Warden of Ireland. He maintained the Angevin Empire in Ireland for 17 years, 12 of them as Lord Warden. He negotiated with the Irish even before they had come to terms with the English. He was the last great Anglo-Norman lord of Ireland, and he died at his castle at Dundalk in 1219. His tomb is in Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin.

EXPLANATION:
At this point in the text, the purpose of the document becomes clear when the king states that he is granting a series of perpetual ‘liberties’ to the free men of his kingdom. The fact that the liberties were originally granted to liber homines (free men) meant that Magna Carta was only of benefit to a very small fraction of the male English population at the time. Only gradually were its provisions extended to include wider sections of the population.

NO TAXATION WITHOUT REPRESENTATION

LATIN: ‘Et ad habendum consilium regni nostri de auxilio assidendo ... summoneri faciemus archiepiscopos, episcopos, abbates, priores, comites et maiores barones, sigillatim per litteras nostras. Et preterea faciemus summonerii in generali, per vicecomites et bailivos nostros, omnes illos qui de nobis tenent in capite ad certum diem, siclicet ad terminum quadranginta ad minos, et ad certum locum.’

TRANSLATION: ‘And to have the common counsel of the kingdom for an aid to be assessed ... we will cause to be summoned archbishops, bishops, abbots, priors, earls and greater barons, individually by our letters. And furthermore we will cause to be summoned in general, through our sheriffs and bailiffs, all those who hold of us in chief at a specified day and place, namely at a term of at least forty days.’
old heir, Marshal became the English Regent. In order to bring conflict to an end, Marshal re-issued Magna Carta in November 1216 in the name of the new boy-king, Henry III.

**CHRIST CHURCH & THE MAGNA CARTA**

**The Black Book of Christ Church contains a copy of Magna Carta 1215**

The Christ Church Magna Carta appears in a manuscript codex (book) known as the Liber Niger (‘Black Book’). It was probably brought to Dublin by an Augustinian canon Henry le Warre or ‘Henry of Bristol’, who became prior of Holy Trinity (Christ Church) in 1301.

The section of the Liber Niger containing Magna Carta served as a lawyer’s handbook. It contained copies of many documents of legal and constitutional significance.

The book became part of the monastic library at the cathedral. The manuscript shows marks in the margin indicating clauses of Magna Carta that interested the monks.

**Archbishop of Dublin witnesses Magna Carta**

The Archbishop of Dublin in the year of Magna Carta was Henry of London (d. 1228), one of King John’s most trusted officials. He was present at the tense negotiations at Runnymede between the king and his barons. His name appears as Magna Carta’s second named witness after Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury.

Henry of London later gained a fearsome reputation. He is said to have burned the title documents of all his Irish tenants, an act for which he became known as ‘Scorchvillein’ — the flayer of serfs.

**MAGNA CARTA’S LEGACY**

Magna Carta spread across the world as England, and later Britain, spread its power across the globe. As a result Magna Carta 800 celebrations are especially fervent in North America, Australia and India.

**Magna Carta in Ireland**

The first country outside England to receive Magna Carta was Ireland, in February 1217. However, not everyone benefited. The legal protections conferred by the charter were only for English settlers and were not extended to the Irish population.

In the early fourteenth century, a scribe working in the Dublin Exchequer (the financial department of English government in Ireland) adapted the original text to suit Irish circumstances.
DID KING JOHN SIGN MAGNA CARTA?

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\text{LATIN: } \text{‘Data per manum nostrum in prato vocatur runnymede inter Windsor et Stanes xv die Juni anno regni nostri vi.’}
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\text{EXPLANATION: } \text{In the Middle Ages, kings did not personally place their signature on charters. Instead, the charters were authenticated with a ‘dating clause’ that specified the place and time the charter was given. A wax seal was then appended to the charter. The Christ Church copy of Magna Carta ends with the dating clause, which refers to Runnymede, where the negotiations between John and his barons took place in June 1215. The copyist has made two mistakes here. First, the spelling of Runnymede in the Christ Church copy is ‘Ronnemed’, whereas in the original Magna Carta it is ‘Runnymed’. Second is the date. Dates were calculated by the ‘regnal year’, which was different from a calendar year.}
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\text{Magna Carta in America}
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During the American War of Independence, the revolutionaries depicted George III as a tyrant who – like King John – had infringed the rule of law. At the time of the American Declaration of Independence, the seal of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts depicted a man wielding a sword in one hand and a copy of Magna Carta in the other. Fundamental principles associated with Magna Carta were later enshrined in the American Bill of Rights (1791). The bronze panel doors at the entrance to the US Supreme Court depict King John placing his seal on Magna Carta.

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\text{Magna Carta Today}
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Magna Carta is most commonly used today as a metaphor, referring to any set of fundamental liberties. When the United Nations issued its ‘Universal Declaration of Human Rights’ in 1948, Eleanor Roosevelt described it as ‘the international Magna Carta’. In 2013 Sir Tim Berners-Lee, the inventor of the World Wide Web, called for an online Magna Carta.

However, it would be a mistake to dismiss Magna Carta as merely symbolic. It still plays an important role in the law of the English-speaking world and was cited in 2008 in a decision made by the U.S. Supreme Court that prisoners at Guantánamo Bay should not be detained indefinitely without trial.
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