

Curriculum subject: Citizenship

Key Stage: 3 and 4

Theme: Legacy

Topic: Introduction to Magna Carta: Does Magna Carta matter today?

Rationale

In this introductory activity, students will find out what Magna Carta is, how it came about and why many believe it remains one of the most significant documents in history.

Through exploration of a series of facts and opinions, pupils will develop a critical understanding of Magna Carta. They will evaluate clauses from the translation of the 1215 Magna Carta, explore life and attitudes in medieval England, and compare and contrast the 13th and the modern world. In a debate students will discuss: does Magna Carta still matter today?

Content

Historical sources:

- [Magna Carta, 1215](#)

Recommended reading (short articles):

[Why Magna Carta still matters today](#) by Justin Fisher

[Magna Carta in the 20th century](#) by Alex Lock

Films:

- [Animation: What is Magna Carta?](#)
- [Animation: 800 years of Magna Carta](#)

Key questions

- What is Magna Carta?
- How did it come about?
- What kinds of rights and freedoms has Magna Carta led to over time?
- Do you think Magna Carta is still important today? Why?

Activities

- 1) Begin with a short class discussion to establish what pupils know and understand about Magna Carta. Show the short animations available from the British Library to introduce some key ideas about Magna Carta and its meaning.
- 2) Give pupils a true/false quiz including a range of statements containing **key facts and opinions** about Magna Carta. Statements could include:
 - Henry VIII approved the 1215 Magna Carta (FALSE – it was King John)
 - The 1215 Magna Carta was signed at Runnymede (FALSE – no-one 'signed' the document. King John's seal was used to show he had approved it at Runnymede)
 - The 1215 Magna Carta lasted 13 weeks before it was annulled by the Pope (TRUE)
 - Relations between the monarch and the barons remained complex in the 13th century and Magna Carta was later reissued four times (TRUE)
 - None of the clauses from the 1215 Magna Carta remain in our laws today (FALSE. Three clauses remain)
 - Some historians believe Magna Carta is a key document that led to the establishment of rights, liberties and democracy in the UK and elsewhere (TRUE. This is the opinion of some people. However, in the 13th century, the majority of people would not have felt this, as Magna Carta only applied to men at the top of society. Some academics argue that it's inaccurate to see Magna Carta as the basis for democracy, and that the document has been mythologised over time.)
 - The significance of Magna Carta can be seen across the world. It influenced those writing the American Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights (TRUE)
 - Magna Carta was referenced by the Suffragettes in their struggle for votes for women, and by Nelson Mandela in the struggle for equality and justice for black people in apartheid South Africa. (TRUE. Arguably this can be used to show the extent to which Magna Carta remains important today as a symbol of our rights and freedoms.)
 - Magna Carta can be understood as an early human rights document that influenced the writing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was intended to become 'a Magna Carta for all humanity'. (TRUE. Eleanor Roosevelt, who played a key role in the creation of the declaration, stated this.)

- A New York business man paid £10.6 million for a rare copy of the 1297 Magna Carta in an auction in Sotheby's (TRUE)
- 3) Ask pupils to try to identify facts and opinions in each of the statements above, and point out they need to spot any errors. Distinguishing between what is fact and opinion is not always straightforward. Ensure pupils understand the important principles and processes that Magna Carta led to and which are still important today. For example:
- No one is above the law (including leaders and monarchs). Often referred to as the 'rule of law', today this means that everyone living in the UK including the Prime Minister and members of government are subject to the law of the land
 - People have the right to justice and a fair trial and cannot be imprisoned without due process
 - There can be no taxation without general consent, which created a need for the people to be represented and matters of taxation to be discussed in a 'parliament' which developed into the Westminster model of parliamentary democracy.
- 4) Ensure pupils have a corrected version of the quiz statements to work from. Ask pupils to work in pairs to sort the statements from the quiz and decide which are fact and which are opinion; then sort from each pile a list of statements that support the view that Magna Carta still matters today and a list showing that Magna Carta does not matter today.
- 5) Give pupils a copy of six or eight clauses from the British Library's [translation of the 1215 Magna Carta](#) including clauses 39 and 40. Ask them to work in their pairs to review the clauses to identify evidence of different areas of life and attitudes in medieval England. Ask them to compare their findings with life and attitudes in the UK today. For example:
- Clauses 10 and 11 are interesting to explore attitudes towards money lending and the different rules concerning money lending for Christians and Jews at the time.
 - Clauses 20, 21, 24, 28, 30, 31, 38, 45 examine **law and order, justice, different ranks in society, goods and trade**. The terminology will need some scaffolding.
 - Clause 33 is an interesting insight into **medieval food** and how fish were caught. It may also be interesting to consider who might have been affected by the clause asking for the removal of fish weirs.

- Clause 35 gives valuable insight into goods, but also into **buying and selling**.
 - Clauses 39, 40 and 41 examine some of the underpinning principles **of human rights**.
 - Clauses 8 and 54 provide an interesting insight into the status of **women**.
 - Clauses 56-60 provide some information about **relations between England, Scotland and Wales** at the time.
- 6) Organise pairs of pupils into groups – red or blue. Red groups use what they have learned from each activity to prepare arguments for why Magna Carta still matters today and blue groups argue for why it no longer matters.
- 7) Hold a 'boxing match'-style debate to discuss: does Magna Carta matter today? Organise the class into two larger teams with a red corner and a blue corner. Each team nominates one pupil to 'box'. The two 'boxers' have a short quick fire exchange drawing on some of the arguments and statements the team has prepared until the teacher rings the bell for the end of the round and awards points. At this point the pupil returns to their corner for advice from their team about how to make their case more clearly and persuasively.

Extension activities

Ask pupils to evaluate the following pieces of information and discuss what they tell us about the way Magna Carta is viewed today:

- A rare copy of a 1297 Magna Carta, one of only 17 in existence, was sold for \$21.3m (£10.6m) in an auction at Sotheby's in New York by US businessman David Rubenstein.
- Prime Minister David Cameron was unable to give a literal translation of the words 'Magna Carta' when interviewed on *The Late Show* by host David Letterman in 2012.
- Magna Carta was mocked in an episode of *The Simpsons* where Marge is telling the children historical stories and Homer, who is playing the part of a gluttonous Henry VIII, wipes his greasy lips on the historic document.
- Magna Carta was relied on by one of the Occupy London group of protestors who camped in the courtyard of St Paul's Cathedral in the winter of 2011/12. Paul Randle-Jolliffe maintained that his supposed descent from one of King John's barons exempted him from compliance with an eviction order — until the Court of Appeal explained that 'Magna Carta heir' was a concept unknown to the law.
- Around 46,000 people applied for the public ballot that allowed 1,215 people to see the four copies of the 1215 Magna Carta together for the first time on 3 February 2015 at the British Library.
- In 2014, Sir Tim Berners-Lee, the inventor of the World Wide Web, called for a

MAGNA CARTA

www.bl.uk/magna-carta

TEACHERS' NOTES

'Magna Carta for the internet' that would guarantee the independence of the internet and ensure users' privacy.

- In a case about the detention without trial of Lakhdar Boumediene at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba in 2008, the Supreme Court Justices traced the history of habeas corpus back to Magna Carta, and ruled that Guantánamo Bay detainees had an absolute right to petition for that writ despite Congress legislating to the contrary. Following this judgment, Boumediene was tried in a Federal court and acquitted. After seven years in detention, he was released in May 2009.
- In 2008 David Davis, the Conservative Shadow Home Secretary, resigned from the House of Commons in protest at the passing of the Counter-Terrorism Act. The Act contained a controversial provision allowing terror suspects to be detained for up to 42 days without charge, and for Davis this was an unacceptable infringement of civil liberties. In his resignation speech, Davis invoked Magna Carta as a document that guaranteed fundamental freedoms.