

Curriculum subject: History
Key Stage: 3

Theme: Medieval context

Topic: What was the significance of Magna Carta in the 13th century?

Rationale

Magna Carta has been re-interpreted in many different ways over eight centuries. But how significant was it at the time of its creation, and what was its impact in the 13th century?

This activity aims to explore the significance of Magna Carta in the context of the 13th century.

It can be used in conjunction with another of our Magna Carta lesson plans: [Who benefitted from Magna Carta?](#) This activity presupposes some knowledge of medieval England and life at the time, particularly feudalism.

Magna Carta was re-issued four times in the 13th century and eventually became part of the Statute Book, yet the original document was not dubbed Magna Carta or 'the Great Charter' until after 1215. In its original state, Magna Carta only lasted for 13 weeks before it was annulled by the Pope.

Content

Historical sources:

- [The siege of Lincoln Castle and battle of Sandwich \(13th century\)](#)
- [Statute book containing Magna Carta issued by King John and Henry III \(14th century\)](#)
- [Great Seal of King John \(1203\)](#)
- [Magna Carta, 1216](#)
- [Magna Carta, 1225](#)
- [Magna Carta, 1297](#)
- [Papal bull annulling Magna Carta \(1215\)](#)
- [On the Laws and Customs of England \(1272-1307\)](#)

Recommended reading (short articles):

[Magna Carta: people](#)

[Magna Carta in context](#) by Claire Breay and Julian Harrison

MAGNA CARTA

www.bl.uk/magna-carta

TEACHERS' NOTES

[Magna Carta: an introduction](#) by Claire Breay and Julian Harrison

Films:

- [King John and the origins of Magna Carta](#)
- [The impact of Magna Carta in the 13th century](#)

External links:

History Today Article on Magna Carta

<http://www.historytoday.com/ralph-v-turner/meaning-magna-carta-1215>

Key questions

- What were the barons' intentions for Magna Carta?
- How significant was Magna Carta in the 13th century?

Activities

- 1) Explore the concept of significance with pupils. What makes something significant? You could share these [significance criteria](#) from keystagehistory.org, particularly Model C. Do they agree? What criteria might they use to measure significance? Using knowledge of the period, how might they measure significance in the context of the 13th century? Would they need different criteria? Allow the group to define their own significance criteria.
- 2) Examine the story of Magna Carta with pupils. What caused it to be issued? Who was involved? Who was it aimed at and what was its original purpose?
- 3) What can the sources tell us about how significant Magna Carta was in the 13th century? Allow pupils to work in groups to work through the sources and weigh them up against the significance criteria they have developed. For each source considered, pupils should think about what questions the source generates and carry out research before weighing up what the source can tell them about the significance of the charter. An example of this might be that at first sight, the fact that the charter was re-issued several times by other monarchs could seem significant. But when pupils ask why it was re-issued, they may find that the reasons relate less to a commitment to principles and more to an act of necessity in a time when the complex relationship between king and barons needed to be maintained. For teacher information, a sample of sources that might be used for this exercise follows below:

MAGNA CARTA

www.bl.uk/magna-carta

TEACHERS' NOTES

Source	Inference
Copy of Magna Carta with King John's seal.	Issued and sealed by the King. Leads to discussion of mark making and ideas of authenticity.
Other copies of 1215 Magna Carta	Several copies were made and distributed. There are four surviving copies, two of which are in the British Library's collection. It is believed that at least 13 were made in total.
Later copies of Magna Carta	It was later re-issued by other monarchs, although several clauses of the original were removed or changed. This should also be considered with reference to why later monarchs re-issued the charter.
1297 Statute Book	Magna Carta became enshrined in law.
Letter from Pope annulling Magna Carta	The Pope called the original 1215 charter null and void and declared that it should not be followed. The Pope was the highest authority at the time.
On the Laws and Customs of England	It was referred to and used to prove a case in law as a legal and binding document. This happened no less than 59 times in the 13 th century.
Siege of Lincoln	The annulment of the 1215 charter caused a rebellion by barons.
Clause 39 of 1215 Magna Carta	Arguably this set the course for the development of human rights and liberties in countries around the world. You may wish to add contemporary historians' views on Clause 39 (some will agree and others will disagree.) Ordinary people at the time however, would probably not have felt this freedom.

- 4) Feedback. Based upon the sources available, how significant was Magna Carta in the 13th century? Allow pupils to use their knowledge of the story of Magna Carta as well as what they have learned from the sources to build up a case. Possible arguments could be as above, but also include elements from their knowledge, for example:
- It was only called the 'Great Charter' after 1215.
 - It only lasted 13 weeks initially before another rebellion.
 - It was essentially a hurried peace treaty to solve a conflict.
 - It was not originally intended to lay the foundations of rights and liberties.

- It only applied to free men, of whom there were very few at the time, being that the majority of the population were tied peasants according to the feudal rules.
 - It did initiate a fragile peace and, in a feudal society, where barons ruled and peasants might be expected to take up arms, it could well have been a relief for many.
- Feedback could be in the form of a class debate or a written piece.

Extension activities

- Ask the group to delve deeper into the concept of significance and look at how that might have been different for different groups in society or in the charter. You could take the people/groups that are implied, involved or referred to in Magna Carta, for example the King, Archbishop, Jews, women, free men etc. and explore more directly how it might have affected them according to feudal custom and the clauses of the charter. Much of the charter deals with the rights of the barons, but it also makes reference to free men. Although villeins (unfree peasants) are not directly named in Magna Carta, it does make several references to feudal customs. According to feudal rights and obligations, would unfree peasants have felt any impact?
- You might also delve deeper into the final feedback arguments made as to how much impact Magna Carta had in the 13th century and relate that back to today.