

Curriculum subject: History  
Key Stage: 3

Theme: Legacy

Topic: Did Magna Carta apply to women?

### **Rationale**

The 17<sup>th</sup> century saw a rediscovery of Magna Carta and its emergence as a symbol of liberty. Whenever freedoms and liberties are later challenged, Magna Carta has been used to help to explain and understand the voice of those campaigning for greater freedoms. The women's suffrage movement was one such campaign. This activity is designed to form a small part of a much wider understanding of how the legacy of Magna Carta was able to hold influence in later periods of history. This activity will explore how Magna Carta was used by the Women's Suffrage Movement. Students will need some prior knowledge of both the medieval period and the female suffrage movement.

### **Content**

#### **Historical sources:**

- [Article on Magna Carta and women from journal \*The Englishwoman\* \(1915\)](#)
- [Cartoon captioned 'Magna Carta' in publication \*Votes for Women\* \(1911\)](#)
- [Political caricature of Queen Caroline 'Britain's Best Hope, England's Sheet Anchor' \(1820\)](#)
- [Magna Carta, 1215](#)

#### **Recommended reading (short articles):**

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

### **Key questions**

- What was the status of women in the medieval period and what mention of women does Magna Carta make?
- What was the women's suffrage movement and what did it campaign for?
- How did the suffrage movement make use of Magna Carta?
- Why did the suffrage movement make use of Magna Carta?

## Activities

- 1) Ask pupils to name as many famous women from history lessons as they can think of and build up a group map. Discuss the list with the class and encourage any observations. This could also be a very useful exercise for your history department to provide insight into the number and diversity of historical female figures that pupils are able to talk about.
- 2) What was the status of women in the past? Working in groups, ask pupils to explore women in the medieval period. Ask pupils to provide evidence of where women could be powerful in public and in private, i.e. public/political arena and in ordinary life. Which has the most examples?
- 3) Look at a transcript of [Magna Carta](#): which clauses relate to women? How are women treated? Tease out the idea that those clauses that relate to women are protective.
- 4) Introduce the [caricature of Queen Caroline](#) who gained popular support, especially as her husband George IV tried to divorce her. How and why was she able to have political power?
- 5) Introduce/recap the female suffrage movement from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and some of the key personalities as well as some of the key inequalities. Explain that very little had changed for women in the public arena into the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century.
- 6) Introduce the page from the [article Magna Carta, Englishwoman](#) and also the cartoon captioned [Votes for Women](#). What is the message that each gives and who are they aiming at? How does each make use of Magna Carta?
- 7) How can we see from these two sources that Magna Carta has by now become a symbol of rights and freedoms?
- 8) How might pupils use Magna Carta to campaign for female suffrage or modern female issues? Allow them to design or write their own posters/arguments. This could also provide a link to Citizenship work and pupils might consider measures taken to protect and promote equalities as well as more contemporary campaigns for women's rights in society today.

## Extension activities

It was not until 1980 that legislation was issued indicating that wherever the word "man" appeared, this referred to women as well. Were the suffragettes right to use Magna Carta in their campaigns?