

# Magna Carta (Great Charter)



"New Zealand Conservative." : Hilaire Belloc. N.p., n.d. Web. 19 June 2014.

## **Background**

In the late 800's the Vikings launched many raids and attacks on the island of Britain. They captured some territory and created their own kingdoms. The native people of the island defended their homes and overtime were able to halt the invaders advances. A strong king was able to unite the native kingdoms, thus creating the **nation-state** of "Angleland" better known today as England. Unfortunately, the kings who succeeded this strong leader in power were weak leaders. When the last of the weak kings died, he did not name a clear cut successor.

**Question: What are the dangers of a king not picking an heir to succeed them?**

Two cousins of the king would step up and claim to be the rightful heir to the English throne. Harold and William were both English nobles, unfortunately for William he lived hundreds of miles away in Normandy, France. Harold used this advantage to swoop in and quickly have himself crowned the king. News of his coronation quickly reached William and he was outraged. He gathered his supporters and began to prepare for an invasion of England. In the fall of

1066 A.D., William and his army of knights landed on the coast and slowly worked their way in land. Harold gathered his supporters and marched his army of knights to meet his cousin in battle. The armies engaged each other and the fighting was fierce. There was so much blood shed during the Battle of Hastings, that grassy field is still considered one of the greenest places in the world. The nutrients from the blood of the fallen soldiers have enhanced the soil for the past thousand years. King Harold was killed during the battle and his army was soundly defeated.



Painting depicting the Battle of Hastings

<http://www.poetsandprinces.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/08/hastings1.jpg>

## Hail to the King

After this epic battle, William was crowned the king of England. Historians consider him to be the first true King of England and have given him the nickname "**William the Conqueror**", to honor his victory. William **introduced feudalism to England**, by rewarding his knights and supporters that fought for him with land and formal title. Feudalism had long been practiced throughout France and William carried it with him to England. The feudal system organized society and enhanced William's power and the role of the monarchy as a whole. It also slowly started to *weaken the power of the nobles*, because they had to fulfill their feudal **obligations** (promises of service) and **allegiances** (loyalty). The English kings who followed William the Conqueror would continue to expand their powers and rule with England with absolute power.

**Question: What are the pros and cons of having one leader with absolute power?**



<http://www.kidspast.com/world-history/0208-lords-knights.php>

Knights pledged their **allegiance** (loyalty) and **obligations** (promises of service) to their king. In return, the king gave the **fiefs** (land/title) and supplies such as armor, weapons, etc.

### Did you know?

The Bayeux Tapestry is an embroidered cloth that was created to depict the events leading up to William the Conqueror's invasion of England and features the Battle of Hastings. Monarchs often hung **tapestries** on the walls of their castles for decoration and to limit the draftiness of the stone. The handmade tapestry is nearly 230 feet long and roughly 1 ½ feet tall. It is currently located in the Bayeux museum in France. Below is a piece of the actual tapestry.



<http://www.deconetwork.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/bayeux-tape.png>

**Question: How do we commemorate big events in history today? Give some examples.**

**Question: Do you think Harold and William could have solved their dispute peacefully? Why or why not?**

## **Abuse of Power**

The kings following William ruled England with absolute power. Some of these kings were capable rulers, while others were not quite so good. The kings lived the good life and enjoyed their vast wealth and power. They were above the law, in charge of taxes and money, and could do pretty much as they pleased. This gradually started to build resentment among the nobles (barons). Feudalism had caused the nobles (barons) to lose some of their influence and many of them started to become displeased with their situation. To make matters worse, the new ruler of England immediately began to abuse his powers.

**King John** took the throne, despite already being unpopular with the people of England. He was a fraction of the leader his older brother (King Richard the Lionheart) had been and often made hasty decisions without thinking of the consequences. The rift between the monarchy and nobles (barons) grew much larger because of John's abuse of his powers. John had made many enemies

throughout his life and he decided that it would be wise to **purge** (or get rid of them). He ordered all of his enemies to be rounded up and thrown into prison without trials. John seized or took the property of whoever he pleased including land, horses, etc. He also raised the taxes on the people several times to pay for a costly war with France; that he lost. Losing this war did not set well with his people, because he surrendered English territory in northern France.

King John even managed to make the Roman Catholic Church angry at him. Without asking the Pope, he decided he would appoint a new archbishop (high level church leader). The Pope was outraged and he promptly **excommunicated** or kicked King John out of the church. This punishment had never happened to the ruler of England and was spiritually devastating.

## **Magna Carta**

The nobles (barons) and church leaders decided it was time for a change. They decided to rebel against the authority of the king and vowed to limit his power. Together they drew up a **charter** (document) that they called **Magna Carta**. The nobles and their knights met the king and his army at a field called Runnymede. Here they forced King John to sign the Magna Carta. By placing his seal on Magna Carta, John agreed to restore the power of the nobles (barons) and stay out of the church's business. Initially, the document only gave rights to the nobles (barons), but overtime (hundreds of years) it evolved to give rights to all English citizens.



### **Did You Know?**

2015 A.D. marks the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the Magna Carta. Four copies of the original Magna Carta are known to exist and are safely preserved. Last year a copy of this important democratic document was found in Kent, England wedged into an old scrapbook. The document was damp, missing some lettering, and without the king's seal. Even in this rough condition, this copy of the Magna Carta has been valued at more than 15 million dollars.

<http://www.history.com/news/ask-history/files/2013/06/magnacarta.jpg>

## Effects of Magna Carta

1. **Rule of Law:** All citizens including the king are accountable to the laws of the land. No longer was the king above the law.



The King has parked in a **NO PARKING** zone and was given a ticket on his carriage. He is not happy about this insult.



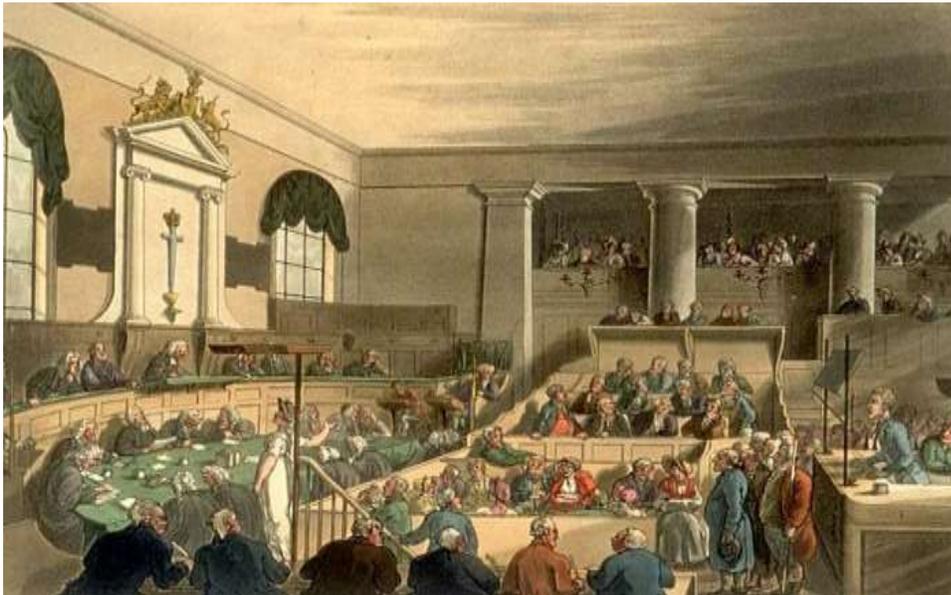
*Before the Magna Carta:* the King could burn the parking ticket and not worry about paying the fine or going to jail.



*After the Magna Carta:* the King was now held responsible for his actions and had to pay his fine or face the consequences.

<https://www.brainpop.com/socialstudies/worldhistory/magnacarta/>

2. **Due Process:** When arrested, everyone was guaranteed a trial by jury. No longer could the king throw his enemies in jail or have them executed without going through the judicial process.



[http://www.bookdrum.com/images/books/192665\\_m.jpg](http://www.bookdrum.com/images/books/192665_m.jpg)

3. **Great Council (Parliament):** The **Great Council** was established to advise the king, giving the nobles a voice in the decisions of the government. They also had the right to approve taxes. Overtime, the name of this group of advisors to the king became known as **Parliament**. Originally, the members of this council could only be nobles, church officials, and select knights. As time continued to pass (hundreds of years) and the Magna Carta evolved to give rights to all English citizens, the common people were invited to have representation in government. There would now be two houses of Parliament: the House of Lords (upper) and the House of Commons (lower). Parliament became the first democratic legislative body in modern Europe.



<http://media.web.britannica.com/eb-media/97/297-004-F52BABDF.jpg>

**Question: Which of the three effects of the Magna Carta do you think was the most important change? Explain your answer.**

**Question: Do you think King John regretted signing the Magna Carta? Why or why not?**

The Magna Carta is considered to be one of the most important democratic documents in history. The rebellious actions of the nobles set an example for future struggles between absolute rulers and those they ruled. Magna Carta also laid out basic ideas for guaranteeing individual rights and establishing representative government (w/separation of powers). The founding fathers of the United States referenced it when they gathered to write the Constitution and the concepts of "individual rights" was an inspiration to the American Revolution.

**Question: How do you think the world might be different had the Magna Carta never been created? Would it be better or worse? Explain your answer in detail.**