

Curriculum subject: History
Key Stage: 3

Theme: Medieval context

Topic: Who benefitted from Magna Carta?

Rationale

The significance of Magna Carta is debated by historians, and many point to the numerous ways in which it has been interpreted over time. But what was its significance in 1215? Who really benefitted from its clauses?

Issued and sealed by King John, Magna Carta was widely copied. Despite its annulment by the Pope, it was re-issued four times in the 13th century and eventually became part of the Statute Book. It was cited no less than 59 times in legal cases of the 13th century. This evidence points towards a charter that people felt needed to be kept alive and adhered to – but why?

This activity aims to explore the significance of Magna Carta in the context of the 13th century, based upon the clauses and the impact of these on the groups identified. This activity presupposes some knowledge of medieval England, particularly feudalism. This activity can be used on a stand-alone basis or in conjunction with another of our Magna Carta lesson plans: [‘What can Magna Carta tell us about life in medieval times?’](#)

Content

Historical sources:

- [Magna Carta, 1215](#)
- [Magna Carta, 1216](#)
- [Magna Carta, 1225](#)
- [Magna Carta, 1297](#)
- [On the Laws and Customs of England \(1272-1307\)](#)

Recommended reading (short articles):

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

Film:

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

Key questions

- What groups of people made up society in the 13th century and how numerous were they?
- Who was involved in Magna Carta?
- What particular people or groups are mentioned in Magna Carta and to whom did it apply?
- What kind of provisions did Magna Carta make?
- What impact might Magna Carta have had on different groups?

Activities

- 1) Explore/recap the different groups in medieval society, the feudal system and feudal obligations.
- 2) Examine/recap the story of Magna Carta with pupils. What were the political circumstances in which the charter was created? Who was involved? Who was it aimed at, who did it mention and what purpose did it have?
- 3) Use the [transcript](#) of the clauses of Magna Carta. You may want to simplify this text if necessary. Allow pupils to look at the document in detail, ideally working in groups. Ask them to use highlighter pens to group themes by colour, for example people or categories of provisions (forests, money, laws and justice, feudal rights, trade or goods). If you prefer, you could do this as a card sort or a living diagram, with pupils representing different sections of the social structure and discussing if they think they would benefit from each clause as it is read out. If they feel they would benefit, they should take a counter. Which group has the most counters? According to their now nicely coloured documents, who does Magna Carta mention? Is there anyone we know that was involved but not mentioned? Is there any group of society left out? Does this mean the charter didn't apply to them? What kinds of provision are being made? What is the most popular focus for the clauses of Magna Carta?
- 4) Draw pupils back to a diagram of the feudal system and the different groups of society. Ask them to write the clause number next to each group in society that would have benefitted from it. You may need to supply additional scaffold for this activity, but pupils should get the idea that actually, there were clauses that might have been beneficial to all contained within it. Who benefitted the most? Who benefitted the least? In what ways did peasants benefit from Magna Carta?

MAGNA CARTA

www.bl.uk/magna-carta

TEACHERS' NOTES

Extension activities

- Based on knowledge gained, why do they think Magna Carta was retained, re-issued and referred to in no less than 59 legal cases and several chronicles in the 13th century? What motivation might subsequent kings have had? This might involve some further research into the reigns of Henry III and Edward I and civil war with the barons. What can this tell us about the relationship between the King and his barons?