

How did a peace treaty from 1215 forge the freedoms of 2015?

Making peace

London – 2015.

The people of this city are free to walk its streets and go about their business more or less as they please. 800 years ago the picture would have been quite different. In Medieval England people owed their livelihoods and even their lives to whoever owned the land they lived on. And ultimately everyone owed allegiance to the King.

But in the year 1215, relations between ruler and ruled were at breaking point.

The King at this time was John. He had ruled for 16 years, and he was hugely unpopular. He'd been humiliated in battle, murdered members of his own family, he had upset the Church, and he had tried to bully his nobles into supporting him with blackmail, extortion and violence.

Now, a powerful group of these nobles decided they'd had enough. They renounced their oaths of loyalty to the crown, and spread a message of rebellion throughout the country and in May 1215 they arrived here - in the City of London.

John realised he was in a corner. If he wanted to keep his crown, he had to placate these powerful men. So with the kingdom on the brink of civil war, the Archbishop of Canterbury was called in to oversee Peace talks at Runnymede – about twenty miles up the River Thames.

The resulting agreement between King and rebels was recorded in a document we now call Magna Carta: 'The Great Charter'.

Today that event remains a historic milestone – the barons made the King concede that although he was the highest power in the land, he could no longer do just what he wanted. He had to act within the same laws that governed everyone else.

In 1215, holding the King to account wasn't a totally new idea but writing that idea down was, and it's come to symbolise a giant leap in human progress.

But the terms set by the barons, which are laid out in this facsimile of the original document, didn't really aim to create a freer or more equal society. Instead they were defending the interests of a narrow coalition of ultra-rich nobles and bishops – the ruling class of Medieval England.

Magna Carta was for them and by them.

Yet at its core were basic ideas that today we might take for granted: No-one – not even an all-powerful King – is above the law. As citizens, we have rights the state can't arbitrarily take away.

These ideas have inspired and underpinned the growth of liberty and democracy across the world and they were first written down in Magna Carta, 800 years ago.

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