



The Magna Carta

For Key Stage 2

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ARTICLE

House of Plantagenet

The House of Plantagenet was a royal dynasty that ruled England for 331 years, from 1154 to 1485. The dynasty is also known as the House of Anjou or the Angevin dynasty. It was originally a noble family from north-west France. Some historians believe that the Plantagenet dynasty ended with Richard II's death in 1400, and that it was followed by the Houses of Lancaster and York. However, York and Lancaster were both branches of the Plantagenet family tree.

Fourteen kings of England belonged to the royal house of Plantagenet.

Start of the Angevin Empire

The first Plantagenet king was Henry II, who was crowned in 1154. The name Plantagenet was not his family name. It was possibly a nickname that came from the Latin name for a plant (*planta genista*) that Henry's father, Geoffrey of Anjou, wore in his cap.

Henry II (ruled 1154–89) ruled over a huge area of Europe. The lands stretched from south-west France to the Scottish borders. He inherited Anjou from his father and gained south-western France from his marriage to Eleanor of Aquitaine. During Henry's reign, the legal system in England was improved.



A painting shows the coronation of Richard I, known as 'the Lionheart'.

The British Library/Robana/REX/Shutterstock.com

Richard I (ruled 1189–99) was the next Plantagenet king. He spent most of his time on Crusades. The Crusades were efforts by Christians from Europe to gain control of Jerusalem and other parts of the Middle East that were known as the Holy Land. Richard spent only six months of his 10-year reign in England.

King John and the Magna Carta

King John (ruled 1199–1216) is sometimes known as the last of the Angevin dynasty. He was the last English king to reign over Anjou, which he lost in the early 1200s.

The early Plantagenet kings struggled for power with the Roman Catholic Church and the English nobles. By the time of King John's reign, a group of powerful men known as barons had joined together to try to limit the king's power and to make him rule according to law. In 1215 they forced him to sign a document called the Magna Carta (or 'Great Charter'). This limited the rights of the king and protected the rights of his subjects.



A painting shows King John being forced to sign the Magna Carta in 1215.

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John declared that he had been forced to sign the Magna Carta against his will and he tried to gather support from France to fight the barons. He died before he could carry this out, leaving his crown to his nine-year-old son, Henry.

Rise of Parliament

Henry III (ruled 1216–72) spent a large part of his reign fighting the barons. They disliked the fact that the king had chosen many foreigners to be his close advisers. In 1264, the barons staged a rebellion, under the leadership of Simon de Montfort, but this was crushed the following year.

Under Edward I (ruled 1272–1307) Parliament developed into a body of men who had to approve all the laws that the king made. The men who made up Parliament were noblemen and Church leaders.

Edward was a great reformer and a good soldier. He brought stability to the country for the first time in many years. His son, Edward II (ruled 1307–27), however, was a weak leader and was forced to abdicate (give up the throne).

Hundred Years' War

In the 1300s, England began a long struggle with France that was later called the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453). This began when Edward III (ruled 1327–77) tried to claim the French throne. There was a 28-year truce during the reign of Richard II (ruled 1377–99), but the war continued under Henry IV (ruled 1399–1413).

Henry V (ruled 1413–22) emerged as one of the great English warrior kings of the Middle Ages. He scored several victories against the French, in particular at the Battle of Agincourt (1415), when his troops beat a much larger French force. Henry V eventually united the crowns of England and France through his marriage to the French princess Catherine of Valois.

Wars of the Roses

Henry V died young, and the throne passed to his son, Henry VI (ruled 1422–61 and 1470–71), who was not even one year old when he became king. Others ruled for him until he grew up, but when he did he was not a good ruler. Much of the land his father had gained was lost within a few years.

Several powerful men in the kingdom began to fight for control of the government. This led to a long period of civil war between the houses of Lancaster and York, known as the Wars of the Roses (1455–85). During this period Henry was overthrown and imprisoned by his cousin, Edward of York, who became Edward IV (ruled 1461–70 and 1471–83). Edward IV, too, was overthrown briefly, but he regained power in 1471.

Edward died in 1483. He left his two young sons – including Edward V – in the care of his brother Richard. The boys were taken to the Tower of London. After a few months they disappeared and were never seen again. Richard had himself crowned King Richard III (ruled 1483–85).

Richard was the last of the Plantagenet line. His reign lasted only two years. In 1485, Henry Tudor killed Richard at the Battle of Bosworth and became Henry VII – the first of the Tudor line.

Citation (MLA style):

"House of Plantagenet." *Britannica LaunchPacks: The Magna Carta*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 20 Aug. 2024. packs-learn.eb.co.uk. Accessed 23 Sep. 2024.

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ARTICLE

John

King John ruled England between 1199 and his death in 1216. He is best remembered as the king who signed the Magna Carta, which limited the power of the monarchy.



King John signed the Magna Carta in 1215.

© Eileen Tweedy—REX/Shutterstock.com

Early Life

John was the youngest son of King Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine. When Henry II died in 1189 John's brother Richard became king, and John was made count of Mortain and lord of Ireland. John's first marriage was to Isabella of Gloucester.

King Henry II gave his son John the nickname Lackland because John had no land. Later, the king gave John castles and lands in both England and France.

In March 1190 John promised not to enter England while King Richard was away fighting in the Crusades. John wanted to be king of England, but Richard had named their nephew, Arthur, as his successor. John was angry at this and broke his promise, returning to England.

In January 1193 John heard that Richard had been imprisoned in Germany. He formed an alliance with King Philip II Augustus of France and tried to seize the throne. When Richard returned to England he sent John away. Two years later they became friends again and Richard named John as his heir.

King John's Reign

War Breaks Out

Richard died in 1199 and John succeeded him as both duke of Normandy and king of England. John's marriage to Isabella of Gloucester ended in 1199. In August 1200 John married Isabella of Angoulême, who had divorced

Hugh IX of Lusignan (a province of France). This made the Lusignans angry and they rebelled. John was ordered to appear before Philip II of France. When he failed to do so, war broke out.

By 1206 John had lost several territories that he had held in France. From this time onwards John spent most of his time in England.

The Magna Carta

John argued with leaders of the Roman Catholic Church and made people pay high taxes. He was therefore not a popular king. A group of barons began a rebellion against him. As part of a settlement with the barons he was forced to sign the Magna Carta ('Great Charter'). He signed the document at Runnymede on the River Thames in June 1215. The Magna Carta limited the power of the king and increased the influence of the barons in England.

John continued to fight against the barons, and the dispute led to a civil war. John died in 1216, with the civil war still raging.

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ARTICLE

Magna Carta

The Magna Carta, or the Great Charter, was a document that gave privileges to the English people. King John placed his seal on it in 1215. The charter stated that the king of England must follow the law. He could not rule as he wished. The Magna Carta is regarded as the foundation of the constitutions of many nations.



A manuscript of the Magna Carta, dating from 1215, is displayed in the British Library in London.

Reproduced by permission of the British Library Board

King John ruled from 1199 to 1216. The English people greatly disliked him because he was cruel and greedy. The powerful barons, church leaders and the common people joined together against King John.

The leading barons of England decided to force the king to respect the rights of his subjects. The barons and the church leaders made a list of demands. John tried to avoid giving in to their demands. However, on 15 June 1215, he met with the barons and church leaders. He agreed to their requests and sealed the Magna Carta.

The Magna Carta addressed specific rights, including rights of landowners, those who rented land and merchants. In addition, it discussed law reform and explained how royal officials should behave. The charter also gave a council of 25 barons the right to declare war on the king if he did not follow the Magna Carta.

The Magna Carta was changed a few times over the years. However, by 1225 it became clear that keeping the document up-to-date would not be practical. The document became a source of basic principles of government. It was also a symbol against oppression.

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 IMAGE

Magna Carta



A memorial stands in the field where King John signed the Magna Carta in Surrey, England.

WyrdLight.com

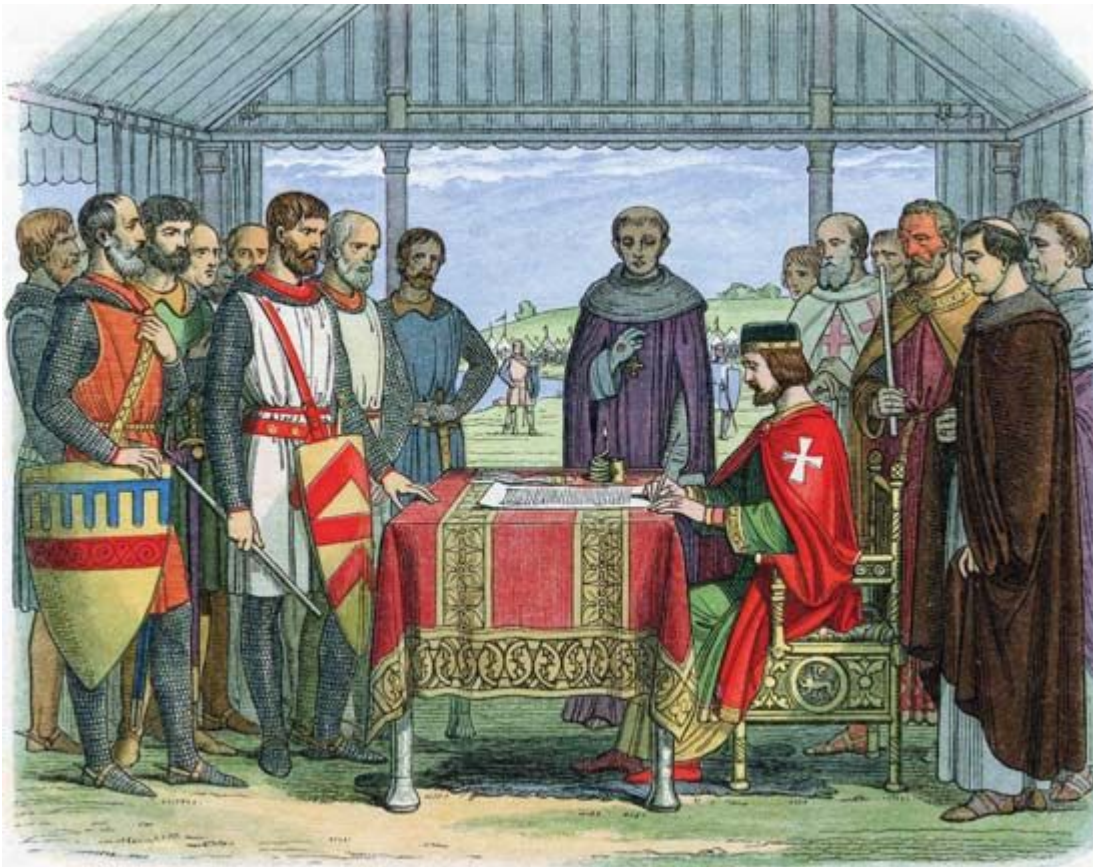
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IMAGE

King John



An illustration shows England's King John signing the Magna Carta.

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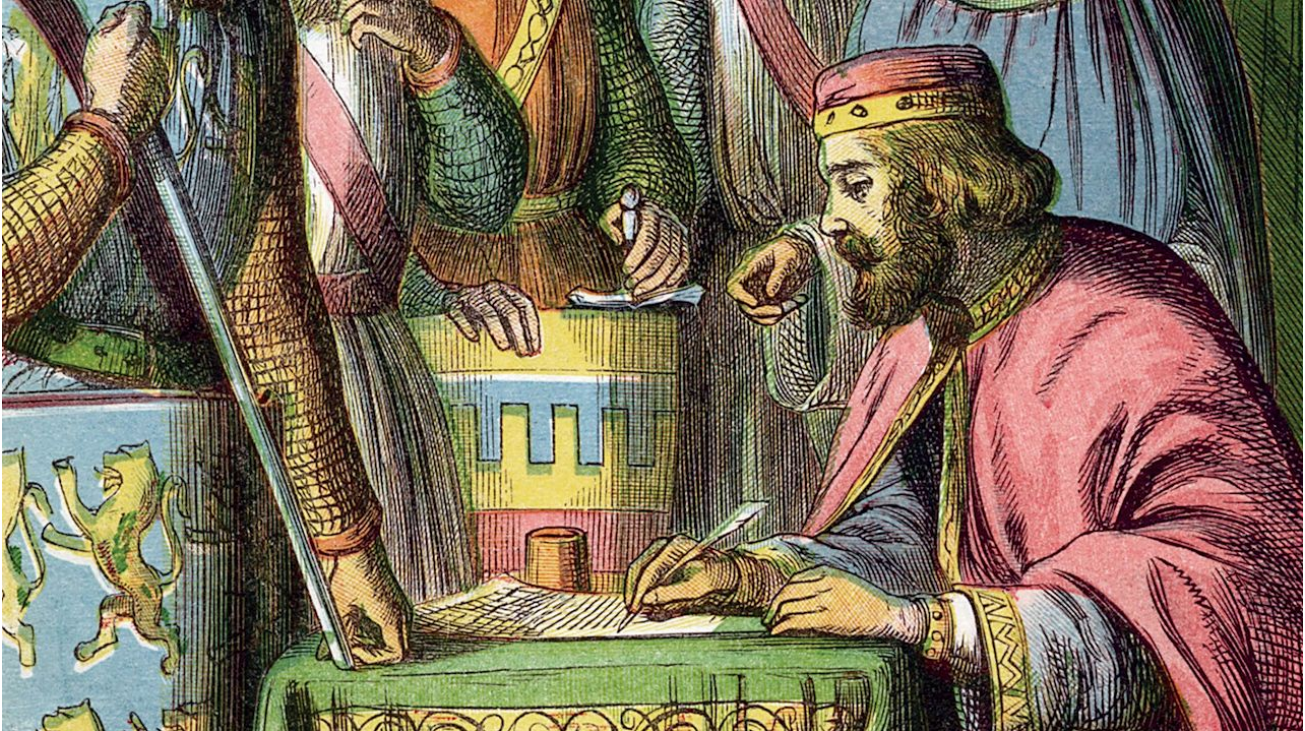
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Magna Carta



Video Transcript

NARRATOR: The Magna Carta was signed by King John of England in 1215. A copy from that year is on display in the British Library in London. The Magna Carta limited the power of the monarchy. From then on the king had to follow the law; he could no longer simply rule as he wished. The Magna Carta was a first step toward the creation of England's constitution.

King John signed the Magna Carta in 1215.

Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

Citation (MLA style):

Magna Carta. Video. *Britannica LaunchPacks: The Magna Carta*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 20 Aug. 2024. packs-learn.eb.co.uk. Accessed 23 Sep. 2024.

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