



BRIT POLITICS Fact Sheet – King John

This fact sheet covers the life and reign of King John. You can find lots more about today's Royal Family and past British Kings and Queens on www.britpolitics.co.uk

How did John become King?

King John was the youngest son of Eleanor of Aquitaine and King Henry II.

His brother Richard I (known as Richard the Lionheart) succeeded to the throne and became king on the death of their father Henry II.

While Richard was away on the Third Crusade, John tried to start a rebellion and take the crown from him.

In 1199 Richard I died and John became King.

King John's Early Reign

John laid claim to the Crown as the only living son of Henry II. His nephew Arthur, as the son of his deceased elder brother Geoffrey, also had a potential claim to the throne. The English Barons supported John as the rightful heir to the Crown of England.

Upon succession to the throne King John inherited the Angevin Empire. This Empire included all of England and large areas of France. In 1200 King John and King Phillip II of France signed the Treaty of Le Goulet.

King John pledged loyalty to King Phillip and agreed to be his vassal. This meant that he had to obey any summons Phillip might issue and support him during times of war. In return John was recognised as the rightful King of England and heir to the fiefs his brother Richard I had held in France.

King John had been granted the authority to rule these French territories but he held them from King Phillip who was his feudal lord. He also had to pay a large sum of money to King Phillip upon the inheritance of these lands. The Duchy of Aquitaine was not included in this treaty as it was part of the English Crown through John's mother Eleanor.

Not pursuing the military option and making peace with King Phillip of France led to King John earning the nickname of Soft-sword. He had been given his other nickname of Lackland at an early age as he was not given the rights to hold land in France, unlike his older brothers.



In 1200 King John married Isabella of Angouleme. Hugh, Lord of Lusignan, a powerful noble, complained about the marriage to King Phillip of France. Isabella had already been promised as his wife. King Phillip summoned King John to appear before him in the French Court. King John did not obey the summons. King Phillip declared King John's lands in France forfeit and gave them, with the exception of Normandy, to John's nephew Arthur of Brittany.

War with France

At first the war with France went well for King John. He captured and imprisoned many of the rebel leaders including his nephew Arthur. However he began to lose support from his regional allies, the Barons which governed his French territories. Many of the rebel leaders were high-ranking nobles and the maltreatment they received as prisoners angered the Barons. King John hired mercenaries to fight for him. These had a reputation of mistreating civilians. He also put them in positions of military command that would traditionally have gone to the local nobles. King John offended some of his allies by not trusting them or not listening to their advice.

In 1203 Arthur of Brittany disappeared. Rumours spread that King John had ordered his death. The annals of Margam Abbey claimed that King John, while drunk, had committed the murder himself and thrown Arthur's body into the Seine weighted down with a stone. This seriously damaged King John's reputation in France and England.

In December 1203 King John went back to England. King John had raised more money and was assembling his forces to launch another attack. However, Phillip II had made too much progress for this to happen. In 1204 Phillip's forces captured Normandy.

King John's mother Eleanor of Aquitaine had also died.

By 1205, most of the Angevin Empire that King John had when he began his reign had been lost.

Troubles with the Pope

In 1207 Stephen Langton became the Archbishop of Canterbury. King John had chosen a different candidate but Pope Innocent III did not approve of him, so he had appointed Stephen Langton. King John did not want Langton to be Archbishop as he did not feel that he could trust him. King John was also angered by the Pope's decision not to involve him in the election of the new Archbishop. He thought it was part of his rights as a King to influence who was appointed. King John took all of the land of the Archbishop of Canterbury and he banned him from coming to England.

In 1208 the Pope imposed an interdict on England. This meant that the clergy were not allowed to perform most religious ceremonies. Christian burial was also forbidden.

King John took the lands of any clergymen who carried out the Pope's instructions.



The Pope 'excommunicated' King John in 1209. Excommunication meant that King John would not be able to attend Church or take part in any religious services. This was very serious. At this time people believed that excommunication meant you would go to hell when you died.

King John claimed all the money from the taken Church lands and used it to help finance his wars in France.

In 1213, political pressure and possibly in response to the threat of French invasion, King John negotiated with the Pope to bring an end to his excommunication. He accepted Stephen Langton as Archbishop of Canterbury. King John gave his loyalty and obedience to the Pope and turned the Kingdom of England over to the Pope. This made Pope Innocent III his feudal Lord and a powerful ally of King John.

Getting on with the Barons

The English Barons had been used to governing England because Richard I had spent the majority of his time when King away on crusade.

Unlike Richard I and Henry II, King John spent longer amounts of time in England. He also wanted to take a more active role in ruling England. He was interested in government and the justice system.

Men of King John's choosing were filling many of the positions at court and in the Royal household but they weren't necessarily Barons. King John often ignored the advice of the Barons or chose not to seek it. He preferred to rely on his own men or chose to do things his own way. This made them dislike him.

King John was also deeply suspicious of the Barons. They were powerful, rich men. He saw some as a potential threat to his crown and so treated them more like enemies than friends. King John did not trust them and they in turn did not trust him. This meant a bad relationship between the King and the Barons.

Raising Money

King John spent most of his reign trying to reclaim Normandy. For this he needed to raise revenue. He brought in a series of financial measures designed to maximize income going to the Crown. These were not very popular.

The main sources of income available to King John came through his feudal rights. Scutage payments were to be a great source of contention between the Barons and the King. Scutage was a means of raising money in times of war. A knight could make a payment instead of performing military service for the King. King John levied this tax more frequently than any Monarch before him and he successively increased the amount to be paid.



Some of the taxes, fines and payments demanded by the Crown amounted to enormous sums. Many Barons had to borrow money to pay them. Some who could not pay had their lands confiscated.

King John needed the money to pay for his wars in France. He amassed a large army, which included the hiring of mercenaries, and he built up the navy. To the Barons, there were no significant gains of territories, no great victories that justified the amount of money being demanded from them. In 1214 King John tried to re-take Normandy for the last time. After the defeat of his allies at the Battle of Bouvines, King John signed a peace treaty with King Phillip II of France and returned to England. In 1215 the Barons rebelled.

1215, First Barons' War

The Royal Chancery drew up formal copies of this Charter and sent them out to officials throughout the country. King John did not accept the conditions of the Charter as it attempted to limit his Royal powers. He tried to have it annulled by appealing to Pope Innocent III. The Pope sided with King John and released him from any obligation to abide by the terms of the Charter. Civil war broke out again. Within only a few months King John's forces had defeated the rebels and their allies in most parts of England.

The rebels looked to France for assistance. In return for helping defeat King John they offered Prince Louis the throne of England. Prince Louis, son of King Phillip II, laid claim to the English throne through his wife Blanche of Castile. Blanche was a descendant of Henry II. In 1216 Prince Louis landed with his armies in England. The combined forces of the rebel Barons and the French began to re-take lost territory forcing King John to retreat. In September King John launched fresh attacks.

Rebellion of the Barons

In 1215 a group of Barons started a rebellion against King John. They were mainly from the north and east of England. Robert Fitzwalter a Baron from East Anglia was chosen as their leader. The Barons tried to get King John to listen to their demands. When attempts at negotiation failed, civil war broke out. The rebels marched on London and in May 1215 successfully occupied it. King John was forced to negotiate.

In June 1215, the rebel leaders and King John met in a meadow at Runnymede near Windsor. Archbishop Langton had been engaged in peace negotiations with the Barons. The result of which was the drawing up of a document known as The Articles of the Barons. This set out the terms for peace. It was based upon a charter, which dated from the time of Henry I. The rebel army would leave London and pledge their allegiance to the King, if King John agreed to their reforms.

On 15 June 1215 King John placed his Great Seal to the Articles. On 19 June the Barons pledged their loyalty and swore oaths of allegiance to the King. The Royal Chancery drew up the agreements made at Runnymede as a formal Charter. This became known as the Magna Carta.



Magna Carta

The original Magna Carta or Great Charter of 1215 was essentially a peace treaty between King John and his Barons. It was originally known as the Charter of Liberties. The Barons wanted to ensure that King John's misuse of the justice system and his exploitation of feudal rights, primarily to raise money, would end. They wanted to protect in law their customary rights and liberties. The Barons also sought to limit the authority of the King. The King should be subject to the law and not arbitrarily impose his will. It made clear the rights of the Church and other groups including merchants and knights. The liberties were granted to all the 'Freemen' of the kingdom. Free men did not mean everybody. There were many peasants who were serfs or villeins and so not classed as free men.

The original document was written on parchment in Medieval Latin and was laid out as a single piece of text. The rights of the Church were set out in Chapter 1.

Some of the liberties dealt with taxes, particularly scutage, which had been the main source of discontent between King John and the Barons. Chapter 14 of the Charter stated that a 'common council of the Kingdom' made up of high ranking religious officials as well as the leading Barons needed to be consulted with, before the King could raise taxes.

The Barons were asserting their feudal rights to be part of the Great Council and advisors to the King.

King John's abuse of the justice system was also dealt with. Men who carried out judicial functions, such as bailiffs or sheriffs, had to know the law of the land and carry it out properly.

Chapter 39 was to guarantee that 'no Freeman shall be taken or imprisoned or be disseised [deprived of property]...or be outlawed, or exiled, or in any other way destroyed; nor will We not pass upon him... but by the lawful judgment of his Peers or by the Law of the Land.' Chapter 40 went on that 'We will sell to no man, we will not deny or defer to any man either Justice or Right.' This clause also appears in the 1297 version of the Magna Carta, when King Edward I confirmed the Charter drawn up during the reign of King Henry III. It has not been repealed. This clause took on greater significance long after the signing of the Magna Carta and probably much more than when it was first written. It formed the basis for the legal concept of habeas corpus. An individual's freedom should be protected from arbitrary actions of the state.

In Chapter 13, the City of London and other cities and towns were guaranteed to 'have all their Liberties and free Customs'. This clause has also not been repealed.

Most of the clauses deal with specific issues where customs or traditional rights have been exploited or abused.

Chapter 61 stated that twenty-five Barons were to be appointed to ensure that all observed the conditions of the Charter, including the King.



Death of King John

In October 1216, King John died at Newark, probably of dysentery. He was buried in Worcester Cathedral.

Henry III, John's nine-year-old son was proclaimed King of England. William Marshall, Earl of Pembroke was named as his Regent. Many of the rebel Barons turned to support the new king. Prince Louis returned to France. The Magna Carta was edited and re-issued to set terms for the governance of the country and to try and prevent another civil war.

Four copies of the original Magna Carta 1215 still exist. Two are held at the British Library. Salisbury Cathedral holds one as does Lincoln Cathedral. A translation of the Magna Carta is available on the British Library website.