



# What was in the Magna Carta?

*Magna Carta – the Great Charter – was not a statement of human rights, but a series of concessions addressing long-standing grievances from the barons.*

**It was the product of months of bargaining and its principal beneficiaries were the highest ranks of feudal society.**

The first of the sixty-three clauses of Magna Carta, granted and confirmed that 'the English Church shall be free, and shall have its rights undiminished, and its liberties unimpaired'. It reflected the powerful influence of Archbishop Langton who was clearly eager to confirm the rights and freedoms of the Church, which John had challenged so persistently earlier in his reign.



*King John by Matthew Paris of St Albans*

About two-thirds of the remaining clauses in Magna Carta focused on the royal abuses of feudal custom, and provided means for obtaining redress. These clauses did not abolish the king's rights, but moderated and regulated them.

Magna Carta also dealt with the barons' legal grievances, in particular their exposure to the arbitrary will of the king in matters of justice and his use of judicial disputes to extort huge fines from them.



*Articles of the Barons, a list of their grievances*

Magna Carta met most of the grievances of the barons, but it did not fully address the concerns of the lesser landholders. They wanted action to restrain the malpractices of sheriffs and other office-holders, who were able to exploit their positions for personal profit, and reductions in the extent of the royal forests which were governed by harsh and punitive laws.

Whilst Magna Carta provided only limited concessions to the lesser landholders and the freemen of England, the peasantry who constituted the mass of the population were firmly outside its remit.



*Signing of the Magna Carta at Runnymede in 1215 – a scene probably never in reality was captured by French artist Jeanne Hebert-Duclos, 1898-1978*

Perhaps the most radical clause in Magna Carta was that which provided for the election of a commission of twenty-five barons to check and enforce its terms. This confirmed the whole tone of Magna Carta: the law was a power in its own right and the king could not set himself above it.

[www.burymagnacarta.org](http://www.burymagnacarta.org)

 Bury Magna Carta 800  @BuryMC800

Magna Carta is owned and loaned by Lincoln Cathedral.

Bury St Edmunds Magna Carta 800 Partnership

