

Document: "Magna Carta"

The gradual building of a sound English constitutional monarchy in the Middle Ages required the king's willingness to share power. He had to be very strong but could not act as a despot. The danger of despotism became severe in England under the rule of King John. On June 15, 1215 the English nobility forced him to recognize Magna Carta, which reaffirmed traditional rights and personal liberties that are still enshrined in English law.



John, by the grace of God, king of England, lord of Ireland, duke of Normandy and Aquitaine, count of Anjou; to the archbishops, bishops, abbots, earls, barons, justiciars [justices], foresters, sheriffs, reeves¹, servants, and all bailiffs² and his faithful people greeting.....

In the first place we have granted to God and by this our present charter confirmed...that the English church shall be free, and shall hold its rights entire. We have granted moreover to all free men of our kingdom for us and our heirs forever all the liberties written below, to be held by them and their heirs from us and our heirs....

No scutage³ or aid [tax] shall be imposed in our kingdom except by the common council....

And for holding a common council of the kingdom concerning the assessment of an aid...we shall cause to be summoned the archbishops, bishops, abbots, earls, and greater barons...[In addition], we shall cause to be summoned by our sheriffs and bailiffs all [our other vassals]...for a certain day...and for a certain place....

No free man shall be taken, or imprisoned, or dispossessed, or outlawed, or banished, or in any way destroyed, except by the legal judgment of his peers or by the law of the land.

No constable or other bailiff [of the king] shall take anyone's grain or other chattels⁴ without immediately paying for them in money, unless he is able to obtain a postponement at the good will of the seller.

No constable shall require any knight to give money in place of his ward of a castle [i.e., standing guard], if he is willing to furnish that ward in his own person, or through another honest man, if he himself is not able to do it for a reasonable cause; and if we shall lead or send him into the army, he shall be free from ward in proportion to the amount of time which he has been in the army through us.

No sheriff or bailiff of [the king], or any one else, shall take horses or wagons of any free man, for carrying purposes, except on the permission of that free man.

Neither we nor our bailiffs will take the wood of another man for castles, or for anything else which we are doing, except by the permission of him to whom the wood belongs....

No free man shall be taken, or imprisoned, or dispossessed, or outlawed, or banished, or in any way injured, nor will we go upon him, nor send upon him, except by the legal judgment of his peers, or by the law of the land.



¹ a ministerial officer, appointed to execute process, keep the king's peace, and put the laws in execution. He witnessed all contracts and bargains; brought offenders to justice, and delivered them to punishment; took bail for such as were to appear at the county court,

² person who has, by delivery, the custody and administration of lands or goods for the benefit of the owner or bailor

³ a tax paid instead of military service.

⁴ any tangible movable property (furniture or domestic animals).