

Magna Carta - 800 Years

The Great Charter

The Magna Carta or 'Great Charter' is famous throughout the world and the rights and freedoms it enshrines have been incorporated into many documents including the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It continues to be relevant today: 800 years after it was first agreed by King John on 15 June 1215.

The origin of the charter lay in a dispute between King John and the English barons who were rich and powerful landowners. They objected to the extensive taxes levied for military campaigns to recapture lands lost in France. The defeat of the King's army in 1214 escalated the conflict.



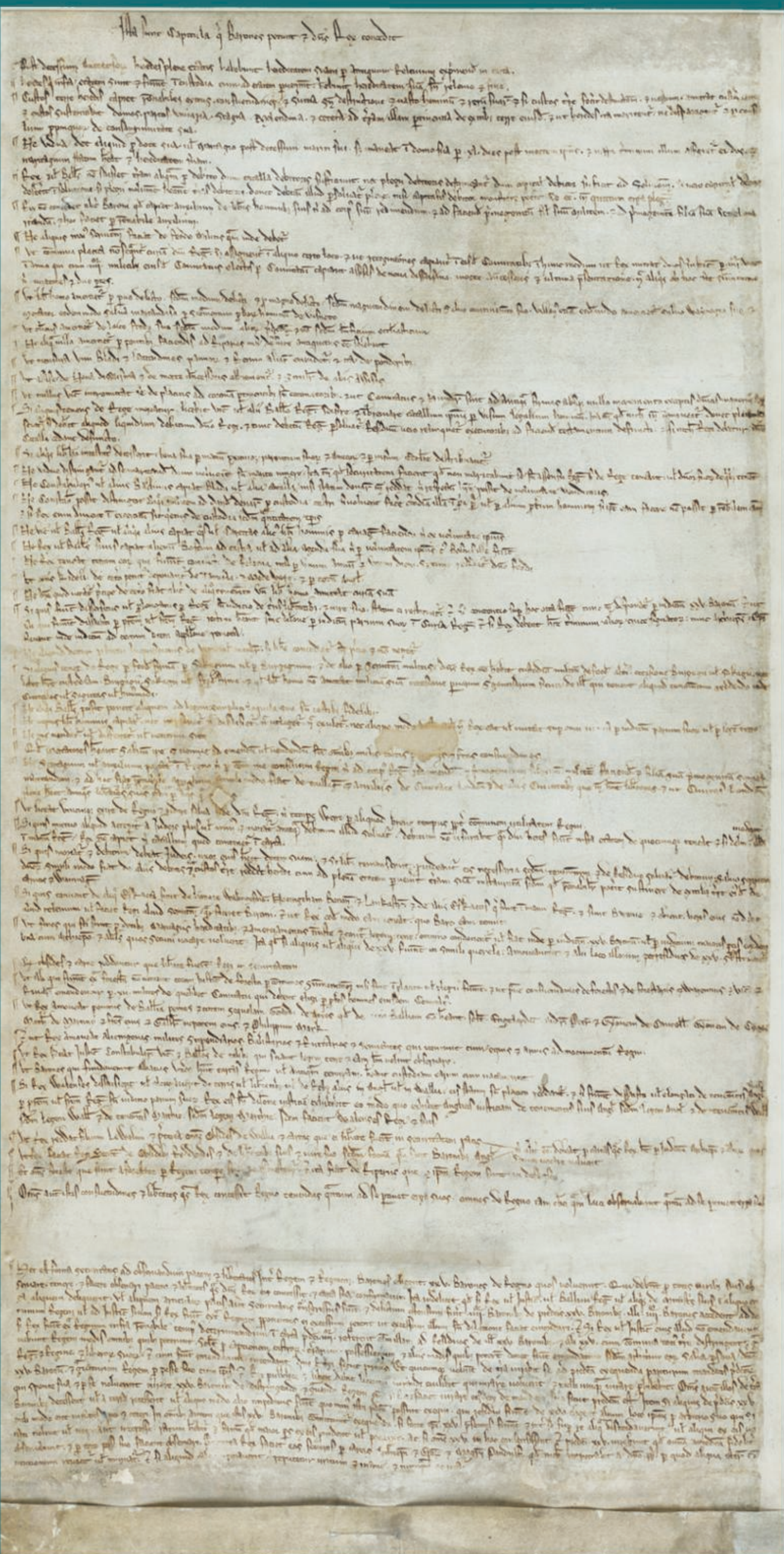
Pope Innocent III

King John had made enemies of two powerful factions and the barons from the north and east of England met with the archbishop to discuss their grievances. They wanted the King to respect traditional laws and customs and in particular to confirm his compliance with the charter issued by Henry I in 1100. This document had promised 'to abolish all the evil customs by which the kingdom of England has been unjustly oppressed'

In early 1215 discussions between the King and the barons broke down and in May they renounced their feudal ties and allegiance to him. They formed an army and took control of the City of London. This meant that John was forced to negotiate with them. Archbishop Langton played a key role in this process.



Statue of Stephen Langton, Canterbury Cathedral (Photograph by Ealdgyth)



Articles of the Barons

The two sides met in June 1215 and drafted the Articles of the Barons. This was the first document recording what the barons wanted and became the basis of the Magna Carta itself. Once King John had agreed, peace was restored and the barons renewed their oaths of allegiance to him. Copies of the Magna Carta were made to be distributed to all parts of the kingdom so that people would know that the King had agreed to respect the rule of law and had guaranteed certain rights and freedoms.

At the time few could have realised that the principles enshrined in that document would come to have such long term and global significance.