**Magna Carta**

This may look like a plain, unassuming piece of parchment, but it’s actually one of the most famous documents in the world. Magna Carta, meaning ‘the Great Charter’, has inspired people across the centuries, from Thomas Jefferson to Mahatma Gandhi. But why was the charter originally created? And what does it actually say?

Let us take you back to medieval England. It’s the year 1215, and the ruler is King John. Many people believe that King John was one of the worst kings in history. He imprisoned his former wife; he starved his opponents to death; he allegedly murdered his own nephew, and pulled the beards of the Irish Chiefs.

King John had imposed heavy taxes on his barons in order to pay for his expensive foreign wars. If they refused to pay, he punished them severely or seized their property. The barons demanded that King John obey the law; when he refused, they captured London and John was forced to negotiate.

The two sides met at Runnymede in June 1215. The result of the negotiations was written down by the king’s clerks in the document we know as Magna Carta. Although most of the charter’s clauses dealt with medieval rights and customs, Magna Carta has become a powerful symbol of liberty around the world.

The most famous clause, which is still part of the law today, for the first time gave all ‘free men’ the right to justice and a fair trial.

‘No man shall be arrested or imprisoned except by the judgment of their equals and by the law of the land. To no one will we sell, to no one deny or delay right or justice.’

However, this clause was not as liberal at it sounds. The Charter only applied to ‘free men’, the vast majority of people in 1215 were unfree peasants who were ruled over by their landowners.

And although, Magna Carta was intended to create peace between King John and his rebellious barons, England was plunged into civil war after the Pope declared the Charter invalid.

When King John died of dysentery in 1216, nine year old Henry III took to the throne. To keep the peace, Magna Carta was reissued several times during the 13th century, until it was finally made part of English law.

Magna Carta has lived on for 800 years, and is echoed in the United States Declaration of Independence and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.Perhaps Magna Carta’s most important legacy is that everyone – including our leaders – must obey the law.

What started out as a document of specific complaints from a group of barons has turned into an international symbol of liberty, without which we might not have the rights we value so much today.

<https://www.bl.uk/magna-carta/videos/what-is-magna-carta>