



King John and the Magna Carta

King John is popularly remembered as the bad king in the story of Robin Hood.

His reign saw disputes with the Pope, the barons and also military losses. On the 15th of February 1214, King John arrived in France for his last and most disastrous campaign. Its failure led to rebellion and, in 1215, to the sealing of Magna Carta.

John quarrelled with Pope Innocent III over the appointment of the new Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton. In 1208 the Pope put England under an interdict. The English people were terrified at being cut off from the church and John was blamed. The Pope excommunicated John in 1209.

John disagreed with the barons over increased taxes and feudal dues. He charged large reliefs when a son inherited an estate, he exploited the lands of his wards, he sold the marriages of heiresses and he gave important positions to his foreign relatives and was responsible for many actions of cruelty.

By granting Magna Carta, John had allowed the power of the king to be limited by a written document. This had never happened before, but John was just playing for time and never intended to comply. In July he sent envoys to Innocent III seeking an annulment of the charter.

The Pope issued a document, known as a papal bull, declaring it null and void. Magna Carta had been legally valid for only ten weeks.

Within months, England was embroiled in an even worse civil war than the one which Magna Carta had sought to avert.

In October 1216, John died suddenly in Newark, having failed to recover from his attack of dysentery.



Castle under siege



King John and the Magna Carta crisis drawings by Peter Chrip

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