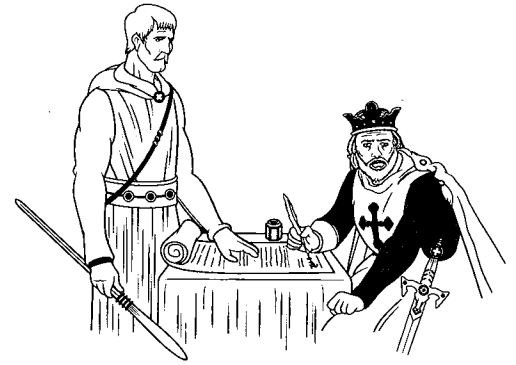


The history of Magna Carta

King John of England, like most European kings about 800 years ago, believed he could do whatever he wanted, just because he was the king. He kept demanding his barons pay him more and more tax and provide more and more troops to fight in his long, drawn-out war with France.

That was until a group of his barons, angry about not being consulted, told him they'd had enough of his unreasonable demands. They rebelled in 1215 and insisted things had to change before they'd give him more men or money.



About a month later, King John was forced into signing Magna Carta (the Great Charter), setting out rules limiting the monarchs' powers and safeguarding human rights. This document stated he must obey the law and had to take the advice of his barons. He also agreed that every 'freeman' in the country would have the right to a fair trial and could be judged by a group of people. This was a huge step towards democratic government.

Further changes to Magna Carta were forced on the next king, who agreed to have an advisory council of 15 barons. The document underwent more changes as new amended copies were written. Four copies of the 1215 Magna Carta, written in Latin on parchment made from sheepskin, have survived. They and all later copies remained in England, except for two from 1297. One, purchased for \$1.3 million in 2007, is in the United States of America and the other is in Australia.

1. Magna Carta limited the English monarch's power to determine guilt or innocence and to order appropriate punishments.

What were some of the problems with one person having this power and why is trial by jury considered a much fairer system?

2. Today people often say they would like to take the law into their own hands and punish someone they 'know' is guilty of a terrible crime.

(a) Describe a situation in which people might feel like this.

(b) Why would it be wiser for them to let the law deal with it?