

THEN AND THERE SERIES

MAGNA CARTA



J.C. HOLT

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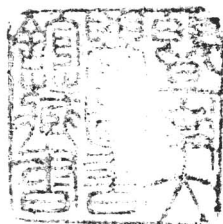
Magna Carta



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Illustrated from contemporary sources by

H. SCHWARZ



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TO THE READER

THIS book tells the story of a civil war which began in England in 1215, in the time of King John. It is also about the causes and results of this war. Every fact in this book comes from records written at the time the book is describing or from books written by men who lived at this time. These are the original sources to which historians have to go back for their information.

In the same way many of the pictures in this book are based on drawings made by men who lived near this time. Other pictures are of buildings which King John, his friends and his enemies must have known and lived in.

You will find out more about these original sources and pictures by reading pages 78 to 81.

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Midsummer 1215

At the end of June 1215 a clerk called Elias of Dereham rode out from King John's court at Windsor. He was an important man who was quite well known, for he was the *steward*¹ of the greatest churchman in the land, Stephen Langton, the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Elias was probably in his thirties. He was to live for another thirty years and before he died he became famous as a builder of churches; he was the man who directed the work on the great new cathedral at Salisbury. But his business in 1215 was not of this kind. In his saddle-bags he carried four *charters*, large *parchment* documents, each bearing the Great Seal of King John. These were copies of Magna Carta. He also carried twelve copies of a letter which the King was sending out to his chief local officers, the *sheriffs* of the counties. This letter ordered them to see that the measures contained in Magna Carta were carried out at once.

One of the copies Elias carried was directed to Westmorland, another to Shrop-



¹ You will find the meaning of words printed like *this* in the Glossary on page 86.

shire, another to Devon and others to Sussex, Surrey and several southern and midland counties. Elias had a long and tiring ride in front of him. He had to do the whole journey on horseback; there were no mail trains for the delivery of Magna Carta. Probably he got some of the other servants of the Archbishop to help by delivering some of the letters. At all events, three weeks later, he had returned to the King's court, which had moved to Oxford, where he received six more copies of Magna Carta.

Other men, besides Elias, were given copies of Magna Carta and the letters about it, to take to other counties. Some of them were great *barons* or bishops. These documents were thought to be important. Men must have waited for them eagerly throughout the country, hoping that the quarrels of the last few years were ended.

The last few years had seen many troubles both abroad and at home. King John had been at war with King Philip of France and had lost many of his French lands. He had quarrelled bitterly with the Pope, and in 1212 some of his own barons in England had plotted to murder him. The plot had been discovered in time, but the King had not done much since to make people less discontented. The countryside was filled with false rumours. There were stories that the King's reign would soon end. Some were saying that he had been murdered or handed over as a prisoner to his enemies. Others told of attacks on the Queen and young Prince Richard, who were living at Marlborough Castle in Wiltshire. None of these stories was true. Whole villages even believed that robbers were about to attack them and in panic raised the *hue and cry*, only to find that the robbers did not exist.

At last in 1215 something real did happen. In January

some of the King's barons met him at London and demanded reforms. They repeated these demands in the spring and, when John rejected them, made war on him. They marched on London and took the city by surprise. They then forced John to grant them Magna Carta.

So Elias and the other messengers were riding out into a countryside in which a civil war had only just ended. Indeed, in some places battles still continued. At Lincoln, for example, some of the barons were still trying to capture the castle. The charters and letters which Elias and the others carried must have been very welcome news. They meant that there would be peace, that the civil war was at an end. They also meant that the barons had won a great victory over King John. They had made him agree to their demands, saying how he should rule, what he could and could not do.

This was a great achievement. When men wrote about King John in their chronicles, either at the time or later, they nearly always mentioned Magna Carta. Many described it in detail. Some copied it out in full. It was known as the Charter of Liberties. Men quickly came to use it to defend their rights against the King and his officers. Soon they were calling it the Great Charter, in Latin, Magna Carta.

Magna Carta is the most important single document in the history of England. To understand how it came about in 1215, we must first look at King John, at what he was like and at how he ruled, at why men came to hate him and why they demanded Magna Carta from him.

King John

WHAT WAS HE LIKE ?

When King John died in 1216 he was buried in Worcester Cathedral where you can see his tomb today. It carries an *effigy* of the King which was made within twenty years of his death. It is made of marble; the nose and crown have been slightly damaged.

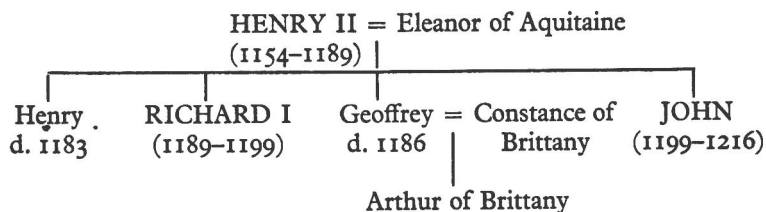
King John was a stocky man. When his tomb was opened in 1797 he was found to be 5 ft. 5 ins. tall. He would count as a small man today but was not regarded



Effigy of King John,
Worcester Cathedral

as noticeably small in his own day. He was a determined, energetic, ruthless person who loved hunting, feasting, jewelry and fine clothing. His death was probably brought on by too much eating and drinking, but a week before he died, when he was already sick with his last illness, he was still able to ride thirty miles a day. He liked to have a good time, but he also worked himself very hard.

King John insisted that nobody should ignore or invade his rights as King. He was frequently harsh. Sometimes he was cruel. We see this in the way he treated his nephew, Arthur of Brittany. Today, as you can see from this chart, Arthur would have become King of England in 1199 instead of John.



John managed to get the Crown for himself, but some of Arthur's friends put forward his claim to it. Arthur was thus a possible rival to John and became highly dangerous when he joined in plots and rebellions against his uncle in France. He was captured there in 1202 and imprisoned at Rouen in Normandy. It is probable that he was murdered soon afterwards; some thought that John committed the crime himself. We do not know whether this was so, but at least it must have been done on John's orders.

This crime was not the only one. In 1210 Matilda de Briouze, the wife of one of John's barons, was imprisoned in one of the King's castles, probably Windsor, and starved to death, along with her eldest son, William. We do not know the exact reasons for this. Matilda and her husband, also called William, possibly knew too much about how Arthur of Brittany had died. They had certainly failed to pay the very large debts which they owed the King. William had made war on the King's men, and Matilda had encouraged him. In the end William was outlawed and fled to France, where he died in exile.

These are blots on King John's character. But he lived at a time when kings sometimes committed this kind of crime if they considered it worthwhile. There was a good side to John's character as well. He was an educated person who was fond of reading. Sometimes he borrowed books from monastery libraries. We do not know whether he could write. He probably had no need to since his household clerks wrote letters for him. He had been trained in law and government by the old Chief *Justiciar* of Henry II, a learned and famous man called Ranulf Glanville.

When John travelled about his kingdom, he liked to hear and judge law cases.

He often took special care to see that the law was carried out properly and frequently consulted his justices and barons before giving judgement. He could be merciful; for example, when poor people could not pay the fines imposed on them by the justices they were sometimes given a pardon. In this matter of giving justice

skilfully and regularly, John was a much better king than his brother Richard the Lion-Heart, for Richard, who was a crusader, was scarcely ever in England and left his ministers to govern for him. Indeed, John maintained the law so well that some said that there had not been such a king since the days of King Arthur.



Richard I, from his seal

WHAT MEN SAID ABOUT KING JOHN

But only a few men thought like this. Practically all the history books in John's time were written by clergymen.



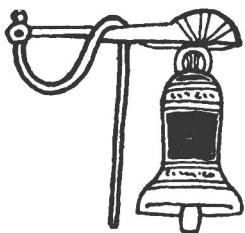
A monk at work on a chronicle

Most of these were monks who wrote their books, which they called *chronicles* or *annals*, in monasteries. Before all else, they loved their own order and their own religious house, and most of these men hated King John. He insisted that they should pay special taxes, for many of the monastic orders were very rich.

Also, the monks sided with the Pope in his great quarrel with King John. They quarrelled over who should be chosen as Archbishop of Canterbury and over which of them really should play the biggest part in choosing an archbishop. In 1208, after the dispute had lasted for more than two years, the Pope, whose name was Innocent III, placed England under an *Interdict*. This Interdict lasted until after the King had made his peace with the Pope in 1213. An Interdict meant that all church services ceased, except for baptisms and a sermon in the churchyards on Sundays. Church bells no longer rang. When Matthew Paris, a



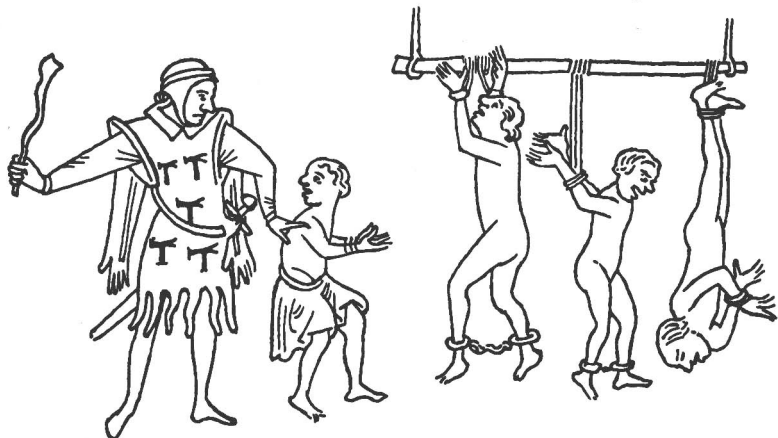
Innocent III



monk of St. Albans, wrote about this later, he remembered the silence of the bells and drew one with its rope looped in the margin of his chronicle.

King John quickly got his own back. He drove many of the clergy who supported the Pope out of England and seized the lands of many monasteries, putting his own men in charge of them. He gave other monastic lands to his favourite barons. Thus clergymen, especially monks, had reasons of their own for disliking the King and for attacking him in their writings.

Some of those who wrote about the King presented him as a monster, a cruel and greedy tyrant, lazy when he should have been most active, yet sometimes full of the energy of a madman, a man who *scoffed* at religion and who suffered from insane fits of rage. 'Foul as it is, Hell itself is defiled by the fouler presence of John', wrote one of them. Another called him 'Nature's enemy'.

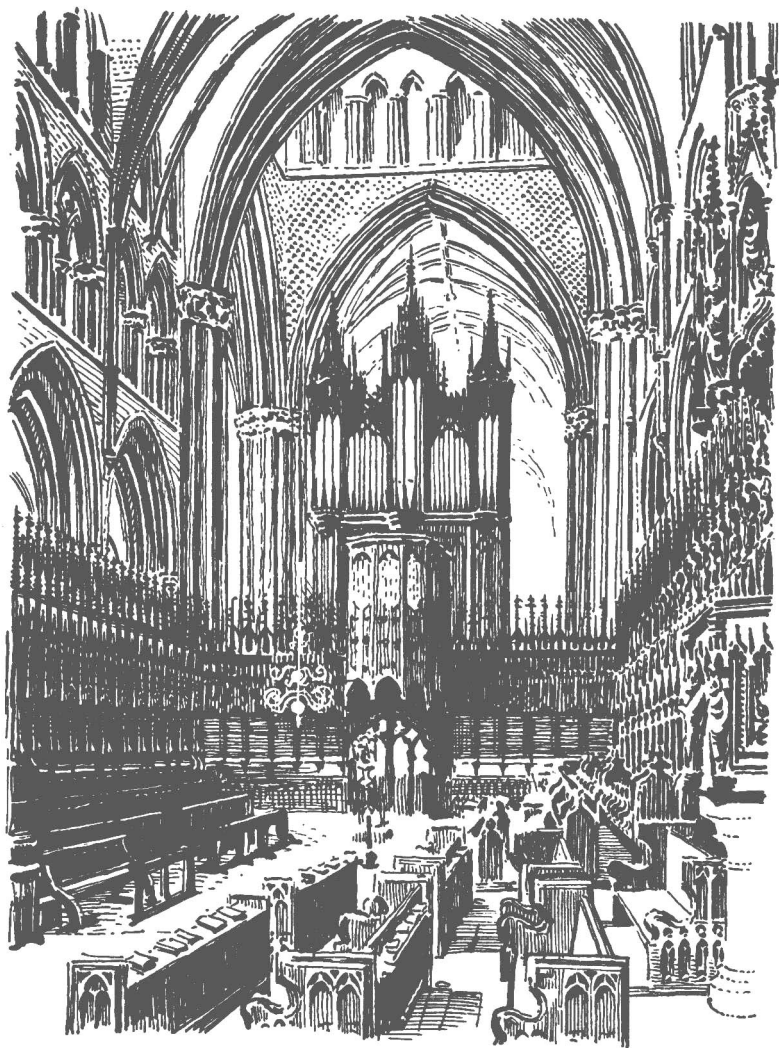


John's treatment of his people, as pictured by Matthew Paris

Most of this was untrue. Many of the stories about John's *brutality* were nothing but inventions. Writers repeated the worst gossip about the King as monks exchanged their news or as travellers carried it from one monastery to another. John was not a pious man, like his son, Henry III, but he certainly did not hate religion and the Church, as some writers said. For example, he made devout gifts to various churches and gave *alms* to the poor at Christmas, Easter and other festivals. He encouraged men to give money to Hugh of Avalon, Bishop of Lincoln, to help build the great new choir at Lincoln cathedral. He was especially fond of the church of Worcester and of its two bishops who had been made saints, St. Oswald and St. Wulfstan. St. Wulfstan was John's patron saint. If you turn back to the picture of the King's effigy on page 4 you will see that the two saints appear on it, one to each side of the King's head.

However, although most of the stories of the monks were untrue, men were still ready to listen to them. John was unpopular not only with the Church, but also with many barons and knights and with some of the townsfolk. Also, although he was clever and energetic, he failed to live up to what men thought a king should be, because he gave in too often. He lost most of his lands in France to King Philip of France. When he made up his quarrel with the Pope he surrendered his kingdom to the Pope and received it back again as the Pope's *vassal*. In 1215 he gave in to the barons' demands for Magna Carta. His reign ended in a bitter civil war. After his death most men were prepared to believe the worst of him. In their eyes he was a bad king.

This judgement was unfair. To understand this we must look at what he was trying to do.



Lincoln Cathedral: St. Hugh's Choir. The organ and stalls were put there much later

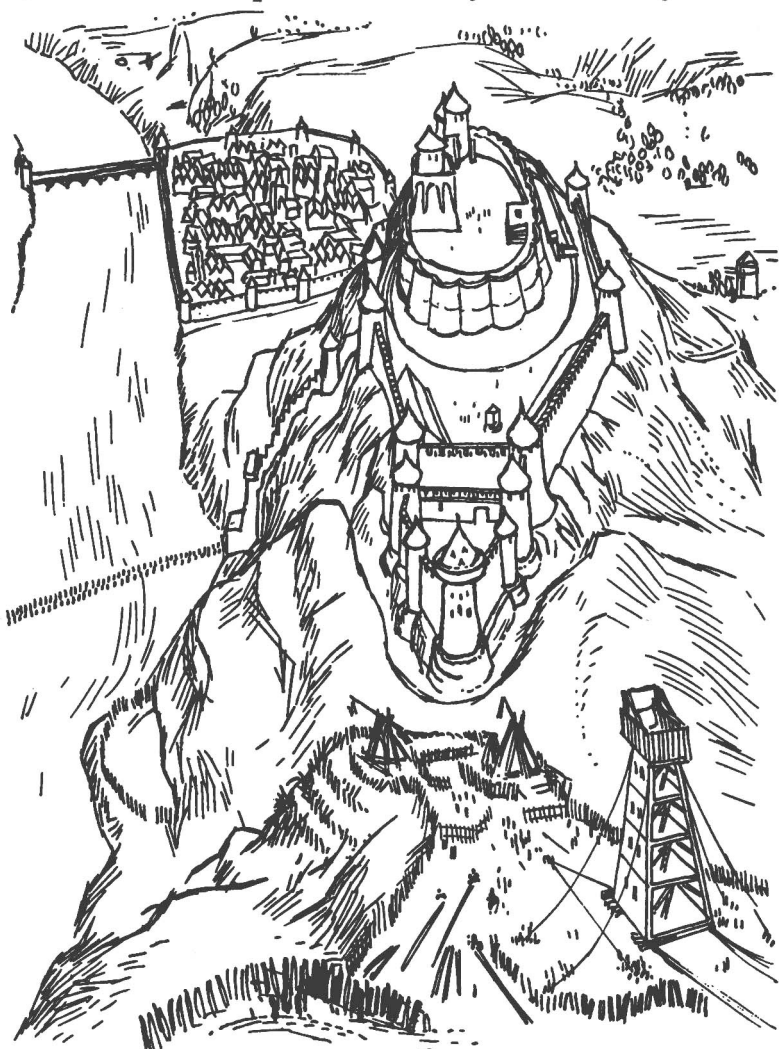
WHAT KING JOHN WAS TRYING TO DO

King John, his brother, King Richard the Lion-Heart, and his father, King Henry II, ruled over other lands besides England. These included the whole of western France, from Normandy and Brittany south to the county of Anjou and the enormous duchy of Aquitaine, which included Poitou and Gascony. They held these lands as vassals of the kings of France. Indeed, they controlled more of France than the kings of France did, and the French kings naturally objected to vassals who were more powerful than themselves. Henry II tried to get more lands in France, but he was not very successful in the end, for he had to pay more attention as time passed to defending what he already had. Richard the Lion-Heart had to fight especially hard to hold the frontiers of Normandy against the French. In 1196 he built a great new castle called Château Gaillard just inside the borders of Normandy at a place called Les Andelys on the banks of the river Seine. This is what it looks like today.



Château Gaillard today

The French finally seized many of these lands in the reign of King John. In 1204 they captured Château Gaillard and conquered the duchy of Normandy. In the



The siege of Château Gaillard