

Magna Carta

A background paper, courtesy Guildford Diocesan Synod

1. Two clauses of the Great Charter were and are of global significance, granting rights which remain central to civilised government the world over: no condemnation without due legal process and judgement of peers; and that justice should not be denied, delayed or sold.
2. The Church in England was central to the development of legal and human rights centuries before the French Revolution, now generally credited (with the Enlightenment) for the secular genesis of human rights: the first parties to the Charter were the bishops – led by Stephen Langton of Canterbury, who was a major drafter and mediator between the King and the Barons; and its first and last clauses state that the Church in England shall be free.
3. It is important that the Church's crucial and central rôle in Magna Carta and its rights is not air-brushed out in 2015 – as was the rôle of Christians in the anti-slave trade celebrations some years ago. (William Wilberforce had a single caption in the Liverpool exhibition and no mention of his specifically Christian motivation or of Thomas Clarkson at all.)
4. So the 800th Anniversary of Magna Carta in 2015 is an important opportunity to celebrate the Charter's principles which, in their evolution over the centuries, have established the rule of law that permits the Church herself and all our citizens to live in freedom: the freedom of the English Church (clause 1); due process before law (clauses 39-40); and democratic restraints upon the executive (clause 61); and for grateful celebration of the part played by Archbishop Stephen Langton in the Charter's formulation and implementation, and by the Archbishop of Dublin, the Bishops of London, Winchester, Bath, Lincoln, Worcester, Coventry and Rochester and the Master of the Temple who advised the King to seal the Charter (Preamble).
5. The Christian remembrance of Magna Carta should be a national Church of England concern as well as for Runnymede Deanery, where it was sealed, and what is now Guildford Diocese, in which Stephen Langton may have been born (near the foot of Leith Hill).
6. We anticipate the 800th Anniversary of the Sealing of Magna Carta will be celebrated with a great deal of fanfare and attention from across the world on 15 June 2015. In the lead in these celebrations will be lawyers and politicians rightly acknowledging the foundational importance of the Charter for democracy, constitutions and the rule of law. But there is more to celebrate in the Anniversary of Magna Carta and it will be for the Church to ensure that these aspects of the Charter are appropriately celebrated and emphasised.
7. The very first Clause of Magna Carta (which along with Clauses 13 - Liberties of the City of London - and 39 - due process - are still in force today as English Statute) is about the Liberties and Independence of the English Church. "First, that we have granted to God, and by this present charter have confirmed for us and our heirs in perpetuity, that the English Church shall be free, and shall have its rights undiminished, and its liberties unimpaired."
8. So foundational was this principle that the final Clause 63 repeated that the Church in England shall be free. That text in its original Latin (*Ecclesia Anglicana Libera Sit*) is carved in the stone above the West Door of St John's Egham, where heraldic crests of the attending Barons are displayed within and in which parish Runnymede itself lies.
9. We can celebrate the Church's major role in brokering the agreement between the King and the Barons, and Archbishop Stephen's key part in drafting the Charter to defend the rights and dignities not only of the Barons and Monarch but crucially of the commoners or Freemen of his day. In this way the Archbishop, along with the eight other Bishops played a crucial role part in transforming their community, and working for peace, justice and reconciliation. It is perhaps

significant that at the time of the 800th Anniversary we have an Archbishop of Canterbury who is also recognised for his work towards peace and reconciliation and his commitment to transforming society.

10. The resolution before General Synod was initially passed by the PCC at St John's Egham in September 2013, then at Runnymede Deanery Synod in October and Guildford Diocesan Synod last November.

11. The Resolution first calls on Synod to recognise the 800th Anniversary of Magna Carta in June 2015 as an important opportunity to celebrate the Charter's principles which have established freedom for the English Church and freedoms for individuals that have contributed to human flourishing in the British Isles and across the world;

12. Secondly, it urges dioceses, deaneries parishes and other church bodies to continue to play their part in transforming community by caring with the love of Christ for those in need or facing exploitation;

13. And thirdly the resolution encourages Churches to plan events that celebrate the Anniversary.

14. Some of these celebrations will be one off and focussed around the anniversary in 2015: there are plans for special services and evensongs in Cathedrals and Churches, and there is great scope for Churches in England to arrange special Civic Celebration services inviting representatives of Government, Law, Education, Welfare, and Commerce.

15. Plans are also afoot for church bells to be rung across the UK and further afield. Sunday 14th June has been designated a Big Ringing Day and new Methods have been developed, including one called Magna Carta Surprise Royal which was rung for the first time last March in Egham.

16. This will also be a great opportunity to plan street parties, community fairs or pageants or other local events and it is entirely appropriate for the Churches to take the lead and create a tremendous opportunity to serve and celebrate their local community. The Church may well be the only institution, and maybe even building, that was standing in your community 800 years ago.

17. Dioceses such as Salisbury and Lincoln, who have exemplification copies of Magna Carta, are planning significant programmes of events around the public display of these. New music commissioned for a Festival Eucharist will contribute to celebrating the living legacy of Magna Carta for social justice and liberty right around the world.

18. But the most enduring tribute to the Magna Carta would be to find ways to continue to transform your community through caring for those in need so we can use this opportunity to set up or expand ministries that directly demonstrate the love and care of the Church towards those who are marginalised and excluded. The Church in England shall be free: free to serve and free to express the love of Christ in words and deeds.

Mr Keith Malcouronne, Guildford