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Reseigh-Lincoln, D. (2015). Bad King John. *All About History*, (26), pp. 78-84.



Bad King John

Written by
Dom Reseigh-Lincoln

Reviled and revered in equal measure, King John I of England remains one of history's most provocative rulers. But was he as 'bad' as his enduring moniker suggests?

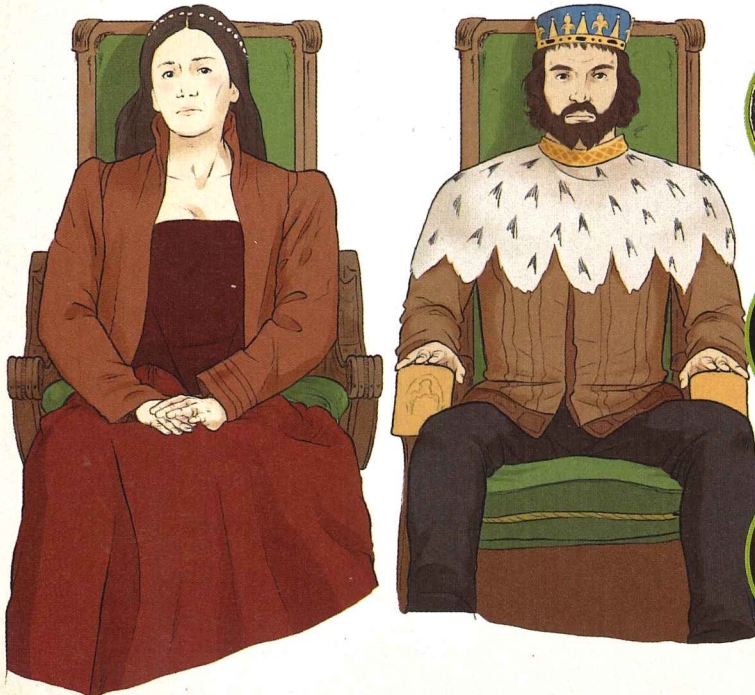


uch like the equally controversial king Charles I, who would throw his nation into the most devastating civil war in English history, John Lackland was never meant to be king. He entered the world on Christmas Eve 1167, the youngest legitimate son of Henry II of England and Eleanor of Aquitaine. His parents held sway over one of the most intimidating power bases in the world, the

Angevin Empire, covering half of France and all of England.

Even from a young age the prince was a cynical and, at times, ruthless character. His tutors would remark on his restless energy and common fits of rage, personality traits that also often flared up in his father. However, unlike the king, these flaws were rarely kept in check, their dark presence forming into cruelty and malice towards those around him. As his childhood began to fade away, his distrust of others grew, along with a deep sense of paranoia.

Despite his son's poor standing in the line of succession, Henry was far from uncaring towards his prospects. In 1171, Henry organised a betrothal between John and Alais, the daughter and heiress of Count Humbert III of Savoy. As part of the deal, John would acquire the future inheritance of Savoy, Maurienne and the count's other lands. In order to bolster John's stature, Henry also promised him the castles of Mirabeau, Chinon and Loudun.



The best and worst of British kings and queens

Alfred the Great 871-99

A precursor in some respects to the domestic resolve and foreign success of future kings Henry V and Edward III, Alfred not only defended his kingdom from a number of Viking invasions but also helped revolutionise England's military structure and legal system.



Henry V 1413-22

Immortalised by Shakespeare, Henry V was a rare commodity in the pantheon of Medieval rule. A fair yet direct monarch, Henry's reign was a relatively peaceful one domestically - which allowed him to wage a military career so successful he was named heir apparent to France.



Elizabeth I 1558-1603

When Elizabeth took to the throne in 1558, she inherited a realm deeply fractured by the reformation of her father and the Protestant purge of her sister. Yet, for all those pitfalls, Elizabeth helped usher in a climate of religious reconciliation and a golden age of economic and artistic growth.



Edward III 1327-77

Despite inheriting a kingdom wrought with problems following his father's disastrous reign, Edward III managed the impossible. A series of successful campaigns re-established England as a military stronghold and his overhaul of parliament changed the country forever.



John I 1199-1216

He may not have been the worst monarch in England's history, but a mixture of cruel personality traits, a military campaign that weakened England's hold over Europe and the refusal to honour Magna Carta, which led to civil unrest, saw him earn the moniker 'Bad King John'.



Mary I 1553-58

A palpable air of religious zeal will forever typify the brief reign of Mary Tudor. Her desire to return England to the Old Faith was so blind in its intent it led England into a disastrous alliance with Spain and a fever of public burnings so vicious it made Catholicism shorthand for persecution.



Charles I 1625-49

The almost polar opposite of his father James I, Charles was an introverted monarch easily manipulated by his wife, Henrietta Maria, and his Privy Council. His unwillingness to appease the rise of parliament as a political entity led to a civil war that nearly tore the country apart.



Magna Carta

THE ABRIDGED VERSION



'The guardian of the land of an heir who is under age shall take from it only reasonable revenues, customary dues, and feudal services. He shall do this without destruction or damage to men or property.'

No one can make money from other people's property.

'Inquests of novel disseisin, mort d'ancestor, and darrein presentment shall be

taken only in their proper county court.'

Property disputes should be settled in court.

'No free man shall be seized or imprisoned, or stripped of his rights or possessions, or outlawed or exiled, or deprived of his standing in any other way, nor will we proceed with force against him, or send others to do so, except by the lawful judgement of his equals or by the law of the land.'

Everyone has the right to a fair trial.

'All merchants may enter or leave England unharmed

and without fear, and may stay or travel within it, by land or water, for purposes of trade, free from all illegal exactions, in accordance with ancient and lawful customs.'

Merchants can travel and trade freely.

To no one will we sell, to no one will we refuse or delay, right or justice.

No one is above the law.



BAD KING JOHN



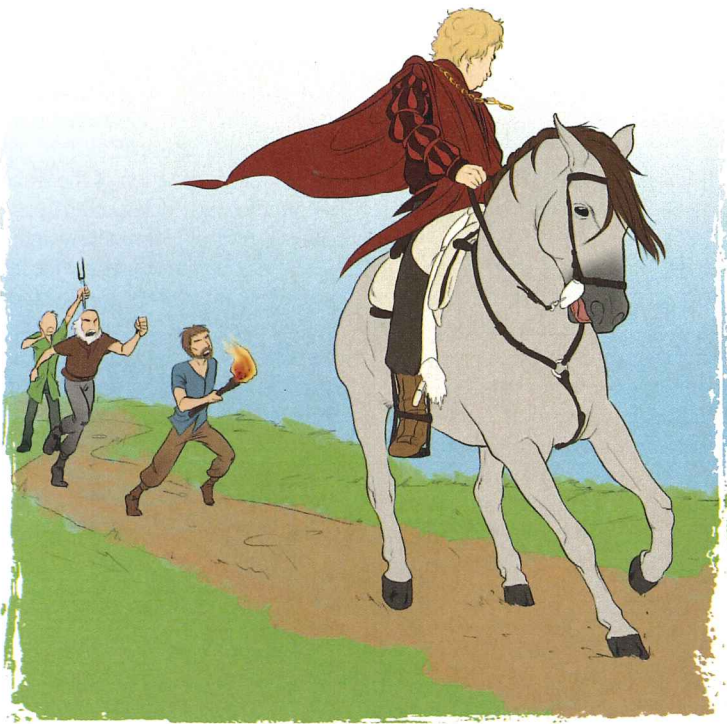
his move to legitimise John as part of royal strata did not best please his oldest brother and heir to the throne, Henry the Younger. The disgruntled heir apparent fumed at the idea of lands and castles that should eventually pass to him being divvied up among his siblings. Yet, despite gaining a potential foothold in the politics of Medieval Europe, John's run of good fortune ran out when Alais died before they could marry. As fast as it had formed, John's potential inheritance was obliterated.

In 1173, the disenfranchised Henry the Younger, backed by his mother Eleanor, made a vie for power. With his brothers Geoffrey and Richard encouraged to join him, the move sparked a brief series of rebellions between 1173 and 1174. Henry II would eventually bring the rebellions to an end, but the uprisings proved just how cannibalistic a royal family could become if the balance of power was shifted too far.

Henry the Younger, for all his posturing, would retain his place as the English king's heir apparent, but it would be John that would benefit most from the conflict. As the revolts were raging across the region, the young John joined the king at his side. Despite his rebellious nature, John clearly understood the importance of showing allegiance to his father. Within months of the rebellion's beginnings, the king could often be found proclaiming that John was his favourite child, and began granting the young prince lands and titles across England and

Normany. In 1175, King Henry took this one step further by arranging a new betrothal, this time to Isabella of Gloucester, the wealthy daughter of the Duke of Gloucester.

In 1177, when John was a mere ten years old, Henry decided that he would grant his youngest son a position of tangible power and appointed him Lord of Ireland. When John arrived on Irish soil eight years later with a contingent of 300 knights and a council of administrators, he found a country still sore from the strains of an Anglo-Norman occupation. This was a scenario that the 18-year-old John would only make worse - as soon as he landed he went about insulting most of the Irish nobles he met, belittling their long beards and clothes, and failing to make valuable allies with the Anglo-Norman settlers. Before the year was over, John had been driven out, his first attempt at power ending in abject humiliation.



Elsewhere, the House of Plantagenet was in disarray. Henry the Younger, now Junior King of England, and his younger brother Richard, who had supported him in his rebellion against their father, had come to blows over the future of the kingdom. But Henry the Young King would succumb to dysentery in 1183 aged 28, with his father officially recognising Richard as his legitimate heir. As part of this reshuffling of positions, John's older brother Geoffrey would retain power in Brittany and John would be made Duke of Aquitaine.

Three years later, Geoffrey was killed in a jousting tournament, bringing John one step closer to the throne. With their father in ill health, and his own desire to lead a new crusade in the Holy Land growing with each passing season, Richard feared Henry would appoint John king in his absence, so he formed an alliance with the French king Philip II in 1187 and waged war against his father's remaining forces. John initially remained faithful to his father, but eventually switched sides when Richard's resilience began to win out.



Henry II, King of England, died on 6 July 1189 and Richard ascended the throne soon after. The next decade saw John embrace the ruthlessness that had typified his youth. While Richard conducted the Third Crusade from 1189 to 1192, John conspired to replace the man who governed England in his absence, Richard's steward and justiciar, William Longchamp. Richard's justiciar was

unpopular with the people and the nobles alike, so John positioned himself as an alternative steward of the English throne. When Richard failed to return from the crusade as expected, John began spreading propaganda that the Lionheart had died in battle, presenting himself as the only true claimant to the crown.

In reality, Richard had been taken hostage by Holy Roman Emperor Henry VI. Knowing that his brother still remained immensely popular with the nobility, John had no choice but to pay the extortionate ransom to release the king. Upon his release in 1194, Richard openly forgave John for his attempts to overthrow him but stripped him of all his lands, with the exception of his lordship in Ireland. It was a prime example of the relationship that existed between the two brothers - one the dashing absentee king riding the wave of adulation

BAD KING JOHN



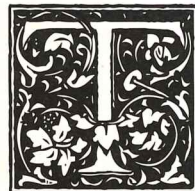
that came with new foreign conquests, the other a paranoid bureaucrat more concerned with the machinations of his kingdom's inner workings. Still, John remained relatively loyal to Richard for the remainder of the Lionheart's reign until his death on 6 April 1199.

John ascended the English throne and became the head of the Angevin Empire at the age of 32, but his succession wouldn't be without obstacles. Arthur of Brittany, the eldest son of his brother Geoffrey, had a stronger claim to the throne, but Richard had openly named John as his heir in the final years of his reign. Unfortunately, as with every succession in the Middle Ages, even the smallest claim could divide a kingdom. John's coronation took place in Westminster on 27 May 1199, with the majority of the nobility in England and Normandy backing his claim and recognising his kingship. Arthur, on the other hand, had the backing of Breton, Anjou and Maine nobles, as well as the support of Philip II. The shrewd French monarch was doing everything he could to undermine the Angevin Empire that John's father had worked so hard to maintain.

John would, after fortifying defences along the borders of Normandy and renewing alliances with Count Baldwin of Flanders and Renaud of Boulogne, eventually hold back Arthur and Philip's advances, forcing a truce in January 1200. The treaty would become one of John's defining moments as a ruler. As part of the agreement, Philip renounced his support of Arthur's claim and recognised John as the rightful successor of Richard and ruler of his Angevin lands. In turn, John agreed to break his alliance with Flanders and Boulogne and accept Philip as the unchallenged overlord of his French holdings. Such a move was incredibly unpopular across England and the Angevin territories, earning him the title of 'John Softsword' among his other people.

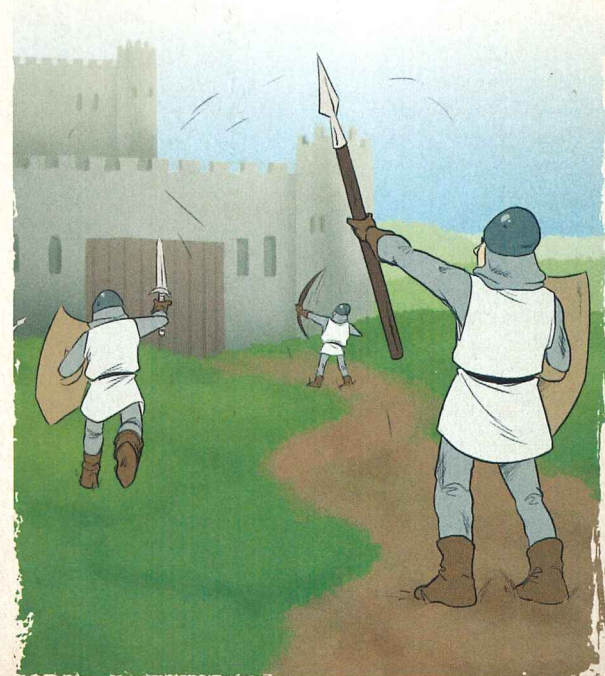
The peace would last a mere two years. John had become obsessed with the 12-year-old daughter of Count Aymer of Angouleme, Isabella. He had his marriage to Isabella of Gloucester annulled and married the girl in August 1200, sparking the conflict anew. Isabella had been promised to the powerful French noble Hugh de Lusignan and the jilted ex-fiancé turned to the manipulative Philip II for help.

John was summoned to the French court to answer for his actions (including rumours that he'd captured and murdered his nephew and former rival, Arthur of Brittany). John, ever the firebrand, refused to cooperate and Philip stripped him of almost all his foreign lands and proceeded to invade Normandy. Chateau Gaillard, John's nigh on impregnable castle, fell following a long and bloody siege in 1203, and most of Normandy fell soon after. His funds exhausted, John was forced to flee back to England, the Plantagenet's hold over Europe finally broken.



he king soon turned his attention to more domestic matters of state, a role that his father had revelled in during his younger years. Unlike his father, John paid little heed to the nobles and leaders that he crossed as part of his administrative duties as king, but he did excel at the bureaucratic management of his kingdom. His interference in the election of the new Archbishop of Canterbury in 1205, however, would provoke the ire of the pope himself, with the pontiff placing an interdict that forbade church services from taking place in England for six years, as well as excommunicating the troublesome king for his continued belligerence.

With the immolation of the Angevin Empire still fresh in the mind of the nobles and barons, and the nation in a state of religious turmoil, John wisely agreed a treaty with the pope in 1213. However, unfortunately for John, the damage had already been done and the disgruntled barons had had their fill of a king who would answer to no one but himself. Faced with the prospect of an armed revolt that could tear the kingdom asunder, John had no choice but to sign a renewed version of Henry I's Coronation Charter on 15 June 1215. Known as



King John's road to ruin

3 Berwick-upon-Tweed
December 1215 - Spring 1216
 With the rebels on the back foot, they turn to their closest ally of power, Alexander II of Scotland. He begins capturing towns, so John marches to meet him, burning Berwick-upon-Tweed to the ground.

7 Newark Castle, Nottinghamshire
October 1216
 After marching into rebel-held East Anglia in September 1216, John is believed to have contracted dysentery while resting in King's Lynn. By this time, John's forces have entered into a stalemate with the rebels. The king's health finally fails him after he reaches Newark Castle.

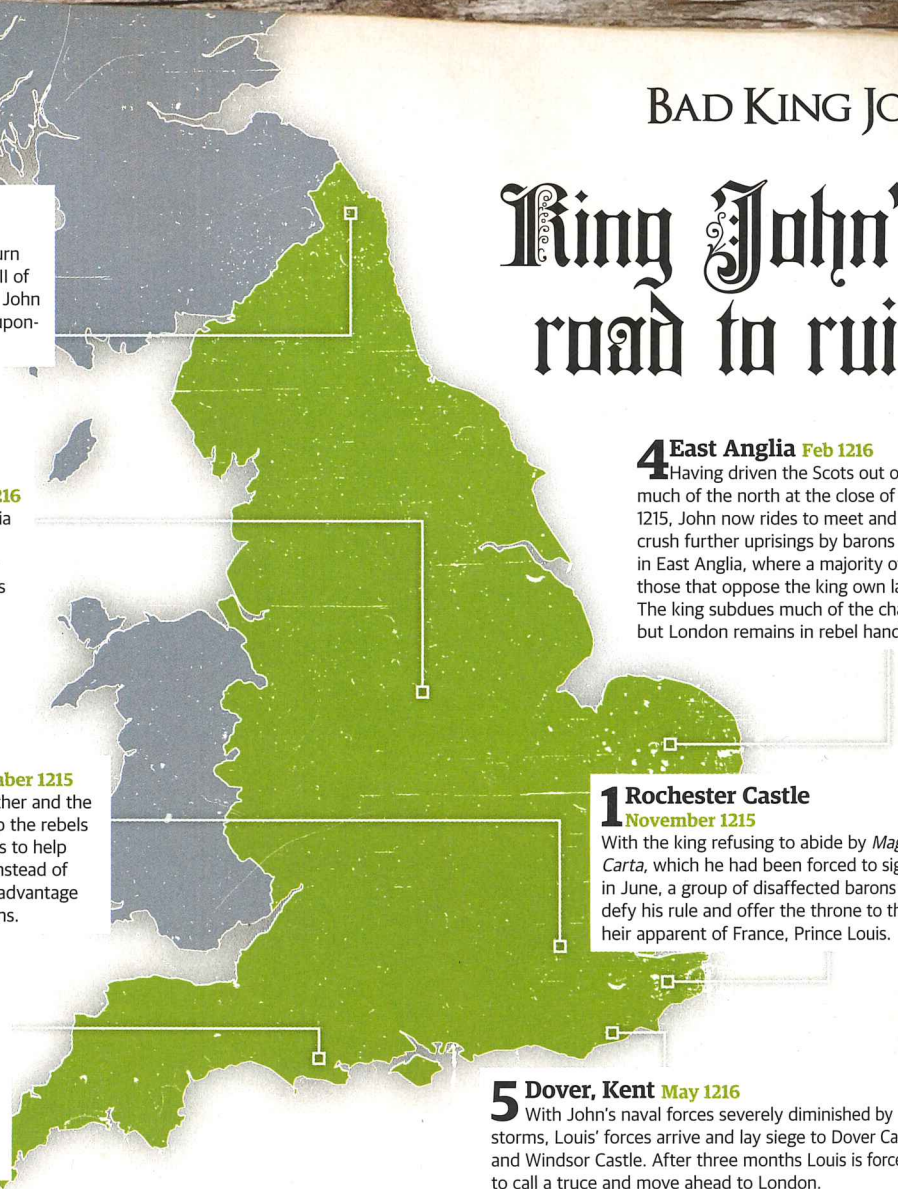
2 London/East Anglia
November 1215
 Despite discouragement from his father and the pope himself, Prince Louis agrees to help the rebels and sends a contingent of French knights to help the rebels maintain control of London. Instead of pushing to take London, John loses the advantage and instead harries rebel-controlled towns.

6 Corfe Castle, Dorset
August 1216
 With Louis now controlling a third of the country, including London, John is forced to consolidate his forces in Dorset, where he plans to retake the south from the French usurper.

4 East Anglia
Feb 1216
 Having driven the Scots out of much of the north at the close of 1215, John now rides to meet and crush further uprisings by barons in East Anglia, where a majority of those that oppose the king own land. The king subdues much of the chaos but London remains in rebel hands.

1 Rochester Castle
November 1215
 With the king refusing to abide by *Magna Carta*, which he had been forced to sign in June, a group of disaffected barons defy his rule and offer the throne to the heir apparent of France, Prince Louis.

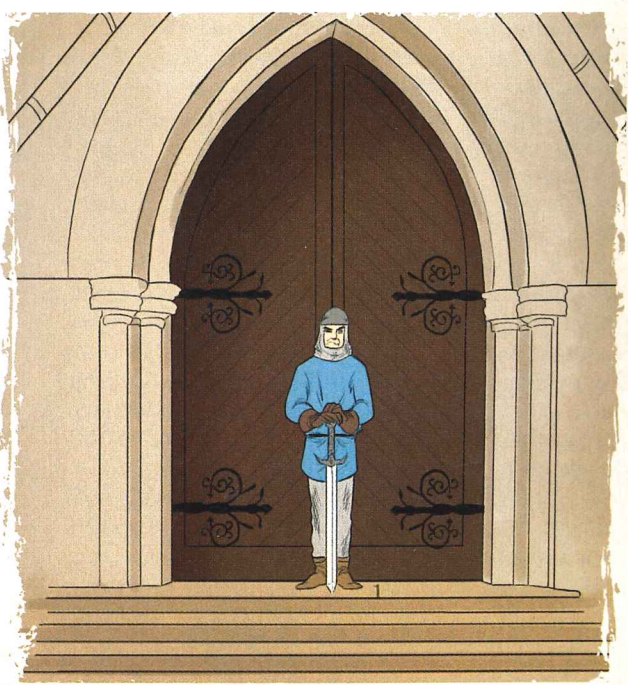
5 Dover, Kent
May 1216
 With John's naval forces severely diminished by storms, Louis' forces arrive and lay siege to Dover Castle and Windsor Castle. After three months Louis is forced to call a truce and move ahead to London.



Magna Carta, the document reiterated the king's responsibility to his subjects and his lands. Rather than being designed to bind the king, *Magna Carta* was created to uphold the liberties of England's citizens.

Such a moment was meant to be one of peace, a triumph for civil liberties among the seemingly endless strife that had dogged England since Richard the Lionheart's death and his malicious brother John's ascension. But the king had only signed the treaty to placate his nobles. After all his clashes with the Vatican, John now turned to the new pontiff, Pope Innocent III, for help. John placed himself at his mercy, proclaiming the charter an infringement of the 1213 agreement that deemed the pope as John's feudal lord. Pope Innocent was inclined to agree, calling the charter "not only shameful and demeaning, but illegal and unjust." He then excommunicated the barons involved in forcing John to sign, plunging the country into the civil conflict known as the First Barons' War.

So why did only the barons, members of England's elite class, decide to rebel against the king? The answer lies in John's approach to taxation. For all his faults he was a shrewd administrator who knew the only way to fund his exhaustive wars on the continent was to levy taxes on the rich.



BAD KING JOHN



he most lucrative tool that John used to gather funds was 'scutage'. All barons were sworn to serve in military campaigns as part of their royal fealty, but these moneyed individuals could pay a feudal aid that released them from this duty if they did not wish to fight. This tax remained relatively unchanged under the reign of John's brother Richard I, but his successor increased it from one marc (the unit of taxation used at the time, roughly equivalent to two thirds of a Medieval pound and about £4,000-£5,000 in modern Sterling) to a staggering two marcs. The fact that John forced this tax through even when the nation wasn't at war was the splinter that would eventually lead his gentry to revolt.

The rebellion lasted for two years, fuelled by the barons' desire to finally bring their wayward king to heel and by the support of Prince Louis, the heir apparent of Philip II. Ironically, it was a conflict neither side particularly wanted to fight. The barons certainly had no desire to throw their nation into turmoil - the fact that they were forced to turn to an overzealous prince to escalate matters proves that the gentry had been backed into a political corner. In fact, Louis' presence in England and the presence of a formidable French invasion force ended up posing as much of a threat to the infrastructure of England as John did.

By the time of his death in October 1216, reportedly from dysentery, the same illness that claimed his eldest brother Henry, John had left the kingdom he inherited a shadow of its former self. The Angevin Empire of his predecessors had collapsed under poor political decisions and failed military campaigns, and England's standing with its neighbours and rivals was significantly diminished. Its funds had been

How did Magna Carta change England?

Professor Scott Davidson

Scott Davidson is the deputy vice chancellor for teaching quality and student experience at the University of Lincoln. He is a legal scholar and historian specialising in international law and human rights. He holds a degree of the Doctor of Laws from Canterbury University, New Zealand.

"*Magna Carta* is perhaps better known for what people think it says rather than what it actually says, but there is no doubt that it has had a profound effect on the constitutional law of England and beyond, particularly in the United States of America. Many of the ideas and principles that we take for granted today have their seeds in the *Great Charter*. The requirement that the monarch must call an 'assembly of the realm' to debate tax increases provides a glimpse of the origins of parliament, while the incipient ideas of due process of law, the preservation of property rights and the right to protection of the person can be discerned in *Magna Carta*. The words of Chapter 40, which declares 'to no one will we sell, to no one deny or delay right or justice,' still resonate in the law of England today."

drained and his inadequacies as a leader and a commander had left a once powerful nation wide open to invasion.

Yet for all his mistakes, most fuelled by his telltale ruthlessness, John did have some positive impacts on his realm. Record keeping and administrative duties maintained in his father's reign flourished under John's stewardship, as did the judicial system. John showed a great interest in the proliferation of justice, with the royal courts becoming more involved in regional cases than ever before. Sadly, such improvements to Medieval life have long been buried beneath the actions of men too flawed to rule.

