

Celebrating Lincoln Magna Carta

Words: Helen Wilson Photographs: Dick Makin

Lincoln is justly proud of its Cathedral and Norman castle but the other great treasure in the city, Magna Carta, is often overlooked. This is not true of the USA where Magna Carta is celebrated as one of the inspirations for the Bill of Rights and the US Constitution.

For the last three years the Chapter of Lincoln Cathedral, the owners of this iconic document, have been working to develop an ambitious exhibition programme in the USA and elsewhere, with Magna Carta as its centrepiece. This has many advantages. It helps promote Lincoln and Lincolnshire to American visitors, it secures much needed income towards the Cathedral's upkeep, and it promotes discussion of important issues about the rule of law at a time when individual liberty is threatened by anti-terrorism legislation.

As Philip Buckler, the Dean of Lincoln explains- *"It reminds us of the rule of law, the principles of Justice to which we must hold, the freedom of religion which we must cherish and the danger of unlimited power which needs to be regulated"*.

Its most famous clause states that – "No free man shall be seized or imprisoned, or stripped of his rights or possessions, or outlawed or exiled nor will we proceed with force against him except by the lawful judgement of his equals or by the law of the land. To no one will we sell, to no one deny or delay right or justice".

A LITTLE HISTORY

Magna Carta, or Great Charter is, perhaps, the most significant single document in the history of constitutional government. In 1215 the majority of the great feudal lords in England rebelled against King John's repressive and rapacious rule. After seizing London in May 1215, the Barons and Bishops forced John to agree to their terms on June 15th at the famous field of Runnymede. These terms were later dictated to teams of scribes and copies of the agreement were sent to Sheriffs and Bishops throughout England. This document later became known as Magna Carta or Great Charter.

One of these came to Lincoln and still carries the address "Lincolnia" on the reverse side. It has been here now for 793 years carefully preserved by Lincoln Cathedral. Only three other 1215 versions survive – one at Salisbury and two at the British Library, although one of these was so damaged in a fire it cannot be read.



MAGNA CARTA IN THE USA

In spring 2007 Magna Carta was on display in Virginia Beach for twelve weeks as part of their commemoration of the first landing in Virginia by Captain John Smith, one of Lincolnshire's famous sons. It then travelled to the National Constitution Centre in Philadelphia as part of an exhibition

for the 150th anniversary of the National Education Association, the largest education association in the USA.

This year plans are well underway for a three month exhibition in the Fraunces Tavern Museum in New York from November 2008 to January 2009. Negotiations are progressing for a subsequent exhibition in the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in California in early 2009. Further exhibitions in other Presidential Libraries are also proposed.

Lincoln Magna Carta has had a particularly close association with the USA. Just how close was revealed recently when a later, 1297, copy of Magna Carta was auctioned in December 2007 by Sotheby's of New York for over £10 million. The auction catalogue tells how the Lincoln Magna Carta was nearly gifted to the American people. In 1939 it was in New York for the World Fair. When war was declared it was deposited for safe keeping in the Library of Congress and spent much of its time in Fort Knox. During this period the British War Cabinet, anxious to encourage the USA to enter the war on our side, discussed making a gift of the Lincoln Magna Carta to the US people. They failed however to consult with the Dean and Chapter of Lincoln who, there is every reason to suppose, would have refused consent outright.

MAGNA CARTA IN LINCOLN

Since the early 1990's Lincoln Magna Carta has been on loan to Lincolnshire County Council. It is now on public display as part of a special exhibition in Lincoln Castle.

For the last three years there have been special events in Lincoln in June to commemorate the sealing of Magna Carta.

This year the Cathedral's vellum replica will be part of a small exhibition in the Cathedral stand at the Lincolnshire Show on 18th and 19th June.

On the 25th to 28th June, the University of Lincoln will be hosting a forum on 'Magna Carta 2008: Exploring Democracy'. Tony Benn, Lord Falconer and Dr Liam Fox MP will be among the guest speakers in attendance, with the Chancellor of Lincoln Cathedral, The Rev Canon

Mike West. The university will also welcome academics and students from across the world to participate in these sessions. For more information about this forum please contact the University of Lincoln on 01522 886626 or email events@lincoln.ac.uk

There are also two lectures in the Cathedral open to the public— the details are given in the box below – and a special exhibition in the Cathedral Library. Why not come and found out more about this very special part of Lincoln's history.



MAGNA CARTA EVENTS: 20 AND 21 JUNE

Friday 20 June, 7.30 p.m., the Annual Magna Carta Lecture in the Chapter House

Drinks in the Cloister at 7 p.m. Lecture starts at 7.30 p.m. Baroness Butler-Sloss, retired Senior Judge and President of the Family Division of the High Court, 1999 - 2005, speaks on Magna Carta and Modern-Day Justice.

Tickets are free. Apply in person to Lincoln Minster Shop, or in writing to the Cathedral Library enclosing an SAE (Minster Yard, Lincoln LN2 1PX)h8

Saturday 21 June, 3 p.m., afternoon lecture in the Wren Library 'The Charter of the Forest, 1217, its Background and Implementation' Dr David Crook (formerly of the Public Record Office, Kew)

Although the Dean and Chapter's 1215 Magna Carta is famous, their less well known 1217 Charter of the Forest is also of great interest. It amplifies the clauses in Magna Carta that deal with the rights of ordinary people living in royal forests. One of only two surviving copies, it will be on view in the Medieval Library.

Tickets £6 (including a cup of tea afterwards) from the Cathedral Library.

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