

## **'King John was not a Good Man – Understanding Magna Carta on its 800<sup>th</sup> Anniversary'**

**Dr Alan Crosby**



Dr Crosby began by pointing out that those involved in the development of the Magna Carta in the twelfth century could not have realized its true importance. There was a time when it looked as if it would become a footnote rather than central in the political history of Britain and other English speaking nations. Within 25 years of its sealing it was being used in courts and had become a key document. By the fourteenth century it had become symbolic and in the fifteenth century ordinary people were seeing it as offering freedoms and guarantees. In the sixteenth century England is seen as well governed compared to other countries and the Magna Carta is considered an important factor. In 1630 Parliament turns to Magna Carta as a cornerstone of the rights of the individual. It becomes both symbolic and a practical charter in many British colonies and in the twentieth century it is used to support human rights.

Dr Crosby went on to discuss the personalities and processes behind Magna Carta and how it survived. King John has acquired a bad reputation over the centuries and Dr Crosby drew on historical texts to help paint a picture of his character. He was able, liked administration and was interested in the law but the records show him to have varied from being effective to incompetent. He appears to have been decadent, lazy, unpredictable, wayward and erratic. His behavior was often shocking and he meted out savage punishment to his enemies. One historian said, 'Foul as it is, hell itself is defiled by the Presence of King John'.

Dr Crosby pointed out that the early twelfth society was changing. England was now a unified kingdom with relatively strong central control and administration. There was rapid economic and population growth. The law was being formalized and becoming more complex. Ideas of government were evolving – what were the King's obligations, should the King consult. It is against this background that John became king. He was also an unexpected king as he was the youngest of four brothers. As the youngest he inherited few titles and little land, becoming known as 'John Lackland'. He came to the throne in 1199 following the death of his brother Richard I, the two older brothers having died earlier.

Soon after becoming King, John engaged in a series of wars with France and within Britain. The first French campaigns ended in defeat and the humiliating loss of Normandy. He successfully invaded Scotland, Ireland and Wales but then invaded France again where his army is crushed. In 1204 he became involved in a damaging dispute with the church over the appointment of the new Archbishop of Canterbury, which resulted in a papal Interdict. The barons had become appalled at the extravagant cost of the wars, the loss of lands in France, the disputes with the church and the lack of any consultation by the King. In 1214 a group of barons rose up against John and this led to civil war in 1215. Discussions began about how John's powers could be restricted which led, in June 1215 to the Magna Carta. It is unlikely that John intended to fully implement the agreement and a second civil war flared up in September of the year. John persuaded the Pope to annul the Magna Carta. The Barons became increasingly frustrated and invited Louis of France to come to England. John died from dysentery in 1216 and was succeeded by his son Henry III. Loyal barons defeated Louis and rebel barons in 1217. All the barons then united around the new King.

William Marshall is responsible for seeing the transition of power on John's death and eventually becomes Regent of England. He can be fairly said to be responsible for rescuing Magna Carta. The barons were thinking of themselves and their rights in Magna Carta but it soon gained wider relevance. It was reissued in the name of the new King in 1217. Copies widely distributed and were read out at public gatherings. Further revisions and reissues took place over the next 20 to 30 years and by that time it had become a reference point in the law and when considering peoples rights.

*Mike Hornung September 2015*