

MAGNA CARTA

The four official engrossments held by
The Bodleian Library, University of Oxford

Magna Carta (issue of 1217)

Sent by the royal chancery to Oxfordshire. Well preserved, apart from the loss of one of its two seals, that of William Marshal; the surviving oval seal in dark green wax shows the papal legate Cardinal Guala in his ecclesiastical robes. The landscape format of the parchment is rarer but not unique amongst the other surviving originals. The Oxfordshire destination is inferred from its medieval storage in the archives of the Augustinian Abbey of Osney (Osney), near Oxford. The archives passed soon after 1539 to the Chapter House of Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford, from where those charters not related to Christ Church lands were given in 1667 to Anthony Wood (1632–1695). Bequeathed by Wood to the Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford, and transferred from there to the Bodleian Library in 1860.

Approx. 11.6 in. x 16 in. (296 x 410 mm.). 43 lines.
MS. Ch. Oxon. Osney 142c

Magna Carta (issue of 1217)

Another original evidently also sent by the royal chancery to Oxfordshire and stored later at Osney Abbey. The text is written in the larger and more usual upright format. The round equestrian seal in green wax of William Marshal the elder survives, that of Cardinal Guala is lost. Three large but regularly spaced holes in the parchment suggest that it was nibbled by rodents whilst still folded. Bequest of Anthony Wood (1695), as above.

Approx. 19.3 x 14.9 in. (490 x 378 mm.). 66 lines.
MS. Ch. Oxon. Osney 142b

Magna Carta (issue of 1217)

Sent by the royal chancery to Gloucestershire. William Marshal's equestrian seal in green wax on the right is well preserved, that of Cardinal Guala in white wax on the left entirely defaced. Otherwise in fine condition. Later medieval endorsements on the back are characteristic of St Peter's Abbey, Gloucester (now Gloucester Cathedral), where it must have been stored. Received by the Bodleian Library in 1755 in the bequest of Richard Furney (1694–1753), archdeacon of Surrey, a native of Gloucester and former schoolmaster at Gloucester Cathedral (1719–24).

Approx. 19.3 x 16.6 in. (490 x 422 mm.). 56 lines.
MS. Ch. Glouc. 8

Magna Carta (issue of 1225)

The parchment is damaged at the foot, where the missing Great Seal of Henry III would once have been attached. The King had assumed nominal control of his own seal in 1223, on nearing his majority. Although catalogued separately at the Bodleian by 1878 as a 'London' charter (on the basis of its issue by the royal chancery at Westminster), the document carries an earlier numbering on the back which places it in sequence with the two Osney charters of 1217. Accordingly, it most likely followed the same path as those, via Osney Abbey, Christ Church, Anthony Wood and the Ashmolean Museum to the Bodleian Library in 1860.

Approx. 18.6 x 11.7 in. (472 x 298 mm.). 72 lines.
MS. Ch. London 1

MAGNA CARTA Oxford to the Manitoba Legislative Building

On the occasion of the visit by Her Majesty Queen
Elizabeth II to Winnipeg, Manitoba, July 3, 2010

The Great Charter agreed on 15 June 1215 between King John and his barons at Runnymede near Windsor remains to this day one of the world's great symbols of freedom and the rule of law. Its declaration that no free man should be imprisoned without due process underlies the development of common law in England and the concepts of individual liberty and constitutional government which created the United States of America.

The document here displayed is an original Magna Carta – not a copy, but an official engrossment or exemplification of the Latin text, sent out by the royal chancery to Oxfordshire in 1217. No master-prototype has survived from King John's ceremony at Runnymede. Instead, engrossments were distributed to county courts across England by the chancery, both in 1215 and as official reissues another five times before 1300, in the succeeding reigns of John's son Henry III and grandson Edward I. Seventeen such originals still survive from the 13th century, as sent out during the three reigns: four from the first issue of 1215, one of 1216, four of 1217, four of 1225, none of 1265 and four of 1297.

The one example now kept permanently in the United States is from 1297, evidently dispatched to the county of Buckinghamshire. It had formerly belonged to the Brudenell family of Deene Park, Northamptonshire. It was bought in 1983 by Ross Perot and loaned for display at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. In December 2007 it was sold at auction by the Perot foundation at Sotheby's, New York, to David M. Rubinstein, who has generously returned it to the National Archives for further long-term loan

and display. Another example of 1297 is displayed in the Parliament House of Australia at Canberra. The other fifteen all belong to eight institutions in England. Single charters are now held at the cathedrals of Lincoln, Salisbury and Hereford, and at the London Metropolitan Archives; two each at Durham (Cathedral Muniments) and the National Archives in London; three more at the British Library in London; and four at the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

The Bodleian charter here displayed is one of the Library's three originals of the solemn reissue of November 1217. Its heading names the boy king Henry III, then just ten years old, who had succeeded his father in 1216. Power was held by his guardians, William Marshal the elder and the papal legate, so this document carried their seals, not Henry's. Marshal's is now lost, but Cardinal Guala's oval seal still survives, with his portrait in ecclesiastical robes.

The destination of this parchment original may be inferred as the shire court of Oxfordshire, since it was evidently stored throughout the Middle Ages at Osney Abbey, just outside Oxford. After the Abbey's dissolution in 1539, its archives passed to Christ Church Cathedral, where in 1667 the antiquary Anthony Wood was given his pick of those charters which did not relate directly to lands held by Christ Church. Wood bequeathed his manuscripts (1695) to the Ashmolean Museum, which transferred them to the Bodleian Library in 1860. Thus the charter has been in Oxfordshire since 1217 and has belonged to Oxford University for over three centuries. This overseas trip in 2010 is the first time it has left home in nearly 800 years.



Seal of Cardinal Guala, 1217
MS. Ch. Oxon. Osney 142c*



Seal of William Marshal the elder, 1217
MS. Ch. Oxon. Osney 142b*

