

British churches to celebrate Magna Carta's 800th birthday by reasserting its Christian heritage

by [Trevor Grundy](#)

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CANTERBURY, England (RNS) Churches are planning a major campaign to reassert Britain's Christian heritage on the 800th anniversary of the signing of the Magna Carta.

The Magna Carta is the 13th-century document enshrining the rights, privileges and liberties of the clergy and the nobles. It is also considered a founding document for human rights.

"It is one of the most hallowed documents in the world . . . written into the constitution of numerous countries and admired as a foundation stone in the Western traditions of liberty and the rule of law," said Dan Jones, author of *Magna Carta: The Making and Legacy of the Great Charter*.

After King John of England violated a number of ancient laws and customs, the country's barons forced him to sign the Magna Carta (Great Charter) in 1215 at the small picturesque village of Runnymede alongside the River Thames west of London.

The document enumerates the church's right to appoint its own clergy, bishops, and archbishops following a bitter church-state row about who should be archbishop of Canterbury—the man appointed by King John or Pope Innocent III's appointee, Stephen Langton.

The row became so bitter that the pope excommunicated the king and declared an "interdict" on England, which meant ordinary people were denied the sacraments.

"England's bishops played a major role securing peace by acting as the middlemen in a war of interests between King John and his barons and knights that could easily

have led to civil war and the break-up of the kingdom,” said Sophie Ambler, a specialist in 13th-century history at the University of East Anglia.

The 2015 campaign to mark the 800th anniversary kicked off earlier this month with a dinner ceremony attended by the British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond, U.S. Ambassador Matthew Barzun, and Bishop of London Richard Chartres.

Throughout the year, churches, schools, colleges, universities and libraries will hold exhibitions, lectures and other events about the Magna Carta, emphasizing the way 13th-century Christians influenced its contents.

Shakespeare’s famous theater in London—the Globe—will put on a play called “The Troublesome Reign of King John.”

Ceremonies marking the 800th anniversary will be held throughout the English-speaking world but the highlight will be at Runnymede Meadows where the document was signed. Queen Elizabeth II is expected to attend.

There are only four copies of the Magna Carta in existence—one held at Salisbury Cathedral, another at Lincoln Cathedral and two in the British Library in London.