



# 1215: The Year of Magna Carta

*By Danny Danziger, John Gillingham*

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From bestselling author Danny Danziger and medieval expert John Gillingham comes a vivid look at the signing of the Magna Carta and how this event illuminates one of the most compelling and romantic periods in history.

Surveying a broad landscape through a narrow lens, *1215* sweeps readers back eight centuries in an absorbing portrait of life during a time of global upheaval, the ripples of which can still be felt today. At the center of this fascinating period is the document that has become the root of modern freedom: the Magna Carta. It was a time of political revolution and domestic change that saw the Crusades, Richard the Lionheart, King John, and—in legend—Robin Hood all make their marks on history.

The events leading up to King John's setting his seal to the famous document at Runnymede in June 1215 form this rich and riveting narrative that vividly describes everyday life from castle to countryside, from school to church, and from hunting in the forest to trial by ordeal. For instance, women wore no underwear (though men did), the average temperatures were actually higher than they are now, and the austere kitchen at Westminster Abbey allowed each monk two pounds of meat and a gallon of ale per day. Broad in scope and rich in detail, *1215* ingeniously illuminates what may have been the most important year of our history.

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## **Editorial Review**

### **Review**

"Entertaining and informative...Even more enjoyable than the account of the Magna Carta itself is the depiction of who we were in the crucial year of 1215."

-- Antonia Fraser, *Mail on Sunday*

"Brimming with period detail."

-- *The Washington Post*

"This is an excellent slice of popular history which has 'bestseller' written all over it."

-- *Sunday Express*

"In 13th-century England, it was bad manners for lords to pick fleas from their breeches during meals. Urinating in the dining hall was likewise frowned upon, 'unless you were the head of the household.'... Such nuggets abound in this small volume, which doubles as a brilliantly concise history of the Magna Carta... Students of history, and of engaging writing, should hope for further installments."

-- *Dallas Morning News*

### **About the Author**

**Danny Danziger** was brought up in England and America. Now an award-winning columnist for *The Sunday Times*, he is the author of eight books, including the bestselling *Eton Voices* and *The Year 1000*. He is currently writing a book on the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

**John Gillingham** is professor of history at the London School of Economics and the author of a number of highly regarded academic works on the Middle Ages, as well as the popular history *Medieval Britain: An Introduction*.

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## **Chapter One: The Englishman's Castle**

*Neither we nor our bailiffs shall take other men's timber for castles or other work of ours, without the agreement of the owner.*

### **Magna Carta, Clause 31**

This was a time when a laborer was paid a penny a day, and when an income of ten pounds a year was enough for a country gentleman to maintain a comfortable lifestyle. A wealthy magnate, possessing twenty or thirty manors, had an annual income of several hundred pounds and lived luxuriously in his castles and country houses. It is hard for us to visualize this today. Surviving castle walls tend to make us think of cold, dark, drafty, damp and thoroughly uncomfortable rooms. And so they were by twenty-first-century standards. But by the standards of the time, when they compared the way they lived with the way in which their parents and grandparents had lived, the rich families of King John's England felt they were enjoying all mod cons.

When we see ancient, crumbling stone walls, we think of dungeons and sieges. Instead, we should think of chimneys and fireplaces. Until the twelfth century most castles and great houses were built of timber, and usually one storey high. Heat was provided by open fires or braziers in the center of the floor, the smoke being drawn out through a louver in the roof. In stone buildings fireplaces and chimneys were encased in the thickness of the walls and one room could be piled on top of another to make a tower. While early fireplaces usually had short flues, by the later twelfth century it was known that an extended flue produced a stronger draft.

Stone walls were not just fireproof and handy for keeping enemies out, they could also be used for plumbing in running water. The lead pipes in the Great Tower, King Henry II's keep, at Dover Castle drew water from a well sunk more than 240 feet into the chalk. Thick walls could contain corridors and private rooms -- above all, latrines, usually approached round a sharp bend so that the person using it could have some privacy. You no longer had to go outside to use a lavatory.

In 1215 new fashions were beginning to change the way the houses of the aristocracy were designed. For many centuries before this, the residences of the aristocracy had nearly always consisted of a number of buildings within an enclosure. The principal buildings were a hall, for receiving visitors and dining, a chamber block, where the lord's family had their private space, which it was rude to enter uninvited, a kitchen and at least one privy. These separate units were often linked by covered ways. There would be other buildings too: extra accommodation for visitors or senior servants, stables, a brewhouse, and workshops for jobs such as carding and spinning wool, or retting flax. Poultry and other animals ran freely in the yard.

The hall was at ground level. In his manual of good manners, *The Book of the Civilised Man*, Daniel of Beccles advised keeping pigs and cats out of the hall, but allowed in a "gentleman's animals": dogs, hawks and even horses. Only those whom the master had expressly allowed to do so could enter the hall on horseback. King Henry II liked to ride into his chancellor Thomas Becket's hall, jump over the table and join the dinner party. The hall was a public space and some behavior was frowned upon, as Daniel of Beccles makes clear: don't scratch yourself or look for fleas in your breeches or on your chest; don't snap your fingers; don't comb your hair, clean your nails, or take your shoes off there in the presence of lords and ladies. Messengers should take off gloves, arms and cap before they entered -- though bald messengers were permitted to keep their caps on. Urinating in the hall was particularly bad manners -- unless you were the head of the household; then it was permissible.

By contrast with the hall, the chamber block often had two storeys, a semi-basement cellar with chamber above -- the word "chamber" could mean either a room or a suite. When stone replaced wood, kitchens especially and chamber blocks were built or rebuilt in this more durable and less flammable material. Chairs were rare. Often a bed was the only piece of furniture in a room. During the day people sat on beds made up for the purpose -- "daybeds." A chair was reserved for a person of status -- hence the modern term "chairman" or, nowadays, "chair."

The walls of the grandest rooms in important houses were often painted. Henry II commissioned a mural of an eagle and its four chicks for his Painted Chamber in Westminster Palace. In that room the bed was lavishly decorated, a "state bed" on which the king received important visitors. Other walls were decorated with embroideries or tapestries. When a household moved from one residence to another, the best of these wall hangings were packed and taken along, either in carts or on sumpter horses, as also were costly soft furnishings such

as the coverlets with which daybeds were spread.

The king led the way in setting new fashions. Take, for example, the great tower at Orford, a royal castle built on the Suffolk coast in the 1160s. It was architect designed, based on a precisely calculated geometrical pattern, a 49-foot-diameter circle with three projecting towers. It contained two fine public rooms, one above the other, both circular, each lit by three double windows, the upper room embellished with a dome-effect ceiling. Similarly the great tower at Conisborough in Yorkshire, built for King John's uncle Hamelin, contained two spacious circular rooms one above the other. At Orford, with a kitchen on each of the two main floors and a bakery, it was possible to provide the five private chambers with what was, in effect, night storage heating. One of these chambers had a well-ventilated privy en suite. In addition a cistern provided running water and three separate privies, although if two people were using a double one, it was not polite, Daniel of Beccles explains, for one to stand up before the other. At Orford the doorways were reminiscent of the pedimented entrances of classical antiquity.

These magnificent stone towers were phenomenally expensive when compared with timber buildings. The timber hunting lodge built for Richard I at Kinver in Staffordshire in the 1190s cost £24 18s 9d. For this the king got a hall with a buttery and pantry, a chamber block, a kitchen and a jail, all enclosed by a 16-foot-high palisade with a fortified gatehouse, plus a newly made fishpond outside the enclosure. By contrast, the luxurious tower at Orford cost nearly £1,000 and Henry II's great tower of Newcastle-upon-Tyne cost £912. At this date few nobles could afford to build even one such prestigious "power house."

Another design feature that became increasingly common during King John's lifetime was the window seat, which allowed the proud owner of a fashionable new house to make better use of the light and enjoy the view. Increasingly the rich had their windows glazed. In 1237, for example, Peter the Painter was paid 5s 6d for making a glass window in Marlborough Castle. At this time, what is now the tiny village of Chiddingfold in the Sussex Weald was the center of the English glass-making industry. Those who could afford them chose floor tiles in place of beaten earth or stone floors -- and fine tiles were meant to be admired, not covered with rushes or rush matting. In *The Romance of Horn* the poet describes a princess's chamber "paved with intricately worked marble and blue limestone." Tiled floors were easier to keep clean too. Comfort and fashion were of primary importance rather than defense. When the rebellion against John broke out in 1215 it was more than forty years since the peace of the English countryside had been seriously disturbed. In the borderlands people were vulnerable to Scottish and Welsh raids; elsewhere they preferred to spend their money on luxury and pleasure rather than on preparation for war.

Hundreds of churches from King John's time still survive today, but only a handful of town and country houses. Buildings in which people prayed have been used for many centuries without the need for fundamental redesign, but the same cannot be said of domestic accommodation. Changing ideas of comfort and fashion have meant that homes have been torn down and reconstructed time and time again. For this reason books about medieval architecture are almost entirely devoted to churches. We know very much less about domestic buildings -- although, thanks partly to the spadework of archaeologists, we are no longer quite as much in the dark as we used to be. We can see now that in this period the basic design of the aristocratic residence was changing. Once separate buildings were being brought together to form a single whole. Service rooms, later known as the buttery and the pantry, were added at one end of the hall, often with cellar space below. The early thirteenth-century fashion for attaching the other end of the hall to the principal chamber block led to the establishment of what is thought of as

the classic "English medieval house," a three-part house, all under one roof, with great chamber and parlor at the "upper" end of the hall. At the "lower" end there were service doors from the buttery and the pantry, often shielded by screens from the eyes of upper-class diners at the "top table." A passage designed to give direct access into the hall from the kitchen -- which, for safety reasons, still remained separate -- ran between buttery and pantry. For the next three centuries anyone who had any social pretensions lived in this new type of house.

The palace at Woodstock in Oxfordshire was a royal residence on which a great deal was spent from Henry I's time onwards. Nothing remains of it today, and even the landscape in which it stood was drastically altered when Blenheim Park was laid out in the eighteenth century. In King John's time a spring fed three pools around which gardens and a group of buildings clustered. Henry II kept the most favored of his mistresses, Rosamund Clifford, "Fair Rosamund," in this rural retreat. It included the "ki...

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