

# The Cathedral Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Salisbury

Salisbury is unique amongst medieval English cathedrals, built within one century with no substantial later additions. The building itself is remarkable, a testimony to the faith and practical skills of those who erected it.

But it is much more than an historical monument. It is the Cathedral Church of the Salisbury diocese and so the Mother Church of several hundred parishes in Wiltshire and Dorset. It is a centre of pilgrimage for hundreds of thousands of visitors every year. Every day, week in week out, for century after century, God is worshipped here. Above all it is a place of prayer.

## Magna Carta

Magna Carta (Latin for "Great Charter") is one of the most celebrated documents in English history. At the time it was the solution to a political crisis in Medieval England but its importance has endured as it has become recognised as a cornerstone of liberty influencing much of the civilized world.

A visit to view the best preserved original Magna Carta in the Chapter House is for many visitors the highlight of their time at Salisbury Cathedral.

### **How did the Magna Carta come about?**

The feudal system bound medieval society together in a hierarchy of relationships. Under the feudal system the King was all-powerful. Dispute grew between the barons and bishops and King John over his poor government, heavy war taxes and quarrels with the Pope.

Weakened by his defeat by the French in 1214 and keen to avoid a civil war he feared losing, King John met the barons at Runnymede (between Windsor and Staines in Southern England) on 15 June 1215 and agreed the terms of the document now known as Magna Carta. Its content, driven by the concerns of barons and church, was designed to re-balance power between the King and his subjects. When King John set his seal on Magna Carta he conceded the fundamental principle that even as king he was not above the law.

### **The Salisbury Connection**

At Runnymede King John was urged to accept the demands of the barons and agree Magna Carta by his half-brother, William Longspeé, whose Effigy is in Salisbury Cathedral. Also present at Runnymede was Elias of Dereham, who at the time was steward to one of the key players in the crisis, the Archbishop of Canterbury Stephen Langton. Elias himself was a skilled negotiator and was at the very centre of the discussions between the King and the barons. Once Magna Carta was agreed and sealed he was entrusted with delivering ten of the thirteen copies made, one of which was given to the original cathedral at Old Sarum. Elias later became a Canon of Old Sarum before masterminding the building of the present Salisbury Cathedral.

### **Magna Carta today**

Magna Carta contains 63 clauses written in Latin on parchment. Only three of the original clauses in Magna Carta are still law today. One defends the freedom and rights of the English Church, another confirms the liberties and customs of London and other towns, but the third is the most famous:

*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.*

The Magna Carta has come to symbolize the rule of law in England, protecting the rights of the individual. Its basic principles have been used in the constitutions of the USA, the former USSR, Japan, Germany and many Commonwealth and other countries.