

The Magna Carta

In 1215, the barons of England forced King John to sign the Magna Carta. The following excerpt contains 13 of the original 63 articles.

1. First of all have granted to God, and, for us and for our heirs forever, have confirmed, by this our present charter, that the English church shall be free and shall have its rights intact and its liberties unincroached upon...

9. Neither we nor our bailiffs shall seize any revenue for any debt, so long as the chattels¹ of the debtor suffice to pay the debt; nor shall the sponsors of that debtor be distrained so long as the chief debtor has enough to pay the debt. But if the chief debtor fail in paying the debt, not having the wherewithal to pay it, the sponsors shall answer for the debt. And, if they shall wish, they may have the lands and revenues of the debtor until satisfaction shall have been given them for the debt previously paid for him...

12. No scutage² or aid shall be imposed in our realm [by the King] unless by the common counsel of our realm; except for redeeming our body, and knighting our eldest son, and marrying once our eldest daughter. And for these purposes there shall only be given a reasonable aid...

20. A freeman shall only be amerced³ for a small offence according to the measure of that offence. And for a great offence he shall be amerced according to the magnitude of the offence, saving his contentment; and a merchant, in the same way, saving his merchandize...

23. Neither a town nor a man shall be forced to make bridges over the rivers, with the exception of those who, from of old and of right ought to do it.

28. No constable or other bailiff of ours shall take the corn or other chattels of any one except he straightway give money for them, or can be allowed a respite⁴ in that regard by the will of the seller.

30. No sheriff nor bailiff of ours, no any one else, shall take the horses or carts of any freeman for transport, unless by the will of that freeman.

31. Neither we nor our bailiffs shall take another's wood for castles or for other private uses, unless by the will of him to whom the wood belongs.

38. No bailiff, on his own simple assertion, shall henceforth put any one to his law, without producing faithful witnesses in evidence.

¹ Moveable personal property

² Payment to get out of military service

³ Punished by fine

⁴ Break