

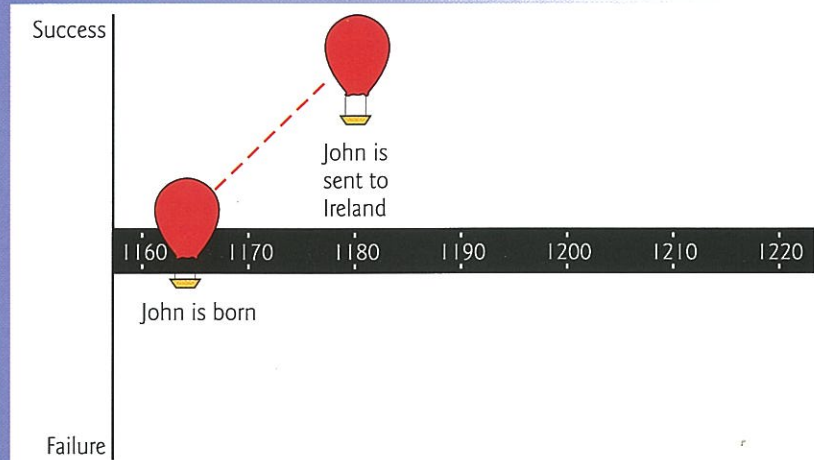
You have met King John and heard his opinions. He clearly thinks he was a success, even if most people disagree with him. Now it is time for you to begin your own investigation of the man who has been called 'the worst king who ever sat on the English throne'. Here is a summary of John's story, as it usually appears in the Robin Hood tales. It will help you understand:

- ◆ the main events in John's life
- ◆ what John is supposed to have done so badly.

Some of the key events take place overseas. Make sure you refer to the map on page 7 as you read the story.

ACTIVITY

1 Design a graph like the one below to record the main events in John's life. The graph should show when things went well for John and when things went badly. Imagine John in a hot air balloon. The balloon rises when John is successful and drops when he is in trouble.



2 Make a list of all the reasons why John was 'a bad king'. Divide your list into two sections:
 a) the people he quarrelled with
 b) his personality and the things he was not good at.

The life and crimes of King John

Lackland John was born on Christmas Eve, 1167. In 1185, King Henry sent John to rule Ireland. But, this plan failed: John and his young friends insulted important Irish barons by giggling at their long beards, and the Irish barons soon rebelled against him. With no land to rule, John was nicknamed 'Lackland'.

John breaks his father's heart

In 1189, John secretly joined Richard and King Philip II of France in a rebellion against his father. When Henry was shown a list of the rebels he was shocked to find John's name on it. He never recovered from John's betrayal, and died soon afterwards from a broken heart.

John plots against his brother

Richard was crowned king in 1189. He gave John land and money, but that did not stop John plotting against him. John and King Philip II of France tried to take control of Richard's land while he was away on Crusade. When Richard was captured on his way home from the Holy Land, John did nothing to help.

Richard returns

Don't be afraid, John. You're still young. You've got into bad company and it is those who have led you astray that I will punish.

In 1194, Richard was released from prison on payment of a huge ransom. He regained the land that King Philip II of France had taken from him, and John was forced to ask for his brother's forgiveness. Richard did not punish John.

In 1199, Richard was fatally wounded fighting in France and named John as his heir.

A rival for the throne

After Richard's death, John's claim to the throne was supported by the barons of England and Normandy. However, the barons in the rest of the empire chose John's twelve year old nephew, Arthur of Brittany, as their ruler. In 1202, John captured Arthur and put him in prison. Arthur was never seen again. Many people believed that Arthur had been murdered. One source claims that, in a drunken rage, John killed Arthur, tied him to a heavy stone and threw him in the River Seine.

Soft-sword

In 1200, John divorced his wife and married a rich French girl called Isabella, who was only 12 years old. This caused problems because Isabella had been promised to the French baron Hugh of Lusignan. Hugh complained to King Philip II of France, so Philip invaded John's land in France. Most of John's French barons happily welcomed Philip. By 1205, John had lost most of his land in France. These defeats earned John the new nickname... 'Soft-sword'.

Ruling England

John was determined to regain the land he had lost in France. He made the English people pay huge taxes to fund a strong army. He fined people heavily and put them in prison when they could not pay their debts. John used his courts to help his friends, and to punish anyone he did not like. He was a cruel king, who liked nothing better than to see prisoners tortured in dirty dungeons.

That sounds interesting. I must pop down and watch when I've finished counting my money.

AARGH!

John quarrels with the Pope

In 1205, John quarrelled with the Pope. They disagreed over who should be the new ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY. John refused to let Stephen Langton, the Pope's choice, enter the country. In 1208, the Pope punished John by passing an INTERDICTION over England and Wales. This meant that church services stopped and no marriages or burials could take place. John retaliated by taking away all the Church's property and punishing many monks. In 1209, the Pope EXCOMMUNICATED John. This meant that he would go to hell when he died. Eventually, in 1213, John gave in to the Pope.



John quarrels with France – again

In 1214, John attacked France. His army was crushed by King Philip II of France at the battle of Bouvines. John's hopes of regaining his land in France were destroyed. All his money and all those taxes had been wasted.



The barons rebel

John's defeat in France angered many barons. If he had won, they might have forgiven him for the way he ruled England, but now they rebelled. In May 1215 the rebel barons captured London and forced John to agree to a set of rules about how to govern the country. These rules were written down in a charter, known as Magna Carta.



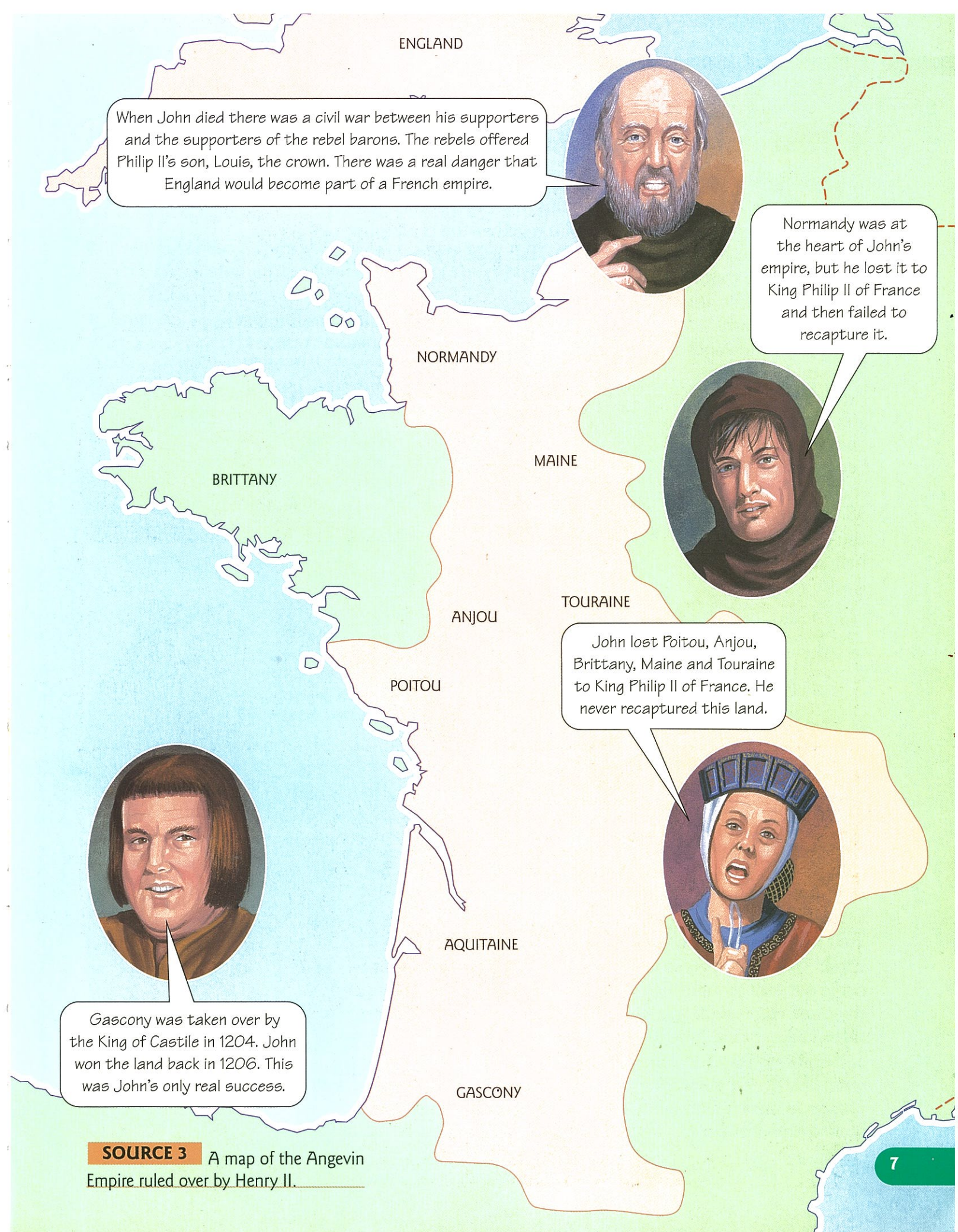
The end of John

John did not change his ways after Magna Carta. He broke the agreement, so the barons invited Prince Louis of France to take over as king. During the war against Louis, John lost many of the crown jewels when his baggage train sank in the quicksands of the Wash. Shortly afterwards, in 1216, he died at Newark. It is thought that John died from dysentery (fever with serious diarrhoea) after eating too many peaches and drinking too much beer!



he position in 1216.

By the end of his reign, John had lost much of his father's empire. The map opposite shows you how disastrous his reign had been...



SOURCE 3 A map of the Angevin Empire ruled over by Henry II.

Why did John anger the barons?

John insults the Church, and he punished churchmen because of his quarrel with the Pope. The king should treat the Church fairly.

If John agrees to what we ask how can we make him keep his word? Can we force him to keep his word when he has all these foreign mercenaries to use against us?

John keeps demanding the scutage tax from us. In the past we paid this 'shield money' instead of sending knights to join the king's army in wartime. But John makes us pay scutage even when he is not going to war – and he is demanding twice what we paid Richard.

I know we have to pay the king when we inherit family land, but John demanded over £6000 from me. I only make £550 a year from the land. £100 would be a fairer price.

John is also squeezing money out of elderly women. When my father died, my mother had to pay John over £3000 so that he wouldn't force her to marry again. She really did not want to remarry so she had no choice but to pay the fine.

Why should we fight in France? My lands in the north of England are a long way from France. I will not gain anything from a war against France. The king wastes money on these pointless wars – which he always loses.

John is far too hard on us. He takes our land if we do not obey his commands. He even takes our sons as hostages, in case we rebel against him. Look at what happened to the sons of those Welsh barons in 1211. John took 28 as hostages and they were all executed, on John's orders, because he thought their fathers had plotted against him.

I do not trust John. I want a say in how our country is run, but he never asks us for advice. He spends all his time with his favourites. John will only work with people like Gerard d'Athee from France. John has put him in charge of the castles at Gloucester, Bristol and Hereford. John lets him punish anyone who steps out of line.

John uses the law to punish his enemies and help his friends. If John is against you he will not allow your case to be heard in court. I owed him money when I was Sheriff of Lincolnshire and I couldn't keep up the repayments. John imprisoned me in Rochester Castle. He said I would stay there until I paid every last penny I owed.

ACTIVITY

- 1 Using pages 26–27, list all the reasons why the barons were unhappy with the way John ruled the country.
- 2 Use your list to draw up a charter which gives the king clear rules about how he should govern the country. Your Magna Carta must make sure that the king rules the country fairly and wins the support of the barons.