

Why did the barons rebel against King John?

Edward III was one of the most successful kings. John was one of the worst, possibly the worst king in the Middle Ages. He even managed to lose the crown jewels when his baggage train was caught by the incoming tide as he tried to cross the area of water called The Wash! John's reign (from 1199 to 1216) ended in civil war with some of his barons fighting against him.

So what had John done that was so bad his barons rebelled against him? Let's begin with a picture of John, drawn by the monk and historian, Matthew Paris, in the 1250s. It shows John's crown almost sliding off his head, a sign that there was a lot of opposition to him while he was king.

The picture contains two more clues to John's failure. Can you work out what they are telling us?



Matthew Paris drew pictures of other kings. In all of them the king is shown holding a church up high, to show his support for the Church. Here King John is shown blocking out a church behind him.

Other kings are shown sitting on proper thrones. King John is sitting on a temporary folding stool, the kind used by kings who spent a lot of time travelling to fight wars.

Enquiry Step 1: First evidence – asking questions

- 1 What do you think Matthew Paris, the artist, is telling us about King John in picture A?
- 2 What questions do you want to ask about John and his reign?

'Softsword' – King John's wars

John did spend much of his reign fighting very unsuccessful wars. The maps B and C show you how much land he lost to the king of France.



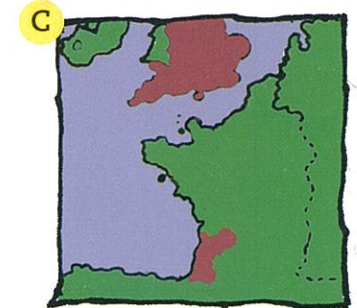
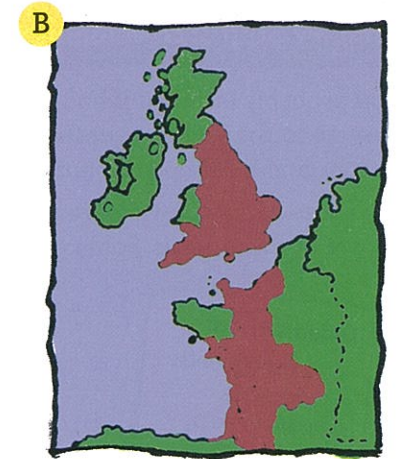
King John out hunting. John was aged 48 in 1215 at the height of his quarrel with the barons. By then he was fat and bald and he loved fine clothes, especially robes made of fur.

One of John's difficulties was that King Philip of France was a tough opponent. Philip was determined to take control of English lands in France. These lands had been successfully defended by Henry II and Richard the Lionheart, John's father and brother. Both men had been great soldiers, but once Richard died Philip saw his chance.

Philip skilfully stirred up trouble among John's French barons but John also made mistakes. He made his French barons angry through two bad decisions.

- Firstly, in 1200 John married a rich French girl called Isabella. However, she was already promised to a French baron who complained to King Philip. Philip used the marriage as a perfect excuse to seize John's lands in France.
- Secondly, John had his nephew, Arthur, killed in 1202. Some of John's French barons had wanted Arthur as their ruler instead of John. Rumours spread that John had murdered Arthur in a drunken rage. This angered some of the French barons who now wanted Philip, not John, as their king.

Therefore, John lost supporters in his French lands and was not strong enough to fight Philip. By 1204 John had lost nearly all of his land in France and was given a new nickname, 'Softsword'.



Maps showing the land (in red) John inherited when John became king in 1199 and his land by the end of his reign in 1216.

Enquiry Step 2: Suggesting an answer

You now know a little about King John so you can begin to build up your answer to the enquiry question:

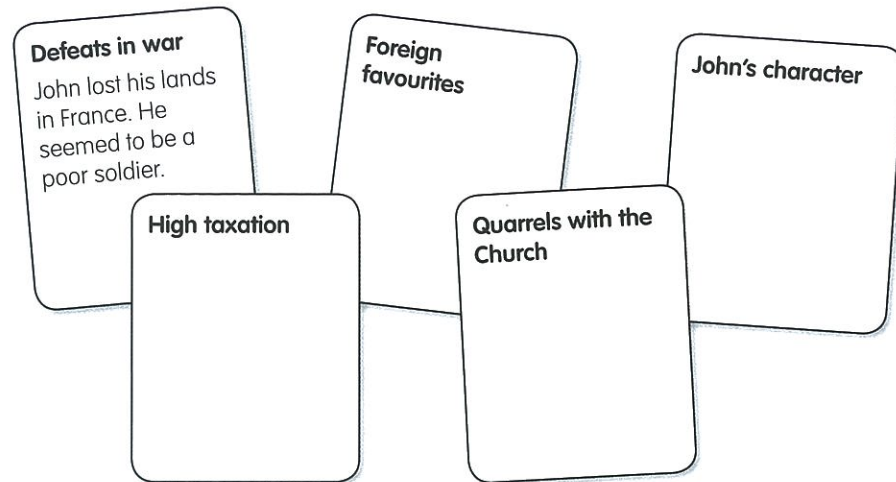
Why did the barons rebel against King John?

- 1 What mistakes did John make as king? It might help to look back to page 54 to see what made Edward III a success.
- 2 Suggest your own possible answer to the question. Write it out clearly and note down any evidence that supports your answer. You will need this answer when you get to Enquiry Step 3.

Enquiry Step 3: Developing your answer

You probably included John's defeats in war in your hypothesis – your possible answer to the enquiry question from Enquiry Step 2. Now it's time to dig deeper and build up your answer in more detail.

1 These cards show five reasons why the barons rebelled. Make your own set of these cards. Some detail has already been added to the first one.



- 2 Read pages 57–59 and add a sentence or two to each card to show how each reason led to rebellion.
- 3 Now look again at your answer to the enquiry question from Enquiry Step 2.
 - a If you still think it is right, note down any more evidence that supports your answer.
 - b If you think it needs improving or changing then write out your new answer, noting down the evidence that supports it.

The quarrel with the Pope

King Philip was not the only opponent King John had to face. The new Pope, Innocent III, was determined to increase the power of the Church throughout Europe. In 1205, Innocent tried to choose the Archbishop of Canterbury even though English kings usually chose their own bishops. When King John disagreed the Pope ordered an **interdict**. This meant that priests stopped all church services. No marriages or burials could take place on Church land.

In 1208 John retaliated by confiscating Church land and property. This raised a lot of money but made his argument with the Pope even worse. In 1209, the Pope **excommunicated** John. This meant John would go to Hell when he died.

Advisers and taxes

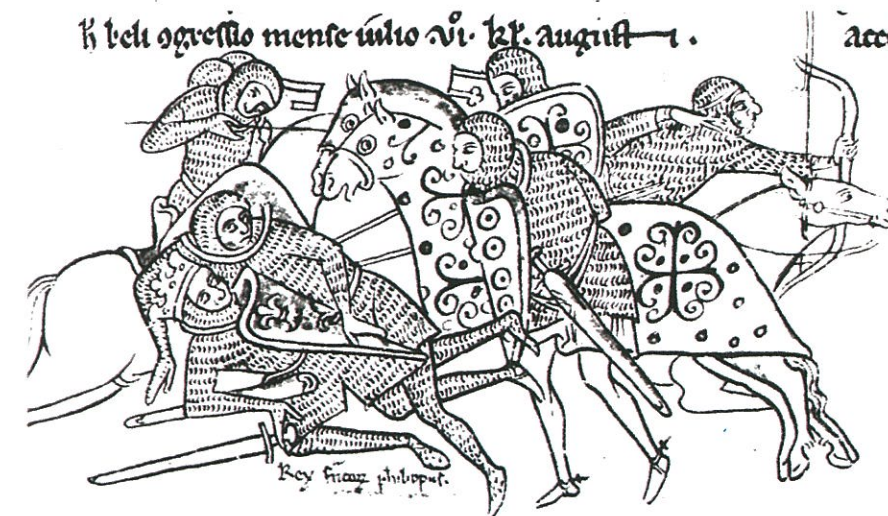
John was not good at winning the support and trust of his barons. He often took important decisions without consulting them. They did not see why they should give John money or risk their lives for him when he failed to ask for their advice or listen to them. John preferred the advice of foreign **mercenaries**. He even gave them castles taken from his English barons.

The barons also distrusted John because he kept demanding higher and higher taxes. Barons expected to pay taxes when they inherited their father's land, but they expected to pay the same amount of tax as in the past. John made them pay huge amounts of money, far more than the land was worth. He also made widows pay a large tax or be forced to marry again. By 1213, King John had collected so much tax that half of all the coins in England were stored in his castles.

The Battle of Bouvines

The reason for these high taxes was that John was desperate to win back his lands in France. He needed the money to pay for his army and weapons. In 1214 John and the Emperor of Germany agreed to attack France. Many of John's barons refused to join the invasion. The northern barons did not see what France had to do with them. John and the Emperor divided their attack. John invaded the south of France while the German Emperor invaded the North.

The plan nearly worked. Philip was almost killed fighting the German army at the Battle of Bouvines but, in the end, the French army won. John now had no ally and no hope of beating Philip on his own. He had lost the chance to win back his lands in France.



◀ A picture from a thirteenth-century chronicle of the Battle of Bouvines. It shows King Philip of France on the ground (you can see his crown). If Philip had been killed John would probably have won back his French lands and there would have been no rebellion in England!

Enquiry Step 4: Concluding your enquiry

It is time to use the work you have done in Enquiry Steps 1–3 to answer the enquiry question:

Why did the barons rebel against King John?

1 You now have five cards showing reasons why the barons rebelled against King John. Which ones do you think are the most important? Where would you put each card on the line below?



2 Write your final answer to the enquiry question. Include all the five reasons, beginning with the reason you think was most important. Remember to include evidence to support your choice of the most important reason. Look back to page 54 for help in how to structure your answer.

How did the barons deal with troublesome kings?

John was not the only king who made his barons angry. Sometimes the barons believed they had to stop the king doing whatever he wanted even though they did not want to fight the king or start a civil war. On pages 60–65 you can find out how they tried to make sure kings such as John ruled England in the way that everyone expected.

The barons (who were also known as nobles) were the rich families who owned lots of land. In return for their land they provided soldiers for the king's army. They also helped the king by keeping their own areas of England peaceful and as free from crime as possible. The barons wanted to co-operate with the king and expected him to rule the country fairly. However, some kings:

- did not ask the barons for advice and just listened to advice from a few favourite advisers
- failed to lead the army courageously against foreign enemies
- let crime and disorder grow
- tried new and unfair ways of raising taxes for wars.

On pages 61–64 you will find out how the barons dealt with four troublesome kings – John, Henry III, Edward II and Richard II. After reading about each reign you will be asked to identify which of the options below were chosen by the barons as the way to deal with each king. Here are their options:



1 Force the king to agree to rules on how he should govern the country.



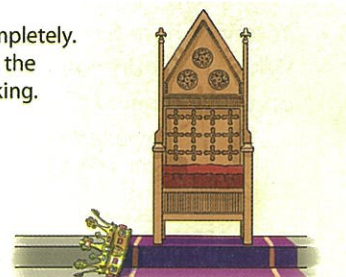
2 Force the king to meet the barons regularly so that the king cannot do anything without their agreement.



3 Depose the king and choose a new king. Ideally the new king would be a close relative of the old king.



4 Get rid of kings completely. The barons can run the country without a king.



King John (1199–1216)

You have already (on page 59) worked out why the barons rebelled against King John but here's a quick reminder to get you started.

By 1204 John had lost his lands in Normandy to the French king. John's barons had many other complaints too:

- If barons did not send soldiers for his army, John charged those barons heavy taxes or put them in prison without trial.
- John did not trust his barons or ask for their advice but listened to a few favourite advisers.
- John quarrelled with the Pope over the right to appoint the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Pope excommunicated John and punished everyone in England by stopping all church services.
- John kept raising taxes unfairly. For example, he made barons pay massive amounts of money to inherit their fathers' land, ten times higher than they expected to pay.

The barons did not trust John any more. They gathered an army although they did not want to **depose** John. No king had been deposed since 1066 and people still believed that the king was chosen by God. In 1215 the barons forced John to agree to **Magna Carta** (the Great Charter), a set of over 60 rules about how the king governed the country.

The most important rules in Magna Carta were:

- The king should not demand taxes without the agreement of the barons.
- No one should be arrested or imprisoned without a trial.
- All the foreign mercenaries supporting King John had to leave the country.

A group of 25 barons were chosen to make sure that King John kept to Magna Carta.

↓ One of the four original copies of Magna Carta which still exist from the 40 copies made in 1215. Nobody knows what happened to the copy sealed by King John at Runnymede in 1215.

Activity

- 1 Which of the four options on page 60 did the barons use to deal with King John?
- 2 Why do you think they chose that option rather than the others?



Henry III (1216–72)

Henry became king when he was only nine. While he was young Henry agreed to follow the rules in Magna Carta but it was a different story when he grew up. He was extravagant and untrustworthy. He only took advice from a small group of his wife's French relatives and he gave them rich rewards. Then Henry lent the Pope a huge amount of money for a war – without discussing the loan with the barons.

By 1258, the barons, led by Simon de Montfort, were determined to make Henry change his ways and keep to Magna Carta. They forced Henry to hold regular meetings (called parliaments) with them to make sure he governed the country according to the rules in Magna Carta.

However, Henry broke the agreement and this started a civil war. Henry was captured at the Battle of Lewes in 1264 and Simon de Montfort took over running the country. He called a parliament, inviting the barons and bishops who were on his side, two knights from each county and two merchants from each large town. He needed the support of as many rich men as possible in his war against Henry.

In 1265 Henry's son, Edward, killed de Montfort at the battle of Evesham. With Edward's help, Henry regained control of the country. When Henry died in 1272, Edward became king. Edward I was a great soldier and the barons were happy to follow him into war.



← Henry III's tomb in Westminster Abbey. Henry III was King John's son. He was very religious and rebuilt much of Westminster Abbey where monarchs are crowned and many are buried.

Activity

- 3 Which of the four options on page 60 did the barons use to deal with Henry III?
- 4 This was a different choice from the one made in 1215 under King John. Why do you think they chose a different option this time?

Edward II (1307–27)

Edward II was more interested in farming than fighting. He lost wars against the Scots, but the defeats didn't push the barons into rebellion. Instead they rebelled because Edward was only interested in the advice of his friend, Piers Gaveston.

On the day that he married the beautiful French princess Isabella, Edward spent all his time laughing and joking with Gaveston. In 1311 the barons forced Edward to send Gaveston abroad but they could not control the king for long.

Edward soon called Gaveston back, but the barons would not give up their fight. Their leader, the Duke of Lancaster, had Gaveston taken prisoner and executed. From that day onward Edward hated Lancaster. In 1322 Edward had his revenge when he had Lancaster taken prisoner and beheaded. This really angered many barons because Lancaster had not been legally put on trial. He had just been murdered on the king's orders. Five years later the barons (led by Roger Mortimer, the queen's lover) finally forced Edward to give up being king. His son (Edward III) was made king. Soon afterwards, Edward II was murdered.



← Edward II's tomb in Gloucester Cathedral. Edward II was one of the very worst kings in the Middle Ages.

Activity

- 5 Which of the four options on page 60 did the barons use to deal with Edward II?
- 6 This was the first time the barons had deposed a king. Why do you think they chose this option? (Think about how effective their choices had been with John and Henry III.)

Richard II (1377–99)

In 1381 Richard was the fourteen-year-old hero when he faced thousands of rebels in London and persuaded them to go home (see pages 88–89). Maybe this made Richard think he could do anything he wanted. But he made two mistakes. He made peace with France and then gave money and land away to his favourite advisers. The rest of the barons were angry that Richard was wasting money and not following up England's earlier victories against France. They rebelled in 1386 and took over running the country. Richard was furious but had to wait to take his revenge. Ten years later he struck. His enemies were executed or forced to hide abroad – but now it was their turn to want revenge. In 1399 Richard's cousin, Henry, returned from exile abroad with an army and forced Richard to give up being king. Henry became king. Soon afterwards, Richard was murdered.



Activity

- 7 Which of the four options on page 60 did the barons use to deal with Richard II?
- 8 Why do you think they did not choose the last option – to do away with kings completely?

◀ Portrait of Richard II dating from the 1390s which now hangs in the nave of Westminster Abbey, known as the Westminster Portrait. Richard became king aged ten after the death of his grandfather, the great soldier, Edward III. Richard's father, the Black Prince, had also been a great soldier.

So could medieval kings always do whatever they wanted?

What do all these decisions by the barons tell us? Here are some conclusions which will help you with this section's big question when you read pages 66–67.

1. Nobody wanted to get rid of kings completely

The barons tried a different way to get kings to govern the country properly. In 1215 they tried Magna Carta. In 1258 they tried parliaments. In 1327 (and in 1399) they deposed a bad king and chose another one. The new king was a close relative of the last one. The methods became tougher as time went on as you can see in this table.

| John | Henry III | Edward II | Richard II |
|----------------|--|-----------|------------|
| Agree to rules | Had to call regular meetings (parliaments) | Deposed | Deposed |

However, the barons never got rid of kings completely. Nobody could imagine a country without a king because they believed that kings were chosen by God.

2. Rebellions only happened when kings broke rules

Rebellions only happened when a king did not ask the important barons for advice, gave all the rewards to his favourites and made the barons frightened he might attack them.

3. A king could do whatever he wanted – provided the powerful barons supported him

The king was still by far the most powerful person in the country. A king who had the support of his barons could do whatever he liked – raise high taxes, go to war – with no fear of rebellion. If the king was a great soldier and asked his barons for advice then they supported him. Barons and knights loved to follow kings like Richard I, Edward I and Edward III into war.

4. Ordinary people had little say in government

Parliament was not nearly so important as later in history. Parliaments first met regularly in the reign of Edward I (1272–1307) because he called Parliament to agree to taxes for his wars against France, Wales and Scotland. However, Parliament did not decide whether to go to war. Edward made that decision. Parliament continued to meet after Edward's death whenever kings needed money for wars and defence. However, if Parliament caused trouble, the king just closed it down. Ordinary people did not take part in Parliament.

Activity

- 9 Statements A, B and C below are all wrong! Explain why each one is wrong. Use examples from this chapter as evidence to support your explanations.

- A Kings could always do whatever they liked in the Middle Ages.
- B Barons liked to have a weak king who was a poor soldier.
- C Barons were always keen to rebel against the king.

- 10 Why did the barons choose different options to deal with troublesome kings as time went on?