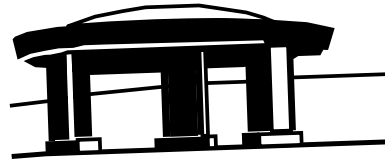


MAGNA CARTA PLACE



In September 1995, a group of Canberra residents met to consider the need for a commemorative project in the national capital which celebrated the Centenary of Federation in 2001, and the close historical and cultural links that exist between Australia and Britain.

In November 1996, the ACT Branch of the Australia-Britain Society was invited to assume leadership of the group, and Magna Carta was suggested as a theme for the proposed monument. This was endorsed and the name 'Magna Carta Committee' adopted.

Field inspections of possible sites followed and eventually a semi-circular grassed area, adjacent to the Old Parliament House Senate Garden, was selected. Langton Crescent, which borders the site, is named in honour of Stephen Langton who, as Archbishop of Canterbury, played a crucial role in persuading King John to seal the first issue of the Magna Carta at Runnymede in 1215. Magna Carta Place was formally authorised as the site for the monument on 1 October 1997.

The Hon. Sir Gerard Brennan AC KBE, Chief Justice of Australia, dedicated Magna Carta Place on 12 October 1997. This date was the 700th anniversary of the sealing by King Edward I of the 1297 issue of Magna Carta. An original of this issue of the Magna Carta is on permanent display in Parliament House.

A high point in the Magna Carta Committee's fund-raising campaign was reached after an approach to the British Deputy High Commissioner in Canberra. The British Government made a donation of \$528 000 towards the cost of the monument as its Centenary of Federation gift — from the people of Britain to the people of Australia.

On 8 August 2001 a time capsule – to be opened in 2101 – was placed in the ground beneath the pavilion, in the presence of the wife of the Prime Minister, Mrs Janette Howard. The Prime Minister, the Hon. John Howard, officially dedicated the Magna Carta Monument on 26 September 2001.

THE DESIGN

In August 1999 a two-stage design competition for the Magna Carta Monument was advertised in Australia and Britain, and design professionals from both countries were invited to enter. The design brief emphasised the commemorative purposes of the monument and the special landscape character of the site.

Fifty-three entries were received. History, myth and geology inspired the winning design, by Australian architect Alastair Falconer in collaboration with exhibition designer Marcus Bree, with artists Silvia Velez and Chris Meadham collaborating on murals.

The design of the monument draws its main ideas from the original Magna Carta, as an ancient document that still retains important values and rules for our society today. The concept of the passage of time is explored at various levels within the monument — from the layered design of

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the wall cladding, evoking the sedimentation layers in a rock, to the careful selection of timeless materials (bluestone, granite, cast bronze and ironbark) and their hand-crafted finishes.

The visual reference to time takes on a second dimension, as the geometry of the walls invites visitors to stroll along and gradually discover the story of Magna Carta. Like traces left in a rock, two long, etched murals display a description of historic political events which led to the emergence of Magna Carta in England and later to the development of legislation and civil rights in Australia. The murals are given relevance by a display of texts, set in the curved section of the wall and in the pavilion. The pavilion has the look of an ancient shrine, with its bronze dome and crown-like ring with ancient lettering. The words are Chapter 29 of Magna Carta (1297 issue), in Latin. The English words are on a rubbing plaque in the pavilion.

MAGNA CARTA

Magna Carta comes from the Latin for 'Great Charter'. The document was drafted at Runnymede, a meadow by the River Thames in England, and signed by King John in 1215 under pressure from his rebellious barons, who were encouraged by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton. Resentful of the king's high taxes, they demanded certain rights and liberties. Among the charter's provisions were clauses providing for a free church, reforming law and justice, and controlling the behaviour of royal officials. It was reissued with alterations in 1216, 1217 and 1225. The Magna Carta is traditionally regarded as the foundation document of British constitutional law.

Magna Carta remains the foundation stone on which many legal systems around the world are built, particularly in the Commonwealth nations and in the United States of America. Its main features are also reflected in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, proclaimed by the United Nations in 1948.

MAGNA CARTA AND AUSTRALIA

While Magna Carta is now seen as a traditional mandate for trial by jury, justice for all, accountable government and no arbitrary imprisonment, these qualities apply in a particular way to Australia.

When Europeans arrived, their new colonial society was often in conflict with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The early colonial settlements, founded mostly on convict labour, also imposed a system of justice at odds with the rights and liberties expressed in Magna Carta. However, as penal settlements evolved over time into free colonies, Magna Carta's principles could no longer be ignored. Ultimately, with the federation of Australia's colonies in 1901 through various Acts or as part of the common law, the rights expressed in the Magna Carta were confirmed to suit the unique conditions of our Australian society.

