

18 October 1216

An attack of dysentery proves the death of ‘Bad King John’

Monarch’s demise is caused by “violent fever” and “anguish of mind” – exacerbated by a surfeit of peaches and cider

King John has never had a good press – and it’s easy to see why. Despite levying heavy taxes and scutage (a feudal relief paid by barons in place of military service), John failed to defend his lands overseas. He was known for mistreatment of prisoners and the reputed seduction of the wives and daughters of his barons.

By 1216 John had been on the throne for 17 years. Not only had he fallen out with his barons and lost almost all of England’s empire in France, he had also been excommunicated by the pope during a row over the appointment of a new archbishop of Canterbury.

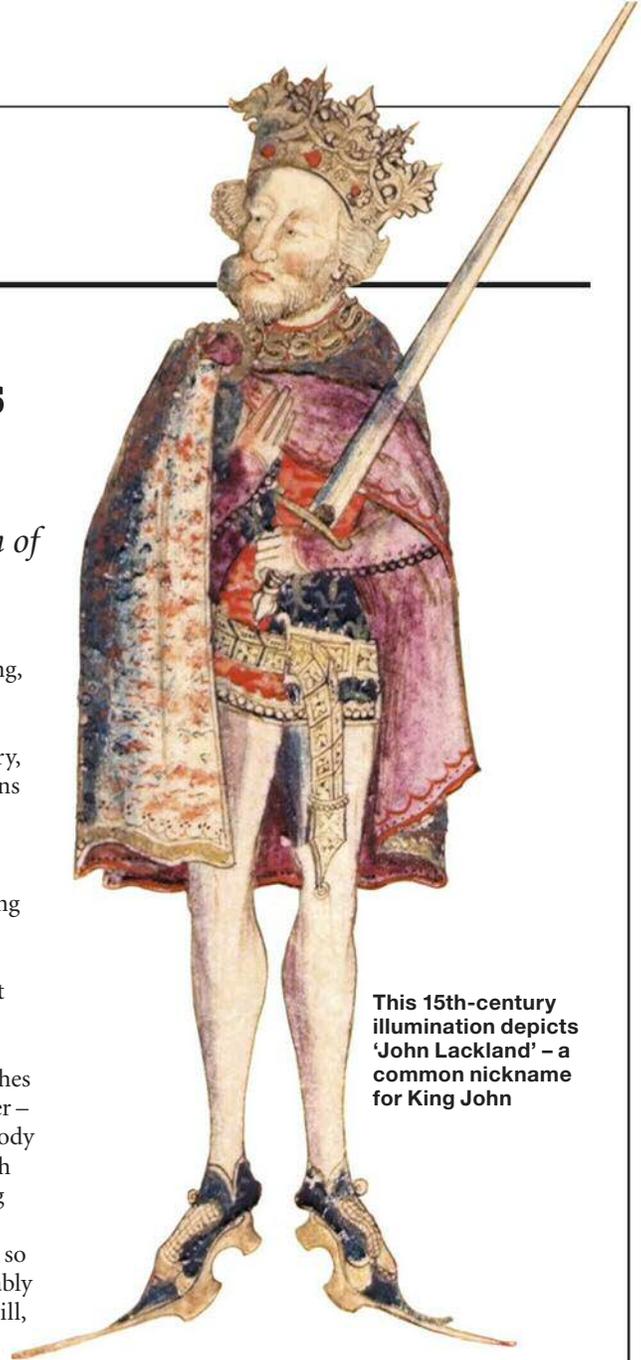
John managed to patch up relations with the Vatican but the problems with his rebellious barons were a different story. Disaster was piled on disaster: that autumn, after relieving a rebel siege of Lincoln, he learned that the Scots had invaded the north of England.

Crossing the great tidal estuary of the Wash, John contrived to lose part of his

baggage train in quicksand – including, some chroniclers claimed, his crown jewels. And by the time he reached Newark he was badly ill with dysentery, a common curse of military campaigns in the Middle Ages.

What happened next has become part of John’s legend, though many historians doubt its veracity. According to the chronicler Roger of Wendover, John now had a “violent fever”, made worse by his “anguish of mind” about the loss of his baggage in the Wash.

Sunk in misery, the king consoled himself by stuffing himself with peaches and sinking vast amounts of new cider – not, perhaps, the ideal diet for somebody suffering from dysentery. His stomach cramps worsened and, on the evening of 18 October, he died. At that time, dysentery was often a death sentence, so the famous “surfeit of peaches” probably had nothing to do with his demise. Still, it makes a good story. **H**



This 15th-century illumination depicts ‘John Lackland’ – a common nickname for King John

COMMENT / David Carpenter

“John’s death enabled the survival of his dynasty, and also that of Magna Carta”

“ King John’s demise was one of the most momentous, game changing deaths of any English king.

John died right in the middle of a civil war that had seen his insurgent barons offer the throne of England to Prince Louis of France. More than half the country was in rebellion against him and it looked as if he was going to lose the war. Indeed, if John had lost the war, the consequences would have been momentous: England and France would have come under the same dynasty, Louis would have become king of England, and the whole political shape of Europe would have changed.

It is also unclear as to what would have

happened to Magna Carta if John hadn’t died when he did. John had conceded Magna Carta in 1215 only to reject it soon after – a decision that had caused his barons to rebel – but we actually don’t know what Prince Louis’ attitude to Magna Carta would have been. He, like John, may have wished to govern without his hands being tied by such a document.

John’s death altered the political situation completely. In place of the deeply unpopular King John came his young, innocent nine-year-old son, and the barons lost the animus that had driven them to rebel in the first place. In short, John’s death enabled the survival of his

dynasty, and also that of Magna Carta. It was Henry’s charter of 1225, not John’s of 1215, which became the definitive version and the law of the land. ”



David Carpenter is professor of medieval history at Kings College London. He is currently writing a book on Magna Carta, due for publication in 2014