

July Anniversary.



KING JOHN SIGNING MAGNA CHARTA.

SIGNING OF MAGNA CHARTA.

The 2nd of July was the day appointed to be observed as a national holiday, for thanksgiving and joy, by those noble barons who so resolutely and successfully defended the rights of the people, against the oppression, duplicity, and immorality of the universally hated John; and forced him to sign and concede on the 15th day of June, 1215, "this great charter of English liberties."

King John and the Barons met according to a previous arrangement in a meadow between Staines and Windsor, adjacent to the Thames, called Runnymede, and this meadow, which has for ages been regarded as the place where the great charter was signed, or rather sealed, is in the parish of Egham. It has been stated, however, that although the conferences between the opposite parties may have been held at Runnymede, yet the actual scene of the ratification of the covenant was an island in the Thames, still known by the name of Charter Island, which is not within Surrey, but belongs to the parish of Wraysbury, in Buckinghamshire. The fallacy of this assertion is easily proved, for Runnymede is expressly named in the King's subscription to the charter itself, as the place where it was signed. The words are—"in Prato quod vocatur Runnymede in Windleshor' et Stanes," as may be seen in an original copy of the charter, preserved among the archives of Lincoln Cathedral. The "Carta de Foresta," which was granted by John on the same day, was also signed at Runnymede. The ceremony took place, not in any house, but in the open field; the assembly continued for some days; but it was no sooner dissolved than the King threw off the mask, which, with consummate hypocrisy, he had worn during the proceedings. Lingard says, that "in a paroxysm of rage, he cursed the day of his birth, gnashed his teeth, rolled his eyes, gnawed sticks and straws, and acted all the froaks of a madman."

This charter is often regarded as the constitutional basis of English liberties; but, in many of its provisions, it seems to have been only a declaration of rights which had been enjoyed in England before the Conquest, and which are said to have been granted by King Henry I. on his accession. However, if it did not properly found the liberties which the English nation enjoys, or if it were not the original of those privileges and franchises which the barons (or the chief tenants of

the crown, for the names here are equivalent), ecclesiastical persons, citizens, burgesses, and merchants enjoy, it recalled into existence, it defined, it settled them, it formed in its written state a document to which appeal might be made, under whose protection any person having interest in it might find shelter; and which served, as it were, a portion of the common law of the land, to guide the judges to the decision they pronounced in all questions between the King and any portion of the people.

The names of the chiefs who gained this grand concession from the King are preserved in the charter itself. The first name is that of Robert Fitz Walter, who belonged to the great family of Clare. Next to him come Eustace de Vesci, Richard de Percy, Robert de Roos, Peter de Brus, Nicholas de Stuteville, Socier de Quenci, Earl of Winchester, the Earls of Clare, Essex, and Norfolk, William de Mowbray, Robert de Vere, Tulk Fitz Warine, William de Montacute, William de Beauchamp, and many others of families long after famous in English history, the progenitors of the ancient baronial houses of England.

Magna Charta has been painted in a great number of forms; there are fac-similes of a copy of it which was made at the time, and still exists in the British Museum, and another preserved at Lincoln, already mentioned. Of this charter the late Board of Commissioners of the Public Records caused to be engraved and published an exact fac-simile, and it will be found printed and translated in the first volume of "The Statutes of the Realm." Long after the charter was granted, to keep the rights thus guaranteed fully in the eyes of the people, a copy was sent to every cathedral church, and read publicly twice a year.

Blackstone gives a satisfactory abridgement of the charter in his "Commentaries;" we have, besides, an express treatise on it. It was called Magna Charta, or the Great Charter, not on account of its extent, for a single page of parchment, measuring 20½ inches by 14½, contains the whole of its privileges; but because it recorded so many ancient rights of the nation, and abolished so many unjust oppressions. The finest and most perfect original of the charter is that at Lincoln. For popular gratification, the charter has been lithographed, and published at a moderate price.