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Snapshots in Time:
Mapping Wells

KING JOHN CHARTER, 1201

(Wells City Council Archives, WCC/1001/4)

This charter was issued by King John in 1201 to the people of Wells and granted the City the status of a free borough. The charter gave formal permission for Wells to hold a weekly market on a Sunday and an additional fifth fair on the Feast of the Translation of St Andrew, to last eight days.

Most importantly the charter allowed Wells to establish its independence (apart from the contribution of Wells' resident bishops) and set out its own civil liberties and customs, which have made this city what it is today.

Until the early part of the reign of Henry VIII, charters were the most solemn royal grant issued for a range of topics which included: land, offices, titles, pensions, pardons, patents for inventions, licences, leases of crown lands, presentations to churches, and rights to hold markets and fairs.

Overleaf is a translation of the Latin text.

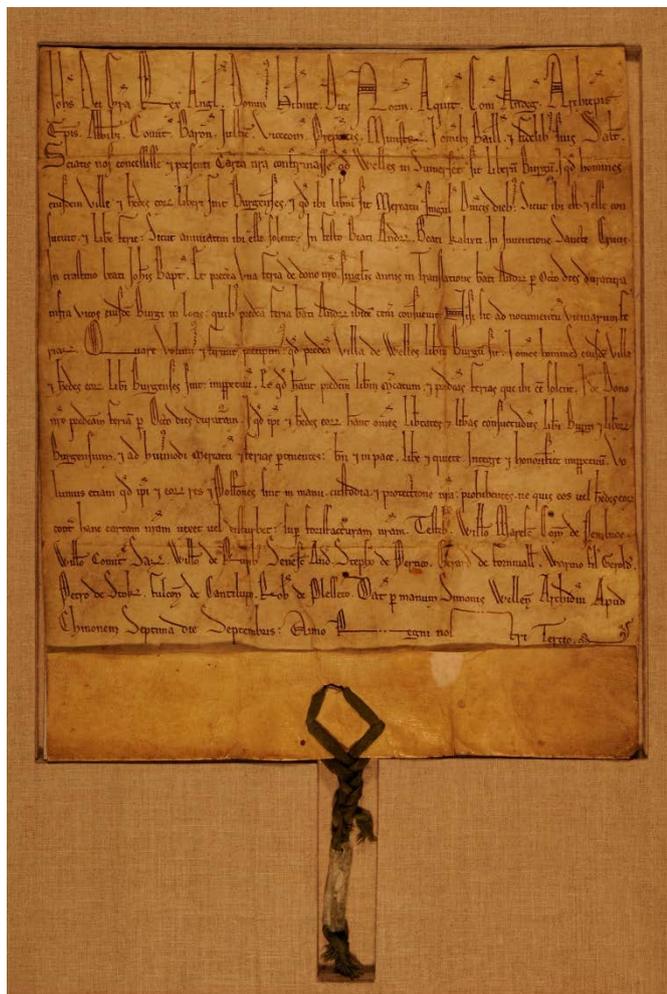


Figure 1 Original King John Charter, 1201. © Wells City Council Archives (WCC/1001/4)

Overleaf is a translation of the Latin text.

N.B. The following is a transcript¹ of the Latin text as written, i.e. without punctuation.

JOHN by the Grace of God King of England, Lord of Ireland, Duke of Normandy and Aquitaine, Earl of Anjou To the Archbishops, Bishops, Abbots, Earls, Barons, Justices, Sheriffs, Headboroughs, Ministers and all his Bailiffs and Liegemen. GREETING. KNOW YE that we have granted and with our present Charter have confirmed that Wells in Somerset be a free Borough and that the men of the same Town and their heirs be free Burgesses and that there be there a free Market every Sunday as is there And had been accustomed to be and free fairs as yearly are accustomed to be there; In the Feast of the Blessed Andrew; of the Blessed Callixtus. In the Invention of the Holy Cross. In the Morrow of the Blessed John the Baptist And moreover One Fair of our gift every year in the Translation of the Blessed Andrew to last for eight days within the Streets of the same Borough in the places in which the aforesaid fair of Saint Andrew hath been accustomed there to be holden Unless it be to the nuisance of the neighbouring fairs - Wherefore we will and firmly command that the aforesaid Town of Wells be a free Borough and all the Men of the same Town and their heirs be free Burgesses for ever And that they have the aforesaid free Market and the aforesaid fairs which are accustomed to be there and of our gift the aforesaid fair to last for eight days And that they and their heirs have all the liberties and free customs of a free Borough and of free Burgesses And to such Market and fairs belonging well and in peace freely and quietly wholly and honourably forever-We will also that they and their things and possessions be in our hand custody and protection forbidding that anyone vex or disturb them or their heirs against this our Charter upon pain of our forfeiture. Witnesses William Marshall, Earl of Pembroke. William Earl of Salisbury, William de Rupibus Seneschal of Anjou. Stephen de pertico. Gerrard de Fornivall. Warrin Fitz-Gerald. Peter de Stoke. Fulke de Cantilupe. Robert de Plesseto. Given by the hand of Simon Archdeacon of Wells at Chinon on the seventh day of September in the third year of our Reign.

If you would like further information on the history of Wells and its buildings, you are welcome to contact or visit Wells City Archives (archives@wellsmuseum.org.uk) and Wells & Mendip Museum (admin@wellsmuseum.org.uk).

¹ Transcript from Wells City Archives (WCC/3058)