



Location, location, location is the prime reason why Runnymede, a low-lying water meadow in the idyllic Surrey countryside, has become synonymous with the struggles for freedom, democracy and individual rights. The 200 acres that Runnymede covers is full of nostalgia, memorials and natural habitat that commemorates this powerful message.

Long before Runnymede became famous for its stance on justice and liberty, it was where the Witan Council (the council of kings) would meet occasionally in the Anglo-Saxon period. Runnymede is derived from the Anglo-Saxon language: “runieg”, a regular meeting place, and “mede”, a meadow.

As you enter Runnymede from the east via the A308, your thoughts of tranquillity and peacefulness are shattered by the roar of traffic noise and the low-flying aircraft overhead. In its own way I find that this is a living tribute to the freedoms of choice that we are entitled to and not just a privilege that may have had to be earned before the days of Magna Carta. To understand the significance of Runnymede, we must travel back in time to when William the Conqueror invaded Britain in 1066 and was crowned in Westminster Abbey. William was ambitious, and in his fight for national domination he built nine castles as a defence around London.

These castles were mainly of the motte and bailey design: planks of wood on a mound of earth, cheap and quick to erect, a kind of Ikea flat-pack castle but without the benefit of an instruction manual or double glazing. The nearest of these castles to London was Windsor, a perfect setting high on a bluff and close to the River Thames, great for transportation.

Let us fast-forward about a hundred years and we have King John on the throne. He was not a great military leader like his brother before him, Richard I, or their father Henry II. Instead, King John was cruel, vindictive and quite a slippery individual to negotiate with – he had run-ins with the church and treated his barons and knights with contempt.

The barons had decided to take matters into their own hands and forced the king to a meeting to negotiate a new charter. On 15th June 1215, it was agreed that Runnymede would be the location of this meeting. It was a safe distance from Windsor Castle, where the king was in residence, and would prohibit any thought of threats that King John may have had to swing the negotiations in his favour. It was also far away from London where the barons and knights had taken control, to the fury of the King.

This charter would contain 63 clauses covering law, liberty and the church. It was

unique because it held the king accountable to the rule of law just like his subjects. The most famous and important of these clauses gave rights of ‘free men’ to justice and a fair trial.

This set of promises was to be known as the Magna Carta – or the Great Charter. However, before the royal seal had time to dry, the king was planning to renege on the deal by appealing to the Pope to annul it. It took a couple more revisions before Henry III finally gave the charter a royal nod of approval in 1225. The Magna Carta has become the cornerstone of many British and foreign constitutional documents, including the 1791 United States Bill of Rights and in 1948 the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.

This historic piece of land has had other royal connections in its glorious past. In the 18th and 19th centuries it was the home of Egham racecourse, the sport of kings, horse racing. Royal patronage and aristocracy were often in attendance, George III and Queen Charlotte were regulars to this event and if they were not able to attend, their sons, the Prince of Wales and the Duke of York, attended in their place.

However, there were many allegations of corruption and cheating among the competing participants and pick-pocketing and concerns over safety had become such



The Magna Carta Memorial

a major issue that the police felt they had to withdraw their support in 1886 and horse racing had to be curtailed despite a public outcry.

The A308 holds another surprise on either side of the road in the form of two distinctive octagonal kiosks with green shuttered windows together with granite pillars with an inscription about Runnymede. There are two similar larger buildings further up the road towards Windsor referred to as lodges. Both the kiosks and lodges are by Edwin Lutyens. One of his most famous buildings is the Cenotaph in Whitehall and the refurbished Midland Bank HQ in the City of London, now known as the upmarket hotel Ned, Edwin's nickname.

Edwin, or should I say Ned, had been commissioned by Lady Fairhaven, an American by birth and widow of Urban Hanlon Broughton, an engineer and a member of parliament. Following Urban's death in 1931, Lady Fairhaven bequeathed the estate to the National Trust after they purchased this historic parcel of land in 1929 to save it from being commercially developed. Nowadays one of the lodges is a National Trust tearoom, a typically quaint English oasis set amid the flora and fauna that cover Runnymede meadow.

This is picnic central where tourists, walkers and pilgrims come to explore the

meadow and its carefully mowed pathways that provide a route to the art installations and commemorative symbols and memorials interwoven with the sloping landscape of the English countryside. Be warned, I would strongly advise a robust dress code particularly in the footwear department, as I have personally fallen foul of strolling through the meadow that has seen overnight rain and suddenly I've had the feeling of my shoes squelching into the sodden ground. So, wellies or a good pair of walking shoes should do the trick.

It is said the day that President John F Kennedy was assassinated on 22nd November 1963 is a date that everyone alive then recalls where they were and what they were doing when they first heard it on the news, much the same as with the Twin Towers and when Princess Diana died.

Today we can visit the Kennedy Memorial on a symbolic one acre of land that was gifted from Britain to America in 1965 and unveiled by the Queen and Jackie Kennedy with the Kennedy's children, John and Caroline. It is easy to immerse ourselves in the allegoric interpretation that landscape architect Geoffrey Jellicoe designed that encapsulates life, death and spirit into a memorial that blends with the surrounding landscape.

To reach the memorial, you pass through a wicket gate from the meadow through



View from north bank of Thames over Magna Carta Island and water meadows

The Jurors' chairs © The National Trust



woodland and begin to ascend a steep pathway of uneven granite setts or cobble stones that make up the 50 steps, reflecting the number of American states. As you reach the summit, beside the memorial stone stands a hawthorn tree, which some regard as a symbol of Kennedy's Catholic belief. Standing just behind the memorial is the American Scarlet Oak, which transforms its leaves into a vivid red colour at the time of Kennedy's death in November.

The stone itself is a seven-ton block of Portland stone that was sourced from the same quarry as the stone used for St Paul's Cathedral. The inscription is taken from Kennedy's inauguration speech that he delivered on 20th January 1961.

Just a few steps away from the memorial is a walkway with a stone bench for two, the seat of contemplation, with dramatic views high above Runnymede Meadow and the banks of the River Thames. It also overlooks Ankerwycke, Runnymede's neighbour, which is famous for an ancient 2,500-year-old yew tree that famously had King Henry VIII on bended knee proposing to wife-to-be Anne Boleyn.

As we descend the steps from the JFK memorial, the sunlight reflects through the woodland forest and we find ourselves back in the meadow, where you'll notice a plaque in front of an oak tree that was planted in December 1987 with soil taken from Jamestown, Virginia, the first English settlement in the New World. Keeping to our carefully mowed grass route, we reach another memorial that has strong links with the struggles for power, equality, justice and the constitutional rights.

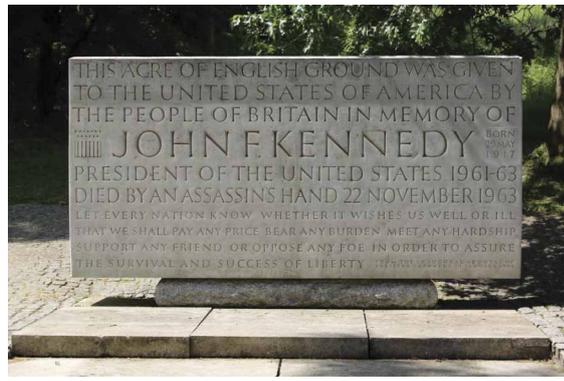
The Magna Carta Memorial is in a field, accessed by a low wooden gate. No one knows for sure of the exact spot that King John sealed the historic charter on Runnymede but from all accounts I feel that this could be a prime contender.

The idea of a physical memorial was first mooted when a delegation of the American Bar Association (ABA) came to pay homage at Runnymede in the 1950s and discovered there wasn't an official memorial to the Magna Carta. After discussions with local authorities and the National Trust, a scheme was approved and funded by the ABA to commission eminent architect Sir Edward Maufe to execute the design. The unveiling of the memorial took place in 1957 in front of an audience of 5,000 and the Queen.

Taking centre stage as you enter the paddock is a saucer-shaped dome supported by eight octagonal pillars, reminiscent of a classical temple. The ceiling of the dome is



HM The Queen, Prince Philip and the Kennedys inspect the Kennedy Memorial, Runnymede, 1965



KING JOHN

decorated with gold stars on a pale blue background. In the centre of the memorial stands a two-metre-high granite cylinder with the inscription: “To commemorate Magna Carta symbol of freedom under law”.

It must be remembered that when the Mayflower pilgrims left England for America in 1620 seeking a new life free from religious persecution, they took with them a copy of the Magna Carta. The US Constitution and ultimately the Bill of Rights were directly descended from the Magna Carta.

In the centre of the meadow is an art installation by Hew Locke, a sculptor and artist, born in Scotland and of Guyanese and British heritage. The *Jurors* was unveiled in 2015 by the Duke of Cambridge, marking 800 years since the sealing of Magna Carta on this ancient meadow. The installation is made up of 12 bronze chairs which are set apart, as if they are awaiting to be occupied by individuals who want to discuss or debate the past and ongoing struggles of freedom, imprisonment and torture. The visitor can be that individual and complete this work of art by sitting on or around the chairs as though they are a juror in a court of law deliberating a case.

Each chair, back and front, is richly embellished with flowers, keys and symbols which serve as connections in the fight for equalities, freedom and liberties. Locke created a contemporary piece of living art that has to be valued as a rich commentary on today's values and culture. The artist has drawn on a variety of people, events and text to emphasise this stunning piece of work, so take your time and study each chair, I find something new and exciting every time I visit this masterpiece. They include Oscar Wilde's incarceration in Reading gaol, Nelson Mandela's imprisonment on Robben Island, and the text of clause 39 of the Magna Carta: “No free man shall be seized or imprisoned, or

stripped of his rights or possessions, or outlawed or exiled, or deprived of his standing in any way, nor will we proceed with force against him, or send others to do so, except by the lawful judgement of his equals or by the law of the land.” These and many other less well-known recipients of injustices and imprisonments benefit from Locke's unique artwork.

The final memorial I would like to bring to the table in this article is “Writ in Water”, which is one of the most beautiful and profound pieces of art that characterise the principles of Magna Carta and resonates with the fight for freedom and liberty.

Writ in Water by Mark Wallinger took me by total surprise and led me through a series of emotions that I wasn't expecting. Acting as a backdrop, Cooper's Hill slopes gradually into the meadow to expose a concrete rotunda that has the appearance of a war-time bunker. You are led to the entrance with no formal doorway, as you enter the darkened passageway you are aware of a series of 12 apertures at floor level that allow light to flood the ground you are walking on. This labyrinth leads into a chamber with a large circular pool of still water in the middle with the sky exposed through the open roof.

Inscribed on the inside rim of the pool in reverse lettering is the text of clause 39, but this is where the magic works. As the light from the roof dances on the reverse lettering, the image of the words is clearly readable in the reflection of the water.

Around the interior of the chamber is a continuous bench which encourages the visitor to sit and contemplate the natural elements that have been used to create a concept that captures the birth right of the British legal system and the continuing war against mankind's inhumanities to man.

Perhaps this may be a good time to trek back across the meadow and take advantage of the fabulous tearoom and indulge in a pot of tea, scone and a slice of cake.

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