

Two Hundred and Twelve Year-old News

Those of you who have been reading these “Bytes” for the past decade or so know that I love to go through old newspapers; I seldom fail to find some item that I feel is worth sharing, and today’s article, from the Limerick [Ireland] Chronicle, August 2, 1797 is no exception.

The papers in those days of sailing ships were full of information about matters that involved the arrival and departure of vessels and also what passengers or supply officers might expect to find at ports of call along the trade routes. I doubt that the following item raised eyebrows, and most likely was read as an attempt to alert passengers on the next ship departing a local port that expected to have a stop at the south end of the African continent and nothing more. How our eating habits have changed over the past two hundred years, and consequently how much longer our life expectancy is!

“The following is the price of provisions at the Cape of Good Hope:

Bread, very coarse, dearer than in England. Mutton, from 2d. to 3d. [two pence to three pence] per lb. Beef, very bad, almost carrion, the same price as mutton. A fowl, from 2d. to 3d. Pork and veal, very bad, and hardly any to be got, 6d. per lb. Eggs, 2 for 6d. Milk, 6d. a quart bottle, and bad. A cabbage, 6d. and every other vegetable very dear. Firewood (no coal) very dear, six dollars a cartload. [I have no idea why they use the term “dollar” in this paper.] A house, unfurnished, for a small family, from £7 to £8 per month. [These are usury rates, as this indicates the rent to be in the 35-40 dollar range in a period of time when many entry level workers didn’t make that much for a years work.] India and European goods near 100 per cent. [Meaning that the price was doubled what they were “back home”.]”

On an inside page of the four-page newspaper appears the following:

Shrine of King John

“On Monday last [July 31, 1797], in consequence of a general reparation of the Cathedral Church of Worcester, the venerable shrine of King John was opened, wherein the remains of that illustrious personage appeared entire; his robes, in which he was interred, are undecayed, but the color, through length of time, is indiscernible; on one side of him lay a sword; the bones of his left arm lying on his breast; his teeth quite perfect; his feet stood erect; the coffin, which is of stone, lay even to the surface of the floor of the church; his remains measured 5 feet 5 inches, being his stature when living.

It is somewhat singular, that after lying there 582 years, the body was not more decayed. [By now, the span of years has increased to 794 years.] This preservation is the most ancient one extant in England, of the lineal ancestors of his present Majesty [George III]. That of Henry I, which is the only one known of an earlier age, lies in that chaos of ruins, the Abbey of Reading.

King John died at Newark, in Lincolnshire, October 19, 1215; and was buried, according to his own desire, in the Cathedral Church at Worcester.”

The Magna Carta, or in English, The Great Charter, that King John was forced to sign at Runnemed, granted certain freedoms to the barons that John had been curtailing. While most

history books describe Runnemede as a meadow, it actually was an island near the north bank of the Thames River tangent to the village of Poyle and Colnbrook, of which we are familiar. The island site was chosen because it was feared that John would secretly have an army of his supporters sneak up on the barons while negotiations were underway and kill them; an island setting would prevent this.

King John signed the charter on June 15, 1215, but it didn't take him long to break his oath to grant liberties to his subjects. Tensions rose throughout the summer, and on August 24th, Pope Innocent III, at the behest of the English King, declared the Magna Carta null and void. Open warfare then broke out, and the barons asked the son of the King of France to take the crown of England. The fortunes of war began to abandon King John, although he was still leading his followers on the field of battle when he was taken ill, dying at Newark Castle on the 19th of October, 1216.

Magna Carta throws much light on the condition of England in the early 13th century. By denouncing the evil deeds of John and the innovations practiced by him, it shows what these were and how they were hated; how money had been raised, how forest areas had been extended, how minors and widows had been cheated and oppressed. By declaring, as it does, what were the laws and customs of a past age wherein justice prevailed; it shows what was the ideal of good government formed by John's prelates and barons. Magna Carta can hardly be said to have introduced any new ideas. Its importance has been summed up in these words: "The whole of the constitutional history of England is a commentary on this charter."

Near the beginning of the newspaper article, the terms "venerable" and "that illustrious personage" were used; this seems odd, as he was a tyrant of the first order; that was the main reason behind the need for the charter. My guess is that the media of the time wouldn't or couldn't say a word that might cast aspersion on any British monarch, no matter how long he or she had been dead

The original charter, as signed by King John, consisted of 63 paragraphs; when reissued in 1217 after his death, it contained only 47, as many related to misdeeds of John himself. As an example, chapter 49 provided for the restoration of hostages. John had been in the habit of taking the children of powerful subjects as pledges for the good behavior of their parents; chapter 49 expressly denied him that right.

King John, as we have already stated, has been sleeping in the Cathedral Church for 794 years, and we will close here and let him slumber on.

Historic Bytes
Bob Grigg