FACTS RELATING TO THE SIGNING OF MAGNA CHARTA, AND MAGNA CHARTA ISLAND.

BY THE REV. C. LOWNDES, M.A., F.R.A.S.

In carrying out the object for which our Society was founded, the Members have an opportunity of enjoying an excursion on the river which forms the boundary of the southern part of our county. Its beautiful scenery, which requires no encomium from me, has been faithfully depicted by the artist, the poet, and the historian. And thousands who, having no care to perpetuate their impressions on paper or on canvas, and have merely wandered from village to village, or pulled from bend to bend of the winding stream, have enjoyed its graceful forms and softened colours. The towns and villages on its banks, the homely life, the old-fashioned inns, the traces of English life of centuries back—all these give a strange charm to this river, which attracts visitors from all parts of the kingdom.

History informs us of many deeds of the past in connection with this river; and amongst them, not the least interesting and beneficial to Old England, is that which is said to have taken place on this island, on which we are now assembled, viz., the signing by King John of the Great Charter of English Liberties, distinguished in history by the Latin title of *Magna Charta*.

The result of the great political gathering which took place on this occasion, is an event ever memorable in the annals of England. Sir J. Mackintosh has justly said of it, "To have produced it, to have preserved it, to have matured it, constitute the immortal claim of England on the esteem of mankind." *

The causes which led to the concessions, dictated by the Barons and granted by John, and the effects they have produced, have been so recently and so lucidly laid before you by the Rev. J. R. Pretyman, a member of our Society, in his "Illustrations of English History," printed in the RECORDS OF BUCKINGHAMSHIRE, Vol. IV., p. 242,

* Mackintosh's History of England, vol. i., p. 222.

and by J. Parker, Esq., in his Paper on "Magna Charta," printed in the current number (p. 359) of the RECORDS, that I shall not refer to them; I will merely allude to the facts as they occurred.

King John ascended the throne on the death of Richard Cœur de Lion, who was slain by the hand of Bertrand the crossbowman before the wall of Castle Chaluz. The heir to the throne, the unfortunate Prince Arthur, who, with his lovely sister Eleanor, "the Pearl of Brittany," had been taken prisoners in the battle before the fortress of Mirabeau, A.D. 1202, was murdered by King John himself; while Eleanor, who, after the death of her brother, was the next heiress to the crown of England, was confined in Bristol Castle, where she remained a prisoner for life.

John's chief residence was at the Temple in London, where the royal treasure was deposited, and from whence "the writs to his lieutenants, sheriffs, and bailiffs were dated." * He was a great benefactor to the Temple; and was much influenced in all that he did by the Master of the Temple, Brother Amaric de St. Mawr. On his ascending the throne, most of the earls, barons, and free tenants swore fealty to him. But from the pride and cruelty of his temper, he soon became hateful to all his subjects. Differences also arose between him and the Pope; and the false and mean-spirited King held many conferences and negociations with the imperious and overbearing Roman Pontiff, in which the Knights Templars took an active part. Two brethren of the Order were sent by Pandolph, the Pope's legate, to King John, to arrange between them that conference which ended in the complete submission of the latter to all the demands of the Holy See. The Pope, in the first instance, laid his kingdom under an interdict, then he excommunicated him, and afterwards deposed him. He instigated Philip King of France to take possession of his kingdom, and thus a war between the two nations seemed inevitable. But the English people, however bitterly they hated the king, would not suffer invasion quietly. They flocked to Dover, where the English standard was, to defend their

* Acta et fœdera, tom i., pp. 165, 173, "Itinerarium regis Johannis," by T. Duff Hardy, published by the Record Commissioners.

native land. John, by the advice and persuasion of the Templars, repaired to the preceptory of Temple Ewell, near Dover, where he was met by the Pope's legate, who intimidating him with exaggerations of King Philip's power, and his own weakness in the discontent of his barons and the people, discharged his commission so effectually that he persuaded him to take the most extraordinary oath in all the records of history, before all the people, kneeling, and with his hands held up between those of the Legate. He resigned his kingdom of England and Ireland "to God, to the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul, to the Holy Roman Church his mother, and to his Lord Pope Innocent the Third, and his Catholic successors, for the remission of all his sins, and the sins of all his people, as well the living as the dead."* After this he had power only to hold his kingdom by the Pope's leave, and on payment of a tribute of a thousand marks yearly—700 for the kingdom of England and 300 for the kingdom of Ireland.

The best and bravest of the earls, barons, and knights, were for some time faithful to their king; but, instigated by Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury, the originator and promoter of Magna Charta—they threw off their allegiance, raised the standard of rebellion, and became the foremost of those bold patriots who stood forth in the defence of their liberties. They assembled in Easter week a large body of men at Stamford; appointed Robert Fitzwalter their general, whom they called "The Mareschal," and styled themselves "The army of God and Holy Church."

John, having returned to the Tower, offered to refer all differences to the Pope alone, or eight barons—four to be chosen by himself and four by the confederates. This the barons scornfully rejected, and went to him, as Matthew Paris tells us,† "in a very resolute manner, clothed in their military dresses, and demanded the liberties and laws of King Edward the Confessor with others for themselves, the kingdom, and the Church of England."

The King promised to satisfy their demands; and

* Matt. Paris (the monk of St. Albans), ad ann. 1213, p. 237.
† Matt. Paris, p. 253, ad ann. 1215.

William Marshall, Earl of Pembroke, who was the faithful attendant on the English monarch, and the constant mediator between him and his rebellious subjects, became security for the performance of his promise. The Earl, enjoying the confidence of both parties, was deputed to enquire what those laws and liberties were; and after having received at Stamford the written demands of the barons, he urged the King to satisfy them; but he swore that he would never grant them and reduce himself to slavery. Failing in his endeavours, he explained to the Barons the King's denial. The Barons' army then entered London (May 24th), where they were joyfully received; and then the Earl was again sent to announce the submission of the King to their demands.

John, attended by the Earl Marshall and Brother Amaric de St. Mawr, Grand Preceptor of England of the Knights Hospitallers of St. John of Jerusalem, retired to Old Windsor as a place of refuge and security against the growing power of the Barons. By the advice and the earnest exhortation of these two exalted personages, the King consented to sign Magna Charta.*

A conference between the two parties was appointed to be held on the opposite bank, called Runnymede —in Anglo-Saxon *Rhùn* and *Mede*, signifying the Council Meadow. I may here remark that Leland, the antiquary, gives the same derivation, and seems to favour the opinion of John of Beverly, "Pratum consilii quod antiquis temporibus, ibi de pace regni sæpius concilia tractabant:" *In ancient times the councils concerning the peace of the Kingdom was frequently assembled here.* A less probable derivation is from the races which are held there on the last Tuesday and the two following days in the month of August.

It is probable that Edward the Confessor held his *witan* or council at Runnymede during his residence at Old Windsor, and that the Barons chose this spot, as well on account of its previous associations with those very rights they met to assert, as because it was a convenient distance from Old Windsor, sufficiently near for the King, but far enough removed to prevent any treacherous surprise by his forces.

---

* Matt. Paris, ad ann. 1215, pp. 253, 256.

On the morning of Friday, June 15th, A.D. 1215, the steady tramp of many horses and the well-known ring of hauberks,* foretokened the arrival at Runnymede of the Barons' army from the direction of Staines. It consisted of troops of mounted archers, and many companies of heavily-accoutred infantry, each led by a steel-clad knight with his distinctive pennon fluttering from his lance's head. The King and his retinue approached from Old Windsor. The two parties encamped apart like open enemies; "One army," as tradition goes, "lay in Long Mead, the other in Runny Mede next Egham." On the one side was the Mareschal Robert FitzWalter, supported by a great concourse of the nobility. On the other, the weak and unstable tyrant, attended by only some four-and-twenty persons of any note, many of whom despised him, and were merely his advisers in form. The names of the King's supporters are given by Roger of Windover. "Those who were in behalf of the Barons," he adds, "it is not necessary to enumerate, since the whole nobility of England were assembled in numbers not to be computed."

The terrified King was compelled to yield to the demands of the Barons who had got him into their power, and who, under the pretext of securing him from the fury of the multitude, conveyed him to this island, where on this stone, and very much against his will, he concluded the treaty by signing Magna Charta.

Some authorities, particularly the historians of the county of Surrey, assert that Magna Charta was signed at Runnymede, and maintain that their assertion is confirmed by the concluding passage of the document: "Dat' p' manum n'rum in prato quod vocat' Runimed' int' Windleshor' 't Staines, quinto decimo die Junii, anno regni 'nri septimo decimo:" † *Given by our hand in the meadow which is called Runnymede between Windsor and Staines on the* 15*th day of June, in the* 17*th year of our*

* Hauberk, a coat of mail without sleeves. It extended from the throat to the thigh or knee, and was composed of interwoven links of steel.

† See "Fœdera," vol. i., pars. i., edit. 1816, in which are engraved facsimiles of Magna Charta from an original copy preserved among the archives of the cathedral church of Lincoln.

reign. But surely there is something due to tradition, and from the circumstance that the island was called the island of Runnymede, and that the document was probably prepared previously to the meeting of the two armies, we may infer that the actual scene of the ratification of the covenant by the royal signature was upon this island.

On the same day, time, and place, the King granted the "Carta de Forestæ," which is terminated by the same sentence; and on the 19th of June he affixed his signature to a writ, directed to the Sheriffs and others, for the election of twelve Knights in each county, to inquire into the abuses and aid in carrying into effect the provisions of Magna Charta. From this it may be inferred that the assembly at Runnymede continued several days; but it was no sooner dissolved, than the King threw off the mask which, with consummate hypocrisy, he had worn during the proceedings, and in a paroxysm of rage, as Lingard says, "he cursed the day of his birth, gnashed his teeth, rolled his eyes, gnawed sticks and straw, and acted all the freaks of a madman."*

Two years after the signing of Magna Charta this island was the scene of the peace made September 3rd, 1217, between the Earl Marshall—the Protector, on behalf of Prince Henry (afterwards Henry III.)—and the associated Barons, who had invited the Dauphin of France to seize with their aid the English crown.†

This small island is in the parish of Wyrardisbury—called Wraysbury—in our county, and is now attached, on the western extremity, to the main land. It formerly belonged to the Nuns of Ankerwyke, and passed into the possession of the Harcourt family; and G. S. Harcourt, Esq., built a cottage over the stone which tradition asserts as that on which the document rested when the King and the Barons affixed their signatures to it. The stone is in a painted chamber, with the shields of the Barons who signed the Charter emblazoned on its walls. It is fixed in a massive oak frame, and is inscribed, "Be it remembered that on this island, on the 15th of June, 1215, King John, of England, signed Magna Charta;

* History of England, 4to, vol. ii., p. 259; from Matt. Paris, "Historia Major," p. 254.

† Matt. Paris, "Anglica," p. 287.

and in the year 1834, this building was erected in commemoration of that great and important event, by George Simon Harcourt, Esq., Lord of the Manor, and then High Sheriff of the county." The cottage was formerly inhabited by a ferry-man, but for the last quarter of a century it has been a private residence, and the island is no longer a public resort for picnicing.

In "Curiosities of Literature" (vol. i. p. 10), the author relates that the Charter of King John was rescued by Sir R. Cotton, from a tailor's shears. Cotton MS. Julius C. iii., f. 1916, in the British Museum, contains a letter, of which the following is a copy:—

"Sir, I have heere the Charter of King John dated at Running Meade. By the first safe and sure messenger it is yours. So are the Saxon Charters as fast as I can copy them; but in the meantime I will close King John in a box and send him.—Your affectionate friend and servant, EDWARD DERING.

Dover Castle, May 10th, 1630.

Discovery by Sir R. C. at is tailors."

A proposal has often been made to erect a column as a memorial of this great event; but no effectual steps have been taken to accomplish this object. About the middle of last century the poet Akenside composed the following lines as an appropriate inscription for such a monument:—

"Thou, who the verdant plain dost traverse here,
Whilst Thames among his willows from thy view
Retires; O stranger! stay thee, and the scene
Around contemplate well. This is the place
Where England's ancient Barons, clad in arms,
And stern with conquest, from their tyrant King
(Then render'd tame), did challenge and secure
The Charter of thy freedom. Pass not on
'Till thou hast bless'd their memory, and paid
Those thanks which God appointed the reward
Of public virtue. And if chance thy home
Salute thee with an honour'd father's name,
Go, call thy sons; instruct them what a debt
They owe their ancestors; and make them swear
To pay it, by transmitting down entire
Those sacred rights to which themselves were born."

Such are the principal facts relating to the signing of Magna Charta—a Charter which secured very important liberties and privileges to every order of men in the

kingdom, to the Clergy, the Barons, and the people; and which continues in force to this day. While it is a great enjoyment to us in the nineteenth century to look back on the past and dwell on the historical scenes of olden times, it is with increased pleasure and gratitude that we look upon the far brighter present of our national greatness; when the respective powers of our Royal and constitutional Queen and her subjects are equally balanced and distinctly defined; when the Earls, Barons, and Knights use their influence, both in public and in private, for the promotion of every good and charitable institution in the State; when the freemen and tenants endeavour to conform themselves to the laws of their country; and when the Bishops and Clergy, by their blameless and zealous lives, are unceasing in their efforts to advance the temporal and spiritual welfare of the whole community.