Why did the barons rebel against King John?

Now you know what a ‘Superking’ was supposed to do it is time to investigate a king who wasn’t super at all, King John. Your task is to work out what went wrong for John and why the barons rebelled against him.

Your enquiry – stage 1: Why were the barons angry with King John?

ACTIVITY 4

This scorecard shows how we think the barons would have scored King John.
1. Read the story strip on pages 8-10 and fill in the last column with evidence about John’s successes and failures in each category.
2. Decide whether you agree with us about how the barons would score King John. Change any that you think are too high or too low.
3. Which three jobs in column 1 do you think mattered most to the barons? Explain why you chose them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What should a king do?</th>
<th>Score out of 10 (as awarded by the barons)</th>
<th>Evidence for the barons’ score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Look rich &amp; powerful to impress your people</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Win the support &amp; trust of the barons and listen to their advice</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Lead the army, win wars and keep your land</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Raise taxes fairly, in the same way as kings before you</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Stamp out crime and keep order in the country</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Support the Church</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Have sons so there are no disputes over who is the next king</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall Judgement: 2

Timecheck

Here are the events of 1066–1216 so you can see where King John’s reign fits in with events you have already studied:
John was born in 1167, the youngest son of King Henry II. Henry raised high taxes to pay for wars to defend his empire, which included half of France (see map). Henry was such a good soldier the barons paid up. He also quarrelled with the Church. He said he should choose the archbishops.

Henry gave his eldest sons lots of land but had none left to give John, so John was nicknamed ‘lackland’. Then Henry sent nineteen-year-old John to rule Ireland. He upset the Irish barons by giggling at their long beards. They rebelled. John returned to England. He had failed to gain any land.

John became king in 1199. However, he had a rival. Some of the barons in France wanted John’s twelve-year-old nephew, Arthur of Brittany, to be king. In 1202, John captured Arthur. Many people believed that John had Arthur murdered. Others said that John killed Arthur in a drunken rage and threw him in the River Seine.

John’s brother Richard was crowned king in 1189. Richard was an even greater soldier than Henry. He spent most of his reign on Crusade. He increased taxes to pay for his wars. While he was away, John plotted with King Philip of France to conquer some of Richard’s land. But when Richard came home John didn’t dare fight him.

John divorced his wife and married a rich French girl called Isabella. She later gave birth to two sons but the marriage caused problems. Isabella had been promised to a French baron who complained to King Philip of France. This gave Philip an excuse to invade John’s French land.

John did not go to France to lead his army. By 1204 he had lost nearly all his land in France (see map) and had got a new nickname: ‘Soft-sword.’
John was desperate to win back his lands in France. He asked the barons to provide an army, just as they had for his father and brother. Some refused. They did not trust John. They did not like the way he took important decisions without consulting them. They did not see why they should spend money and risk their lives when their lands were in England, not France.

Without the soldiers provided by the barons John had to raise money to pay for an army. To do this, he:
- Increased the fines people had to pay in the courts
- Charged rich widows as much as £3000 for the right to stay unmarried after their husbands died
- Increased the tax people paid to the King when they inherited their parents’ land. He charged one baron £6000 for land that was only earning £550 per year.
- Massively increased taxes on barons who refused to provide soldiers for him. When one baron did not pay, he imprisoned him without trial until he paid.

By 1213 he had collected so much tax that almost half of all the coins in England were stored in his castles, ready to pay for a new war. This made him very unpopular.

John worked hard as king in England. He was very interested in the law. He sat as a judge in the Royal Court and decided cases himself. But people said he was biased and he used the courts to help his friends and punish people he did not like. He also travelled around the country checking that the barons were keeping the laws. The barons resented John’s involvement. After all, Henry and Richard had spent most of their time abroad. But John didn’t have any choice as he’d lost most of his empire.

John did not trust the English barons. He preferred to listen to the advice of foreign mercenaries (men who were paid to fight for him) like Gerard d’Athee. John put Gerald in charge of three major castles in Gloucester, Bristol and Hereford after taking them from English barons.
According to royal records the King had a bath once every three weeks. Each bath cost 6d, which means it was quite an elaborate ceremony – compare this with monks who were expected to bathe just three times a year! King John was also famously well dressed. He particularly liked exotic fur coats made of sable, ermine and even polar bear. When he was young he had thick, curly hair, but later he became bald and fat.

In 1205 John quarrelled with the Pope, just as his father had done. They disagreed over who should be the new Archbishop of Canterbury. John refused to let the Pope’s choice, Stephen Langton, enter the country. It had always been the King’s right to choose the Archbishop and the barons agreed with him over this.

In 209, the Pope excommunicated John. This meant that John would go to hell when he died. Next the Archbishop threatened to excommunicate all of John’s soldiers. In 1213, John gave in to the Pope.

And finally, there was John’s biggest problem: his empire. He was determined to reclaim the land he had lost in France. In 1214, John and the Emperor of Germany agreed to attack France. But once again John did not ask his barons for their advice, and did not get their support. Many refused to fight, but John went ahead anyway. He raised an army of mercenaries and invaded the south of France.

He left the German Emperor to fight the King of France. It was his biggest gamble, and he lost. The Emperor was beaten by the French at the Battle of Bouvines. John’s hopes of regaining his land in France were over. All those taxes had been wasted.