

Magna Carta Rediscovered

Enhancing Tourism through a Travelling Multimedia Exhibition

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Abstract: In the 800th anniversary of Magna Carta, the travelling multimedia exhibition Magna Carta Rediscovered celebrated — in six strategic locations across the South of England — the extraordinary 1300 reissue recently rediscovered in the town of Faversham, Kent. With the objective of communicating the meaning and the historical value of Magna Carta in an engaging and interactive way, and of promoting tourism in Kent, Magna Carta Rediscovered unique quality has been the combination of the historical narration with a thoughtful use of technology, resulting in an exhibition built on different levels of interaction and discovery where, alongside admiring the original document, Visitors could interact with digital maps, explore high-quality digitalisations, re-act the sealing of Magna Carta at the interactive table, write their very own clause for a "Magna Carta for Today". The exhibition was commissioned by Visit Kent, the regional institution promoting tourism and cultural activity, in collaboration with Faversham Town Council, and was financed by the Heritage Lottery Fund from National Lottery proceeds that support British national heritage projects. This paper aims at presenting and discussing the benefits of the employment of technologies in this specific cultural heritage context, and the role these can play in lighting up the past's enduring relevance.

Keywords: Multimedia; Technology; History; Interaction; Touring Exhibition



Fig. 1 – Mixed exhibits from Magna Carta Rediscovered, from left to right: the interactive table surrounded by the four corten thrones; backlit panels; the welcome panel graphics; a detail of Magna Carta's hi-tech display case.

Premise

This presentation focuses on a project developed by ETT, an ICT company, in the field of museum exhibits. We shall illustrate and describe the Magna Carta case history, based on a combination of multimedia exhibits and traditional exhibits.

The exhibition context

Today as never before multimedia is part of our daily lives. There is a growing interest in the world of culture and research to demonstrate the application of interactive technology in different areas (art, history and preservation of ancient works), and the need to discover new ways of sharing and spreading our heritage is emerging as a strong task. It is a new way of thinking about cultural enjoyment as an experience, not only participatory, but also immersive. Today, many institutions such as museums and libraries feel the need to innovate, and make works of art usually reserved for a niche audience more interesting and eye-catching. Despite the fact that these places are particularly suitable for processes of learning and acquiring new knowledge, the concept of “museum” is even today often associated with something boring and old. But New Technologies can help to change this way of thinking and, as we have seen, can be used to build new kinds of educational activities with the aim of regaining a wider audience, no longer passive but active and participatory. As a private company specialized in multimedia exhibits, we have the opportunity and the fortune to manage projects involving the use of advanced technologies.

The Approach to Museum Exhibition Design

Within this evolutionary process, as we have seen, museums have become increasingly digital: not only for cataloguing and conservation, but also for enjoyment and communication. The central point, on which ETT has focused its development activities, is the enhancement of the visitor experience. In recent years, the trend towards improving the visitor experience has taken a great leap forward. We are entering a new era in museum design as the technologies for immersive, interactive experiences become more sophisticated and widespread. This new approach to museum exhibitions is based on the use of the most recent technologies and devices in order to:

- enhance visitor engagement and interaction
- give visitors an active role to play, part visitor – part actor: a “visit-actor”
- define the goal of an “immersive museum”, in which the visit-actor is absorbed into the storyline

Museums are, in fact, becoming more aware that boredom is the most fearsome enemy and that a museum, to attract, must surprise every visitor. Starting from the message that the organisers want to get across, together with the exhibition theme, the best use of the most effective Immersive Visitor Engagement Technology must be correctly planned. A successful way in which advanced technologies can be used to enhance visitor engagement and “absorb” them into the storyline is outlined here.

Design, Storytelling and Multimedia solutions for Magna Carta Rediscovered

Designing a travelling exhibition

Magna Carta Rediscovered travelled to six locations (Faversham, Canterbury, Maidstone, Dover, Sandwich and Rochester) each one of a completely different size and nature — architecturally, aesthetically, functionally. The prerogative was to create flexible layouts, where flows and exhibits order could be re-arranged and shuffled freely to adjust to the different spaces. Secondly, there was a strong need to maximise the efficiency of the exhibits, which had to be easy to install, dismantle, pack and stack, as well as robust in every component. The approach adopted by ETT was consequentially a modular one, featuring a set of single units of same size and volume but different fittings levels (basic one-faced, basic two-faced, with interactive screen, with backlit panel etc.), to adjust not only to different types of content (that is, traditional printed graphics and multimedia/digital content) but also to different types of spaces and interactions. The exhibition was built almost in its entirety in corten-finished metal which, rather than suffering from it, acquired a most interesting weathered look each time it travelled. All interactive screens were protected by MDF frames which prevented any damage during transportation. Needless to say, the multimedia stations enabled the condensation of a large amount of content in relatively small space.

Creating an engaging Storytelling around one single document

Just as challenging, the whole exhibition was to be built around one single document which, while terribly relevant from an historical point of view, did not present any particular aesthetical feature: the quite inaccessible abbreviated Latin, the plain calligraphy, the ancient parchment; and the inscription "Pro baronibus portus de Fauresham" (*for the Barons of the Port of Faversham*) to mark it as unique and, of course, Kentish. Nevertheless, the curatorial challenge was not how to display an ancient manuscript, but how to engage Visitors and get them to understand what they were witnessing, showing them both its history and contemporary importance. The storytelling needed to be divided into independent narrative capsules accessible to users with varying levels of knowledge, and be accompanied by a rich portfolio of archival images within the copyright budget and limitations to support that narration; ultimately, we wanted to take Visitors on a journey of discovery and bonding with the territory. The multimedia reconstruction has been crucial to the accomplishment of all these goals, immersing the Visitor in the Medieval world that produced the document, showing the various forces at play at the time when King John's great seal was affixed, interrogating Visitors on what they would write in a Magna Carta of today.

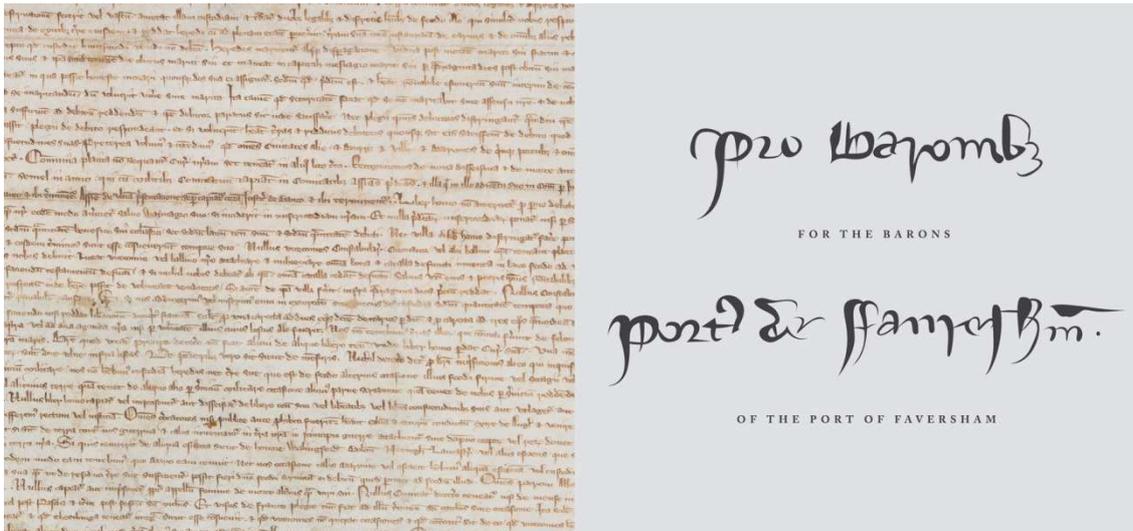


Fig. 2 – Detail of Faversham's Magna Carta (Copyright: Faversham Town Council / Roger Crosby Photographic) and a digital reproduction of its inscription, with English translation.

Designing the Multimedia Exhibits

Approach to design

The exhibition, divided into four theme areas and enhanced by interactive stations, not only told the story but also presented the main figures involved in the negotiations on 15th June 1215, during which King John was forced to cede powers to the barons of his kingdom. The exhibition combined, for each narrative unit, a traditional approach to storytelling - that is, one to three printed panels - with a multimedia, interactive station. The exhibition counted three 32" touch screens, one 65" touch table and three 11" tablets. The content of the printed panels always aimed at giving the general facts and an overview to the topic presented, and addressed all Visitors: of any level of knowledge and time available. This "basic" content was always accompanied by relevant archival images, purchased mostly via the British Library, London and the Bodleian Library, Oxford. On the other hand, the multimedia content was intended as a chance, for those Visitors with more time at hand, to delve deeper and explore into detail what was stated on the main printed panels. This created two separated levels of narration, addressing two different Visitors groups. The age of Visitors was also taken into account: the graphics of the printed panels respected the exhibition design best practice (an excellent guide is "Exhibition for All" published by the National Museum of Scotland), including font size, height of text, positioning of captions etc. The UI for all multimedia stations was equally thought through, to make sure accessibility was granted to all Visitors. A large font size was employed; the navigation was simplified to a minimum; icons were specifically designed and employed consistently across all multimedia stations, to describe every single action Visitors could perform. The team involved in the creation of all multimedia included curators, designers, software developers and game developers, to make sure quality was ensured in every aspect.

1215 — The Making of Magna Carta

The first exhibit, "1215 — The Making of Magna Carta", was composed by two printed backlit panels and an interactive table. The printed panels gave Visitors an account of the key facts which led to the sealing of the first Magna Carta in Runnymede and presented the main figures involved in the negotiations. The printed

panels addressed a general public which needed an introduction to what Magna Carta was and why its sealing was considered to be such a pivotal historical event; the exhibit also needed to address children. Because large school groups were expected to visit, the design and curatorial team was looking for a solution to make the learning process fun and stimulating for kids. How could we help children to really grasp the meaning of the 1215 events, to understand what really happened, why and how? At the "Table of Negotiations", a 65" touch table surrounded by throne-shaped chairs made of corten-finished metal, kids and adults alike could learn the value of dialogue and compromise, acting the part of the four historical characters whom, sitting around a table, came to the famous agreement in 1215. The interactive game, which has been developed in Unity, is easily explained: each kid, or group of kids, was assigned a character (these were: King John, the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Marshall and the Rebel Barons). Each character, colourfully illustrated, was accompanied by a simple description, stating in a few words who the character was and what he wanted. The computer would then randomly select a character, and the player representing that character could now select a topic between Trade, Justice, Ownership and Taxation, Law of the Land, Women and Family. Once the topic was selected (by dragging the icon with a finger) the computer would present the different players' views on that topic - for example, this is King John on Justice:

"King John abused the justice system for his own ends. He created arbitrary fines to make money. He unfairly punished those who opposed him, denying their right to trial and handing out inconsistent punishments."

At this stage, kids could start discussing and negotiating - mirroring the opinion of their own character - and try to come to an agreement in less than three minutes. If they could come to an agreement, by holding a finger on the 'Let's Agreee' button, then the game would be solved, and the real Magna Carta agreement related to the chosen topic would appear on the screen, to help kids understand how the issue was historically solved. The game was easily one of the most crowded stations; nevertheless, the presence of a moderator appeared to be quite decisive and not all locations could spare a member of staff to cover for this.



Fig. 3 – Graphics from the "Table of Negotiations": the four protagonists of the sealing of 1215 Magna Carta, and the screen saver displaying the structure of the feudal society.

The Legacy of Magna Carta

As the Visitor proceeded, the narration became more detailed and specific. The second multimedia exhibit, dedicated to the legacy of Magna Carta, narrated how the Magna Carta legacy had evolved across the centuries: from peace treaty to manifesto, to statue book, to human rights icon. The multimedia exhibit, just below a photo of Eleonore Roosevelt holding the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, displayed an interactive map of the world, colourfully illustrated. Visitors could navigate the globe and locate all issues and re-issues of Magna Carta: the interactive would give information about the manuscript and provide a photo of the building hosting it. In addition to this, the map would also display the influence of Magna Carta in the world's legislations, showing, per each country, the clauses and speeches by relevant political leaders inspired by Magna Carta.

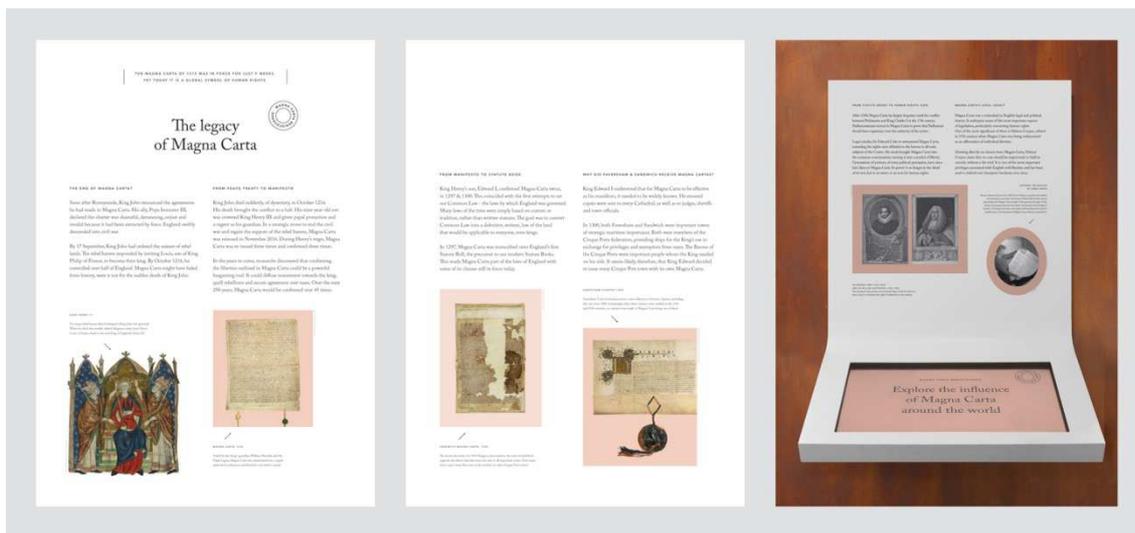


Fig. 4 – Exhibit from Magna Carta Rediscovered, composed of two backlit panels and one MDF panel with interactive screen.

How was Faversham's Magna Carta written?

This exhibit contained information about the language used for Magna Carta, who could read the document, who wrote it and how it was written, including a description on how quills were manufactured. The multimedia touch-screen allowed Visitors to zoom in a high-quality digitalisation of Magna Carta and truly explore and appreciate the ancient calligraphy; furthermore, they could write a personal message, see it appear in the original calligraphy on a virtual parchment identical to the original, and have the possibility to send it to themselves or a friend as a unique token of their visit.

What does Faversham's Magna Carta contain?

On the printed panels, a comparison of Magna Carta 1215 and Magna Carta 1300; an analysis of the different topics; Magna Carta's most celebrated clauses and the most unexpected ones, such as the one ensuring freedom of movement for international merchants and establishing uniform English measures for wine, beer, corn and cloth. According to this poem, written by William FitzStephen in the 1170s, London was a most lively international market at the time:

*Gold from Arabia, from Sabaea spic and incense;
 from the Scythians arms of steel well-tempered;
 oil from the rich groves of palm
 that spring from the fat lands of Babylon;
 fine gems from Nile, from China crimson silks;
 French wines; and sable, vair and miniver
 from the far lands where Russ and Norseman dwell.*

The interactive enabled Visitors to delve deeper and explore the single clauses by topic or in order of appearance, visualising on a same page the original clause, its Latin transcription, its translation and, when applicable, its commentary. Visitors expressed a very high interest in this interactive station; while it was designed thinking mostly of scholars, the possibility of deciphering the calligraphy with the Latin text underneath, reading the actual words and commentary in English, and the possibility of browsing the clauses by topic, was appreciated by most adult Visitors.

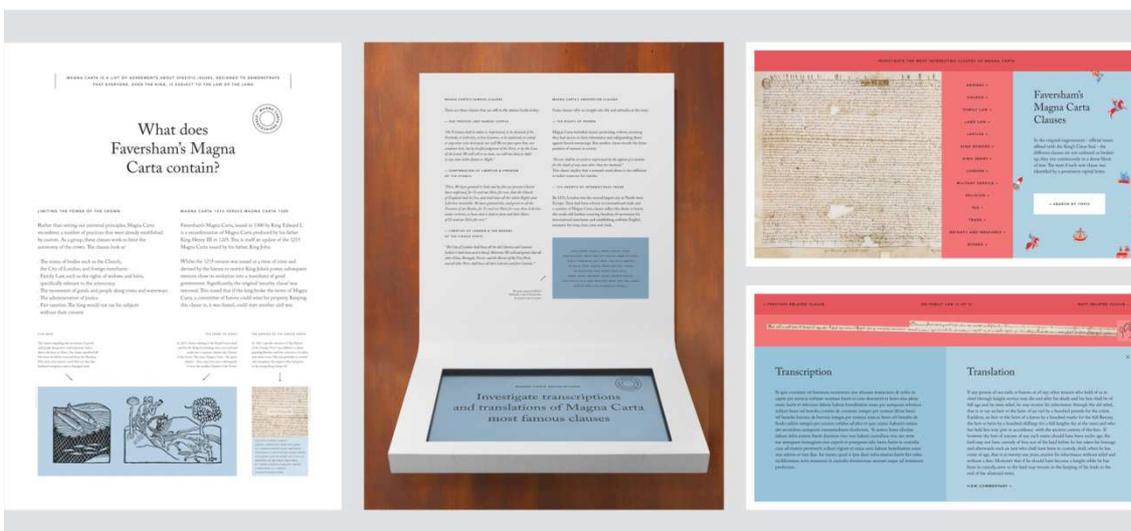


Fig. 5 – Exhibit dedicated to the contents of the manuscript: printed introductory description; interactive touch-screen with printed panel; digital graphics cataloguing clauses by topic and displaying transcription, translation and original text from the manuscript.

Magna Carta: Now and Forever

This last exhibit was dedicated to the future of Magna Carta. Visitors could write their very own clause for the 2015 Magna Carta, addressing issues of global relevance such as cyber security, mass surveillance and privacy, big data, human rights and climate change. Should we, for instance, limit the power of those organisations that know all about us, in the same way that the Magna Carta limited the powers of an absolute Monarch? Part of this exhibit were three tablets for the completion of digital feedback forms (about the exhibition itself, about the future of Magna Carta, about the territory of Kent) and a station for the completion of paper feedback forms, to address those Visitors which were less confident around tablets. Our technical team was careful to extract the digital feedback forms at the end of each leg of the exhibition's journey, so to enable our developers to analyse the forms per location. This exhibit enabled us to collect an impressive amount of

information, which will be able to inform us and our Client (i.e. Visit Kent, Faversham Town Council) on future exhibitions and serve as case study generally for the design of a small-scale touring exhibition.



Fig. 6 – Exhibit from Magna Carta Rediscovered, composed of four vertical printed panels and three tablets positioned at different heights, for Visitors to leave their feedback and write their very own clause for a "Magna Carta for Today".

The benefits of Multimedia in Magna Carta Rediscovered

We have been able to follow each and every aspect of the exhibition across all locations and life-span of the project, and have registered a considerable amount of Visitors feedback. The multimedia solution not only constituted a non-intrusive support to Faversham's treasure, but was also responsive both to the limited exhibition areas and the location-driven content updates. Technology enabled the creation of different levels of information, targeted for different audience groups with different levels of knowledge — the perfect example being the exhibit dedicated to the content of Magna Carta, where Visitors could read its general description as well as investigate transcription, translation and commentary of each single clause. Digitalisation enabled Visitors to experience details not visible to the naked eye or from the imposed distance. A Larger amount of content was rendered accessible, while the only visible content was the one selected by the Visitors themselves. Finally, technology enabled the collection of data in a non-intrusive way.

Location	Period (2015)	Days	Total Visitors	Average Visitors/Day	Population	Visitors/Population
Faversham	23 May - 28 June	37	12,530	399	19,316	65%
Canterbury	2 July - 19 July	18	5,319	296	55,240	10%
Maidstone	25 July - 6 Sept	44	4,956	113	113,137	4.5%
Dover	10 Sept - 19 Sept	10	1,250	125	31,022	4%
Sandwich	24 Sept - 6 Oct	13	3,383	260	4,989	68%
Rochester	10 Oct - 6 Dec	58	17,695	305	27,000	66%
Total	23 May - 6 Dec	180	45,133	250	/	/

Tab. 1 – Visitors numbers are per se not particularly interesting; they become astounding, however, when compared to the size of the towns hosting the exhibition.

About ETT

ETT is a Digital and Creative Industry, specialising in multidisciplinary technological and cultural knowledge integration, software development and consulting. The company offers high-tech solutions in the New Media field, enhancing and disseminating cultural heritage using mobile, touch and multi-touch devices, virtual and augmented reality.

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