

Doncaster Borough Charters: the Legacy

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The charters continued to be cornerstone of the town's government until 1835. In that year Parliament's reform of municipal corporations placed town councils on a new footing. The Doncaster Borough Council was one of the 178 towns affected by the reorganisation. Under the new regime, councillors were elected by all the tax-paying residents rather than chosen by a restricted body of freemen. Municipal finances were regularised and brought under strict audit. The bench of magistrates was to no longer be chosen by the council but appointed independently by the Crown.

By this time, the age of royal prerogative, expressed through the granting of royal borough charters, had long passed into history. The Municipal Corporations Act of 1835 was the first in a long succession of Acts of Parliament to regulate the constitution and powers of local authorities. Under the provisions of one of these Acts, Doncaster raised its status and became not merely a borough but, in 1927, a county borough. This gave the town greater control over local affairs, particularly in education.

However, what Parliament creates it can also change. In April 1974, all the municipal boroughs and county boroughs - Doncaster amongst them - were swept away in one of the biggest reforms of local government in the twentieth century. In Doncaster, the new authority was the Metropolitan Borough Council, which governs a much larger area and a larger population than all but the largest of the local authorities that existed before 1974.

What, then, of the borough charters? Despite all these major changes they still have legal significance: for instance, the provisions of charter of 1505 still remain the basis of the right of Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council to lay claim to the racecourse and the charter of 1664 was recently consulted to establish the right of the borough to have a civic mayor as well as a town mayor. Moreover, they are a source of local pride and part of the local heritage. Whatever else may change, the charters remain as witness to local aspirations to local self-government over more than seven centuries.