

Doncaster Borough Charter of King James I, 9 July 1604

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The origins of the charter of King James I lay in events of almost ten years earlier. There had been a dispute in the town in 1590 over the selection of the mayor, and two rival mayors had been elected. The government of Queen Elizabeth was greatly concerned that the dispute would lead to local unrest and the matter was debated in the Privy Council. The queen's councillors instructed one of the royal judges to deal with the matter on the customary stay that judges made at Doncaster on their way to York. Judge Clynche was to speak in no uncertain terms to the borough council and give them written instructions from the royal Privy Council about how the mayor of Doncaster was to be elected in the future. (The letter to the judge and the instructions to the council - no doubt awestruck to be the subject of the ominous attention of the queen's ministers - are still to be found at Doncaster Archives.)

A new charter had been drafted in about 1598, to formalise the instructions of the royal councillors. (The draft is amongst the corporation's papers to be found at Doncaster Archives.) It was this which, with some alterations, became the charter granted by King James six years later.

For the first time, a Doncaster borough charter actually specifies the membership of the borough council and how it was to be chosen. There was to be a mayor, twelve aldermen (that is, senior councillors) and twenty four 'capital burgesses' (or councillors). The mayor was to be chosen yearly in late September by all the council from a choice of two aldermen chosen by them a month earlier.

Whilst the mayor served for a year at a time, the aldermen and councillors, once elected, continued to serve indefinitely. New aldermen were chosen by the mayor and remaining aldermen from among the councillors. Councillors were chosen by the townsmen, or burgesses. The election was not an open one, for the electors had a choice only between two burgesses pre-selected by the council.

So the council was a differently-constituted body from what we are now accustomed to. Choice was very restricted and, once chosen, members could serve for life. There was a third difference as well. The number of people who qualified as townsmen or burgesses (also sometimes called freemen) was very restricted. You can find out about how a man became a freeman in Doncaster by reading the webpage on Freemen in Doncaster Archives' Local and Family History alphabet on the website.

The charter also made a number of less important grants. The only significant new power was the right to hold a Saturday cattle market from the Saturday before Easter to 30 November every year, with a market court (a so-called 'pie powder' court, or court of dusty feet) to dispense swift justice between visiting traders.

The provisions contained in this charter laid down the way Doncaster was to be governed until 1835. All the important contents of the charter were repeated in the charter of Charles II in 1664.

This charter does not survive in the original in the borough archives. It came to be entirely forgotten and only came to light again in 1837, when the corporation was researching its legal title to its ownership of the township of Rossington. In doing this, the corporation's lawyers found the Crown's own copy amongst the public records in London.