

## Doncaster Borough Charter of King Edward IV, 30 October 1467

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The charter of King Edward IV is a most important grant, for it gave the townsmen what they had almost certainly been aspiring to for several centuries, namely the right to be recognised as a body with an independent existence in law. In other words, the town was 'incorporated', or given a legal identity. The town ceased to be a mere borough, with burgage tenure and a limited freedom to raise its own taxes and became what constitutional lawyers referred to as a 'municipal borough', with a mayor, borough officers and its own courts. Doncaster remained a municipal corporation for over five hundred years, until the authority, along with all the other municipalities, was abolished on 31 March 1974.

Perhaps it was this new, close connection between the lord of the manor - now the king himself - and townsmen which led to the granting of a charter which gave the town a new, higher, status. It may also have been that the king, formerly duke of York, was keen to grant favours to Yorkshire towns to secure his local power base. Two other towns, Pontefract and Scarborough, also benefited from his willingness to improve the civic status of Yorkshire towns.

The charter gave the borough of Doncaster virtually everything a town of local importance, but not in the front rank, could expect. Every year the community was to choose a mayor and two sergeants-at-mace to govern it. The mayor was also to be the town's magistrate and its coroner, and was to be entitled to receive all instructions from the government directly, by-passing the sheriff of the county.

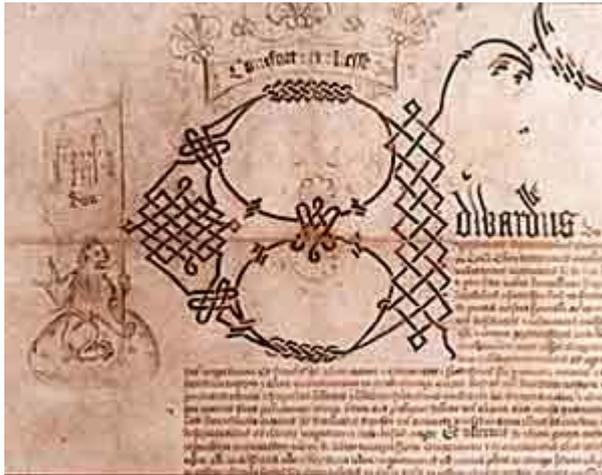
As well as being able to enforce the criminal law within its own boundaries, the borough was to have its own civil court. This was especially important, for being able to enforce contracts and payment of debts was essential to the commercial life of a town.

To improve the commercial prospects of the town still further, the charter authorised the community to hold a fair every year on the three days from 24 to 26 March. At that time, a fair was not the kind of pleasure fair that we know to-day, but an opportunity for buying and selling goods on a much larger scale than would be possible at the town's weekly markets, attracting tradesmen and merchants from a much greater area.

The charter states that it was confirming 'certain liberties and free customs' which the burgesses had enjoyed for a very long time. So certain aspects of town life which the charter mentions were not new. The right to hold a three-day fair had been gained from King John by Robert of Thornham, the lord of the manor, several centuries earlier in 1199. Although the charter of 1467 is the first to actually mention the appointment of a mayor, we know from the evidence of other documents that a leading townsman had been chosen as mayor since at least 1427.

The borough civil court, however, was likely to have been an innovation (previously such matters may have been settled in the manorial court), and the right of the mayor to act as magistrate was entirely in the king's gift, so that right also was new. Perhaps the most important feature overall was the legal fact of incorporation: the borough now had an independent identity recognised in law.

## Charter's appearance



The charter is elaborately decorated with fine penmanship, as befitted so important a document. The initial letter E of King Edward's name contains a design with sunbursts, an heraldic emblem used by the house of York. It is topped by a crown, and flanked by a royal lion holding a banner, another emblem of the house of York. This emblem was adopted by the borough of Doncaster as its own: it was used on the corporation seal and can still be seen on the top of the Mansion House.