

Doncaster Borough Charter of King Richard I, 2 May 1194

eMail: doncaster.archives@doncaster.gov.uk | Telephone: 01302 859811

Address: Doncaster Archives, King Edward Road, Balby, Doncaster, DN4 0NA.

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The charter of King Richard I was granted in France during a military campaign. Important as the campaign was, the business of government did not cease. In the royal retinue were the clerks of Chancery. These were not office-bound bureaucrats, but the staff of a travelling office which dealt with the king's official business as he moved from place to place. In King Richard's camp at Tubeuf, a village on the river Iton in Normandy, on 22 May 1194, the agreement that the townsmen of Doncaster had negotiated with the Crown was ready to be approved.

This first royal charter is small and brief: little more than nine inches by seven inches in size and with less than two hundred words of lawyers' Latin. What had the townsmen of Doncaster asked for? Simply the right to pay the town's customary annual tax payment directly to the royal Exchequer. To be able to deal directly with the Exchequer allowed the town to by-pass the tax-gathering activities of the sheriff of the county: to cut out the middle-man, as it were. Perhaps this desire to by-pass the sheriff had first come to mind when news had reached Doncaster of events at Nottingham after the siege of the castle by the king after his return from Germany in 1194.

Holding his council in Nottingham on 30 March 1194, Richard had offered the posts of Sheriff of Lincolnshire and Yorkshire to the highest bidder. His half-brother, Geoffrey, Archbishop of York, bid the then enormous sum of £2,000 to become sheriff of Yorkshire. Geoffrey would have to recoup his investment by exerting his right of taxing Yorkshiremen heavily. The townsmen of Doncaster probably guessed that there would be hard times ahead. The king, they would have heard, was in need of money for his French campaign, and prepared to sell privileges to all suitable applicants. So they decided to make a bid to take the town out of the hands of the sheriff.

So on 22 May 1194, the terms of the deal which Doncaster had struck with the cash-hungry king were formally drawn up. What had been agreed? In return for the right to pay the town's customary annual taxes of £66 13s 4d, which is about £66.67 in today's money, directly to the Exchequer the townsmen of Doncaster had agreed to increase the payment by a quarter and pay the king a lump sum of £33 6s 8d, or, in present-day terms, approximately £33.33 pence. (These odd sums come about because most monetary transactions at the time were conducted in units called 'marks', which were worth two-thirds of a pound. In these terms, the sums of money in question were the good, round sums of 100, 125 and 50 marks.)

The importance of the charter is that it recognised that the town was developing a corporate identity and its townsmen could be trusted with the serious business of raising royal revenue. As evidence of royal favour, it was to feature again and again in the history of the town.

The charter also confirmed the townsmen in 'all the liberties and free customs appertaining' to their town. The likely significance of this is explained in the webpage on the Doncaster borough charter of king Richard II.

The charter is written in Latin on parchment, which is sheepskin specially prepared for writing. Attached to the charter, hanging from a strip of parchment, would have been the king's Great Seal, which was used to verify all important official documents. The slits in the charter where the strip would have been can be clearly seen. The seal, however, has not survived. Amongst

the witnesses to the document are named the archbishop of Canterbury and William of Warrenne, earl of Surrey and the lord of Conisbrough.

Royal grants were validated with the Great Seal (and indeed, some still are to this day) which contains images of the sovereign on both sides. This seal of Richard I shows him on one side seated on his throne holding orb and sceptre in his outstretched hands and, on the back, the king on horseback, armed for battle with sword, shield and helmet. Cast in wax, it measures about 90mm (3.5 inches) in diameter.

How did the precious document find its way the three hundred or so miles from Thubeuf to Doncaster? That we do not know, but arrive safely it did. As it travelled northward, the king broke camp, and travelled a few miles to the west, to rout the French army at Verneuil. Five years later, King Richard was dead, but in Doncaster the precious charter he had undoubtedly not given a second thought, was passed carefully from hand to hand down the generations. Over eight hundred years later, it has come to rest in the strongroom of Doncaster Archives.

