

## Doncaster Borough Charter of King Richard II, 17 December 1381

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The charter of 17 December 1381 granted by king Richard II simply repeats the charter of king Richard I of May 1194 and confirms that the king approves it. Perhaps the townsmen of Doncaster had asked the king for greater rights, but found him unwilling to do more than confirm his predecessor's charter. But here we can look at what perhaps was meant when the king confirmed the townsmen in their enjoyment of 'all the liberties and free customs appertaining' to their town, in the words of the charter of 1194. Exactly what these liberties and customs were we cannot be certain, but of one of them - and probably the most important - we can be fairly sure. This was the right to hold property by what was known as **burgage tenure**. In this period it was the distinguishing mark of any borough.

A burgage tenant held his house and land from the lord of the manor in return for an annual payment. The plots of land which townsmen, or 'burgesses' occupied were called burgage plots. These were long, narrow, pieces of land. The burgage plots in Doncaster can still be traced, perhaps nearly a thousand years after they were first measured out, on large-scale maps of the town centre, lining Frenchgate and High Street. The name 'Frenchgate' itself has historical significance. As the 'Street of the French' it may well be the place where the Norman settlers lived following the Norman Conquest of 1066.

Most other people in medieval society were not so lucky as the burgesses: they were unfree men and women, or 'villeins'. Instead of being able to devote their time to their own pursuits, they were tied to the land and obliged to provide their lord with 'labour services', (that is, unpaid work done for the lord of the manor), as well as having to cultivate their own land to make a living. Towns have been described as islands of freedom in a feudal sea. Medieval Germany had a proverb which expressed the matter simply enough: 'Town air makes free'.

Evidence from documents shows that Doncaster had 'burgesses' at least as early as fifty years before the charter of 1194, although we do not know which lord of the manor decided that he would allow his tenants their freedom, or when it took place. Naturally, the townsmen would guard their superior status jealously, particularly against the power of the lord of the manor. The burgesses may still have had to attend the lord's courts, grind their corn at the lord's water mills and have their market regulated by the lord's officers, but their right to go freely about their own business was a vital and defining right for any townsman. This is probably the most crucial of the 'liberties and free customs' which the charter of King Richard II guaranteed.