

GLAMORGAN RECORD OFFICE/ARCHIFYDY MORGANNWG

Reference code: GB 214 BC
Title: CARDIFF BOROUGH
Date(s) 1340-1974
Level of description: Fonds (level 2)
Extent: 1368 boxes, 27.36 cubic metres
Name of creator(s) Cardiff Borough and Cardiff County Borough Councils

Administrative/Biographical history

Most ancient boroughs originate from the manor, stemming either from the Court Baron, which was the lord's private court, or the Court Leet, which was the manorial court of public record. Such boroughs would gradually become enfranchised as burgesses purchased or took on rights from the lord. If a borough held property, or had an income, it would normally become a Borough Corporation, and from this a non-manorial Municipal Corporation would evolve.

Boroughs aimed to obtain charters, either from the monarch or from the lord of the manor. These charters would confer detailed privileges, and confirm any rights already held or claimed by burgesses. These would normally include the right to hold, administer and sell real estate; the right to trade, and host markets and fairs; the right to return a member of parliament; the right to hold Quarter Sessions or a borough court, and the right to raise taxes. Certain obligations which the borough was expected to fulfil would also be listed, such as maintaining the peace; sending a burgess to parliament, and acting as public trustees to charitable grants. If the burgesses wished to extend their authority, they would attempt to obtain a new charter which would confirm previous charters, and add new rights and privileges.

The decline of the ancient boroughs began in the late seventeenth century, with the Test Acts of 1661 and 1672. These acts prohibited Roman Catholics and Dissenters from holding office. As a result, the pool of burgesses available to hold office shrank, which in turn led to the formation of small cliques voting each other into office year after year. The result was an increase in corruption and the misuse of power. The enclosure of the commons also contributed to the decline of boroughs, by reducing their geographical jurisdiction, and cutting the income derived from common lands. The increased importance of justices of the peace and of the parish during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries also meant that their powers of management over the towns were being superseded, and the courts leet and baron no longer held sway.

The first written charter relating to Cardiff, dated sometime between 1122 and 1147, confirms a number of privileges granted by the Lord of Glamorgan to the settlement there. These were renewed by successive Lords until, following the Act of Union of 1536, the Borough was constituted as a corporate authority by an Act of 1542. Royal charters of Elizabeth I and James I confirmed and extended Cardiff's ancient rights.

The early charters made provision for the burgesses to choose from amongst themselves candidates for the position of bailiff, two reeves and two ale-tasters. The Constable of the Castle (who answered to the Lord of Glamorgan) would choose and swear in these officers. The charter of 1421 allowed for the election of twelve aldermen to assist two bailiffs and two sergeants-at-mace. The aldermen held their position for life, and replacements were elected by the aldermen themselves. The charter of James I confirmed Cardiff as a free town, the burgesses as a corporate body with its own seal and allowed for the election of twelve capital burgesses and the election of a steward to assist in the town court.

The Borough was administered through the Court of Common Council and the Court of Aldermen, each mainly concerned with the election of burgesses and aldermen respectively. Authority for the Town Court to enforce its laws by fines and imprisonments descended from the charter of 1608, which also made provision for the town to hold magisterial powers under the Commission of the Peace for the Shire with the Mayor, senior bailiff, steward of the lord and senior alderman being commissioned to carry out the duties of the Justices of the Peace within the borough. These Borough Quarter Sessions were only held periodically (none from about 1800) although the Town court was held regularly. The Court of Record with jurisdiction over actions of trespass and debt up to the value of 40s was held by the bailiffs of the borough until 1840 and thereafter by the mayor and a sworn jury of 12.

Each burgess had the right to vote. The status of burgess could be acquired as a right of birth, through marriage to a burgess' daughter, through an apprenticeship to a burgess of at least 7 years, or through gift. Prior to the 1832 Reform of Parliament Act, the boroughs of Cardiff, Cowbridge, Kenfig, Llantrisant, Aberavon, Neath, Swansea and Loughor voted together and sent one burgess to parliament. After 1832, Llantrisant, Cardiff and Cowbridge jointly sent one member, and continued to do so until the reforms of the 1918 Representation of the People Act.

The Municipal Corporations Act of 1835 came into force on 1 January 1836 and a new Town Council was elected by men over the age of 21 who occupied a house, warehouse, counting house or shop and paid rates. The borough was divided into two wards, North and South. By 1875 the city boundaries were extended to include Roath and Splott parishes and Grangetown and Canton. In 1905 Cardiff gained city status and in 1922 the boundaries were again extended to encompass Llandaff, Whitchurch and Llanedeyrn. In 1938 Rumney was brought within the city boundaries and, in 1974, St Mellons. Cardiff became the capital city of Wales in 1955.

The Local Government (County Councils) Act of 1888 (51 & 52 Vict. c.41) reformed local government, establishing elected councils to take over responsibility for those aspects of county administration which had until that date been dealt with by the Justices of the Peace in Quarter Sessions. In practice the changes brought about by the Act were minor. In 1929 another Local Government Act transferred to the Borough council responsibility for public assistance (including out-relief, care of the elderly and infirm and children, poor law hospitals, and institutions) from the Boards of Guardians. Moreover, new legislation passed relating to public health, agriculture, mental deficiency, highways and town and country planning gave substantial further responsibilities to the council, particularly between 1919 and 1947.

In the period immediately after the Second World War, some responsibilities were transferred from the rural district council, but, with the establishment of the National Health Service and the Welfare State, the council lost to central government responsibilities for major services relating to health and public assistance.

Local government was reorganised in 1974 and Cardiff City Council became effectively a district council under South Glamorgan County Council. Following local government reorganisation in 1996, the unitary authority of the City and County Borough Council of Cardiff was formed.

Scope and content

Charters, 1338-1608

Committee Records, 1835-1974

Custom House Records, 1686-1746

Education Committee Records, 1904-1972

Education Department Records, 1902-1969

Fire Service Records, 1943-1974

Glamorganshire Canal Records, 1791-1937

Public Health Department Records, 1924-1931

Royal Hamadryad Seaman's Hospital, 1897-1906

Cardiff Local Board of Health Records, 1850-1879

Cardiff Market Records, 1891-1969

Public Assistance/Welfare Department Records, 1913-1978

Pictorial, 1881-1980

Cardiff Street Commissioners, 1774-1865

Treasurer's Department Records, 1892-1968

Weights and Measures Department, 1893-1974

Cardiff Waterworks Company, 1895-1971

Papers relating to Rees Enoch, Borough Councillor, 1881-1882

Miscellaneous Papers, 19th-20th century.

Appraisal, destruction and scheduling information

All records offered have been accepted and listed

Conditions governing access

Items containing information on named Individuals may be closed in accordance with the Data Protection Act, but access may be given to such records in accordance with Record Office policy

Conditions governing reproduction

Normal Glamorgan Record Office conditions apply.

Language/Scripts of material

Physical characteristics and technical requirements

Fair condition

Finding aids

Detailed lists available.

Related units of description

South Glamorgan County Council

Note

Date(s) of descriptions

April 2003