



SHRIEVALTY
OF CHESTER

900TH ANNIVERSARY

1121 - 2021



THE SHERIFFS
OF
CHESTER



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Origins

The word ‘sheriff’ means ‘shire reeve’, the person who safeguarded the King’s interests within a shire or county. As such, the office - the shrievalty - arose probably in the tenth century following the division of the country into shires as administrative units. The early sheriffs ensured the collection of revenues, played leading roles in the county courts and may have had custody of royal estates in their shires, as was the case after the Norman Conquest. But, given these origins in the shire, how did the City of Chester come to have its own sheriff: indeed, the earliest recorded sheriff of any English borough?

William the Conqueror entrusted Cheshire to his Earl of Chester, with responsibility for defence of the Anglo-Welsh frontier. The King kept no land for himself in the county, made the Earl lord of every lay landholder there and allowed him to enjoy revenues and jurisdiction which elsewhere belonged to the crown. This ultimately led to Cheshire being deemed a ‘palatinate’, although the term was not yet applied. So, while elsewhere in medieval England the Sheriff was the King’s representative, in post-Conquest Cheshire he was the Earl’s. Given a largely free hand, it suited successive Earls not only to continue with the office of Sheriff for the county (known today as the High Sheriff) but also to instal Sheriffs for the city.

Against this background, we celebrate the 900th anniversary of the Sheriffs of Chester in 2021 because the first clear record of such an officer can be identified in a charter of the third Earl of Chester, Ranulf I, in favour of St Werburgh’s Abbey (now the Cathedral). This is undated but Ranulf I was Earl from 1121 to 1129. The charter refers to the City Sheriff and mentions one Winebald, more fully described in

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a later charter as 'Winebald the sheriff'. He is accepted as being the first identified Sheriff of Chester, some years ahead of the first County Sheriff known by name - another Ranulf - in the 1140s.

Thereafter, we have a series of City Sheriffs, imperfectly recorded, until Stephen Fresnell: the last medieval Sheriff of Chester to hold the office on his own before being joined by a colleague, Hamo Despenser, around 1230. Although another leading city official, the Mayor, had appeared by then - originally, it is thought, from the 1190s as head of the gild merchant, an association of traders - the Sheriffs were at this stage regarded as superior.

Heyday

In 1237, the male line of Norman Earls of Chester ended, so Henry III annexed Cheshire for the crown. The earldom was extinguished, to be revived in 1301 for the future Edward II, and the distinctive financial and judicial administrations in Cheshire, hitherto the Earls', were now put to royal service, while retaining their separate identities. They would survive in modified form until 1830. It was in this context that the royal successors to the Norman Earls - customarily the heirs to the throne - continued the office of Sheriff of Chester as a useful, traditional means of governing the city even though borough sheriffs were not the norm elsewhere: generally appearing, where they did at all, not until the fourteenth century or later, as at York in 1396, for example, or Lichfield in 1553.

From the mid-thirteenth century, the royal government increasingly treated the Mayor as the city's principal administrative officer. Even so, the Sheriffs' duties remained important, including the enforcement of law and order and presidency of the portmote, a borough court which dealt with civil and lesser criminal cases. By then the Sheriffs also had their own base in a building against the south wall of St Peter's church called the Pentice. Although this building was superseded as an administrative centre in the late seventeenth century, finally being demolished in 1803, a 'Pentice Court' still meets for the election of Freemen. Names such as Adam



the vintner (1240s), Richard the apothecary (1250s-60s) and David the miller (1290s) indicate typical family backgrounds and, as today, some willing souls graduated from one office to the other. Among them were Alexander Hurrell (Sheriff, 1269-70, Mayor, 1280-83), Robert of Tarvin (Sheriff, 1278-79, Mayor, 1289-90) and - not to be outdone - Alexander Hurrell junior (Sheriff, 1290-93 and 1294-96, Mayor, 1297-1300).

A charter of Edward I in 1300 confirmed the precedence of the Mayor over the two Sheriffs, for instance in the conduct of the portmote, which now had serious criminal cases added to its remit. Over the next two centuries, shrieval responsibilities became less prestigious, largely confined to policing, some court duties and the collection of fines and local dues. Mayors might hold office for several years, at least until the mid-fifteenth century, but the Sheriffs were subject to annual election by a civic assembly or equivalent.

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Even so, certain men managed to be repeatedly elected, notably Madoc of Capenhurst who was Sheriff nine times between 1329 and 1346. There was a good deal of factionalism within Chester's later medieval civic elite and in 1349 the Mayor, Bartholomew of Northenden, was killed by one of the previous year's Sheriffs, Richard of Ditton. After the 1320s, individuals no longer progressed from Sheriff to Mayor, although some families did fill both offices, albeit at different times.

Fresh changes were introduced by another royal charter in 1506. The city was given county status, numbers of councillors and aldermen were fixed and it was laid down that there would be a 'King's Sheriff' chosen by the aldermen and a 'City's Sheriff' elected by the full assembly, both annually on the Friday after the feast of St Denis (9th October), a date already customary. An introduction possibly of 1511 was the 'Sheriffs' Breakfast', an archery competition on the Roodee for the city's leaders followed by a protein-rich meal of calves' heads and bacon, This practice lasted well into the seventeenth century although the custom of charitably inviting to the meal a selection of 'loose' and 'stragglers' people was eventually dropped. A further duty was added in 1543 when Chester was allowed its own MPs, the Sheriffs being responsible for the conduct of elections.

Merchant families continued as prominent providers of Sheriffs, although the practice of serving more than one term came to an end. Instead, by the 1520s under an arrangement which also continued into the seventeenth century, a group called the Sheriff-Peers had emerged, 20 or so former Sheriffs who contributed to the work of the assembly and held office for life: the duties of Sheriffs had waned but they still had considerable influence over the politics of the city. Notwithstanding some disruption during the Civil War - no city officers were elected for 1645-46

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- this remained broadly the pattern until the early nineteenth century. The two Sheriffs continued with their modest money-collecting and more significant policing and court attendance duties, and by the eighteenth century, as population grew, were increasingly required to undertake the distasteful task of executing criminals: a role associated with their custody (until 1823) of the Northgate gaol but extending to those convicted elsewhere in the county.

Modern Times

The Municipal Corporations Act of 1835 established a newly-constituted council with power on 9th November each year to elect a Mayor and - from hereon - one Sheriff only. While the business of local government would pass increasingly to paid employees, the Mayor and Sheriff would maintain the tradition of voluntary service, in company with the councillors from whom they were drawn. From 1974, Chester was governed by a District Council - albeit still known as a City Council - with the shrievalty becoming purely an 'office of dignity' without governmental responsibilities. Further change came with the formation of Cheshire West and Chester Council in 2009. This abolished the separate City Council but since then a newly-formed group of local councillors, the Chester Charter Trustees, has annually elected both a Lord Mayor (the title since 1992) and a Sheriff to cover the former Chester District.

Although the Sheriff of Chester's role is now purely ceremonial, in an echo of earlier judicial duties it includes joining the High Sheriff of Cheshire in hosting the annual Legal Service in Chester Cathedral to mark the beginning of each Legal Year. Since 1908 the Sheriff has also conducted an annual inspection of the city's plate and since 1995 has hosted a modern version of the Sheriff's Breakfast, at which the morning meal is followed by a talk from an author, with funds raised going to charity. Note that, with only one City Sheriff instead of two, the apostrophe now precedes the 's'! Most importantly, the Sheriff supports and deputises for the Lord Mayor at functions and receptions. Since the mid-nineteenth century, the early practice of progression from Sheriff to Mayor has also sometimes been revived, one notable example being Kate Clarke, Sheriff, 1937-38 and Mayor, 1939-40. Since she was also the city's first female Sheriff, she can be said to represent both medieval tradition and modern innovation: the key to the longevity of the city shrievalty as it has adapted over time.

Graeme J. White,
Emeritus Professor of Local History,
University of Chester.

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Declaration

I, John Mercer Butler of 109 Long Lane, Upton, Chester, Cheshire do solemnly declare that I will well and truly serve the Queen's Majesty in the Office of Sheriff of the city of Chester and promote Her Majesty's profit in all things that belong to my Office as far as I legally can or may. I will truly preserve the Queen's rights and all that belongs to the Crown. I will not assent to decrease, lessen or conceal the rights of the Queen or of Her Franchises and whenever I shall have knowledge that the Rights of the Crown are concealed or withdrawn, in any matter or thing, I will do my utmost to make them be restored to the Crown again, and if I may not do it myself, I will inform the Queen or some of Her Majesty's judges thereof. I will not respite or delay to levy the Queen's debts for any gift, promise, reward or favour where I may raise the same without great grievance to the debtors. I will do right as well to poor as to rich in all things belonging to my office. I will do no wrong to any man for any gift, reward or promise nor for favour of hatred. I will disturb no man's right and will truly and faithfully acquite at the Exchequer all those of whom I shall receive any debts or sums of money belonging to the Crown. I will take nothing whereby the Queen may lose, or whereby Her right may be disturbed, injured or delayed. I will, if so required, truly return and truly serve all the Queen's Writs according to the best of my skill and knowledge. I will take no Bailiffs into my service, but such as I will answer for. I will truly set and return reasonable and due issues of them that be within my Bailiwick according to their estate and circumstances and make sue panels of persons able and sufficient and not suspected or procured as is appointed by the statutes of this Realm. I have not sold or let to farm, nor contracted for, nor have I granted or promised for reward or benefit, nor will I sell or let to farm, nor contract for or grant for reward or benefit, by myself, or any other person for me, or for my use directly or indirectly, my Sheriffwick, or any Bailiwick thereof or any Office belonging thereunto, or the profits of the same to any person of persons whatsoever. I will truly and diligently execute the good Laws and Statuts of this Realm and in all things well and truly behave myself in my Office for the Honour of the Queen and the good of Her subjects and discharge the same according to the best of my Skill and power.

*Signed at the Town Hall, Chester
this 15th day of May 1991*



The Chain of the Sheriff of Chester

The Sheriff's chain was presented by Alfred W Butt in memory of his father, Alderman Francis

Butt, on the occasion of the opening of the Town Hall in 1869. The badge bears the arms of the Sheriff, "a chevron between three garbs" and is surrounded by an earl's coronet supported by a lion and a wolf.



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