

A House for the Corporation

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The Centre Building of the Principal Street of the Mansion House

To-day the Mansion House is a working local government building. It houses meetings of the council and its committees, a parlour for the chairman of the council and facilities for elected members. Although the council chamber was moved here from the Guild Hall in 1914, a wartime measure which became permanent, the Mansion House has been used for civic business from the beginning.

Its origins, however, were far less serious-minded. Before the 1740s, entertainment by the borough council took place at a number of locations, usually the mayor's house or one of the larger inns, the Angel or the Three Cranes. From 1719 to about 1727, the corporation leased a house in High Street for this purpose. The corporation began to accumulate furniture, cutlery and other items needed by the mayors 'at their public feasts'.

After several decades of lodging in other men's houses, the council decided to build itself a suitable place for entertaining. It bought a site in High Street in 1738 but then made several false starts before James Paine, an architect at the beginning of what was to be a very distinguished career, was commissioned to take on the design.

This design, as we will see, followed the usual layout of what at that time were known as Assembly Rooms. These were places of public entertainment, the pivot of the local social scene, where the social elite of a town could find amusements, including dancing, card-playing and, more genteelly, tea parties.

The corporation of Doncaster, which commissioned the work, was a very different body from the present borough council. It had a mayor, twelve aldermen (senior council members, two of whom acted with the mayor as magistrates for the borough) and twenty-four 'common council men'. The council men were elected by the freemen of the borough whenever a vacancy arose.

The status of 'freeman' of the borough goes back earlier than any written records. It was enjoyed by a very restricted number of residents. Freedom could be acquired in any one of four ways. The eldest son of a freeman was recognised as a freeman, anyone who had served an apprenticeship with a freeman also obtained his freedom, the right to freedom could be purchased from the corporation and the corporation could grant this right to anyone it chose.

Council members were not elected on a regular basis, but only when a member stood down or died. This was because, once elected, they could remain council members for life. The constitution of the council had been established by the borough charter issued by King James I in 1604. Such arrangements were not unique to Doncaster, for municipal boroughs throughout the country were organised on a similar basis. They remained unaltered until 1835, when a national reform of corporations introduced councils elected on a frequent basis by the ratepayers (local taxpayers).

The Borough charters from 1194, the proceedings of the council from 1565 and all the other of the surviving archives of the corporation are to be found at Doncaster Archives.