

Norfolk Record Office Information Leaflet 22

The Freedom of the Borough of Great Yarmouth

Admissions of freemen or free burgesses of the Borough of Great Yarmouth have probably been made ever since the town received its first charter in 1207/8. The first freeman whose name is known from the records is John Fraunceys of Caister, admitted in 1312.

From 1429 onwards, the names of new freemen are regularly recorded in the Chamberlains' Accounts and Assembly records. From 1706 until the present day the names of freemen are recorded on separate parchment rolls.

Names of freemen have been printed in A Calendar of Great Yarmouth Freemen 1429-1800 (Norwich, 1910). Unfortunately this book contains many errors. The copies in the Norfolk Record Office or Great Yarmouth Town Hall should be used if possible as they contain a large number of corrections and additions made by Fred Johnson. Indexes to freemen 1680-1856 are available on microfiche in the Norfolk Record Office. Very few freemen were admitted after this date.

Before the reform of Municipal Corporations in 1835, a person had to be a freeman to take part in the government of the town. Freemen also enjoyed a privileged position within the community. They were exempt from customs dues levied by the town, only they could act as traders or craftsmen in the town, and only they could vote in parliamentary elections.

The freedom of the Borough could be gained in two ways. Sons of freemen, provided they were born after their fathers had become a freeman, and apprentices of freemen who had duly served their masters for seven years, could claim the right to be admitted. In earlier times residence was insisted on and freedom was lost by absence from the Borough of more than a year and a day.

On admission, freemen swore an oath of loyalty. This dates from about 1500 and its form is unique to Great Yarmouth. It runs:

Thus hear ye bailiffs and all good men that I, A. B. shall bear faith and truth to the king and his heirs with my body and goods, the counterfeiting of the king's seal I shall not see nor know, the king's coin I shall not counterfeit nor impair, the franchises of Great Yarmouth, the good customs, usages and ordinances of the same with my body and goods I shall maintain obey and keep, I shall be at the commandment of the bailiffs and their ministers when I shall be summoned to enquire upon any inquest either for the king or between parties or for any other cause, I shall not conceal nor cover nor cloak any strangers' goods in prejudice of this franchise, if I know any traitor, spy, thief, or any evildoer I shall give warning and notice thereof to the bailiffs of this town for the time being or to their ministers. All this shall I hold and do for my part so God help me.

The freemen's right to vote at parliamentary elections turned out to be their undoing. After a bribery scandal they were disenfranchised for gross corruption by a special Act of Parliament passed in 1848. Their other privileges had already dwindled away and since 1848 there have been very few admissions of the old sort. The last was in 1892 and there is now probably no one who could claim to be a freeman by birth or apprenticeship.

As well as admissions by birth or apprenticeship, the town has always conferred the freedom as a mark of special distinction. Persons honoured in this way include the prime minister, William Pitt in 1757, Lord Duncan after the Battle of Camperdown in 1798 and Horatio Nelson in 1800. The power of admitting honorary freemen was confirmed by the Honorary Freedom of Boroughs Act of 1885 and the Local Government Act of 1933.

In some boroughs it was possible for women to become 'freemen', usually when they took over the trade or business of a deceased husband - the registers of Norwich freemen, for example, contain the names of a few women. However none are known in the Great Yarmouth lists so that when Cora Batley was granted the freedom of the Borough in 1997 she was almost certainly the first woman to be so honoured.

Records relating to Yarmouth Freemen

All are available at the Norfolk Record Office. Document references are given in brackets.

- Borough Court rolls (Y/C 4).
- Freemen's admission rolls, 1706-1848 (Y/C 22/1-32).
- Indexes of freemen admitted, 1680-1892 (Y/C 22/33-37, available on microfiche).
- Index of applications for freedom rejected, 1760-1846 (Y/C 22/38, available on microfiche).
- Freemen's admission papers, 1721-1831 (Y/C 22/39, 50-1).
- Registers of apprenticeship indentures, 1666-94, 1698-1856; with register of payments for apprenticing poor children 1660-4 (Y/C 22/40-48, available on microfiche).
- Index of apprentices, 1739-97 (Y/C 22/49).



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