

The Mayoralty of Appleby

Appleby received a charter from Henry II in 1179, conferring on the town the same borough rights as those enjoyed by York. Medieval Appleby returned two Members of Parliament, hosted Assize Courts and was ruled by a Corporation, at the head of which was the town Mayor, annually chosen by the Common Councillors and Aldermen. The Mayor was the town's first citizen and presided over meetings of the Council, working in conjunction with the Town Clerk, the principal officer of the Corporation. It imposed local bye-laws regarding trading standards, charged tolls on traffic through the town and ran the Borough Market and Whitsuntide Fair.

The first Mayor whose name is recorded was Robert de Goldington, c.1264. From the late 14th Century, we have a continuous sequence, some of whom remained in office for several years, others for one year only. The Appleby Mayoral year now conforms with the practice of councils up and down in the country in beginning in May; but for most of the town's history Mayor and Corporation took office in October. One of the Mayor's most important functions was to act as returning officer in Parliamentary borough elections. Votes in Appleby were attached to particular properties, known as burgage plots. In practice the Mayor's power to influence the result was restricted by the competing aristocratic families who owned large parts of the town: Cliffords, and later Tuftons; Whartons and later Lowthers. They usually agreed on one nominee each, so there was rarely a contest.

We do not know where the Councillors and Corporation officers met prior to the building at the end of the 16th Century of the Moot Hall in Boroughgate, out of which the Council has operated ever since. The Council was presented with a ceremonial sword in the 17th Century and acquired a mace in 1738. It is uncertain whether there was a mayoral chain before the first Baron Hothfield paid for one by the sale of land in Appleby after the borough was reconstituted by the Municipal Reform Act of 1885; or ceremonial robes and hats prior to those presented to the Council by his son, the second Lord Hothfield, in 1937.

For reasons of historical geography Appleby did not industrialise and grow significantly over the centuries. Its present population is a little over 3,000. The 1832 Reform Act deprived the town of its two MPs, and although it retained county town status, when County Councils were established after 1888, Westmorland's administrative capital was Kendal. Appleby's 18th Century Shire Hall then served as headquarters for North Westmorland Rural District Council, as well as housing the magistrates' and assize courts. In 1974 local government reform abolished both the Westmorland and North Westmorland councils; Appleby Town Council remained, though no longer with borough status. Assize courts had already ceased, and the magistrates' sessions soon followed. The Shire Hall is now privately owned. But the Moot Hall continues to function as a working council chamber and clerk's office, with a thriving Visitor and Exhibition Centre and a tenanted shop on the ground floor. Appleby is proud of its heritage as an attractive place to live in and visit and as an exporter of home-grown talent to the wider world.