

## **History of the Mayoralty of Limerick 1197-2006.**

**By Doctor Matthew Potter.**

The first recognizable local government system in Ireland was established by the Normans in the last 30 years of the twelfth century. Within a few decades of their first landing at Bannow Bay in 1169, they had conquered most of Leinster and Munster and had established local government institutions in both urban and rural areas. The towns and cities received charters, which in effect were written constitutions that set out the basic machinery for their administration. The first such charter in Ireland was granted to Dublin in 1171. The Normans also established a series of counties or shires and these provided the basic framework for local administration outside the urban areas. The Norman system of local government provided for a strong representative element in the urban areas, with the establishment of elected bodies known as corporations to run their affairs.

Limerick City had been founded by the Vikings in 922 AD and was captured by the Normans around the year 1195. Soon afterwards, Limerick Corporation was established by a charter issued by John, Lord of Ireland on 18<sup>th</sup> December 1197. In the Middle Ages and the early modern period, Ireland, in common with the rest of Western Europe had a highly decentralised administrative system and consequently the Corporation provided Limerick with a complete range of government services. It organised the city's defence, controlled and regulated the local economy, administered most of the local legal system, dealt with law and order (including crime and punishment and the police), built and maintained infrastructure and protected the environment. Throughout these centuries, the central administration in Dublin had a very limited role and in consequence, the average inhabitant of Limerick only encountered government through the medium of the Corporation. However, the machinery of this local government was the most modern of its time, having been introduced from England and France, the two most dynamic countries in Medieval Europe.

The provisions of the civic constitution of Limerick as it developed in the Medieval and early modern periods consisted of two elements: a written constitution set out under twelve charters issued by various English monarchs between 1197 and 1609 and a series of institutions that had evolved without explicit authorisation. The former included the Hundred Court, Gild Merchant, the mayoralty and the bailiffs while the latter included the Common Council and the aldermen. There were three different representative bodies in the city. The freemen of Limerick constituted the civic electorate and met in the Hundred Court on a weekly basis to transact legal and some administrative business. Also once a year, at a special meeting of the Hundred Court, they elected the Mayor and (after 1413) the two bailiffs to serve for one year each. The Gild Merchant was an association of the merchants of the city, analogous to the modern Chamber of Commerce. However the Common Council was the main legislative organ in the City. It was the equivalent of the modern city council and consisted of the aldermen (who were usually former Mayors) and the ordinary councillors. The method of recruitment to the Common Council in the Middle Ages is unknown but it was probably by what amounted to co-option rather than by election. By the eighteenth century vacancies were always filled by co-option.

The Mayor and the two bailiffs constituted what might be termed the executive of the city and were nominally elected by the freemen assembled in the Hundred Court. They served for one year but could be re-elected. In practice they were chosen by the civic elite from amongst the membership of the Common Council. They governed the city with the assistance of the Common Council and a number of officials.

The title of Mayor is derived from the Latin word *maior* meaning 'a greater man'. (The words 'major' and 'majority' spring from the same source). In the time of the Roman Empire, great landowners often appointed a major domus or supervisor to administer their estates. When Germanic tribes overthrew the Empire, one of the most powerful of these tribes, the Franks established a large kingdom in what had been formerly Gaul, which was later to develop into the Kingdom of France. This Frankish kingdom was ruled from its establishment in 476 until 751 by the Merovingian dynasty that borrowed the Roman practice of appointing a supervisor to run their estates. His official title was major *palatii* or 'mayor of the palace.' These officials took on more and more functions over the years until they became virtual prime ministers. The Merovingian kings soon became mere figureheads and the mayors of the palace governed instead. This process culminated in 751 when the mayor of the palace, Pepin the Short deposed the Merovingian king and mounted the throne himself. Later the title of mayor was given to the chief executive of a self-governing urban area in France and from there was introduced into England and Ireland as a result of the Norman conquest.

The question of when Limerick received its first Mayor has become shrouded in myth. It has been popularly believed for nearly two centuries that Limerick's first elected Mayor took office in 1197, and was the first such elected Mayor in Ireland. Furthermore, it has been asserted that Limerick had an elected Mayor before London itself. However modern research has finally clarified the whole issue. It demonstrates that London's first citizen was termed Mayor after 1191, but the burgesses received the right to elect him only in 1215. This was the first instance in England of a city electing its chief executive. In Ireland, Dublin was the first city to have an elected Mayor, and received this right in 1229, in exchange for payment of a debt owed by the crown to 12 citizens of Dublin. Limerick's chief executive under the first charter was an appointed *Prepositus*, not an elected mayor. This is usually translated to mean 'provost', a title still used in Scotland to denote a Mayor. Adam Sarvant traditionally regarded as Limerick's first Mayor held this office in 1197-98.

However, Limerick's first charter had specified that the citizens of the city should 'have all the liberties and free customs through all Ireland which the citizens of Dublin have', so it might be argued that after 1229, Limerick could also have assumed the right to have an elected Mayor. It is likely that Limerick elected its first Mayor between 1229 and 1272. It is possible that the right was simply assumed following Dublin's example in 1229, or it may be that the future Edward I, as Lord of Ireland (1254 – 72) granted the right, as he is believed to have done in both Cork and Waterford. At any rate, Limerick's first citizen at Edward I's accession in 1272 was called the Mayor. However, it was during the reign of this monarch that Limerick's constitutional status was finally clarified. In 1274, the citizens of Limerick petitioned the King for an enumeration of their liberties under John's charter of 1197. In reply the King directed his Justiciar (chief governor of Ireland) to "inquire what liberties the citizens of Dublin enjoy; whether the citizens of Limerick enjoy the same liberties;

which of them they have used and which not; and whether it would be to the King's detriment that he should grant to the latter citizens his charter specifying the liberties as prayed". The official enquiry was conducted on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1275, and the recommendations of the Justiciar were sent to the King the following March. The most important conclusion was that the" citizens of Limerick use all the liberties and free customs used by the citizens of Dublin and that articles of those liberties are contained in the charter of the latter citizens".

However, the government did not proceed further on the matter for some sixteen years. Then, on 4<sup>th</sup> February 1292, Edward I granted Limerick its second charter, which cleared up the ambiguity concerning the mayoralty. For the first time the citizens of Limerick were clearly given the right to "each year elect from amongst themselves a Mayor discreet, proper, faithful to the King, and fit for the rule of the city". The Mayor was elected for a term of one year by the freemen assembled in the Hundred Court and on election had to be "presented to the King, or the Justiciar if the King is not present and swear fealty to the King". As no English King visited Ireland between 1210 and 1394 (and indeed no English monarch to date has ever visited Limerick City), in practice, it was to the chief governor that the Mayor always tendered his oath of loyalty.

If we use a modern analogy we can say that Medieval Limerick was governed by a Manager (the Mayor), assisted by a management team (his officials) and with a board of directors (the City Council) working with him. The evolution of the office of Mayor parallels that of the British monarchy in that a once powerful office had by the twentieth century become largely a ceremonial one. The Medieval Mayor of Limerick was a very dominant chief executive, whose powers greatly exceeded those of the Common Council, or of any of his subordinate officials. Elected by the citizens for an annual term, he combined the modern roles of city manager, judge and general. He possessed legislative, judicial and executive powers. He presided over meetings of the Common Council and served as chief magistrate in the civic courts. He organised the building and maintenance of the city walls, bridges, and other public works, and organised the paving of the streets. He enforced the Corporation's control over the city's economic life. He organised the collection of taxes and remitted them to Dublin, where he personally accounted for them in the King's exchequer. In times of war, he was supreme military commander of the city militia and in peacetime, he was ceremonial and social leader of urban society. In short, the Mayor was the embodiment of Limerick city and recognising no superior except the chief governor in Dublin and the monarch in London. He was assisted by two deputies whose title was bailiff until 1609 and sheriff after that date.

The role of the Mayor as the active chief executive of Limerick continued until 1934. The only break in the continuity of the office occurred between 1651 and 1656 when Limerick Corporation was abolished by Oliver Cromwell and the city was placed under a military governor. In 1672, the right to elect the Mayor was removed from the citizens and given to the Common Council instead. However in the nineteenth century, the entire local government system in Ireland was drastically remodelled. The Municipal Corporations (Ireland) Act of 1840 brought about the reform of the administrative system of towns and cities in Ireland. In Limerick the modern elected City Council was established in place of the old co-opted Common Council. The number of sheriffs was reduced from two to one (although the office of sheriff was

not abolished until 1920). However the Act left the Mayor and Council in charge of the local government system in the city. From 1841 to 1934 Limerick City continued to be governed by the Mayor who was elected annually and by the City Council acting through a number of committees established under the Act of 1840. However, this system was widely criticised in the decade following the attainment of independence in 1922 as it was believed by many that part-time politicians such as the Mayor and the city councillors did not have the time or expertise necessary to run the increasingly large and complicated administrative machine of a modern urban area such as Limerick.

Consequently, the modern era in the History of Limerick Corporation commenced with the enactment of the Limerick City Management Act, which became law on 6<sup>th</sup> September 1934. The government of Limerick City was transformed forever by this piece of legislation. Before 1934 the Mayor and Council had administered the city on a day-to-day though part-time basis for some 740 years. After 1934 the routine management of civic affairs was placed in the hands of a full-time manager at the head of an increasingly large and professional bureaucracy. The age of the amateur was succeeded by the age of the professional. It was the biggest administrative revolution in the history of the Corporation.

After 1934, the Mayor was no longer the routine chief executive of the city but his position continued to be one of enormous importance and prestige. Indeed it can be argued that, like the British monarch and other modern constitutional rulers, the transformation of the role of Mayor from day-to-day chief executive to ceremonial ruler actually enhanced the position by investing it with the timeless mystique of someone who embodies the traditions, heritage and grandeur of a proud and ancient city. The Mayor was always a practicing politician but was also above politics, representing the entire city and acting as its spokesman both on the national and international stage. He/she was the latest in a line that could be traced back to 1197 while at the same time leading a city that, particularly in recent decades, looked with confidence to the future.

A number of the Mayors who held office after 1934 held office on more than one occasion but only two served for five terms. Daniel Bourke TD was Mayor for an incredible five years in succession (1936-41), which is the only instance of its kind in the entire history of Limerick. George E. (Ted) Russell also served a total of five terms of which three were in succession (1954-57) while the other two were in 1967-8 and 1976-77. Indeed the practice of Mayors serving for consecutive terms, which was particularly prevalent between the 1860s and 1940s, became increasingly rare after Ted Russell's three terms. Since then it has only occurred twice: Frances Condell in 1962-64 and Bobby Byrne in 1978-80. Mrs Condell made history by becoming the first female to be elected Mayor of Limerick in her own right in 1962 (Mrs Mary O'Donovan had been acting Mayor in 1921-22). To date Mrs Condell is the only female Mayor to serve two terms but there have been two others who served one term each: Terry Kelly (1983-84) and Jan O'Sullivan (1993-94). The last Mayor of Limerick to resign before the completion of his term was Donogh O'Malley who did so in December 1961 after serving for just five months. His resignation was caused by his being appointed Parliamentary Secretary (the equivalent of Minister of State) at the Department of Finance.

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