

Huntingdon's Borough Charters

1 What are the charters?

The charters confirm or grant privileges enjoyed by the burgesses of the borough of Huntingdon. They were written in Latin on parchment, and sealed with a royal seal, usually the Great Seal of England.

Many charters are simply confirmations of earlier ones: these were obtained from the reigning monarch in case he or she disclaimed grants made by predecessors. These 'charters of confirmation' generally include the full texts of earlier grants. As a later confirmatory charter may include the full text of an earlier confirmatory charter, which in turn quotes in full an even *earlier* charter, it will be seen that the texts of many charters accrue over the years. The charter of 1205, for example, is quoted in full at least nine times (1252, 1381, 1402, 1424, 1484, 1515, 1550, 1554 and 1559).

Detailed comparison of the texts of the original charters with the texts of their copies in later charters shows occasional miscopyings, additions, and omissions, which then follow through in subsequent copies.

Strictly speaking, only the grants of 1205, 1252, 1348, 1381 and 1402 are properly called **charters**. These five grants were addressed to leaders of society, were witnessed by various named individuals, and were then closed and sealed with the Great Seal of England. Copies of the texts were made on the Chancery's Charter Rolls, now held at the National Archives in London. All of the remainder are **letters patent**, ie. they were not sealed up, but were exposed to open view with the Great Seal pendent at the bottom, and were addressed to all the subjects of the realm. Copies of the letters patent were made on the Chancery's Patent Rolls, now held at the National Archives.



2 The history of the charters' storage

It is not known where the earliest charters were kept. During the reign of Edward VI the borough brought a legal suit against the executors of Thomas Hall, late steward, stating that he had come into possession of the borough records, particularly the charter of 1205, and that his executors had refused to give them up. The executors' defence was that Hall had in fact made copies, and had not taken the originals. This suggests that the borough's steward had easy access to the original records, in order to make copies; but it also implies that by the early 1550s the other borough officials had no idea where these originals were. It is unlikely that were stored in the Town Hall, as the borough officials would surely have been able to locate them before commencing legal action. Nevertheless, they must afterwards have been located, as subsequent charters were kept with the earlier ones, to form one series.

After this period, the charters are believed to have been stored in the parish chest in the tower of All Saints Church in Huntingdon (called the "Corporation Church," as the Town Hall was situated in All Saints parish). They were certainly not stored in the Town Hall itself, which proved lucky, as the Town Hall was destroyed by fire in 1745. Notes made on the charters in 1688 reveal that the charters of 1348, 1363 and 1467 may already have been mislaid by then.

The charters were probably still in All Saints Church in 1824 when they and other borough records were consulted by Robert Carruthers for his book *The History of Huntingdon*.

During the 19th century the charters were transferred to the custody of the Maule family, solicitors of Huntingdon and clerks to the borough. At some unknown date, but presumably after Carruthers had seen the charters in 1824, fourteen of the charters were moved to the underground strongroom of Winter and Co solicitors, formerly Maule and Winter, in Market Hill, Huntingdon, where they were kept in an iron safe. Knowledge of their location was forgotten. The *Victoria History of the County of Huntingdon* vol II, for example, stated in 1932 that "no originals [of the charters] have been found among the borough archives."



Most of the charters were rediscovered by Borough Archivist Philip Dickinson on 23 March 1941. The charter of 1348 had strayed from the main group prior to their move to Winter's strongroom, as it was not among the group discovered in 1941, but was later found among other documents in the Huntingdonshire County Record Office, in 1981.

The charters of 15 October 1363, 29 November 1363, and 16 November 1467 were not among the 1941 cache, and have not subsequently been found elsewhere. Their texts survive only as copies in later charters, and on the Charter Rolls in the National Archives.

In addition, a charter of Queen Elizabeth Woodville, wife of Edward IV, is known to have been granted before 1467, but this too does not survive.



3 Brief notes on each charter

King John

7 August 1205

This short charter confirms Huntingdon's status as a borough.

Document reference number: HB1/1/1

Henry III

5 March 1252

This charter confirms the one of 1205. In addition, the borough is granted all tolls on goods sold in St Ives, including all tolls taken during the St Ives Fair. Huntingdon is to have an annual fair to begin on the Monday before Ascension Day and to last for the following ten days.

Document reference number: HB1/1/2

Edward III

10 April 1348

This charter was thought to have been lost for many years, but it was rediscovered in 1981. It clarifies at the request of the burgesses the specific liberties and customs which, in previous charters, have hitherto only been stated in general terms. The borough is allowed to build a prison, and the town's burgesses are to be free of tolls throughout the Kingdom

Document reference number: M44A/1

Edward III

15 October 1363

The original of this charter does not survive, but its text is recorded in later ones. The charter describes the conditions into which Huntingdon has fallen after the Black Death of 1348-49. A quarter of the town is stated to be uninhabited, and the remainder is too poor to pay the fee farm rent. Unless assistance is quickly brought, the town will be completely bereft of human habitation, and left desolate and ruined. To alleviate this financial position, all fines levied in the borough court are to be retained by the burgesses. Additional privileges are granted, including a toll levied on foreign [non-Huntingdon] merchants for storing wheat, malt, corn and other goods in the town.



Edward III

29 November 1363

The original of this letter patent does not survive, but its text is recorded in later charters. As the St Ives Fair has not been held for twenty years past due to non-attendance of foreign merchants, £25 of arrears due to the king is remitted, and the £20 increase in the fee farm rent made under the 1252 charter is likewise remitted until such time as the Fair is held again.

Richard II

10 December 1377

This charter simply confirms the earlier charters of 1348 and 1363.

Document reference number: HB1/1/3

Richard II

12 December 1381

This charter compliments the burgesses on their behaviour while resisting "the late insurrection," that being the Peasants Revolt of 1381.

Document reference number: HB1/1/4

Henry IV

12 February 1402

This charter confirms the earlier charter of 1381.

Document reference number: HB1/1/5

Henry VI

4 July 1424

This letter patent confirms the earlier charter of 1402.

Document reference number: HB1/1/6

Henry VI

12 November 1439

This letter patent simply confirms the earlier letter patent of 1363.

Document reference number: HB1/1/7



Edward IV

16 November 1467

The original of this letter patent does not survive. It confirms an earlier charter granted by Queen Elizabeth Woodville, wife of Edward IV, but unfortunately this charter does not survive either.

Richard III

1 March 1484

This letter patent incorporates the borough for perpetuity under the name of "the Bailiffs and Burgesses of the Town of Huntingdon," and by this incorporation the borough may legally acquire and sell lands, tenements, rents, services, and other possessions. The corporation is also free from forest tolls and other duties. The corporation can bring cases to court, or be taken to court by others, as a legal entity in its own right.

Document reference number: HB1/1/8

Henry VIII

27 November 1515

This letter patent simply confirms the earlier letters patent of 1424 and 1467.

Document reference number: HB1/1/9

Edward VI

29 April 1550

This letter patent confirms the earlier letter patent of 1515. The initial letter depicts the King, then aged thirteen. This document is sealed with the Seal of the Duchy of Lancaster, rather than the Great Seal, as the Duchy received the fee farm rent for the borough.

Document reference number: HB1/1/10

Mary I

17 February 1554

This letter patent confirms the earlier letter patent of 1515.

Document reference number: HB1/1/11



Elizabeth I

23 April 1559

This letter patent confirms the earlier letter patent of 1554.

Document reference number: HB1/1/12

Charles I

15 July 1630

This famous letter patent completely changed the way Huntingdon was governed. The borough is to have a new corporation, constituted "The Mayor, Aldermen and Burgesses of the Borough of Huntingdon." The corporation may have a common seal, and may have and hold for itself a Council House in which to meet. In order "to prevent and remove all occasions of popular tumult and to reduce to certainty and constant order the elections and other public matters and affairs of the said borough" the Common Council is reduced from 24 burgesses to twelve, who will sit for life, one of whom is to be appointed Mayor. Lionel Walden is to be appointed the first Mayor. Future Mayors are to be annually elected by the members of the Common Council, on the first Tuesday following the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, and to take up office on the Feast of St Michael the Archangel. The Mayor is also to act as Coroner for the borough and as Clerk of the Market of the King's Household within the borough. The Common Council is to appoint a burgess of the town as Recorder, to act instead of the Mayor in the Mayor's absence. The corporation is also to elect "one upright and fit man" to be Common Clerk, and they may also have two Sergeants at Mace, one Keeper of the Gaol, and one Beadle, or more if the Mayor wishes, and also as many Constables and other inferior officers as thought necessary.

Oliver Cromwell, the town's former MP, was made a Justice of the Peace in this letter patent, a role he relinquished a year later when he moved to St Ives. It is possible that he resented his failure to secure a nomination as one of the town's aldermen. It is notable that the letter patent contains no provisions regarding the admission of burgesses to the Common Council: in practice the borough had to pass numerous byelaws in order to deal with this and related issues.

Document reference number: HB1/1/13



James II

9 July 1686

This letter patent confirms the one made by Charles I in 1630. It was automatically revoked on the abdication of James II in 1688, and the town Corporation reverted to the 1630 constitution.

Document reference number: HB1/1/14

