

1883

BANGOR GRANTED A CHARTER
OF INCORPORATION

IF 1882 was one of the most traumatic years in the history of modern Bangor, then 1883 was undoubtedly one of its most joyous. Throughout the summer of 1882 the people of Bangor cringed in fear as an outbreak of typhoid fever swept through the city debilitating hundreds and carrying away twenty-nine to premature death. The high summer of 1883 on the other hand, when Bangor was granted a charter of incorporation and was selected as the site in North Wales for the new university college, was an occasion for consummate joy and satisfaction.

Unlike its castle dominated neighbours, Caernarfon, Beaumaris, and Conwy, Bangor had not been granted a royal charter which, in the Middle Ages, had created the framework for local government in these boroughs. The cathedral settlement of Bangor formed an integral part of the manor of the Bishop of Bangor; the bishop delegated his supreme authority in it to a steward whose organ of administration was the bishop's Court Leet and Baron. This form of government persisted until 1818 when the parish vestry appears to have taken over its few remaining functions.

The principal functions of the vestry related to the relief of the poor and the maintenance of roads and bridges. It had no powers whatsoever to direct or control the very rapid development of the city which occurred in the first half of the nineteenth century. Hundreds of houses were built to accommodate the explosive growth in the population and most of those built for the lower orders of society in particular were small, crowded to-

gether, and without such basic amenities as a clean water supply, drainage and sanitation facilities or refuse disposal arrangements. Conditions of gross overcrowding, abominable squalor and disease were the result and mortality, especially among children, was high. The fear of another typhoid epidemic in 1848 spurred the citizens to petition for the application to Bangor of the hastily enacted Public Health Act of that year.

To a Local Board of Health, comprised of nine members elected by a comparatively small number of affluent ratepayers, was entrusted the task of, *inter alia*, providing an efficient drainage and sewerage system, an adequate supply of pure water and the suppression of nuisances likely to be injurious to health. Although set up primarily to effect sanitary reform and to protect the health of the citizens, it extended its role through the years to include regulating the standards of house and street construction, providing recreational areas, a library and a museum, raising a fire brigade and producing and distributing gas for domestic and street lighting. It also initiated the process which eventually led to the establishment of the University College of North Wales in Bangor.¹

Despite its many achievements, general dissatisfaction arose towards the end of the 1870s with the manner in which the Local Board was attending to the needs of the city and there emerged a desire to have a more effective and representative form of government. The Local Board was considered to be dilatory in the observance of its public health duties, it procrastinated for years over the purchase of the Gas and Water Company and it was not sufficiently enterprising in providing facilities which would attract more visitors, and therefore trade, to the city. Since membership of the Local Board was confined to a small number of the most wealthy citizens who were

¹ See P. E. Jones, 'The Bangor Local Board of Health 1850-83' *ante*. 37(1976), 87-132.

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elected on a narrow franchise, which incorporated plural voting, there was a feeling that a more democratically elected and representative body might respond with greater sensitivity to the aspirations of the citizens. In any event the chairman of the Local Board did not have the dignity or status of the mayors of neighbouring, yet very much smaller, boroughs.

The first direct challenge to the Local Board came in August 1877 from one of its own members. John Roberts, Draper, of Bradford House, in a letter published in the *North Wales Chronicle*, suggested that Bangor should seek a more potent and prestigious form of government; he detailed the advantages which the city would derive if it were governed under a constitution based on a charter of incorporation rather than by a Local Board of Health.²

Charters of incorporation established the framework for the government of medieval boroughs. Granted individually over a long span of time they lacked uniformity and practically everywhere the system had long been abused. Borough government had fallen into the hands of exclusive oligarchies of leading citizens who perpetuated their power by a system of self-election and the rigging of the electorate. One of the first measures of the reformed Parliament of 1832 was to tackle the anachronism of borough government. The Municipal Corporations Act, 1835, laid down a uniform and representative form of borough government 'so that (boroughs) might forever be well and quietly governed'.³ The inhabitants of incorporated boroughs were deemed to be incorporated into one body politic and governed by a council. The council was to consist of councillors and aldermen and would be presided over by a mayor who would have precedence in the borough. In all but the smallest

² *N(orth) W(ales) C(hronicle)*, 4 August 1877.

³ Municipal Corporations Act 1835, 5 & 6 William IV c.76.

boroughs wards were to be created and a specified number of councillors would be elected for each ward and to serve on the council for a period of three years. Aldermen were to be elected by the councillors; they would hold office for six years and they would constitute a quarter of the membership of the council. Both councillors and aldermen were to elect a mayor who would hold office for one year. The franchise was to be extended to include all ratepayers who had resided in the borough for three years, including women, but not married women. The Act imposed certain constraints on membership of the council: only persons owning or occupying property valued over a certain sum were to be eligible and women, clergy and ministers of religion were ineligible. These constraints were subsequently removed, however.⁴ Meetings of the council were to be open to the public and its accounts would be publicly audited.

The Act only applied to existing boroughs but not all of these were granted reformed charters. In Caernarfonshire, for example, Caernarfon and Pwllheli received new charters but Conwy, Cricieth and Nefyn retained their existing ones. The Act did, however, establish procedures under which any town might petition for a charter of incorporation should it consider it appropriate for its civic needs. In the decades after 1835 scores of towns, among them the rapidly growing industrial towns of the Midlands and the North such as Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Manchester, Sheffield and Bradford petitioned successfully for a charter of incorporation. Wrexham (1857), Conwy (1876) and Bangor were the only towns in North Wales to be granted charters by this process.⁵

⁴ Property qualification by Town Councils and Local Boards Act 1880; women by Qualification of Women (County and Borough Councils) Act 1907; clergy and ministers of religion in 1919.

⁵ The Local Government Act 1894 created Urban Districts which would be governed by a council but the chairman of the council was not accorded the title of mayor.

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John Roberts's letter aroused considerable public interest; in September 1877 a meeting was held in the Penrhyn Hall to discuss the matter and a resolution was passed that Bangor should petition for a charter of incorporation. The resolution was presented to the Local Board with a request that it should initiate the appropriate procedures, but the Board declined to act.

Four years later the subject of town government and the Local Board's ambivalent attitude towards town improvement was taken up at meetings of the Bangor Parliamentary Society, a society formed to debate local and national issues on parliamentary lines. At its December meeting the society drew up a resolution incorporating positive suggestions for town improvement and for the incorporation of the city. The resolution was presented to the Local Board with a request that it should act upon it but once again there was little response from the Board.

It was the typhoid epidemic which sealed the fate of the Local Board. Its failure to ensure a safe water supply and its ineptitude in diagnosing the source of the epidemic galvanised support for the movement which sought to bring about a change in city government. As soon as normality returned, John Lloyd, Manager of Williams & Co's (now Lloyds) Bank, convened a meeting of leading citizens at his residence, the Old Bank, on 20 November to discuss the proposition that Bangor should petition for a charter of incorporation. Major Henry Platt of Gorrddinog, Aber, took the chair. The meeting wholeheartedly endorsed the proposition and it was decided to call a public meeting so that the views of ratepayers in general might be ascertained.

The meeting held on 13 December gave unqualified support to the notion and resolved to ask the Local Board to set the process in motion. Characteristically, the Board declined to take a positive lead themselves, and instead requested the churchwardens to call a

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vestry meeting to settle the issue. This meeting held in the Penrhyn Hall in January 1883 was one of largest and most enthusiastic ever witnessed in Bangor. Members of the Local Board called upon the meeting to delay the application but received no support. A resolution that the city should proceed with a petition to Her Majesty's Privy Council, praying that Bangor be granted a charter, was passed by an overwhelming majority and an incorporation committee was set up to pilot the project through its various stages. By the end of the month sufficient signatures had been obtained to accompany the petition. A public inquiry into the application was held on 30 April by a commissioner appointed by the Privy Council; no dissenting opinions were voiced and having satisfied himself that it was a viable and well supported proposition, the Commissioner forwarded a positive report to the Privy Council which in due course advised the Queen to grant a charter.

The charter was comprehensive in its scope. It extended the provisions of the Municipal Corporations Act 1882⁶ to the city and declared the inhabitants of Bangor and their successors to be one body corporate in the name of the mayor, aldermen and burgesses with perpetual succession, a common seal and the privilege to assume armorial bearings. The boundaries of the borough and of the four wards into which it would be divided were fixed.⁷ It established a council of twenty four members, comprising six aldermen and eighteen councillors; north and west wards were allocated six councillors each and east and south wards three each. Thomas Lewis, the chairman of the Local Board of Health, was appointed to perform the duties of mayor, pro. tem., and Richard

⁶ This Act consolidated all the Municipal Corporation Acts passed between 1835 and 1882 into one statute; it also deprived about thirty small boroughs, among them Nefyn, of their borough status.

⁷ The charter extended the boundaries of the (Parliamentary) borough to include Glanadda west of the Hendrewen-Ainon roads.

H. Prichard, Solicitor, the duties of town clerk pro. tem., in order to draw up the burgess list, organise and supervise the first election and summon the first meeting of the council. The first municipal election was to be held on 1 November; the first meeting of the council, at which the mayor and aldermen would be elected and the principal officers appointed, was scheduled for 9 November.

The charter arrived in Bangor on Friday, 17 August. News of its arrival spread like wildfire through the town; there was immediate rejoicing and the bells of the Cathedral and St. James's Church 'rang merry peals'⁸ The incorporation committee organised a day of celebration for Saturday, 25 August which was to take the form of a procession through the streets of the town culminating in the reading of the charter in front of the Old Bank. Citizens were urged to display flags and bunting and to turn out in force to witness the proceedings.

In the afternoon preceding the appointed day news was received that the city had been chosen as the site for the University College in North Wales. Once again a wave of excitement spread through the city and was accompanied by the ringing of bells. The incorporation committee decided that the celebrations the next day should mark both events and encouraged the display of even more support for the arranged programme.

Saturday, the 25th turned out to be a warm sunny day, entirely propitious for the occasion. Hardly a house failed to show its colours, indeed, some of the lower classes had hung out bed sheets decorated with calico of various shades, evergreens and flowers. The procession, led by the band of the Artillery Volunteers, comprised representatives of uniformed bodies, friendly societies, a contingent of quarrymen from Bethesda, clergy and ministers of religion and members of the incorporation committee

⁸ *N.W.C.*, 27 August 1883.

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and of the college committee, the fire brigade and hundreds of townspeople. After the procession was over the charter was duly read; people then slowly dispersed to celebrate in their several ways this momentous day in the city's history.

Preparations were efficiently arranged for the election which went off quietly. Although incorporation had been enthusiastically supported by all shades of political opinion in the city and the incorporation committee had vigorously campaigned for a non-party contest, all the candidates who were nominated stood on a party ticket. Sixteen Conservatives and seventeen Liberals presented themselves to the electorate and the result was a decisive victory for the Conservatives who won twelve seats. At the first meeting of the council, Major Henry Platt was unanimously elected mayor. Platt had worked hard to secure the incorporation of the city; as a Conservative, Anglican and Freemason he represented the majority interest on the council, and being a person of considerable wealth and influence he was considered to be the ideal person to lead the fledgling council. Major Platt and Thomas Lewis (Lib.) were obvious choices for two of the aldermanic seats; Meshach Roberts (Lib.) and Dr. John Richards (Con.), who had won seats in the election, were raised to the aldermanic bench and two successful local businessmen, Charles Pierce (Lib.) and Francis Williams (Con.) accepted an invitation to complete the prescribed number of aldermen. The elevation of Roberts and Richards created a vacancy in two wards and in by elections two Liberals were returned. The council when fully constituted therefore comprised fifteen Conservatives and nine Liberals. Richard Prichard was appointed Town Clerk, E. Smith Owen, accountant and John Gill (former surveyor to the Local Board of Health), surveyor and water engineer.

Being a military man Major Platt attached importance to dress, discipline and tradition. He persuaded the

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council to approve the wearing of gowns at all its sittings and on public occasions. He presented a superb ermine fringed, scarlet mayoral gown to the city together with a mayoral chain and a mace, the symbol of the council's authority. He insisted on the standard rules and procedures governing debates. Finally he invited all members of the council to accompany him to the cathedral on Sunday, 18 November for an act of public worship and dedication. The mayoral procession, which included various uniformed units, representatives of friendly societies and a military band, was surrounded by pageantry and became a focus of public interest. It was moreover an occasion to present to the community those whom it had entrusted with its well being and development.

From the beginning therefore the council established high standards of procedure and dignity which it sought to maintain throughout the period it governed the city. It gained the confidence of citizens by administering the city efficiently and attending to long sought after improvements, and an aura of respectability by attracting the leading figures in the community to serve on it. Social acceptance was an essential complement to the legal authority which the charter of incorporation had conferred upon it in 1883.

Aberystwyth.

PETER ELLIS JONES.