



# Belfast Corporation and the roles of its Sovereign.

In their 1835 report on Municipal Corporations in Ireland, the commissioners examined the workings of Belfast's Corporation in detail, beginning with the election of the burgesses and the Sovereign:

- By the Charter, the feast of St. John the Baptist, 24th June, (or, if Sunday, the day following,) was made the day of annual meeting of the Sovereign and free burgesses, when Arthur Lord Chichester of Belfast, his heirs and assigns, being lords and proprietors of the Castle of Belfast, should present the names of three of the free burgesses; one of whom, the Sovereign and free burgesses so assembled, or the greater part of them, should elect to the office of Sovereign for one year, from the feast of St Michael ensuing, and until another should be elected and sworn. Before executing his office he is to be sworn before the Lord of the Castle, or, in his absence, before the Constable of the Castle.
- These directions of the Charter are, generally speaking, attended to in point of form. The list of three free burgesses sent by the lord of the castle is called "a leet," and the free burgesses assembled name one of the three to be the Sovereign. It does not always happen that a majority of the free burgesses assemble, but no advantage has been taken of such a defect in the election.
- In practice, the same person is constantly re-elected, or holds over, for a long series of years, until the "patron," the Marquis of Donegall, expresses his desire that another person should succeed to the office.
- The Lord of the Castle is a member of the Corporation by tenure of the castle of Belfast. The Marquis of Donegall holds that office, and it appears to have been in his (the Chichester) family from the date of the Charter.

The commissioners outlined, as follows, the many roles of the Sovereign:

- The Sovereign is the returning officer for the borough. (The borough returned two Members to the Irish Parliament, and one Member to the Imperial Parliament, from the time of the Union until the passing of the Reform Act, by which the former number of Representatives was restored. Lord Donegall, before 1832, nominated the Members. Hitherto, under the Reform Act, he has enjoyed the power of nominating the returning officer and 13 voters for the borough.)
- [The Sovereign] is made, by the Charter, judge of a Borough Court of Record, not now held [Samuel Lewis commented in 1837 that the "Charter granted a court of record for the recovery of debts not exceeding £20, arising within the borough or its liberty, to be held every Thursday before the Sovereign, but it has long since fallen into disuse"]. He is also constituted a justice of the peace within the borough, and usually holds the commissions of the peace for the county of Antrim, and the adjoining county of Down.

- He presides at a Court of Petty Sessions twice in each week, (hence called “The Sovereign’s Court,”) at which court [“held every Monday and Wednesday at the sessions-house” (Lewis)] some resident or neighbouring justices usually attend.
- He has been usually considered as the treasurer of the Corporation, and acted as such before the corporate trust funds were dissipated. By a resolution of the Sovereign and burgesses, with the assent of the Lord of the Castle, on the 4th January 1665, it was ordained, that every Sovereign, succeeding to the office, should have authority, with the assistance of the major part of the burgesses, within one month after being sworn Sovereign, to call the preceding Sovereign to an account of all sums received in his time from any freeman, or given by any other person to be employed for the good of the Corporation, and how disbursed and disposed of, to the use aforesaid; and if any Sovereign should die, his executors should be called to account by the succeeding Sovereign, in like manner. This practice has, for a great many years, fallen into disuse.
- He is clerk of the market in the borough by the Charter.
- He is a commissioner of police under the Acts hereinafter mentioned, for paving, cleansing, lighting, improving, and watching the streets.
- He is a member of the corporation of the Belfast Charitable Society, under an Act of Parliament which shall be noticed; and as such, by another Act, has a voice in the election of the commissioners for supplying the town with water.
- Under another Act he is a member of the corporation for preserving and improving the port and harbour. (*Insert from elsewhere in the Appendix: The Lord of the Castle possesses, as already described, the power of nominating persons to the office of Sovereign, and his advice and consent are made requisite, by the Charter, to the enactment of bye-laws. Under the latest statute regulating the harbour, he [the Marquis of Donegall] is a member of the corporation thereby erected for its improvement.*)
- He was formerly one of the commissioners under the statutes for carrying on the navigation of the river Lagan, but that undertaking has become vested exclusively in the proprietors of the joint stock.
- He is also, by Act of Parliament, a Visitor of the Belfast Academical Institution.
- He has been in the habit of appointing the clerk to the petty sessions, (termed the “Sovereign’s Court”) a situation which appears to be lucrative.
- The emoluments of the Sovereign arise from the tolls, &c. of Smithfield market, which, except on fair days, are received exclusively by the Sovereign for the time being, to his own use. They produce to him more than £500 a year, after paying the two serjeants at mace £10 a-year each.
- He has not now any fees; before the 2, 3 Will. IV. c. 21 [Act], making the employment of coal-meters optional with the buyer or seller, he took fees on coal-metage.
- He has not, as Sovereign, a mansion-house.