

The Beginning of the Borough

This article first appeared in Gosport Records No.4
Pages 7 to 11 : May 1972

This year, 1972, is the 50th Anniversary of the Incorporation of Gosport as a Borough and will be the occasion for much celebration locally. My object is to outline the stages that led to the achievement of Borough status with a Charter of Incorporation, a Mayor, Aldermen and Borough Councillors.



There are many references to Gosport as a Borough long before 1922. In a decree of the Court of the Exchequer of 1602 which sought to control the sea passage from Gosport to Portsmouth, Gosport is referred to as a Borough on no less than four occasions. Similarly in the first legislation introduced into Parliament on the 19th May 1761 to deal with the prevention of nuisances, the preamble to the Bill stated, "Whereas the town or borough of Gosport, in the parish of Alverstoke, is not only large and populous, but has two Fairs annually and a market kept three times in every week therein, and is a place of great resort " Again in an Act of Parliament of 1809 entitled 'for the better government of the watermen working on the passage between Gosport, Portsmouth and Portsea', one of the 50 local worthies who were to form a Commission for putting the Act into effect was 'the Bishop's Bailiff for the Borough and manor of Gosport for the time being.'

But these were probably courtesy titles only. There is no evidence of an ancient charter of incorporation. Perhaps that is as well, for according to Sidney and Beatrice Webb (The English Municipal Corporations) many boroughs had by the end of the 18th century degenerated into hopelessly corrupt, self-appointed bodies with very little sense of their functions to the inhabitants.

The Municipal Corporations Act of 1835 re-established the Boroughs with new constitutions and functions and, later in the century, in 1867 and 1882, their new status was defined. Gosport was not one of these new boroughs and for the greater part of the century was governed partly as a manor then as a Local Board of Health and finally as the Alverstoke Local Board. The name gave rise to bitter controversy because although Alverstoke was the local ecclesiastical and civil parish, Gosport by the mid 19th century had become far more populous. On

the 8th January 1891 application was made to the Local Government Board to change the name to the Gosport and Alverstoke Local Board.

In 1894, under the Local Government Act of that year, Gosport became the Gosport and Alverstoke Urban District Council. The first meeting was held on Thursday, 3rd January 1895, when 27 councillors from three wards took up their duties.

Even before the Urban District Council was established there was some agitation that Gosport, with a population of 23,000, should seek Borough status. On the 13th July 1893, a notice of motion before the Local Board read, 'That the Clerk be instructed to prepare a return showing the probable cost which would be incurred in obtaining a Charter of Incorporation for Gosport and Alverstoke and to obtain such information as would guide the Board in the event of its being considered desirable to take steps to procure the same.' There was a lively and at times furious, debate, but in the end the motion was carried by ten votes to six.

The Clerk duly reported on the 12th October 1893. He outlined the elaborate procedure of the submission of a petition to the Queen in Council, required under the Municipal Corporations Act 1882. The application would need the support of a town's meeting and possibly a local poll of the inhabitants. The minimum cost would be £250 but if there were objections costs could be doubled or trebled. The Clerk referred to recent applications from Torquay and Bournemouth where there had been local objections and the costs had been very high. The Clerk was thanked for his report and the matter was dropped. This was not without misgivings. Many smaller towns in Hampshire - Romsey, Andover and Basingstoke were boroughs and boasted their civic dignity. Gosport's population, which was 16,400 in 1851, had risen to 26,000 by 1891 and justified additional status.

There the matter rested until 1905 when the Urban District Council decided at its meeting in February to petition for a Charter of Incorporation. The announcement provoked a furious local storm. There were violent protests. The leader of the opposition was the formidable Admiral Field. He had been the M.P. for South Sussex from 1885 to 1900 and in retirement had settled in Grove House, off Spring Garden Lane. He had won notoriety in the controversy as to whether Alverstoke or Gosport should predominate. The statutory public meeting held in the Thorngate Hall was one of the most rowdy and violent in the town's history. Amid abuse and threats from the local citizens and assertions that the Council was endeavouring to line its own pockets, the proposal was overwhelmingly defeated.

Fifteen years were to pass before the issue was raised

again. Admiral Field died in 1912, the first great war lasted from 1914-1918 and during it Gosport was a busy naval town, bustling with activity. By 1919 all the talk was of reconstruction. The Urban District Council resolved in 1919 to appoint an Incorporation Committee charged with the duty of preparing a petition to the King in Council and of negotiating the new application. This time there was little opposition. The County Council of Hampshire passed a formal resolution which was reported to the Urban District Council on the 17th May 1920, 'That the Council approve generally of the application for a Charter of Incorporation for the Gosport and Alverstoke Urban District.'

It was also reported at the same meeting that the Privy Council had appointed Mr. T. R. Dill to hold a public local inquiry in connection with the application. The date suggested was in August 1920 but the local council was in a hurry and it was finally agreed that the inquiry should be held on the 16th July 1920. There was little opposition. The Incorporation Committee submitted a scheme defining the area as the Borough of Gosport and suggesting a Council of 30 members - 8 wards with three members each (Town, Forton, Brockhurst, Elson, Alverstoke, Leesland, Newtown, and Christchurch) and 8 aldermen.

After the inquiry a year passed by, but on the 4th July 1921 a letter was received from the Privy Council asking for minor amendments and stating that the Charter would probably be granted in 1922. The Minutes for the Urban District Council held on 16th May 1922 read, 'The Chairman reported that a letter had been received from the Privy Council announcing that the King had been pleased at the Council held on the 5th May 1922 to approve the grant of a Municipal Charter to Gosport and Alverstoke and that the Order in Council approving the draft charter had been issued to the Home Office, from which Department the Urban District Council would receive a communication in due course: also that the Council had received the Order of His Majesty in Council in connection with the grant of the said Charter'. When the final reckoning was made it was found that the total cost incurred in obtaining the Charter was £487.18.1d.

The Gosport Borough Mace is believed to be the only wooden one in the country.

It was carved from the mast of H. M. S. Victory and presented to the Council by Charles Pilcher, Esq.

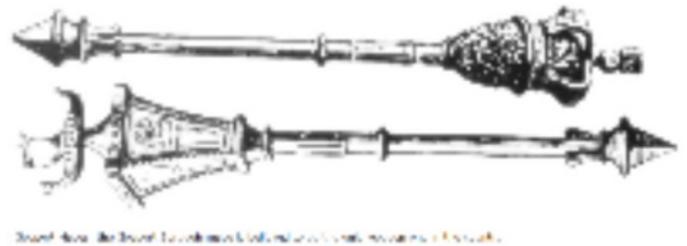
A second Mace was presented to the Borough by the Officers and men of H. M. S. Sultan in 1968.

At its meeting in September 1922 the Council decided

to appoint a sub-committee to improve the Council Chamber and provide a mayor's parlour. They also agreed to accept a new seal for the Borough prepared by the artist Mr. Martin Snape (who was eventually paid £3.3.0d. for the design) and to make a grant of £300 towards the Mayor's expenses.

Elections for the new Borough were held and the first meeting of the new authority took place on the 4th November 1922. The first motion was 'That Mr. J. F. Lee be elected Mayor of the newly constituted borough'. It was also agreed to provide a badge and chain of office for the Mayor.

At the second meeting of the Council the following resolution was submitted: 'That the time has come when the necessary steps should be taken to uphold the dignity of the Borough of Gosport and a Committee should be appointed to deal with the question of proper robes for the Mayor, Aldermen and Councillors and a suitable uniform for the Mace Bearer.' But the Council had had enough of 'upholding dignity' and the expense incurred. The resolution was turned down flat.



Small text caption below the mace images, likely identifying them as the Gosport Borough Mace and the Mace of the Officers and men of H. M. S. Sultan.