

The Origins of Bristol's Mayoralty

By JOHN GODWIN

Introduction

In 2016 Bristol will celebrate the 800th anniversary of its first mayor, with commemorative events being planned in the city. This makes it an appropriate time to re-examine what happened in 1216 and to determine, in particular, whether the origins of the mayoralty can be traced to 1216 and how it fits into the more general context of the Crown's relations with towns like Bristol in the 13th century.

The notion that Bristol first acquired a mayor in 1216 goes back to at least the late 15th century. Robert Ricart was town clerk in Bristol from 1478 to 1489. In 1478/9 he began a chronicle of Bristol, Ricart's *Kalendar*.¹ In the introductory section he wrote that in the third part of the chronicle he would list the mayors of Bristol.

Tercium Principale.

The Thirde to show who was the first Maire made and discharged in this worshipfull Toune of Bristowe, the first yere of the reigne of Kinge Henry the thirde, sonne vnto Kynge John, that moost freest and moost largiest enfranchised this worshipfull Toune; whiche Kinge Henry helde the grete Councelle here in Bristowe, sone aftir his Coronacium at Gloucestre, the first yere of his regne, beinge with hym the same tyme the Pope's Legat Gualo with many lords spirituall and temporall. And how many Maires have been sithen in this worshipfull Toune.²

As promised, the third part begins with a list of the names of the mayor and provosts, stewards, bailiffs, or sheriffs, as the case may be, from the time of Henry III. The first entry is: 'A.D. 1217 Maire Adam le Page'.³

Although Ricart's manuscript is the oldest surviving Bristol chronicle, others were clearly kept during the medieval and Tudor period.⁴ After Ricart, however, the earliest surviving chronicle is that of Adams, written between 1623 and 1639. This suggests that:

1. For Ricart and his *Kalendar* generally, see P. Fleming, 'Making history: culture, politics and the *Maire of Bristol is Kalendar*', in D.L. Biggs, S.D. Michalove and A.C. Reeves (eds), *Reputation and Representation in Fifteenth Century Europe* (Brill, 2004), 289–316.
2. L. Toulmin Smith (ed.), *The Maire of Bristowe is Kalendar* by Robert Ricart (Westminster, 1872), 4.
3. *Ibid.* 27
4. For a review of the medieval manuscripts, see P. Fleming, *Time, Space and Power in Fifteenth Century Bristol* (Brill, forthcoming 2016). A chronicle of Bristol by 'Maurice Toby', known as the Fust Manuscript, was discovered in 1841, but destroyed in a fire in 1860. The title of this work was: *A Brief Chronicle, conteynge the accoumpte of the Reignes of all the Kings of the Realme of Englande, from the entering of Brutus untill this present yeere...also conteyned the names of all the Mayors, Stewardes, Bayliffes and Sberiffes, of the laudable town of Bristowe...from the first yeere of King Henry ye 3rd, A.D., 1217, untill the present yeere, 1565*'. This seems to confirm that mid 16th-century chroniclers made an association between the establishment of Bristol's mayoralty and the start of Henry III's reign: H.P. Biggar, *The Precursors of Jacques Cartier, 1497–1534* (Ottawa, 1911), 194–5.

At the decease of King John, Henry his son of the age of 9 years (by the counsels of William Duke of Gloucester, the Earls of Pembroke and Chester), was proclaimed King of England.⁵ A book or register of all the Mayors, Prepositors, Senesters, Bailiffs and Sheriffs, that ever (by records) have been in Bristol; the first whereof began in the first year of King Henry III anno domini 1216.⁶

The significance of 1216 is further underlined by Adams' list of mayors, which begins with the record: '1216 Mayor – Adam le Page. Prepositors – Stephen Haukin and Rainold Hazard'.⁷

It seems likely Adams took this information from one of the extant rolls of the mayors, sheriffs and prepositors of Bristol. One of these runs from 1216 to 1608, which confirms that in the early 17th century chroniclers regarded 1216 as a significant date.⁸

This tradition seems to have encouraged many later chroniclers and historians not only to take 1216 as the date that the first mayor was appointed, but to speculate that a charter was awarded to the town at that time. For instance, in 1823 Samuel Seyer wrote of Henry III that:

While the young king continued at Bristowe, he probably granted a charter to the town, authorising the burgesses to choose from among themselves a chief magistrate called a Mayor, as Winchester, London, Lynn, and perhaps others, were allowed to do, some years before.....it is unquestionable that at this time leave was given to the burgesses to choose a Mayor annually, all our calendars assert it, they all name Alan le Page as the first Mayor.....yet so far as I can find, no charter for the election of a Mayor has been discovered, or quoted by succeeding charter.⁹

That a charter was granted at this time was later stated as an accepted fact by J.F. Nicholls and John Taylor in their influential history of Bristol:

It was while Henry was in Bristol, in 1216, that he granted a charter to the burgesses similar to the one which his father had given to the burgesses of London in 1213, giving them liberty to choose a mayor from among themselves. This charter is lost, but there can be no reasonable doubt as to its substance.¹⁰

This has more recently been taken up by Bryan Little, who, writing of young Henry III in Bristol in 1216, noted:

The King's stay lasted over Christmas; it appears that he now gave Bristol licence to do as London did and choose a Mayor, also two prepositores in lieu of sheriff and bailiff....The Mayor's name is given as Adam le Page.....¹¹

Despite this longstanding historiographical tradition, the granting of a charter in 1216 seems improbable. First, it may be noted that in 1236 the burgesses of Bristol petitioned Henry, now ruling in his own right, for permission to have a mayor elected and removable by the town, as was the case in London. The Close Rolls say:

*Pro burgensibus Bristolli – Roger Aylard et ceteri burgenses de Bristollo supplicant regi ut ad eorum electionem possint facere majorem et eum removere quo libet anno; et quod habere possint pondus London.*¹²

5. W. Adams, *Chronicle of Bristol* (Bristol, 1910), 7.

6. *Ibid.* 4.

7. *Ibid.* 7.

8. Bristol Record Office, 6608/3.

9. S. Seyer, *Memoirs Historical and Topographical of Bristol and its Neighbourhood*, II (Bristol, 1823), 4.

10. J.F. Nicholls and J. Taylor, *Bristol Past and Present*, I (London, 1883), 117.

11. B. Little, *The City and County of Bristol* (Wakefield, 1967), 38.

12. *Calendar of Close Rolls [Cal. Close]* 1234–7, 363.

For the burgesses of Bristol – Roger Aylard and the rest of the burgesses of Bristol request of the king that they can have the election to have a mayor and remove him as they please each year; and that they have the same importance as London.¹³

Although the petition was refused, the crucial point is that Bristol's application made no mention of any earlier right to elect or appoint a mayor. If an earlier charter had been granted by Henry III, it seems unlikely that the town would have felt the need to petition the king for one just 20 years later. Moreover, if a charter had existed, even if subsequently lost or withdrawn, the 1236 petition would almost certainly have mentioned it.

The second reason for supposing that the establishment of mayors in Bristol was not a consequence of a now lost charter of Henry III is that Henry's father, King John, had himself referred to Bristol's mayor in a succession of mandates issued to Bristol before his death in the autumn of 1216. These will be considered in more detail later.

Finally, it may be noted that while the legal right to elect a mayor was enshrined in later charters, the first of these was not granted until 1300. This charter of Edward I recorded:

And that they and their successors aforesaid, as often as and whenever they shall elect their Mayor in the town aforesaid, time of war excepted, shall present him to the Constable of the same town who for the time shall be, who shall admit him as the usage is and, as such Mayors of the said town were formerly accustomed to be presented and admitted to our Exchequer and shall certify thereof, at the costs of the same burgesses, our Treasurer and Barons of the Exchequer aforesaid.¹⁴

While this charter acknowledges the existence of mayors who had been formally presented to the Exchequer, it refers only to 'as the usage is' and makes no reference to any earlier legal right to elect or possess a mayor.

To consider what might have been happening, it is useful to compare Bristol's situation to that of other English towns in this period. One of the best parallels is Northampton. That town too had mandates addressed to its mayor from King John. However, like Bristol, no charter was issued to Northampton giving authority to have a mayor until 1299:

Edward by the grace of God King of England etc. to Abbots Priors Earls Barons Justices Sheriffs Reeves etcAlso we have granted for us and for our heirs to the burgesses aforesaid that they their heirs and successors aforesaid every year for ever at the feast of Saint Michael may choose one Mayor and two Bailiffs of themselves and him whom they shall so choose as Mayor they shall present at our Exchequer within eight days which pertain to the office of Mayoralty of the town aforesaid faithfully to be executed And which Mayor and Bailiffs shall hold and execute all pleas touching the liberty of the town aforesaid as by the Bailiffs of the same town in times past it hath been accustomed to be done.....
27th day of May in the 27th year of our reign.¹⁵

In considering what may be made of this, it is first necessary to make a distinction between a mandate and a charter. In the early 13th century a mandate was no more than a royal instruction to the addressee(s) to do the king's bidding. It did not grant legal rights; it was an order which the king could expect to be obeyed. A charter on the other hand granted the recipient(s) legal rights, often in a reciprocal form. For example, in consideration of a town providing money or ships to the Crown, the king might grant trade privileges or legal rights.

Apart from London, there is no evidence that either Richard I or John granted *any* town or city the legal right to elect a mayor. Yet between 1200 and 1216 John addressed mandates to mayors of 12 towns, including Exeter (1205), Winchester (1207), Lynn (1212), York (1213), Northampton

13. Where Latin and its translation appear, the translation is by the author, unless otherwise stated.

14. N. Dermott Harding (ed.), *Bristol Charters 1155–1373* (Bristol Rec. Soc. 1, 1930), 44–6.

15. C. Markham (ed.), *The Records of the Borough of Northampton*, I (Northampton, 1898), 56–7.

(1215) and Bristol (1216).¹⁶ Yet, while a number of other mandates addressed to these towns also refer to the mayor, not all do; for example several are addressed to the bailiffs of Winchester and others simply to the citizens of Winchester. Yet there is no evidence of a charter being issued at this time granting the town the right to a mayor and the use of one seems to have been purely customary. This is apparent from a 1323 query by the Court of Exchequer, over a century later. When the townspeople of Winchester were asked by what right they elected a mayor, their reply was simply: 'from a time beyond the memory of man'.¹⁷

In 1216 King John issued five mandates to the mayor of Bristol. At this time he was under great pressure: much of the country was in revolt and Bristol was the centre of royal resistance. The goodwill of the town was thus essential. The second of the mandates, dated 21 August, named the mayor as Roger Cordwainer.¹⁸ The other four refer to the mayor of Bristol without naming him.¹⁹ To understand why these mandates were issued it is helpful to understand something of the administrative context. John's reign saw the growth of a central bureaucracy and better record keeping. This was necessary because the king spent much of his reign travelling around the country, sending out demands and collecting money as he went. The sums collected were kept in newly-created depositories, one of which was at Bristol. The Roger Cordwainer identified as mayor in 1216 was referred to in an earlier mandate in 1207 as one of the joint keepers of the Bristol depository. This implies that Roger was already a figure of authority in the town who was trusted by the king.

Who was the first mayor of Bristol?

The naming of Roger Cordwainer in the mandate of 21 August 1216 raises a further issue: was he the first recorded mayor, or was it Adam le Page, as stated in Adams' *Chronicle* and the surviving mayoral rolls? This question goes to the heart of a further issue: what was the role of mayors in early 13th-century England? As will be seen, the mayor (legally appointed or not) of towns at this time seems to have been a leader appointed or chosen in some other way by the towns themselves, the first civic official not appointed by the king. Susan Reynolds makes this point very clearly when she says that the English mayor was from the start an urban official who symbolized the town's unity.²⁰

Yet Bristol may have been an exception to this, for the evidence shows that Roger Cordwainer was a confidant of John, and Bristol had been in a special relationship with the Crown since the time of Henry II. The reason for this was the proximity of Bristol to Ireland, in particular Dublin. Henry had been anxious to secure his hold over Ireland and, by charter granted by him while in Dublin in 1171–2 it is stated: 'know ye that I have given and granted and by the present charter have confirmed to my men of Bristol my city of Dublin to inhabit'.²¹ At the same time he granted that they should inhabit and hold it 'with all the liberties and free customs which the men of Bristol have at Bristol and throughout all my land'.

There is clear evidence that throughout the last quarter of the 12th century Bristol merchants and their families settled in and around Dublin in significant numbers. One such family was the Cordwainer family. Records of landholdings and gifts to religious institutions are witnessed by

16. T.D. Hardy (ed.), *Rotuli Litterarum Clausarum* [*Rot. Litt. Claus.*] (London, 1833), 39b, 89, 123a, 150a, 188a, 281b respectively.

17. J.S. Furley, *City Government of Winchester* (Oxford, 1923), 16.

18. 'Mand' est Roger Cordwaner Majori Bristoll': *Rot. Litt. Claus.* 283.

19. *Ibid.* 281b, 285, 286b, 294.

20. S. Reynolds, *An Introduction to the History of English Medieval Towns* (Oxford, 1977), 109.

21. Dermott Harding, *Bristol Charters*, 7.

two members of that family, one being Roger Cordwainer himself. In particular, an undated grant by Walter de Scotet to the abbey of St Thomas in Dublin is witnessed by, amongst others, 'Roger Cordwainer; tunc temporis maiore de Brist'.²² Clearly, Roger Cordwainer was of a prominent family with interests in both Bristol and Dublin who early in the 13th century had the confidence of the king. In addition to the 1207 mandate referred to earlier, Roger was also responsible for purchasing wine for the king. The August 1216 mandate referring to him as mayor required him to deliver wine to the earl of Chester and others.

What is emerging from this is the strong possibility that Roger Cordwainer was either a Crown appointment, called by the king 'mayor', or a leading figure in Bristol simply recognized *de facto* by the king (and possibly the burgesses of Bristol too) as a local leader who they called the mayor. The reference to Roger Cordwainer as mayor of Bristol in the grant to St Thomas's abbey raises the possibility of his being referred to informally as the mayor for more than one year. But this need not cause a difficulty. It could well be that Roger Cordwainer was recognized as a leading citizen in Bristol and called 'mayor' for some period during John's reign because of the close relationship he had with John, but on John's death a mayor started to be appointed annually by the burgesses, of which Adam le Page was the first successor to Roger Cordwainer. As Grace O'Keeffe pointed out, Roger Cordwainer being referred to as mayor in August 1216 could mean he had been appointed or re-appointed before Michaelmas 1215.²³ This would allow Adam le Page to have been mayor from Michaelmas 1216–17 as fits the rolls of mayors and Adams' *Chronicle*.

The mayoralty under Henry III

Several of the mandates issued by Henry III to Bristol in the period 1216–37 were also addressed to a mayor. However, others were variously addressed to the bailiffs, burgesses, the worthy men, the reeve or the merchants, and sometimes a combination of several of these. From this it is clear that at Bristol, as in other towns, it was becoming common to call their chief magistrate 'mayor'. On the other hand, the legal right to elect such an official and the primacy of that individual had yet to be established.

From the mandates, it is clear that the Crown was willing to accept the chief officer of the towns, often referred to locally as the 'mayor', as a person with whom a king or his royal officials could deal on behalf of the town. Yet this did not imply a formal recognition of a legal right for the town to be represented by such an official. Subsequent mandates support this conclusion. Two mandates issued in the first year of Henry's reign state:

*Rex majori et probis hominibus Bristoll' salutem. Mandamus vobis quod sine dilacione habere dilecto et fideli nostro Philippo de Albuniaco lx marcas.....*²⁴

The king to the mayor and worthy men of Bristol greetings. We command that you without delay cause to pay Phillip of Albuniaco 60 marks.....

And in the following spring:

*De denariis liberandis.- Rex majori et probis hominibus Bristoll', salute. Mandamus vobis quod.....*²⁵

Delivery of money. - The King to the mayor and worthy men of Bristol greetings. We command you that.....

22. J.T. Gilbert (ed.), *The Register of the Abbey of St Thomas* (Rolls Series 94, London, 1889), 18.

23. G. O'Keeffe, 'The merchant conquistadores: medieval Bristolians in Dublin', in S. Duffy (ed.), *Medieval Dublin XIII* (Dublin, 2006), 116.

24. *Calendar of Patent Rolls [Cal. Pat.] 1216–25*, 6.

25. *Ibid.* 62.

A further example of Henry relying on the mayor and bailiffs to do his bidding is contained in a close roll of 1237:

*Pro burgensibus Bristoll', de vinis.- Mandatum est majori et ballivis Bristoll' quod.....*²⁶

To the citizens of Bristol, concerning wines. The mandate to the mayor and bailiffs of Bristol is that.....

These mandates suggest that Henry recognized the mayor as someone he needed to do work with, and, indeed, he may have found it useful to specify this official as one of those who would be answerable to him. Yet the last of these mandates was issued just a year after the king had refused Bristol's request for a charter to be granted giving the town the right to be represented by a mayor.

The identification of a mayor in Bristol was to continue through the mid 13th century, with further references to such an official occurring in a variety of royal documents. These include an order for William de Putot, mayor of Bristol, to witness the funeral of the king's kinswoman in August 1241, a writ to the sheriff of Gloucester in 1253 that identifies Ralph de Berkham as mayor of Bristol, and a 1257 murage grant 'to the mayor, baliff and good men of Bristol'.²⁷

This tendency to identify mayors and issue instructions to them is also apparent in many other towns and cities across the course of the 13th century. These include a 1236 murage grant to the 'mayor and good men of Exeter', a 1252 patent to the 'Mayor, Burgesses and other good men of Northampton', a 1265 writ to the 'mayor and bailiffs of Winchester', and a 1285 commission to 'Thomas de Normanvill and John Sampson, mayor of York'.²⁸

It seems clear that the king and his advisors were addressing instructions to whomever in a particular town they thought had the responsibility and would carry them out. It did not matter that the mayors had not been officially approved and that the town did not possess the legal right to be represented by such an official. The mayors of these towns were in charge in practice, and the Crown was happy to deal with them when it was convenient for it to do so. On the other hand, the Crown clearly did not feel obligated to conduct its business through the mayor. During the years 1232–47, for example, instructions to Northampton were variously addressed to the burgesses, constable, mayor and bailiffs, and sometimes just 'men of', as well as to several religious officials. In 1245 there was an 'appointment of Thierry le Tyeys [and others], burgesses of Northampton, to buy cloths to the king's use'.²⁹ This pattern was repeated throughout the various towns addressed. The nature of the rolls suggests a careful selection of addressees rather than a random choice. This seems the likely pragmatic position taken by the king and the reason mandates were addressed to mayors in towns that had not received a charter to do so. At the time of John, and in the regency years of Henry III, the Crown needed the money and active support from its towns, particularly the royal boroughs. Yet while the Crown accepted the need to work with those in control locally, it was not willing at this time, nor indeed for most of the rest of the century, to grant towns the legal right to elect their own chief magistrate after the manner of London. Although the reason for this is not stated, it seems likely that while the Crown often found mayors useful, it did not wish to be forced to limit itself to an engagement with this one official.

To understand why the Crown wished to maintain its options, it is probably useful to review the way in which municipal government was developing at this time. During the early 13th century, when mayors began to be mentioned in the royal mandates of John, not all towns had councils.

26. *Cal. Close* 1237–42, 16.

27. *Cal. Pat.* 1232–47, 256; 1247–58, 570; *Calendar of Inquisitions Miscellaneous* [*Cal. Inq. Misc.*] 1219–1307, 61.

28. *Cal. Pat.* 1232–47, 151; *Cal. Inq. Misc.* 1219–1307, 101, 249, 391.

29. *Cal. Inq. Misc.* 1219–1307, 449.

When they do appear, the number of councillors seems often to have been limited to 12 or 24. It is tempting to suggest that the concept of councils and mayors came across the English Channel with the Normans, but this is not necessarily the case. It is true that councils of this size were frequent in France in the 12th century, but it is not automatic that mayors and councils were foreign imports. They should, moreover, be considered separately. The introduction of a mayor in English towns, for whatever reason, was the introduction of a new officer altogether, and generally one appointed or elected by the town, even though he would carry out the functions previously carried out by the king's officer. James Tait in his analysis of the origin of town councils looks particularly at London and 12 other towns. He finds that in some towns there were councils before a mayor and in others a mayor before a council. He also finds evidence of mayors and councils being instituted at the same time.³⁰ Ipswich was one such town where a council received a charter but no mayor. The charter, granted in 1200, shows that Ipswich did not ask for, nor receive permission for a mayor either formally or informally.³¹ As Tait pointed out, the number 12 was well used in England, the sworn inquests of presentment in the courts leet being but one example.³²

The language used does not help decide this question. The English charters and mandates refer to councillors as *iurati* or *prudhomes*, or in Latin *probi homines*. Northampton provides an interesting example of the interplay between a mayor and council in a mandate issued by John in February 1215:

*Rex probis homines suis Norbanton salute. Sciatis quod recepim in Major vestrum William Thilly. Et ideo vobis mandamus quod ei tamquam discoribus et melioribus ville vestrae ad expediend siml cu eo negocia vestra.*³³

The King to the worthy men of Northampton, greeting. Know that we have accepted as mayor William Thilly. And we order you that there be given attention to him by electing twelve of the most discreet and better of the town to deal with the affairs of the town.

Three days later there followed a writ addressed to 'the mayor and reeve of Northampton'. This is the same pattern of instructions to mayors as has been seen in Bristol. In 1233 the King issued a mandate relating to a proposed tournament:

To the mayor and bailiffs of Northampton that if at the said tournament these wish to enter their town with horses and arms, they shall not permit this, but close the gates and shut them out, so that they have no succour of victuals or other necessities.³⁴

A writ of aid to Northampton in 1243 was sent:

to the mayor and bailiffs of Northampton for Roger de Haverhull and John le Fleming, sent to make prizes and purchases for the king at the fair there.³⁵

Yet as has been seen, Northampton did not receive a charter lawfully allowing a mayor until 1299.

The Ipswich example looked at earlier is also instructive. Although the town may not have had an elected council before 1200, the leading portmen were involved in administering the local

30. J. Tait, *The Medieval English Borough* (Manchester, 1936), 263–80.

31. The original was lost later in the 13th century but was re-constituted at an early date: G.H. Martin, *The Early Court Rolls of the Borough of Ipswich* (Leicester, 1954), 8.

32. Tait, *Medieval Eng. Borough*, 263–4.

33. *Rot. Litt. Claus.* 188a. It could be argued that this mandate granted Northampton the right to a mayor. The language better suggests an acceptance of a *de facto* situation. As mentioned earlier, Northampton did not receive a charter for a mayor until 1299.

34. *Cal. Pat.* 1232–47, 20.

35. *Ibid.* 407.

courts, so the appearance of a council was not necessarily new, but simply a transition into a more formal organization.

Unfortunately, there are few records of when councils appeared in other towns. Councils in Winchester and Exeter do not appear in the records until 1275 and 1286 respectively. In trying to ascertain whether mayors and supporting councils came together, it is necessary to be cautious in interpreting absence of evidence as evidence of absence. On the other hand, evidence from Oxford and Cambridge supports the notion that most towns did not get the right to have councils until the second half of the 13th century, Oxford gaining the right in 1257 and Cambridge in 1268. Grants to other towns came from 1300 onwards. The conclusions must be that although towns had a body of men in charge of affairs, their leader may or may not have been called mayor locally; that the title was frequently acknowledged informally by the king, but there was no formal recognition by the Crown of the existence of a council until well into the reigns of Henry III and Edward I.

So why might it be that kings in the 13th century were not willing to grant charters allowing towns to have a mayor, yet by the end of the century were clearly doing so? The answer seems to be embedded in the relationship between towns and the Crown, and the method by which the Crown sought to exercise control. In the 11th and 12th centuries, despite embryonic councils being formed by influential burgesses, the kings retained overall control, usually through the sheriff, who was a royal appointment. The leader of these councils was often called the 'mayor', probably a direct loan from the Norman French *maire*. Because he was not appointed by the Crown, successive kings were reluctant to give him legal recognition. As will be seen, 13th-century kings continued to exercise direct control over towns, granting or withdrawing rights and privileges as they thought fit. Yet Kings John and Henry III used the mayors as officers to carry on the king's business. These kings continued to regard towns in terms of feudal control.

This appears to have changed during the reign of Edward I, which has often been interpreted as a period in which England transformed from a feudal into a national state.³⁶

To exercise central political control and raise money for war, in 1274 Edward instigated an investigation of both magnates' franchises and the exercise of urban liberties. In 1285 the mayor of London complained about royal interference in the city: Edward took London into his own hands and ruled through a warden. In the same year Bristol was fined £500, and the town's administration was taken over by Edward in 1294. York lost its rights of self-government temporarily in the 1280s, and again in 1297. Other towns suffered in the same way, including Lincoln which lost its liberties in 1290. Edward's approach to urban councils was but part of a general struggle against the country's magnates, lay and clerical, who opposed his arbitrary imposition of taxes and the lack of parliamentary approval.³⁷ Yet Edward needed friends. Although his disputes with towns were not to end during his reign, he did decide that granting them greater independence would be advantageous. But it is unclear whether this was because he recognized that towns needed a measure of self-control if they were to thrive, or if it was just that he hoped that towns with powers granted by him would be more loyal, fearing perhaps that another monarch (if he gained power) might revoke these grants. Either way, on 28 March 1300 the king issued the charter to Bristol referred to earlier, confirming charters issued by his predecessors and re-granting them. The mayor was referred to, recognizing that the burgesses elect their mayor, who still had to be presented to the constable of Bristol castle 'who shall admit him', as the charter says, with no element of discretion as to whether to accept or reject the nomination. Thereafter, the mayors became regular addressees. This pattern was followed in charters to other towns. The explanation

36. M. Prestwich, *War, Politics and Finance under Edward I* (London, 1972), 224.

37. *Ibid.* 225, 228.

seems to be that Edward recognized that the old feudal ties with the urban centres were not the best way of seeking assistance, and that working with the elected leaders would enable him to enjoy a better relationship with them.

Conclusion

The succession of charters and mandates from John between 1200 and 1216 reveal a very real step-change in the Crown's attitude to towns. Henry II's suppression of the communes at Gloucester and York had been an example of the Crown trying to keep a central hold on local town aspirations.³⁸ This began to change in the time of Richard I, certainly as far as London is concerned with its commune and mayor, and John's reign saw this develop further. His need for money and support resulted in towns being given rights and obligations but very little formal constitutional structure. The mandates of 1200 to Shrewsbury and Gloucester contained instructions to the respective towns to elect bailiffs and coroners.³⁹ They gave the towns duties. One of the clearest examples of this is in a charter granted by John to Northampton on 17 April 1200. After granting the usual rights and exemptions to the burgesses, the charter then gave new responsibilities:

John by the grace of God King of England etc..... The Burgesses shall make a Reeve whom they will of themselves by the year who may be proper for us and them with this only to wit that our same Burgesses by the Common Council of their Town may choose two of the more lawful and discreet Burgesses of their Town and present them to our Chief Justice at Westminster who shall well and faithfully keep the Reeveship of the Town of Northampton and they shall not be moved so long as they well conduct themselves in their Bailiwick unless by Common Council of their Town. Also we will that in the same Borough by the Common Council of their town there be chosen four of the more lawful and discreet men of the Borough to keep the pleas of our Crown and other things which pertain to us in the same Borough and to see that the Reeve of the same Borough justly and lawfully treat as well the poor as the rich. Witness etc.⁴⁰

From John's mandates it is clearly seen that these early mayors had a real role in local government and were not just ceremonial. It is apparent from the references cited that mayors were the chief magistrates and, as such, had a major role in the running of the town. The duties put upon them were onerous, often combining both administrative and legal functions with the collection of taxes. We cannot be sure when towns first called their chief magistrate the mayor, but 1200–16 is the period when mayors begin to be referred to in mandates addressed to England's leading towns, including Bristol.

Bristol did not receive a charter authorizing a self-governing council until 1373, when it was stated that 'the said mayor and sheriff and 40 men would raise and disburse money for the necessities and profits of the said town'.⁴¹ Yet clearly Bristol had a functioning group of men in control of the town's affairs at least as early as the reign of John, when he recognized it as the body exercising power in the town and gave unofficial recognition of its head, the mayor. The significance of this is that this officer was the first appointed by the town, rather than being a royal official.

While it is possible that Bristol possessed an official they called a mayor prior to 1216, that is the first year in which references to a mayor can be found in Crown records, and it also the first year for which Bristol's later chroniclers, including Ricart, recorded the existence of a mayor.

38. Tait, *Medieval Eng. Borough*, 176–7.

39. *Ibid.* 187, 230.

40. Markham, *Rec. of Northampton*, I, 30–3.

41. Dermott Harding, *Bristol Charters*, 137.

As mentioned above, he could possibly have been appointed late in 1215 for the mayoral year 1215–16, though there is no evidence for this. Nevertheless, while Bristol did not acquire the legal right to be represented by a mayor until a century later, 1216 can still be taken as the time when Bristolians came to be led by such a figure. The evidence suggests that Roger Cordwainer may have been the king's choice as leading man of Bristol, called the mayor, or appointed by the townspeople with the approval of the king, but from late 1216 the mayor came to be appointed annually, probably by the townspeople as their representative. This would have brought the mayoralty in line with other towns who were calling their leading figure 'mayor', understanding him to be the town's representative presiding over the town's own official business and in dealings with the Crown.