

Newcastle-under-Lyme (1173 - 1800)

In 1173, King Henry II granted Newcastle a royal charter. It is this charter that we are celebrating 850 years later. The charter released the up-and-coming town from the control of the Prior of Trentham and turned Newcastle into a "borough". With this came new rights and responsibilities. In exchange for an annual fee to the King, a privileged few were allowed to set up their own shops and market stalls on burgage plots (or strips of land) - initially by Upper Green (the site of modern-day "Sainsbury's") - later the higher ground of the "High Street". They were also provided with common fields on which to grow crops. There were 6 open fields surrounding the town used for this purpose: Brampton Field, Stubbs Field, King's Field, Ash Field, Pool Field & Clayton Field. These early inhabitants of the town were called Burgesses. They enforced local laws and collected taxes on behalf of the King.

Thirteen subsequent charters between 1173 and the 1970s have extended and confirmed the town's rights. The Gild Merchant Charter of 1235 created a closed shop in which only Newcastle people could sell certain goods and services in Newcastle. The first meeting place for the Gild was the twelfth century St. Giles' Chapel (much later St Giles' Church). In the 1250s a Guild Hall was constructed for the Gild meetings on the site of the current hall.

It was at this time that the Blackfriars Priory was established. It sat in the valley alongside the Lyme Brook and to the south of the castle. The Friars settled in larger towns where they tended to the sick, taught the poor and provided spiritual guidance. In 1538 the priory was dissolved by Henry VIII after the split with Rome and its assets.

By the end of the thirteenth century Newcastle under Lyme was a thriving small town with a castle, church, priory, guild hall and market.

Due to its low lying position and development of the cannon our castle lost its strategic value as a defensive fortification. The last recorded date of repairs on the castle is 1485. By 1539, John Leland, King Henry VIII's antiquary, passed through the town he reported that "All the

castle is down, save one great tower". Only the castle mound and a few wall foundations survive today - which can be seen by John O'Gaunt's Road and Silverdale Road.

Newcastle was the most important town in North Staffordshire, predating Stoke on Trent by some centuries. This was due to its markets and commerce and its location on the north-south route though England made it an important stopping place for horse drawn coaches from London to Chester. It became a centre for clockmaking, ironmaking, mining, early porcelain and agriculture. By the 1800s it was a bustling and prosperous town.

