

Lancaster becomes a city, 1937

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King George VI was crowned in Westminster Abbey on 12 June 1937 and, as usual, many coronation honours were bestowed on individuals and organisations across the country. One of those honours was on Lancaster, which was raised to the status of a city. The story of how Lancaster became a city has never been told. It received only a brief mention in the most recent history of the city and the background discussions which led to the promotion were largely conducted in secret.¹ This was not unusual, but it makes piecing the story together more complicated than might have been anticipated. But the story is worth telling because Lancaster was and still is the only town to be promoted to city on the occasion of a coronation and because its elevation broke with the rules which were, at least in theory, operating in the 1930s.

City status is still believed by many people to be associated with Anglican dioceses. In the middle ages, towns which became the sees of bishops automatically became cities, but the link was nominal rather than legally affirmed. However, when in the 1540s Henry VIII created six new dioceses, the see town was, in each case, raised to a city, by letters patent. This principle was endorsed and maintained when the Anglican church began again to make new dioceses in the nineteenth century. Ripon in 1836, Manchester in 1853, St Albans and Truro in 1877, Liverpool in 1880, Newcastle in 1882 and Wakefield in 1888 were all promoted to city following their appointment as diocesan sees. After 1888 the link was broken and in the twentieth century towns which became diocesan sees were no longer automatically promoted; indeed, even today Blackburn,

¹ Andrew White, ed., *A history of Lancaster* (Edinburgh, 2001), pp. 252-53. I should like to thank Dr White for advice when I first researched the Lancaster case.

Chelmsford and Guildford are among cathedral towns which are not cities.

After 1888, government policy changed and city status was granted to large and important towns, including Birmingham in 1889, Leeds and Sheffield in 1893, Hull, Bradford and Nottingham in 1897 and Cardiff in 1905. To try to bring some regulation into the system, in 1907 the Home Office (which until 2002 always oversaw these matters) introduced guidelines for city status, notably a minimum population of 300,000 and a requirement that aspirant cities should have a regional rather than simply a local status. The rule was doomed from the beginning, partly because Victorian urban growth was not sustained into the twentieth century and so no towns actually reached the magic figure, and partly because it was all too convenient for exceptional reasons to be found for raising a particular town to city status. Thus Leicester and Stoke became cities in 1919 and 1925 respectively at the time of royal visits, Portsmouth and Plymouth were promoted in 1926 and 1928 because of their naval importance, and so on. The Home Office operated the population threshold to reject applications it did not want to entertain, but bent the rules when a suitable case (in the eyes of the civil servants) came forward.²

City status, as, technically, a grant from the crown, was first associated with royal events when in 1897 Nottingham, Hull and Bradford were honoured in conjunction with Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee celebrations. Several towns, including Leicester and Swansea, proposed themselves for coronation honours in 1901 and 1911, on both occasions without success, and Lancaster caught the mood when preparations began for King George VI's coronation following the abdication of his brother, King Edward VIII, in 1936.

Alderman Edward Parr, chairman of the finance committee, was the man who proposed and then drove the proposal for having Lancaster promoted to city status in conjunction with the coronation. He first raised it in a speech he gave on 9 November 1936 in the course of proposing the election of the next mayor, Councillor Robert Bamber, at the annual meeting of the council. Parr argued that it would be a great honour if the town could secure elevation to city status in commemoration of the coronation, 'bearing

² John Beckett, *City status in the British Isles, 1830-2002* (Aldershot, 2005).

in mind the fact that His Majesty carries the title Duke of Lancaster'. In Parr's view, Lancaster was 'very often referred to as a City by people of authority in many parts of the Country and these statements no doubt were made because of our long and important part in the Country's history'. He and others made reference to Lancaster as standing with places such as Durham, York, Chester, Hereford and Carlisle, all of which were already cities. Even so, support in the council chamber was lukewarm; 'none of my colleagues took it with any degree of seriousness, but rather thought that I had used it as a remark more or less to fill in my speech'.³ R.H. Middleton, the town clerk, subsequently admitted that he thought Parr was stretching credulity; 'Frankly, when the matter was mooted by Alderman Parr...I was not too optimistic, as Lancaster did not appear to fulfil all the requirements, if the customary procedure had to be followed'.⁴ Parr pressed ahead. He later admitted that 'if I had any misgivings it was on the score of population', but he refused to be swayed by the pessimists on the council.⁵

Parr was aware that the matter had to be handled delicately. In conditions of great secrecy, he first approached the M.P. for Lancaster, Mr Herwald Ramsbotham, who was the Minister of Pensions. His excuse for calling upon Ramsbotham was to ask for tickets to attend the House of Commons to hear the debates, but having made contact he was determined to raise the city status issue, only to be forestalled by the M.P. who had already read about the proposal in the local newspaper. Ramsbotham not only expressed his support, but also the same afternoon he took up the idea with the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Sir John Davidson), who also agreed to help. Ramsbotham sorted out procedural matters and advised Middleton how best to prepare a memorial to the king. The normal procedure when applying for city status was to submit a petition to the Home Office, which the Home Secretary would put before the king with (or, often, without) a recommendation that he grant the requested favour. At an early stage, it was decided in the Home Office, probably because of Lancaster's size, that this was not

³ Lancaster City Museum, LM73.50/1, 'How Lancaster became a City'. This account, written by Alderman Parr, provides a helpful chronology of events in 1936-37.

⁴ *Lancaster observer and Morecambe chronicle*, 14 May 1937.

⁵ Lancaster City Museum, LM73.50/1.

an appropriate course of action and that if a grant was to be made it would have to be regarded as an honour bestowed by the monarch. Lancaster must not be seen to be making a request.⁶

Subsequently a meeting was held, attended by Lord Derby, Ramsbotham, the bishop suffragan of Lancaster and the high sheriff of Lancashire (Mr W.J. Garnet), after which Ramsbotham made the initial approach to the Home Office. Lord Derby, lord lieutenant of Lancashire and an honorary freeman of the borough of Lancaster, approached Sir Alexander Hardinge, the king's private secretary, at the end of April to express his support for Lancaster on the grounds of its antiquity and the king's position within the duchy. Buckingham Palace canvassed the views of Davidson at the Duchy of Lancaster and he supported the case on the grounds of the town's history, including the position of the king as duke of Lancaster and owner of the castle. On 5 May, the king gave his assent. According to Hardinge,

although according to the usual criterion of numbers, the application is not one that could be favourably considered, His Majesty feels that the long association of Lancaster with the Crown would justify a departure from the rule that exists...this privilege has only been granted to Lancaster in virtue of this town being the County Town of the Duchy of Lancaster, and in fact the Castle is The King's personal property.⁷

The obsessive secrecy surrounding the application meant that the official announcement 'was in the nature of a surprise, not merely for the general body of the public but even for the great majority of the members of the Council, for it was not known that the necessary negotiations were in progress'. Middleton, the town clerk, received a phone call a few days prior to the official

⁶ Lancaster City Museum, LM73.50/1; *Lancaster observer and Morecambe chronicle*, 14 and 28 May 1937.

⁷ Royal Archives, Windsor castle, PS/GVI/PS 1909, Derby to Hardinge, 30 April 1937, Hardinge to Davidson, 3 May 1937, Davidson to Hardinge, 4 May 1937, Hardinge to ? and to Davidson, 5 May 1937, Hardinge to Derby, 5 May 1937; Cambridgeshire Record Office, R101/47, R.M. Middleton to Brigadier Maclean, 25 April 1950.

announcement on 12 May 1937, confirming that Lancaster was to be made a city as a coronation honour, but the Home Office insisted that not a word should be breathed to anyone until coronation day, 'not even the Mayor'. Middleton was placed in what he later recalled was 'a terribly difficult position', because

the Mayor left Lancaster the day before the 12th May for the Westminster Abbey Coronation Service, and when the information was released by the Home Office about 5.30 p.m. the night before Coronation Day, the Mayor was hounded like a criminal at his hotel in London, being asked to make statements and give all kinds of information about Lancaster being made a City, and yet he knew nothing whatever about it, because I had to comply with the Home Office's request to keep the information to myself. It was a very embarrassing position for the Mayor, but, of course, I explained the matter thoroughly when he returned.⁸

Awkward though this situation was, the grant was finally made, and on coronation day, 12 May 1937, Lancaster was raised to city status.⁹ The case for Lancaster was subsequently defended as 'long association with the Crown, the county town of the King's Duchy of Lancaster', a specific exception to the king's own rules as a result of its special association with the crown.¹⁰ As far as anyone could tell, it was the first town to be created a city without the necessity of a petition or a resolution of the council and which was not a county borough.¹¹ With a population of only 51,650, it was never in any danger of meeting the then usual population criterion of 250,000.

On his return to Lancaster, the mayor immediately wrote to Buckingham Palace asking if the king and queen would present the letters patent in person at Lancaster, but he was firmly rebuffed on the grounds that there were no plans for them to visit Lancashire in

⁸ *Ibid.*; *Lancaster observer and Morecambe chronicle*, 14 May 1937.

⁹ *The Times*, 12 May 1937; The National Archives, LCO 6/1392. The National Archives does not have a Home Office file on the Lancaster case.

¹⁰ The National Archives, HO 45/18697/19; HO 286/66, 67; LCO 6/1392.

¹¹ *Municipal journal*, 8 (June 1937), pp. 225, 227. In fact, Nottingham had been created a city in 1897 without either a resolution or a petition.

the immediate future.¹² At the first full meeting of the new city council on 26 May, the letters patent granting the status of city were read aloud and the mayor gave a short speech outlining the negotiations which had been underway since the previous November to secure this prestigious award.¹³

Lancaster intended to enjoy its new found celebrity with a week of celebrations at the end of September 1937. On the first day, 29 September, following the monthly meeting of the city council, four panels, containing the names of former mayors since 1885, were unveiled by the mayor (Councillor Bamber) in the council chamber. Souvenir silver spoons were distributed to schoolchildren residing in the city, who paraded in front of the town hall, and with the permission of Buckingham Palace, similar spoons were sent to the two royal princesses, Elizabeth and Margaret Rose. The new city had wanted to present the princesses with gold versions, but only the silver versions were acceptable to the Palace!¹⁴

On the second day, 30 September, senior school children assembled in Dalton Square. The mayor and mayoress with the town clerk and other city officials, all wearing their regalia, assembled on a platform outside the town hall and the town clerk read out the letters patent, the mayor made a speech and the national anthem was sung. The children then lined the route of a civic procession from the town hall to the priory and parish church, which was preceded by the band of the 5th battalion of the king's own royal regiment. In the church, a service was held commemorating the honour. Subsequently, a commemorative plaque was unveiled in the town hall by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, before a civic lunch was held in the Ashton Hall attended by, among others, Lord Derby and Sir John Davidson (or Viscount Davidson as he now was). In the afternoon, a celebration football match was played between Lancaster and Morecambe and there was a concert in

¹² Royal Archives, Windsor castle, PS/GVI/PS 1909, Bamber to Hardinge, 19 May 1937; Hardinge to Bamber, 22 May 1937.

¹³ *Lancaster observer and Morecambe chronicle*, 28 May 1937.

¹⁴ Royal Archives, Windsor castle, PS/GVI/PS 1909, Middleton to Hardinge, 27 and 31 July 1937, Hardinge to Middleton, 30 July 1937.

Dalton Square with the Standfast works prize band during the evening.¹⁵

On the Saturday (2 October) there was a pageant, depicting 21 episodes in the history of the city, ranging from the ancient Britons and the Roman occupation, through the earliest charters of 1193 and 1199, episodes depicting John O'Gaunt and Flodden Field, George Fox and his followers, the charter of King George III and a portrayal of Queen Victoria's visit to Lancaster in 1851. Then came a tableau with a scenic representation of the old charity schools on the 'Green Arms', a model of a trading vessel reminiscent of the one-time prosperity of the port of Lancaster and a final episode relating 'the new charter', involving the mayor and deputy mayor, Alderman Parr and the town clerk carrying the letters patent. The event ended with a ceremony at which the crowd sang 'O God our help in ages past' and the national anthem, led by Miss Dorothy Seward, who used 'a modern invention in the form of a microphone [which] enabled her to make herself heard all over the field'. There was just one sour note, when a local firm complained that children educated in the town but living beyond its boundaries were not given silver spoons. The company resented this petty discrimination and offered to fund spoons for the children who were excluded.¹⁶ The celebrations were brought to an end with a ball in the Ashton Hall on Friday 8 October.¹⁷ The overall cost of the celebrations was put at between £600 and £700 by the town clerk.¹⁸

King George VI, according to his private secretary, 'feels that the long association of Lancaster with the Crown would justify a departure from the rule that exists', so that Lancaster was treated in 1937 as a special case. Yet, in reality, it was a special case only in one sense, that it was, and still is, the only city to be created as a coronation honour. In almost every other sense it was fairly typical, since almost all promotions to city status in the course of the twentieth century breached 'the rule'. In population terms, by

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Middleton to Hardinge, 29 September 1937, Hardinge to Middleton, 1 October 1937. Details from the official programme of events (copy in Royal Archives).

¹⁶ *Lancaster observer and Morecambe chronicle*, 1 and 8 October 1937.

¹⁷ *Municipal review*, 8 (October 1937), p. 414.

¹⁸ Cambridgeshire Record Office, R101/47, Middleton to MacLean, 25 April 1950.

the 1930s the minimum figure which would allow a town to be considered was 250,000, but Plymouth was well below that when it was promoted in 1928 and Cambridge, the next town to receive city status, in 1951, was, like Lancaster, under 100,000. The real credit goes to Alderman Parr for recognising that the coronation gave Lancaster an opportunity to acquire a status to which it would not aspire under normal circumstances and for pressing the case in the face of apathy on the council and scepticism on the part of his own town clerk. As Alderman W.L. Raynes, senior member of Cambridge town council, expressed it in 1950, Parr was 'the prime mover in getting Lancaster made a City'.¹⁹ Parr thoroughly deserved the congratulations of those around him for his perseverance.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Raynes to Hamilton Kerr, esq, M.P., 3 April 1950.