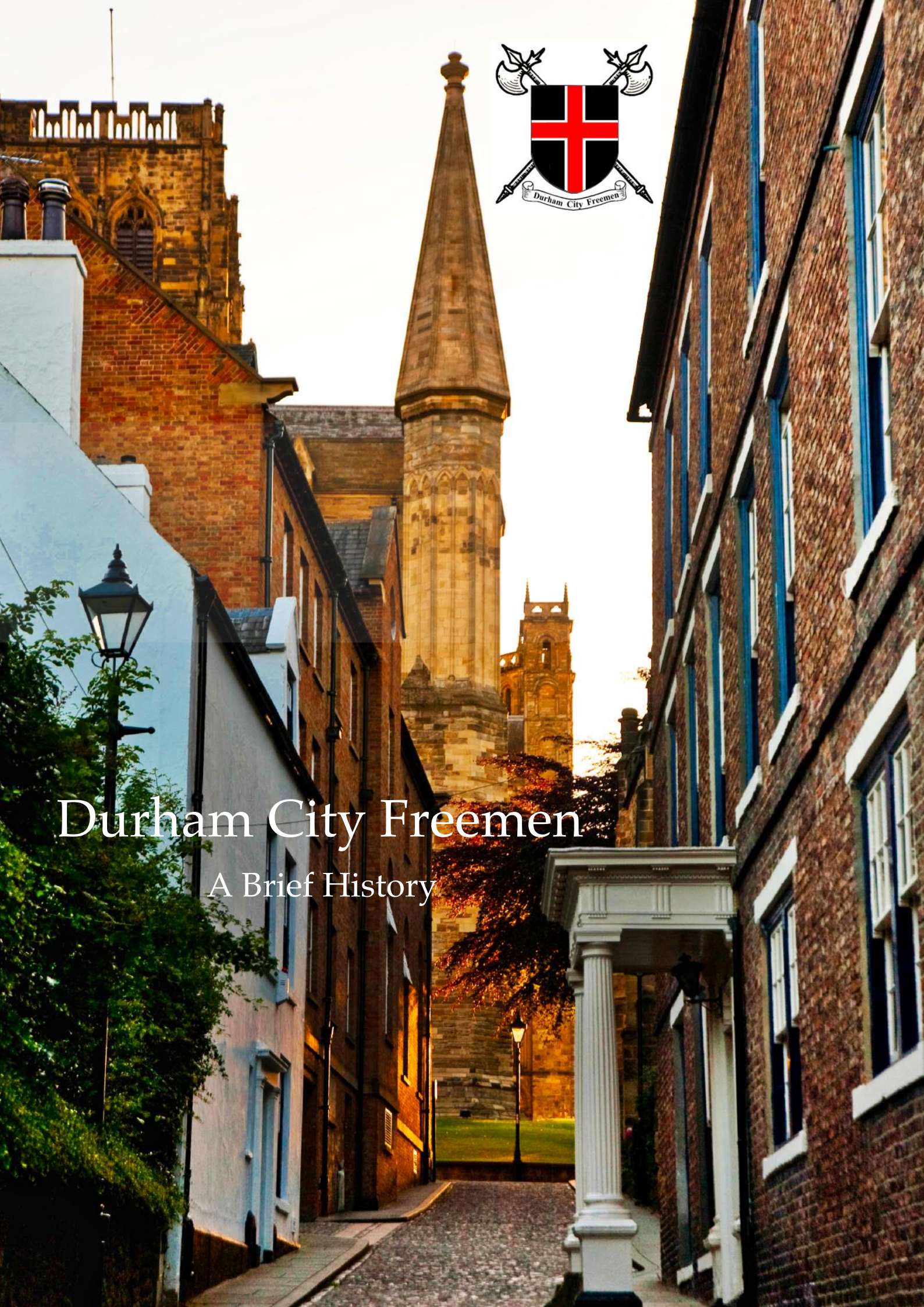




# Durham City Freemen

A Brief History



# Foreword

## Durham City Freemen

### A Brief Guide to the Freemen and Trade Guilds of the City of Durham.

This booklet has been created for those who are interested in the heritage of our City, the local community and visitors.

A question I am frequently asked is "Who are the Freemen?" This simple guide sets out to provide answers to 'who we are and what we do'.

This booklet has been designed to shed some light on the history of the Freemen together with their current role and function.

Freemen were members of Trade Guilds that held power and influence for over 300 years and did much to shape the City and its heritage.

I hope you find this booklet both interesting and informative.

Eric Bulmer  
Chairman of the Wardens  
Durham City Freemen

# Acknowledgements

With grateful thanks to Geoff Kitson, the official photographer for the Durham City Freemen, for providing the images included in this booklet. Also to the County Records Office for their help in researching the history of the Freemen, and finally to John Booth, the Freemens website manager for the production of this booklet.

# Overview

Commerce in the mediaeval City of Durham was controlled by the trades' companies' or 'guilds' who were also involved in local government.

Later, the freemen (members) of the guilds largely constituted the body of Freemen of the City, who exclusively could vote in elections for Durham City Council (1602 -1835) and in parliamentary elections (1678 – 1832). (The 'first movers and shakers' of the City).

## History of the Establishment of Freemen

**1179** Bishop Pudsey granted the first Charter to the City of Durham. In the County Palatine of Durham, almost uniquely, the borough charter would be granted by the Prince Bishop rather than by the Monarch. The people of Durham who were described as burgesses were freed from various duties and tolls due to the Bishop (hence the name 'free men'). The City was governed by a bailiff, and later, a 'Marshal of the Markets' was appointed.

A bodyguard was instituted (now the Mayor's bodyguard).

In the 14th century formal trading associations were developed, to regulate and control the trades in the City.

In 1300 The number of Freemen was around 230



Although the Guild of Skinners claims the earliest date of incorporation in 1327. The first recorded Charter was for the Weavers and Websters in 1450. By the late 15th century there were 16 guilds in the City.

From at least the 15th Century, and probably much earlier, the Freemen and guilds of Durham City would have been active in the election of the corporation of the borough. Those men accepted as Freemen enjoyed civil privileges such as the right to trade and own property, and protection within the town.



**Barbers Company Crest 1784**

**1565** Bishop Pilkington gave the first charter of incorporation to the City, giving it self governance and appointing an Alderman and 12 assistants (the first corporation).

**1602** Bishop Matthews granted a further Charter of Incorporation by which the burgesses and inhabitants were constituted a 'Body Politic and Corporate', consisting of a Mayor, 12 Aldermen and 24 council members drawn from the guilds. From 1602 to 1835 the Freemen of the City were the only electors and the only candidates for election to the City council.

**1654** The first MP was elected for the City. (Commonwealth Period).

**1673** An act of parliament empowered the City and County of Durham to elect representatives to the House of Commons. 2 burgesses to represent the city and 2 knights for the county. The latter were elected by the landowners in the county, while the former were elected only by the Freemen of the City. The corporation has no jurisdiction over the creation of Freemen who were generally still created by connections with Companies of trade, although the Council of the City did have a power to create Honorary Freemen.

**1728** A corporation byelaw attempted to curb the fraudulent creation of Freemen (created prior to a general election in order to swing the vote) by stipulating that applications for admission to the Freemen of the



trade companies and the city could only be accepted if 'called' and approved at three quarterly assemblies of the Mayor and Aldermen of the City of Durham together with the Wardens and Stewards of the City Guilds. These meetings are almost identical to our Guild Days which are held on quarterly festival days of the year, Candlemas, May, Lammas and Martinmas.

1762 At Durham the election and creation of honorary Freemen became sufficiently controversial to force a change in the law. The election was disputed because , most of the 215 new Freemen were not resident in the city. The existing Freemen petitioned against the dilution of their voting rights, the candidates who had been declared elected were unseated by the Commons committee which heard the case, and the following year an Act of Parliament was passed to prevent any honorary Freeman from voting in the borough election within 12 months of them being accorded the status.

**1780** Bishop Egerton, after 10 years of dispute with the Corporation, granted in new charter.



**1801** Inclosure of Brasside including the creation of Trustees of the Freemen to administer Union Hall Farm (a.k.a. Freemen's Farm). The Trustees were appointed for the management of this land and the distribution of its rental income through the Wardens of the City's Guilds ( Union Hall Farm was later purchased from the Freemen).



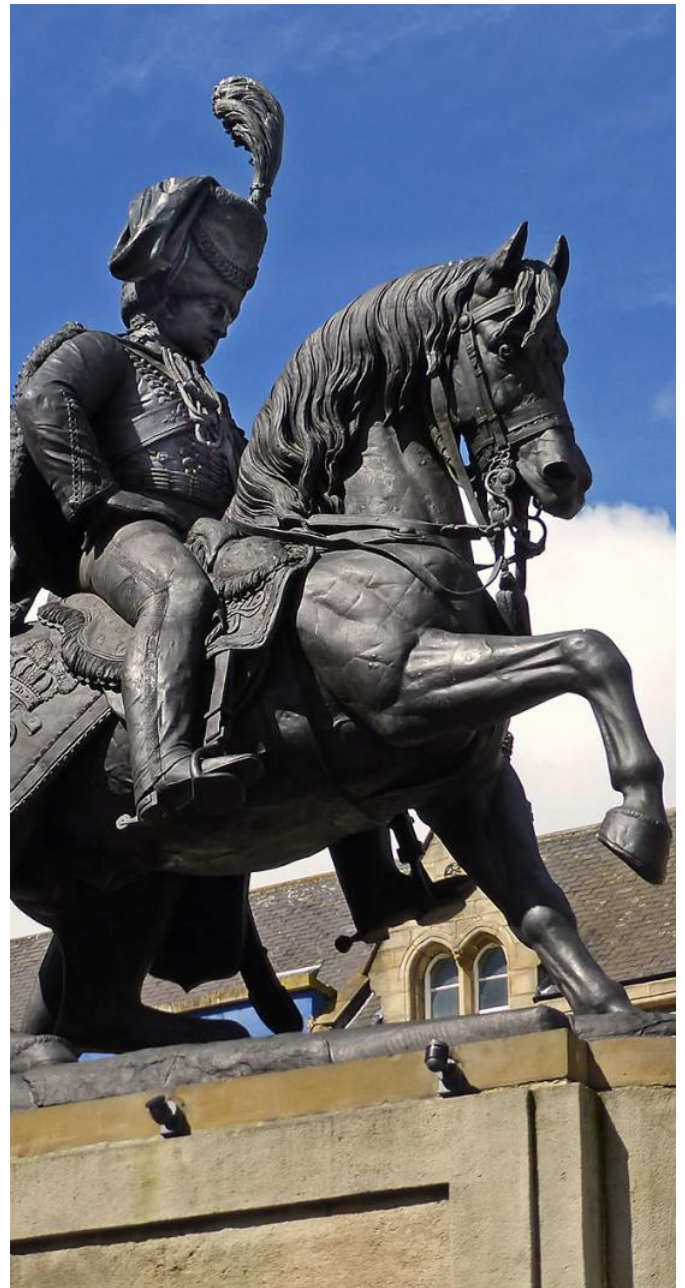
**1832** Great Reform Act and 1835 Municipal Corporations Act. These two acts together curtailed the power of the Freemen by extending the electoral franchise for general elections and local election respectively, to 'householders' those who had been living within 7 miles for at least 12 months and who owned property in the City with a rental value of £10 per year. The 1835 act prohibits admissions by gift or purchase. Town councillors were elected under the new act in 1835 and in 1836 the first mayor was elected by them. At the time of the reform act there were between 1100 and 1200 Freemen in total of whom 427 were resident and 558 lived within 7 miles, while the total population of the borough was 9269. Although the 1835 Act transferred local government from the Freemen to a council elected by the wider franchise, the freedom was maintained by the Guilds. The private property belonging to the Freemen collectively, was retained and the income was then given to support charitable causes. 1972 local government act specifically reserved the Freemen's rights.



**1986** Durham City Council, in promoting a local Bill in Parliament included a clause to clarify the provisions relating to Durham Freemen. There were around 80 Freemen of the time.

Section 8 of the Durham City Council Act restated the qualifications for admission, and lowered the age threshold from 21 to 18. Candidates over the age of 18 could apply having completed a full time apprenticeship of not less than 3 years or by patrimony being the child of a Freeman. The Act also allowed the admission of 'Gentlemen Freemen' by the 'particular decision of the Wardens'. The Freemen were given discretion to require admission of any male; this was intended to allow the Guilds to admit someone excluded by a break in the chain of heredity, or to honour someone considered deserving, this then entitled others to claim inheritance or apprenticeship freedoms in the usual way. Such freedom are on the basis of three calls on the same day. Honorary Freemen of the City do not enjoy the same privileges as ordinary Freemen.

**2009** Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act removed any restrictions entitling only men to be Freemen. 2012 saw the introduction of women Freemen, subsequently membership rose to a new high.



# Guilds and Companies



## Original 16 Guilds

- (1) Weavers & Websters (1450)
- (2) Cordwainers (1458)
- (3) Barber Surgeons, Waxmakers, Ropers & Stringers (1468)
- (4) Skinners & Glovers (1507)
- (5) Butchers (1520)
- (6) Goldsmiths, Plumbers, Pewterers, Potters, Painters, Glaziers, Tinsplate Workers(1532)
- (7) Barkers & Tanners (1547)
- (8) Drapers & Tailors (1549)
- (9) Merchants incorporating (1345), Mercers (1393), Salters (1394), Ironmongers (1464), Haberdasher(1467) (1561)
- (10) Fullers & Feltmakers (1565)
- (11) Curriers & Tallow Chandlers (1570)
- (12) Free Masons, Rough Masons, Wallers, Slaters, Paviours, Plasterers & Bricklayers (1594)
- (13) Blacksmiths, Lorimers, Locksmith, Cutlers, Bladesmiths & Girdlers (1610)
- (14) Saddlers & Upholsterers (1659)
- (15) Carpenters, Joiners, Wheelwrights, Sawyers, Coopers 1661
- (16) Dyers & Listers (1667)

# Surviving Companies

Barbers, Butchers, Cordwainers, Curriers, Drapers, Joiners, Masons, Plumbers

## Durham City Freeman Structure

The organisation currently comprises of 8 Companies - Barbers, Butchers, Cordwainers, Curriers, Drapers, Joiners, Masons and Plumbers.

### Wardens

Each Company elects a Warden to represent them.

Wardens are the executive body of the Freeman.

The Wardens appoint a chairman to manage the day-to-day administration.

The chairman is supported by the membership secretary and a general secretary.

Wardens operate within a 3 year tenure, they may seek re-election at the end of that period.

Wardens manage issues relating to the membership

### Trustees

Trustees are responsible for the stewardship of the assets of the Durham City Freeman and act as a sounding board for developments within the organisation.

### Meetings

Quarterly meetings of the following bodies take place in the Guild Hall within the Town Hall.

- (1) Guild Days Candlemas (Feb), May, Lammas (Aug) and Martinmas (Nov).
- (2) Members
- (3) Wardens
- (4) Wardens and Trustees

# Membership Criteria



Any man or woman who has attained the age of 18 years and has any of the qualifications set out below is eligible to be admitted to the Freemen of the City of Durham.

The qualifications for eligibility for Freedom of the City of Durham are:

## **Guild Servitude**

Completed service in an apprenticeship of at least three years duration in a recognised trade, or equivalent trained employment status deemed satisfactory to the Wardens of the Durham City Freemen with an employer who is a Freeman of the City of Durham.

## **Durham Servitude**

Completed service in an apprenticeship of at least three years duration in a recognised trade, or equivalent trained employment status deemed satisfactory to the Wardens of the Durham City Freemen, in one or more trades within the Durham City boundary.

## **Hereditary Freedom (Patrimony)**

He or she is the son or daughter of a Freeman of the City of Durham.

## Customary Freedom

Men and women who have attained the age of 18 years who are not otherwise qualified in accordance with the above, may be admitted as Freemen in accordance with ancient local custom or practice subject to the approval of the wardens.

All claims to Freedom of the city should be supported by sufficient documentary evidence of entitlement to be submitted for consideration by the Wardens of the Guilds meeting collectively. Following due consideration, the decision of the Wardens in respect of any claim to Freedom of the City shall be final.



The Honorary Freedom conferred by the former Durham City Council or by Durham County Council is a civic award, it is distinct and separate from the Freedom granted through the eligibility outlined above and the approval of the Wardens. The rights, duties and powers of the Durham City Freemen shall continue in accordance with the provisions of the Durham City Council Act 1985 and associated customary practice.



# Guild Hall



## Historical home of the Freemen

The Guild Hall fronting onto the Market Place was constructed in 1535 by Bishop Cuthbert Tunstall.

In 1640, the Scots occupied Durham and caused much damage, so much so that the Hall had to be rebuilt by Bishop John Cosin in 1665.

It was given a classical facade in 1754, but despite these alterations, there is no questioning the building's antiquity.

Durham's Trade Guilds met at the Guild Hall long before the city appointed its first Mayor, in 1602.

The Guilds were subject to rules and regulations and the Guilds in Durham ultimately took their power from charters confirmed by the various Bishops of Durham.

One of the harshest rules was that no Scot could be employed in the Guilds. It was a vestige of the Border troubles that long ravaged Northumberland and Durham.

Today, the Freemen of the Guilds retain privileges including the right of herbage on the Sands, the right to hold meetings in the Guild Hall, and the right to have a stall in the market free of charge.

The Guild Hall is a place of history. The oak roof is still very impressive as are the displays of historic items associated with the city's civic history. The crests of the various Guilds are displayed around the walls and, near the balcony window, stands a large wooden sea chest made in the 1600s.

Around the room, items displayed in cases include a copy of the City Charter of 1179 and the City's Seal. One glass case contains a set of brass measures that set the standard for market traders. They include corn measures, such as bushels, half bushels, pecks and gills.

Another display case holds items of silver from the 1700s, most of which was associated with the Trade Guilds. The case occupies a former doorway that was once linked to a prison cell below and used for bringing offenders swiftly into the Guild Hall, as the building served as a magistrates' court, this is signified by the Royal Coat of Arms above where the magistrates would have administered justice.

The magistrates court ceased to exist in the Guild Hall from December 1964, when the new court opened in Elvet.



# Establishing a History Group to research the Heritage of the Durham City Freemen



## Overview

In a bid to engage the general membership towards a greater involvement with the organisation, a number initiatives have taken place over the last two years, culminating in the creation of a Development Group. The Group was proactive in engaging a cohort of the membership to research the history and heritage of the Durham City Freemen to assist in the organisations future development and to raise its profile with the general public.

## Development

- In January 2016 the Development Group proposed to establish a History Group as a vehicle for engaging the membership to explore the heritage of the organisation by researching the many facets of its history since the inception of the first Guild in 1450.
- A meeting took place in February 2016 with Gary Bankhead, a part-time student of Durham University who has spent over seven years diving in the River Wear under Elvet Bridge where he discovered and recovered thousands of artefacts. Many of these objects may have been used or produced by former Freemen of the Guilds





of Durham City. From discussions emerged a proposal for a project involving a cohort of Freemen to research the history of the Guilds of Durham City.

- The aim of the History Group is to research the artefacts, culminating in the publication of a booklet that will shed light on the life and work of the Trade Guilds and Freemen of Durham City.
- During the discussions it was agreed that members of the general public, with an interest in the heritage and history Durham City would improve the dynamics and composition of the group and reinforce its establishment. It was proposed that identified members of the general public would be approached to determine their interest in joining the project.

Whilst the Freemen were addressing the issue of developing opportunities to involve its membership in exploring and uncovering aspects of it's history, Gary Bankhead was preparing the ground for a major project with Durham University that would research and catalogue the artefacts he had discovered on the bed of the River Wear. It seemed logical that the History Group should work closely with the University to assist both organisations in achieving their aims.

The History group is also working closely with and supported by the County Records Office.



# Charitable Trust



## The charitable giving arm of the Freemen

We have always felt that the general objectives of the Freemen included significant charitable aims that could be better achieved by becoming a registered charity.

On 27 January 2015 The Charity Commission approved our submission and as of that date The Durham City Freemen Charitable Trust was established as a Registered Charity.

This established a more efficient approach to our charitable giving, and enabled us to develop a coherent support strategy for the local community.

The Charitable Trust exists exclusively to facilitate support of community projects/ activities and is independent of the Freemen.

The Charitable Trust has five Members that are drawn from Durham City Freemen Trustees and Freemen, who are responsible for all aspects of its administration.



### TIN Arts

The Charitable Trust provides support through charitable donations to the community of Durham City and surrounding areas to:

- Promote education including social and physical training.
- Provide grants to worthy causes to support activities that develop skills, capacity and capabilities.

Over the past ten years the Durham City Freemen have donated over £100,000 to worthy community causes.

