LEICESTER BECOMES A CITY, 1919

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This article traces the steps by which Leicester achieved city status in 1919 having petitioned the Home Office several times since 1889. Unlike other claimants, Leicester argued its case as a restoration of city status rather than a new grant. The raising of the city’s mayor to the status of Lord Mayor was, however, a grant made separately and not until 1928.

On 10 June 1919 King George V and Queen Mary paid an official visit to Leicester. It was an emotional occasion coming as it did only six months after the end of the Great War. The streets were decorated for the occasion, church bells were rung, and war veterans in their thousands paraded in uniform.1 A week later, with the euphoria of the occasion still hanging in the air, Leicester was given the status of a city. The two events were connected, yet the story of how Leicester became a city in 1919 has never really been told, particularly the political machinations which led to the grant of city status being, technically, a restoration rather than a new grant. It was, after all, the successful conclusion to a thirty-year campaign by the town council. Why did Leicester want to be a city, and what benefits did the new status bring? Why was it so difficult to achieve the status of city? These are just some of the questions posed in this article, which traces the long struggle to achieve city status, and concludes with the slightly bizarre manner in which a separate honour – but one which many people even today think is related to city status – was achieved almost by accident when the city’s mayor was raised to the status of lord mayor in 1928.2

Until 1888 the status of city was granted in England only to those towns which were the seats or sees of Anglican bishops. This principle, which stretched back to the founding of the original dioceses in the Anglo-Saxon period, had been followed by Henry VIII when he created six new dioceses in the sixteenth century, and again by Victorian governments from 1836 onwards. There was some concern in the Home Office that this link made little sense. When the new diocese of St Albans was founded in 1877, and the town was raised to city status, one civil servant wrote on the file, ‘I don’t see why, because they have got a bishop, they should be made a City, when it is only a fourth or fifth rate market town, in point of population’.3 A city, he was arguing, should be a place of substance, not simply a town which happened to be raised in status because of a particular link with the Church of England.

1 Leicester Mercury (LM), 5–10 June 1919.
2 Leicester’s attainment of city status is passed over in virtual silence by Jack Simmons, Leicester: Past and Present, 1860–1974 (1974), and in Victoria County History, Leicestershire, IV (1954), although in fairness the Public Record Office (now The National Archives (TNA) files on which much of this article is based were closed until 1980.
3 TNA, HO 43/9439/65472.
In 1888 the Home Office changed the rules. That year it granted the title of city to Wakefield on the foundation of the new diocese with its cathedral in the town. This was to be the last such grant made more or less automatically if a town on becoming an Anglican diocesan see requested promotion. Also in 1888 – and after much internal debate and reflection – the Home Office agreed to raise Belfast to the status of a city. In 1889 it accepted a similar case for Birmingham. Neither town had an Anglican cathedral, but both could boast commercial and industrial importance. A precedent had been established.4

Leicester was the first town to recognise the significance of this effective change in the rules. It rankled among senior figures in the town that Leicester did not enjoy city status. Many English cities had, and indeed still have, no conclusive documentation of their status as cities. They rely on ‘ancient prescriptive right’ to the title, and this is accepted by the government. Politicians in Leicester believed the town had such rights, but that they had been lost at some point in the past. The case for Leicester that was put to the Home Office was based on several pieces of evidence. Around the year 690 it had reputedly become a see for the bishop of the Middle Angles, and by the early ninth century it had appeared in documents as *Legorensis civitas*, the city of Leicester. Ten bishops had made their see in Leicester before, in 874, the town was taken by the Danes and the bishopric moved to Dorchester-on-Thames in Oxfordshire (from which subsequently it moved to Lincoln). Even so, Leicester had appeared in Domesday Book as a city, and it still carried the appellation as late as 1220 when it was named as such in a return made to the Bishop of Lincoln. Subsequently the name dropped out of charter records. In the sixteenth century Henry VIII designated Leicester to be a new see when he set about dividing the enormous diocese of Lincoln, but although Oxford and Peterborough dioceses were carved out (and both see towns became cities), the Leicester bishopric did not go ahead. In Leicester in 1889, however, this long but now lost history of Leicester as a city still seemed relevant: the application for city status took the form of a request for the restoration of the ancient title, not the creation of a new city, and it was given added impetus by the creation in 1889 of a Suffragan Bishop of Leicester within the Diocese of Peterborough.5 Add to this Leicester’s growing commercial importance and the privilege of holding a separate Assize commission, which it was believed no other English town enjoyed which was not a city, and the case seemed watertight.

Discussions as to the advisability of an application for city status began early in 1889, but they were brought together at a meeting of the town council held on 28 May. The Mayor, Alderman Edward Wood, opened the meeting with a proposal that Leicester should seek a restoration of the ancient status of city. He had, he claimed, done his homework, having researched the basis for Leicester’s claim, and talked at length to the Bishop of Peterborough who was willing to lend his weight to the application. He told the corporation that,

He had also pressed the matter in another direction, and thought that if the Council felt themselves in a position to sanction a memorial being prepared they would have a reasonable hope, at any rate, that the request would be granted. (Applause) He was not in a position to say with absolute certainty that it would be granted, but he was sufficiently encouraged to ask them to sanction a proposal of that kind, and it was his intention to ask the Council to remain in committee at the close of that meeting to consider the question in detail.6

The meeting did indeed approve a memorial moved by Alderman Wood and seconded by Alderman Stafford ‘that the Town Clerk be and he is hereby authorised to affix the Common Seal to a Memorial to Her Majesty the Queen praying Her Majesty to confer the title of City on the Borough of Leicester’.7

Drawing up the memorial was one thing, but the town clerk was not certain of where it should go. He asked the Duke of Rutland (as Lord Lieutenant), whose advice was to send it direct to the prime minister. Consequently, on 8 June 1889 the town clerk sent the petition to the Marquess of Salisbury:

On behalf of the Council of this Borough I have the honour to ask your Lordship to be kind enough to present to Her Majesty the Queen in Council the enclosed petition praying Her Majesty to confer the title of City upon the Borough of Leicester.8

The argument was basically as set out by the Mayor to the Corporation on 28 May, that Leicester had been a city, that it was now an important commercial centre, and that there was a local desire to restore the lost status to the town. Although the Duke of Rutland was mistaken in his advice as to where the petition should be sent, it did finally make its way through the corridors of Whitehall from 10 Downing Street to the Home Office, where it arrived on 8 June 1889.

Unknown to Alderman Wood and his colleagues on the Leicester town council, the petition caused a stir in the Home Office. Coming as it did hard on the heels of applications for city status from Belfast and Birmingham, it looked to be a further attempt to open up city status by towns of commercial importance, in a manner which was clearly anathema in Whitehall. Belfast they could justify as having ‘had special and peculiar claims to consideration which do not apply to ordinary English towns’, and Birmingham because of ‘its great superiority in wealth and population’ which gave it ‘a primacy of its own for exceptional consideration’. Leicester was in neither league because there were ‘nine towns in England superior to Leicester in population and rateable value which at present are not cities’. Leicester had ‘no better claims to the distinction than Beverley and Nottingham’, both of which also had suffragan bishops, and certainly no better claims than large commercial towns such as Hull, Leeds, Portsmouth, Bradford, Salford and Sheffield. So, where should the line be drawn? As one civil servant noted, ‘if it is thought that having granted Birmingham there is no occasion to draw a line at the smaller towns’ the Home

6 *LM*, 29 May 1889.
7 The Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester & Rutland [ROLLR], CM1/23, 28 May 1889. Edward Wood, the mayor (1839–1917) was a boot and shoe factor, who held the mayoralty in 1888–9, 1895 and 1901. He was knighted in 1906.
8 ROLLR 22DE57/97, fos. 343, 346.
Secretary should recommend the Queen to grant the petition. This was not what the Home Office wanted to hear, and when the Home Secretary [Henry Matthews] met with Alderman Wood to discuss the case he ‘intimated the difficulties under which the Government might feel themselves in dealing with the memorial’. Matthews, having dropped as broad a hint as he could, endorsed the file on 21 June ‘I think this should be declined’. Sir Godfrey Lushington, the permanent secretary, wrote to Mayor Wood on 25 June to say that the Home Secretary had laid the petition before the Queen but was not able to advise her to grant Leicester’s wish.

The Home Office’s reply reached the Mayor on 27 June, and he reported the tidings to the town council at its next meeting on 17 July. Alderman Wood opened proceedings by telling the council that he thought it incumbent on himself to explain why, at the meeting in May, he had shown what now turned out to be misplaced confidence as to the success of an application. He added that he hoped this was not the end of the matter since,

he did not think he would be wise in asking the Council, this year (at any rate) to renew the application. But he should like to throw out the hint that applications like theirs had been made before by large towns, and had been refused in the first instance, but had succeeded on a second essay, so that he hoped that whoever was honoured with the position he now occupied in future years would not let the matter drop entirely.

The town council noted the proceedings in its minutes and moved on to other business.

Alderman Wood’s hopes were not misplaced because in 1892 the issue of city status was raised again. In February 1892 Alderman Thomas Wright, the mayor, drew up a petition setting out the case for Leicester’s promotion. The key change for Leicester since 1889 was the borough extension of 1891, by which Belgrave, Aylestone, Knighton, North Evington and Newfoundpool were brought within the town boundaries. Not only did this greatly increased the size of the town, it also gave a significant boost to population, which, largely as a result, grew from 174,000 in 1891 to 211,000 in 1901. The mayor’s memorial was submitted to the Home Office in February 1892, and local M.P. Edward De Lisle, was enlisted to add his support. Mayor Wright told him:

The people of Leicester are very strong upon this, without distinction of creed or party, and it will no doubt be conceded by some Government, as, when the people of a big town like this make up their mind, it is only a question of time. The revival of the title would not involve any serious labor; it would involve no expense, to the Government at any rate; it would gratify the wishes of a very large population and, if I may say so, do no harm to the Government.

9 LM, 18 July 1889.
10 TNA, HO 45/13276/1, 2.
11 ROLLR CM1/23.
12 LM, 18 July 1889.
13 ROLLR CM1/23, 17 July 1889.
14 Alderman Thomas Wright (1838–1905) was a solicitor in Leicester, who became an alderman in 1888, and was given the freedom of the borough in 1892 in recognition of his services promoting the extension of 1891. He was knighted in 1893, and resigned from the Corporation in 1898.
15 TNA, HO 45/13276/3.
De Lisle seems not to have been particularly moved by the plea. It was only in May that he raised the matter with Home Secretary Matthews. Following a brief discussion he sent on to the Home Secretary his copy of the mayor’s memorial, but without offering much support:

With reference to the few words of conversation you were kind enough to give me yesterday on the subject of Leicester’s aspirations to be a ‘City’, I now send you the Mayor’s letters of memorandum for your information. Personally I have no wishes on the subject, and my town of Loughborough has no desire to witness the aggrandisement of Leicester, chiefly because it is such a reservoir of radicalism which is constantly bursting and overflowing into the county.

Perhaps not surprisingly given this rather tepid support, the Home Office decided to take no further action, and closed the file on 3 June. However, Wright was not to be easily put off, and he submitted a further copy of his memorandum on 15 June 1892, this time with extracts from legal dictionaries and a request for an interview at the Home Office. Despite scepticism among the Home Office civil servants as to the point of an interview, Matthews agreed to see Wright on 20 June at the House of Commons where he told the mayor ‘that the request could not be granted at the present moment’. Even now Wright was not to be denied, and in October 1892 he led a further delegation to the Home Office to see the new Home Secretary Herbert Asquith. The mission was again fruitless.

The Leicester party clearly had no intention of giving up. In November 1900 the mayoress of Leicester wrote to the Home Office enclosing a petition addressed to the Queen and asking for restoration of the title of city ‘on behalf of the women of Leicester’. The petition went to The Queen on 23 November, but without a recommendation from the Home Secretary, so nothing further was done. The Home Office did not believe that ‘the increase of population alone is enough reason for a reconsideration of the previous decisions’. In 1902 Mr Joseph Albert Langley petitioned the Home Office asking for the restoration of the title of city as a Coronation honour, because the population in 1901 exceeded 200,000. The petition was presented to King Edward VII, partly because Leicester was the first town to apply for city status in his reign, but he endorsed previous decisions not to proceed. Yet a further claim was put forward in November 1905, largely on the grounds that the population estimate for 1904 was 228,132. In a covering letter the town clerk added:

When the former application was made I understand authoritative information was conveyed to the applicants that the granting of such favours depended largely on arithmetical calculations. I would accordingly point out that Nottingham was created a city in 1897. In 1901 the population of Nottingham was 239,743.

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16 TNA, HO 45/13276/5, 6.
17 TNA, HO 45/13276/7, 8. John Storey, the town clerk, and Sir James Whitehead MP accompanied Wright to the Home Office in October 1892. Mayor Wright seems to have taken the 1892 initiatives himself since there is nothing in the town council minutes to suggest that the Corporation was involved: ROLL R CM1/23.
18 TNA, HO 45/13276/9.
19 TNA, HO 45/13276/10. I have been unable to find out anything about Langley, and am grateful to A.W. Stevenson for checking, albeit fruitlessly, in the files of the local studies library.
I observe that His Majesty has recently conferred a similar dignity on the town of Cardiff [1905] though the population of that place in 1901 was only 164,333. I therefore very humbly venture to suggest that a like act of grace may be extended to Leicester. The title of ‘city’ is popularly regarded as carrying with it a certain accession of dignity, and the restoration to Leicester of its ancient privilege would be appreciated in the town as a mark of Royal favour.

Still Leicester was to be denied. Endorsements on the Home Office file show that the case for promotion fell down on two particular counts. First, there was the danger that if Leicester was made a city Salford, which was marginally larger, could hardly be denied the status should it apply. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the Home Office was mindful of Leicester’s standing on Anti-Vaccination: ‘the town clerk speaks of the efficient conduct of local business. He can hardly refer to proceedings under the Vaccination Act. We should ask Local Government Board how they are doing before we grant any special favour to them.’ This was a reference to the so-called ‘Leicester Method’ of handling smallpox by isolation rather than vaccination. Although by 1905 it was less of an oddity than it had been in the 1890s, with a number of deaths in the town from smallpox 1902–4 the issue of vaccination had again been widely discussed.20 Although another civil servant pointed out that if Leicester had a bishopric no one at the Home Office would object, the application was turned down.21

Still Leicester persisted, with a further application in 1907 following discussions when the Home Secretary, Herbert Gladstone, paid a visit to the town. In the application it was claimed that the population had now reached 232,000, and this made it the largest non-city in the country. But the Home Office was unmoved: as one civil servant endorsed the file, ‘at [the] HO we chiefly know Leicester as the Mecca of Anti-Vaccinationists’. What this had to do with city status was not clear, but the mayor was told that a formal application at this date would be inadvisable.22

No further application was made until 1915, by which time unbeknown to Leicester the rules had been changed in such a way as to rule out the town’s case. Edward VII had agreed in 1907, and his son and heir George V had confirmed in 1911, that applicants for city status ought to have populations of 300,000 or more. The figure was not made public by the Home Office, and Sir Maurice Levy, MP for mid-Leicestershire, did not know of this rule of thumb when he approached the Home Secretary on behalf of the would-be city:

A movement is on foot to petition His Majesty the King to confer the title and dignity of a City upon the Borough of Leicester, the promoter is Mr John Storey President of the Leicester Law Society and Borough Magistrates, 15 years a practising solicitor, previously for 20 years town clerk of Leicester, he fully realises that to achieve his object he must make out a good case to you, and therefore I promised Mr Storey that I would ask you kindly to grant him an interview.

21 TNA, HO 45/13276/11.
22 TNA, HO 45/13276/12. There is nothing in the council minutes for 1907 to suggest any corporation involvement in the application: ROLLR CM1/40.
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Storey had been town clerk at the time of the 1892 application. The Home Office turned down the request for an interview: ‘I am sorry to say that even allowing for change of circumstances since 1907 the case of Leicester falls so far outside the rules laid down by Edward VII, and approved by the present King that it would not be proper for me to make a recommendation to His Majesty’. With a population of 227,000 it was well below the threshold and, in the view of the civil servants, it had no special claims to promotion; indeed, they saw it as being behind Portsmouth in the potential pecking order.23

Leicester’s persistence finally paid off in 1919 when King George V and Queen Mary paid an official visit to the town. The visit was arranged at relatively short notice, but the King and Queen had previously planned a visit to Leicester during the war, which had been cancelled. In Leicester this was evidently seen as an opportunity to request the king to do something for the town. When the something was first expressed as a restoration of city status we do not know, but H. A. Pritchard, the town clerk, was in London on 30 May, when he visited Buckingham Palace in the morning to discuss arrangements for the royal visit, and the Home Office in the afternoon to talk about the town’s forthcoming Electricity Bill. On either, or both of these occasions he may have raised the possibility of city status being restored.24 Certainly, on his return to Leicester he immediately drafted an address for Leicester Corporation to give to the king, and he sent it to the Home Office on 31 May, suggesting that the royal visit had been part of the discussions.25

No mention of city status was made in the formal exchanges which accompanied the royal visit on 10 June 1919.26 However, the Home Office was warned before the visit, and on the advice of the Home Secretary, Edward Shortt, the king told the mayor that the title would be forthcoming. Obviously this raised awkward questions in Whitehall. Applications from Portsmouth and Plymouth, which were believed to be about the same size as Leicester, had recently been turned down, while the Home Office had been working to a rule of thumb population size of 300,000 for city status since 1911. In these circumstances it is no surprise to find the Home Secretary emphasising the ‘exceptional treatment’ that Leicester would receive, by being remade as a city, not created one for the first time. It was obviously convenient for the Home Office to accept this particular line of thinking – which it had rejected for the past thirty years – now that the king had effectively promised the title. The King signed the necessary documents on 13 June.27 The following day the Home Secretary wrote to the Mayor, Alderman Walter Lovell,28 congratulating him on the arrangements made for the royal visit, and adding:

23 TNA, HO 45/13276/13. As with earlier applications there is nothing in the corporation minutes about this application: ROLLR CM1/48.
24 ROLLR 22D57/219, Pritchard to the Earl of Cromer, 29 May 1919 and to the Secretary of the Association of Municipal Corporations, 27 May 1919.
25 ROLLR 22D57/219, Pritchard to the Home Secretary, 31 May 1919.
26 LM, 10 June 1919.
27 TNA HO 45/13276/14.
28 Walter John Lovell was a wholesale sweet confectioner who became an alderman in 1919, and took office as mayor two days before the Armistice in 1918.
I am very glad also to be able to inform you that His Majesty has been graciously pleased to approve the restoration of your Ancient Town to its former status of a city.29

Leicester ‘should never have been divested’ of the title, the Leicester Mercury informed its readers in a leader column accompanying the announcement.30 Reaction in the town seems to have been muted, perhaps because celebrations of the Royal visit were still so fresh in the mind, or possibly because no one explained the advantages conveyed by the new status. The newspaper offered only the thought that ‘rightly or wrongly a peculiar prominence is given by the denomination of city’.31 However, on 16th June church bells were rung in celebration, and some ‘shops closed early to give employees a full evening for recreation’.32 A formal response awaited the next meeting of the town council on 24 June, when the Home Secretary’s letter was minuted, but little else was said. In fact, the main item of business arising from the letter was to record the Council’s satisfaction at the way in which the royal visit had been planned and executed. No celebration of city status was suggested, or any formal commemoration.33

City status was conveyed by the issuing of letters patent, and the documentation, dated 19 July, arrived in Leicester in time to be read to the next meeting of the council on 29 July. In honour of the occasion the mayor wore his robes, and the town clerk his wig and gown. The mayor moved a resolution of thanks to the King, and the Leicester Mercury printed a picture of the Council in solemn session listening to the reading of the document.34 No formal speeches appear to have been made, and there were still no celebrations, although good housekeeping ensured that the Finance Committee was requested to consider ‘the advisability of any alterations desirable consequent upon their new status with regard to the method of assembling at Council Meetings etc’.35 Considering the effort which had gone into obtaining the status, this was all very low key. Meantime the town clerk sent the Home Secretary a copy of the formal resolution passed by the Corporation, and made arrangements to pay the fees and stamp duty expenses required by the Home Office and the Crown Office, amounting to £103 1s 6d.36 And that was it.

To the surprise and, presumably, disappointment of the mayor, the restoration of city status did not bring with it the title of lord mayor. In an attempt to find out why this was the case, he wrote to the Home Secretary on 24 June 1919 asking for an explanation. The response was curt and to the point. City status for Leicester was a re-grant of an ancient title, and since it had never enjoyed the title of lord

29 ROLLR DE 1973/20/194; The Times, 17 June 1919. Similar announcements on the same date in Daily Telegraph, Morning Post, and Daily Chronicle.
30 LM, 15 June 1919.
31 LM, 15 June 1919.
32 LM, 17 June 1919.
34 LM, 29, 30 July 1919.
36 ROLLR 22D57/222, Town Clerk to Under Secretary of State, Home Office, 28 July 1919; Ibid to Edward Shortt, Home Secretary, 29 July 1919; TNA, HO 45/13276/15–18.
mayor this could not be re-granted. Consequently, with the letters patent granting city status still being prepared, Leicester had a new campaign that it could pursue.

The title of lord mayor was not traditionally associated with city status. Until the 1890s it had been enjoyed only by the mayors of London and York. As more cities were created during the Victorian years, they generally asked for, and were eventually granted the status. Consequently Birmingham, Bradford, Hull, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield and Cardiff, all obtained lord mayors (although only Cardiff had both city status and lord mayor granted simultaneously). Two older cities, Bristol and Norwich, also had their mayors promoted.

By the late 1920s the government was finding it difficult to come up with a consistent policy on grants of lord mayoralties, and when in 1928 Portsmouth put in its third application the Home Office was determined to sort out what was increasingly becoming a messy situation. It drew up a list of potential candidates:

There are four cities (of a size comparable to Portsmouth) which have not at present Lord Mayors, viz Nottingham (268,000), Leicester (244,000) Stoke on Trent (276,000) and Salford (247,000). Nottingham has the strongest case of the four in view of its antiquity, importance and general standing. It was made a city in 1897 on the occasion of the Diamond Jubilee. The city has made several applications for a Lord Mayor, and it would be very difficult to continue to refuse, if the grant were made to Portsmouth.38

It was also noted that both Stoke and Portsmouth were ‘inclined to be dissatisfied because they were not also given Lord Mayors’, and that Leicester ‘has always been extremely jealous of Nottingham’ so that applications could be expected from Leicester, Stoke and Nottingham in the event of Portsmouth being successful. In these circumstances, the Home Office recommended – and the king accepted – that lord mayoralties should be bestowed on Nottingham, Leicester, Portsmouth and Stoke, but not on Salford.39 The king decided to make the announcement apropos of Nottingham during a speech he was due to make at the opening of the new University College building on 10 July. Arrangements were made for simultaneous announcements to be made in the other three cities.40 Then the shutters were to be pulled down: the King intimated to the Home Office that no more lord mayoralties should be granted ‘unless there was some marked change in the position’.41

These arrangements were all so well and good, but an element of farce entered into them when it came to putting them into practice. To ensure simultaneous announcements in all four cities, John Anderson, Under Secretary of State at the Home Office, wrote to the appropriate town clerks on 10 July:

I am directed by the Secretary of State to inform you that His Majesty the King upon his recommendation has been graciously pleased to command that the Chief

37 TNA, HO 45/13276/14, the mayor to Shortt, 24 June 1919, Shortt to the mayor, 25 June 1919.
38 TNA, HO 45/12904/26.
39 TNA, HO 45/12938/4, 6.
40 TNA, HO 45/12904/26; HO 45/13276/19.
41 TNA, HO 45/16147/8, 10.
The letter reached Leicester only on the morning of 11 July. Meantime Leicester’s mayor, Alderman James Thomas, was an invited guest at the University College celebrations in Nottingham on 10 July, where he presumably heard the King’s announcement of Nottingham’s lord mayoralty. He must surely have felt disappointed that he now had to congratulate the first lord mayor of Nottingham on his change of status, given that he had himself been putting out feelers designed to obtain the same title for Leicester. Alderman Thomas, the *Leicester Mercury* told its readers, ‘had been working quietly to attain that new dignity for the city ever since his election to the Mayoralty in November last’; indeed, he had said that he would in a speech at the banquet for the outgoing mayor. Obviously he had no inkling while he was in Nottingham that three other towns were also to be given lord mayors, and that a letter was in the post designed to offset any disappointment he may have been feeling to the effect that Nottingham had once again succeeded at the expense of its neighbour. In fact he got to hear of the new status only via a phone call from the chief clerk in the town hall at 8 a.m. on 11 July.

The absence of prior knowledge of the announcement ensured that 11 July 1928 was a day of mayhem in the Town Clerk’s office. The town clerk fired off letters to the editors of the *Leicester Mercury* and *Leicester Mail* informing them of the new status, and wrote directly to the Home Secretary confirming receipt of the letter of 10 July and acknowledging that ‘I feel sure the City will be indeed gratified to know this’. He even persuaded the City Treasurer to issue an immediate cheque for £57 15s 6d to cover the cost of issuing the necessary letters patent, and he wrote in person to Alderman Thomas to congratulate him on the promotion:

I am indeed pleased to be the first to address you in this way – the first holder of the Office. I have the pleasure to inform you that this morning I have received a letter from the Home Secretary to the effect that His Majesty has been pleased to grant the title of Lord Mayor to the Chief Magistrate of the City of Leicester.

The news was officially announced to the city council at its meeting on 31 July, when the Town Clerk read out the original letter of 10 July conferring his status of lord mayor, and the text of the letters patent (which were received on 25 July) was ordered to be recorded in the minutes. A motion moved by the Lord Mayor, and seconded by Alderman Sir Jonathan North, and carried unanimously:

That the Council of the City of Leicester learn with profound satisfaction that His Majesty, King George, has been pleased to grant to the Chief Magistrate for the
time being of the City of Leicester, the title of Lord Mayor, and in full meeting assembled this 31st day of July, 1928, resolve to convey to His Majesty their loyal thanks and express their grateful appreciation of the honour conferred upon the City.

The Lord Mayor also read out letters of congratulations from the Secretary of the Association of Municipal Corporations (23 July 1928) and the Clerk of Leicestershire County Council (27 July 1928). The business then moved swiftly on to other matters, again without mention of any commemoration, although the town clerk had certainly received a letter from an enterprising Birmingham jeweller, who had noted that

We were very interested to learn of the high honour conferred on your town by His Majesty the king in commanding that your chief Magistrate shall in future bear the style and title of Lord Mayor, and it has occurred to us that you may need a new Chain of Office or Jewel for wear by your Lord Mayor. We are specialists in this particular trade and we should be glad if you would allow us to submit suggestions and prices for your consideration.

Only the newspapers seem to have appreciated the significance of the title. Although the Leicester Mercury was keen to point out that the title had ‘no practical benefit beyond those of status’, it did also suggest that Leicester’s restoration to the status of a city, and its restoration too, as the seat of a bishopric in 1926, had both served to strengthen the prestige of the town, not just because of this titular distinction, ‘but because history and worthiness united to give reality to timely honours’. Leicester could now claim ‘to rank among the great towns of England’.

Leicester was still not quite finished in its search for marks of status. In September 1929 the Lord Mayor, Harry Hand, wrote to prime minister Ramsay MacDonald, asking that Leicester should have the right to use the title Right Honourable in respect of his office. He was referred to an answer given by the Home Secretary to the House of Commons in 1927 when this same issue was raised in respect of Liverpool, Bristol and a number of other cities. Liverpool had adopted the title in the 1890s, and had subsequently been told in 1927 to stop using it, and Leicester had to accept this precedent.

What did all this status seeking mean? In reality, very little. Leicester’s search, or perhaps more pertinently the search of local councillors and aldermen for some mark of standing and rank could never change the town in much more than a semi-peripheral way. No one ever seems to have explained why Leicester politicians were so keen on city status, or why a lord mayor was so much more important than a mayor, and nor was there anything much by way of celebration of these honorific positions. Since Leicester acquired in the 1920s a University College and a bishopric, it had all the trappings of a major provincial city anyway,

47 ROLLR CM1/60; TNA, HO 45/13276/20.
48 ROLLR 22D57/310, Thomas Fattorini (Birmingham) Ltd to Town Clerk, 11 July 1928.
49 LM, 11 July 1928.
50 TNA, HO 45/13276/21. Alderman Harry Hand was a joiner/shopfitter, who had become an alderman in 1924.
but beyond that there was little by way of outward show. The town clerk authorised the necessary change of title for notepaper in 1919,\textsuperscript{51} and repeated for the newspapers the stricture from the Home Office that a lord mayor was not entitled to be called Right Honourable, but nothing much more was done and even today in Leicester there is no City Street or City Square. The most notable legacy of 1919 was probably in private enterprise: when the local football team, Leicester Falcons, restarted after the war, in honour of the new status they adopted the name Leicester City.\textsuperscript{52}

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\textsuperscript{51} ROLLR 22D57/222 Town Clerk to the Magistrates Clerk 28 July 1919.
\textsuperscript{52} LM, 30 July 1919.