

Freemen of Gloucester

Background

A “Freeman” was a man who had certain rights and privileges within a city. In Gloucester this included:

- Being able to sit on the Common Council of the City.
- Preferential trading rights within Gloucester and freedom from paying local tolls.
- Grazing rights in the common meadows along the bank of the River Severn.
- Places in the almshouses in Gloucester and also in the Bluecoat Hospital (later known as Sir Thomas Rich’s school), were reserved for freemen and their families.

By the nineteenth century the material advantages of becoming a freeman had declined in importance but it did give a man extra status in Gloucester.

There were four qualifications for admission as a freeman of the city. These were:

1. By patrimony – that is as the son of a freeman.
2. After the completion of a seven-year apprenticeship to a freeman having also lived with him during this time.
3. By fine or payment – that is after the payment of a sum of money for the right to become a freeman. This method was often used by farmers who wanted to take advantage of the grazing rights on the meadows around Gloucester for which freemen were eligible. It was also used by men who married the widow of a freeman, so acquiring his business and who wanted the preferential trading rights granted to freemen.
4. By gift of the mayor and council. This was normally granted to county landowners, national figures, distinguished soldiers and sailors and other worthies.

What records are there and what information will they contain?

The main records are the Freeman’s Rolls, which list those admitted to become freemen. It gives their trade and place of abode. If his father was a freeman his name, abode and trade is given. If the freeman was an apprentice, the same information is given about his master. They cover 1653-1838.

How to Find the Records

Records relating to freemen in Gloucester are held under the reference GBR/C9. To view a full list of these items, search for this reference on the online catalogue.

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| 1565-1656 | No register survives but see minute books (GBR/B3/1 & 2). These will not give much information. |
| 1641-1838 | These registers have been transcribed in <i>Registers of Gloucester Freemen, 1641-1838</i> (BGAS, 1993). |
| 1839-to date | Freemen’s Rolls, 1 Volume - Held at Gloucester City Council – Please enquiry with Gloucester City Council. |