

**Carrick-on-Suir (1836-99)**  
**The Origins of Carrick-on-Suir Town Council.**  
**By Dr. Matthew Potter.**

Carrick-on-Suir was founded by the Normans in the thirteenth century, possibly when Matthew FitzGriffin was given the right to hold a fair there in 1247. The Medieval town consisted of a rectangular walled area on the North bank of the River Suir (situated in County Tipperary) and a suburb called Carrickbeg on the South bank (which was in County Waterford). The Medieval layout and street plan is still intact in the town centre. The Fitzgriffins ruled the town for several decades until it passed under the control of the Butlers, later Earls, Marquesses and Dukes of Ormond, later to become one of Ireland's most powerful families.

An important river port between Clonmel and Waterford, Carrick-on-Suir grew into one of Ireland's most important towns, and was later allowed to set up a system of local government. The town's earliest known charter (or written constitution) was granted in 1366 by James, 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Ormond. In Medieval Carrick, only those with property, known as burgesses, could participate in local government. Each burgess was granted a narrow strip of land known as a burgage, on which he could build his dwelling house. The burgesses met once a fortnight in a combined town council and law court called the Hundred Court to transact legal and administrative business. All of the burgesses had the right to participate in person, in contrast to the modern system, where the citizens elect representatives to act for them. Among the functions of Medieval Carrick's town government were the building and maintenance of the town walls, the local police and night watch, the law courts, crime and punishment, control of the town's economic life, including fairs and markets, refuse collection, street cleaning, and prevention of wandering animals. The building and maintenance of infrastructure, including bridges, streets, quays and public buildings was also their responsibility.

In later centuries, Carrick's local government system fell into disuse and the town did not become self-governing again until 1836. In nineteenth century Ireland, an upwardly mobile Catholic middle class consisting of prosperous shopkeepers, publicans, and professionals, (lawyers, doctors, journalists, teachers, and bureaucrats) became the ruling elite in most of the cities and towns. Naturally, they wanted to run their own affairs, and as well as campaigning for national self-determination, they also sought local self-government. In 1828, the British Government introduced the Lighting of Towns Act (1828) which provided a framework under which an urban area could elect body of town commissioners. Under its provisions, all inhabitants of houses rated at £5 or over within a town or living within one mile of it were to decide at public meeting whether or not to adopt the whole or part of the Act. If they did so, between nine and twenty-one commissioners were to be elected every three years by residents rated at £5 or over. Only those with property worth £20 or more per year were eligible to serve as commissioners.

On 12 October 1836, the Act came into force in Carrick-on-Suir and a council of twenty-one town commissioners was elected. Later the number was reduced to fifteen. Like its Medieval predecessor, Carrick's new town council was confined to a small propertied minority of the population. In 1851, the population of Carrick-on-Suir was 8,147, but of these, only 174 were allowed to vote in local elections and only nineteen were eligible to serve as town commissioners. In 1843, the town council was made up of nine merchants, three solicitors,

two doctors (one of whom was chairman), two apothecaries (pharmacists), and one each of the following: bank manager, brewer, inn-keeper, landed proprietor and miller. Although most of the town commissioners were Catholic and from the 1880s onwards, nationalist, they were still drawn from a tiny prosperous socio-economic elite. Not until 1899 was democracy introduced, when the Local Government Act of 1898 (under which county councils were established) gave the local government vote to all householders and occupants of a portion of a house and to women. In the 1870s, Carrick-on-Suir gained independence from the two counties in which it was situated and in consequence became an urban district council in 1899. In the same year, Carrickbeg was transferred from County Waterford to County Tipperary and for the first time, the whole town was under the latter's jurisdiction. In 1920, proportional representation was introduced for local elections and in the same year, Carrick-on-Suir Urban District Council declared its allegiance to Dáil Eireann during the War of Independence. In 2002, its official name was changed to Carrick-on-Suir Town Council.

Despite their elite status, Carrick-on-Suir Town Commissioners achieved a lot between 1836 and 1899. They provided gas lighting through contract with a private company, introduced street maintenance and cleaning, established a water supply (piped after 1914), and purchased the Town Hall in 1854. Later they acquired functions in other areas such as social housing, planning, the environment, and the arts. The modern Carrick-on-Suir Town Council continues to provide its citizens with representative self-government and a wide range of services.