

Pembroke Freeman Assert Their Rights

This article first appeared in *Dyfed Family History Journal*, Vol 14, No.9, pp29-30 (August 2023)

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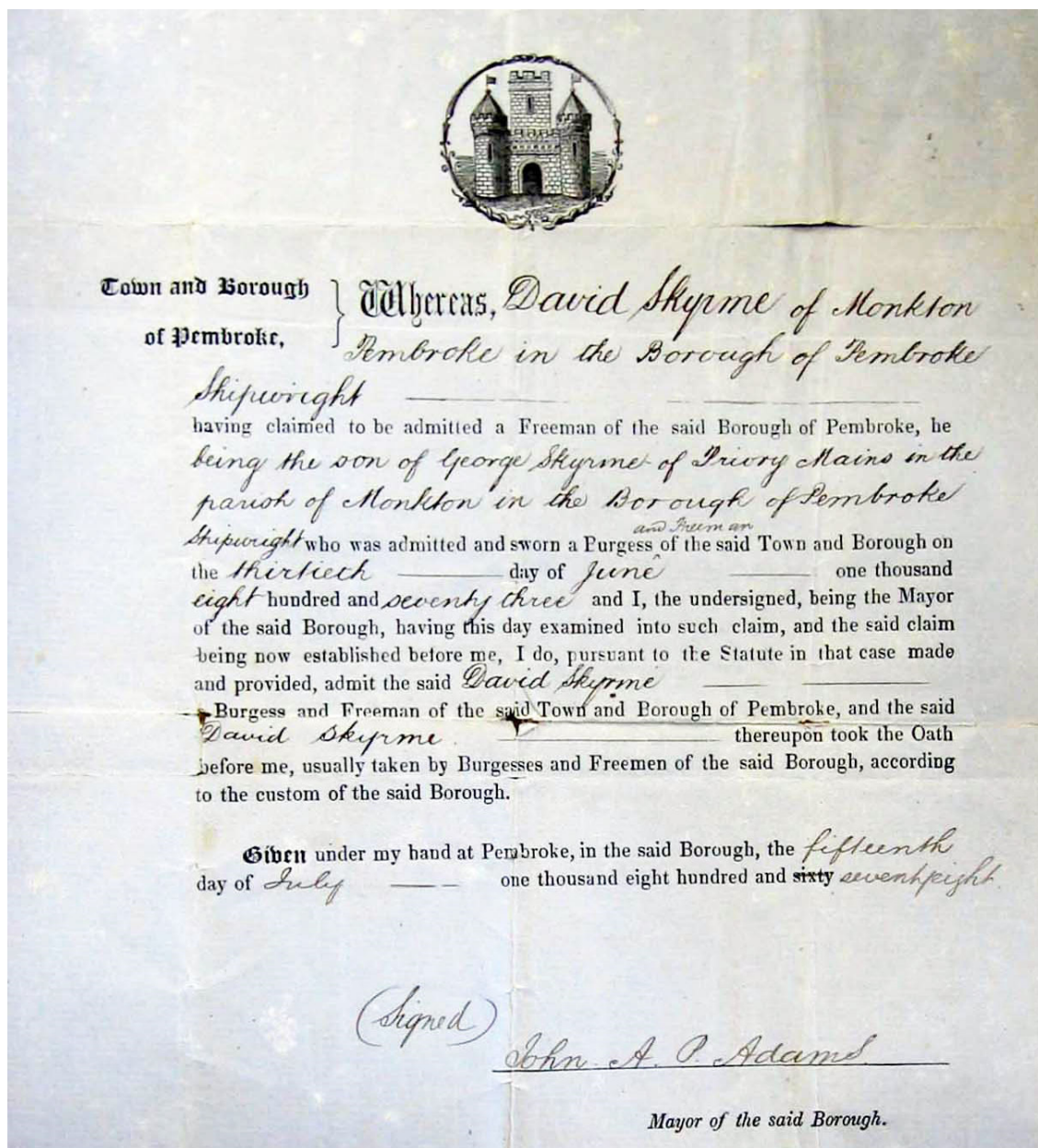
Circle 14 No.9
August 2023



DYFED FAMILY
HISTORY JOURNAL

Volume 14 Number 9
August 2023

I have in my possession a document confirming one of my great great uncles, David Skyrme, as a freeman and burgess of the Borough of Pembroke. Freeman were typically appointed after completing an apprenticeship, as a shipwright in David's case. The freemen of Pembroke had certain rights such as grazing pigs or geese in Narberth woods, or more usefully for many shipwrights - free rides on local ferries.



This got me looking into the freemen registers held at Pembrokeshire Archives looking for all those with my surname Skyrme. On delving into the life of one of these freemen, Peter Skyrme (a shipwright descendant of the Skyrmes of Llangwm) I came across this story of freemen asserting their rights.

Peter was one of a number of freemen of Pembroke who in 1876 protested about a proposal by the town council to sell some land called The Commons. This was approximately 72 acres south of the town going from near Monkton Priory in the west and towards the village of Lamphrey in the east. The freemen claimed that this land and other property was vested in the freemen by the Town Charter granted by Henry II in 1145. At a meeting convened in early February Peter seconded the motion of protest. The freemen were urged, as their colleagues in Haverfordwest had done, to find some tangible proof that "the property was vested in the freemen and was not to be filched and sold at the whim and caprice of any member of the town council". He was nominated to be on a committee to investigate this matter further and if appropriate to submit a memorial to the Secretary of State forbidding the town council to selling the property. The meeting was described as "somewhat noisy but demonstrably enthusiastic and unanimous".

An outcome of the first meeting was that the freemen would inspect their land on 1st March (appropriately St. David's Day). On that Wednesday afternoon, it was reported that upwards of 190 freemen met at the Town Hall and were then "marshalled in procession" by Peter Skyrme. With flags and banners and accompanied by a band of fife and drums, the men walked around the boundary of their land (about 72 acres in total) where at various points were boards stating "Notice - these lands are the property of the freemen of the borough of Pembroke ". I've found nothing about the ultimate result, though subsequent newspaper article indicated that questions of ownership and rights rumbled on.

In 1881 the council proposed banking and draining the Commons marsh described as "the property of the freemen, who are extremely jealous of their right to it, and certain other property of which they say they have been 'robbed'." In 1887 the freemen examined other charters (e.g. Edward IV dated 1361 and James I dated 1602) to investigate their rights. In 1888 the council proposed that the commons be drained and let out into plots, with a conciliatory tone "if the freemen agree to it". A 1909 proposal to turn the commons into a recreation ground suggested that the council owned the freehold but that the freemen had certain rights. Perhaps one of our readers knows how these tensions between council and the freemen were finally resolved.

As an interesting footnote, there is active today a Gild of Freemen of Pembroke that was reconstituted in the mid-1980s. And evidence that harmony now exists was exemplified in May 2022 when The Master of the Gild, Councillor Dennis Evans, was elected Mayor of Pembroke.

Sources: 'Meeting of Freemen', Pembrokeshire Herald and General Advertiser, 11 Feb 1876; and later articles. Also <https://www.facebook.com/FreemenOfEnglandWales/>.

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