

Eight hundred years of obscure terminology

The protocol of City Hall

By MARTIN BYRNES

ANYONE who has ever had formal dealings with the Corporation will have come across some mad-dingly obscure terminology.

To begin with, it's not the Corporation at all, but something called "The Mayor, Aldermen and Burgesses".

And even Mayor Kemmy isn't just Mayor. No, he's officially The Right Worshipful Alderman Jim Kemmy, Mayor of Limerick.

And he can throw in Admiral of the Shannon if he wants.

The terminology to do with the Corporation is pretty ancient and has fallen into obscurity with the passage of time. Of course, the more ancient it is, the more precious, so the more it is treasured and preserved.

Take the word 'corporation' itself. We all know about county councils, but why not just 'city council'? Why 'corpo-

ration'?

'Corporation' is an old word which simply means a body of people empowered under law to act as a unit. The fact that the term is applied mainly to the business world should not detract from its accuracy even today.

So what is a Burgess? Literally, it's a word which came to us from Latin via French, and just means a townsman. In fact it meant a bit more than that at varying times.

It meant a member of parliament from a town or from a university.

In most places, like Limerick, it meant a person who held land stretching from his house in the city to the town wall - a man with an extended back garden - which was called burgess-land.

And what's 'alderman' mean? Not, as would be supposed a corruption of 'elder man', implying seniority. No, because in Middle English, 'aldor' meant a chief. And the old-style aldermen were co-opted to council, and were next below mayor. Today the title is purely honorary and is taken by the person first elected in

each ward.

By the way, the stimulating debate as to who is senior alderman on Limerick Corporation which raged in the pages of our sister paper, Limerick Chronicle last year has been resolved by the local elections. As Aldermen O'Dea, Gilligan and Griffin are each on their first council, Mr Kemmy cannot be other than senior alderman. The long-time holder, Mr Pat Kennedy, though still in council, lost out to Mr Griffin, who campaigned vigorously on the water charge issue.

And what does the word 'mayor' mean? Why not just council chairman? Well, it's from the French again, meaning 'major'.

Why all the French usage? That's simple - all of the early municipalities were Norman, and they spoke French.

And why is the mayor Right Worshipful?

That's because the office of mayor used to be a judicial one, and the power of a petty justice were vested in the office holder. This could lead to corruption, and did, so it was abolished, but the terminology lived on.

And what is the protocol

associated with the Corporation?

Try organising a dinner-dance and invite the mayor and you'll find out soon enough. City Hall will send you a letter on how to address the mayor, the order of speeches, and so on. Even if Mayor Kemmy doesn't go in for all that kind of thing, nonetheless, the rules of protocol are there.

The mayor takes precedence over all other citizens except the President of the Republic, and represents the city in his person.

His is the first name called in the roll-call at the formal statutory meetings of council.

These meetings begin by the ringing of a little bell, and all members rise in their places for a silent prayer, calling God's wisdom upon their deliberations in the interests of the people of the city. After fifteen seconds or so, they seat themselves and Mr Flann O'Neill, the Assistant Town Clerk (another ancient title), intones:

"His Worship, the Mayor?", to which the mayor replies either "anseo", "here", "pre-

sent" or "yes". Not that Mr O'Neill does not call out the mayor's surname.

Then he calls the names of the other members, beginning with Ward One, in the order in which they were elected. So Alderman O'Dea is next to be called to respond, and so on (skipping Mr Kemmy, who has already responded) to Cllr Dick Sadlier, the last man to make it in Ward Four.

And there is a bank of rules about receiving deputations at these meetings (sub committees are a good deal less formal).

Standing Order 40 reads:

"Deputations shall not be received by the council unless four clear days' previous notice in writing of the intended deputation and the subject thereof shall have been delivered to the Office of the Manager: the members of the deputation shall not exceed three in number: not more than two of whom shall be at liberty to address the council, and the speaker, including the readings of the Memorial (if one is to be presented) shall not be more than ten minutes."

And here's another old word

— 'memorial'. Nothing to do with gravestones, just a term to signify one of those parchments or similar which commemorate events. Sometimes the Corporation gives them out to sportsmen and the like, sometimes gets presentations of them from visiting groups.

By the way, it takes a vote of two thirds of council to suspend any standing order - including that one.

So, at the end of all that, how does a person address the mayor?

"Mayor"!

That's it. That's the lot.

Not Mr Mayor; not Your Worship; and certainly not my Lord Mayor. There are three lords mayor in Ireland, Dublin, Belfast and Cork, and all three of those offices are virtual upstarts of only a few hundred years old compared to our noble tally.

It is a proud fact that Limerick's mayoralty is the oldest public office in the country. It may have its anachronisms, but it serves us well for all that.

Physical illiteracy - Dr Liam Dugdale

PHYSICAL illiteracy is a condition suffered by many youngsters because they have not had any proper physical education in primary school, according

to Dr Liam Dugdale, head of physical education and sport science at the university.

He was speaking at the announcement of the international congress of the

International Council for Health, Physical Education, and Recreation, which will be held at the university next week. It will attract four hundred delegates from all developed countries.

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The Docks from the air

