This article was complied from information held by Bury St Edmunds organisations and a former Town Clerk. Grateful acknowledgements are also extended to the material of: Suffolk Records Office, Margaret Statham and the former St Edmundsbury Borough Council's website.

The history of the governance of Bury St Edmunds lay in its Abbey from which considerable power was exercised and controls of land and tithes were administered. Key figures in this dominance were the Abbey's Cellarer and Sacrist.

The Cellarer was an officer whose responsibility was to ensure that the monks of the religious community were fed, and he ensured that the people of the agricultural land surrounding the town made their contribution either by materials or produce. He was also able to negotiate beneficial prices of goods sold in the town's market.

The Sacrist was another key member of the Abbey's organisation, being the collector of rents. He owned at least 250 houses and was the controller of the markets and fairs all of which raised substantial income from rent. He also administered the courts, regulated weights and measures and controlled the provision of intoxicating liquor.

It can be seen that the roles undertaken by the Cellarer and Sacrist were the forerunner of the model of modern local authorities, but life did not always function smoothly – disputes were regular and riots occasional. Throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries tensions between the Abbey and townspeople were high, the latter regarding their life as being undemocratically ruled.

Bury St Edmunds was described as being in a lawless state in 1327, a situation that lasted two years. On 15 January 1327 approximately 3,000 people gathered at the gates of the Abbey, forcibly entered the premises, manhandled the monks and looted property including the town's charters. A great desire among the rebellious townspeople was that the Borough should become incorporated, and they extorted from the Abbot a charter of incorporation but upon the restoration of law and order the charter was nullified because it had not been freely and lawfully obtained.

More riots occurred in May that year when townspeople, Franciscan friars and other clergy carried out a further assault on the Abbey and destroyed the doors of the churches of St Mary and St James. In August the situation worsened when the Abbot was kidnapped. It was not until November 1327 that the King's soldiers intervened, rounded up the perpetrators and the town was fined £14,000 for its rebelliousness, remitted to £4,000 if the townspeople behaved.

The national peasants' revolt of 1381 against the introduction of a poll tax led to further disorder in the town in June of that year. Peasants and people from the town ransacked the Abbey and the home of the King's Chief Justice, barbarically murdering the latter and one of the monks. The revolt was quelled within nine days, again resulting in the townspeople being fined.

During the fifteenth century the Guildhall Feoffment Trust was established and was allowed by law in 1472 to administer the bequests of two of its prominent members, John (known as Jankyn) Smyth and Margaret Odeham and others who subsequently gave or bequeathed large sums to the Trust. The Trustees not only used the money to provide alms to the poor but in maintaining the town's fabric for example by repairing its gates and bridges.

As part of the English Reformation, Henry VIII began the dissolution of the monasteries. In 1539, the Abbey was invaded by his followers and sacked. Without its roofs being protected, the structure o the buildings rapidly deteriorated and fell to ruin. Townspeople added to the destruction by removing stonework, recycling it for other purposes. The only buildings to survive were the churches of St Mary and St James, the Abbey Gate, Norman Tower and foundations of parts of the original Abbey.

As the seventeenth century approached, a petition for incorporation was drawn up but objections staved off the inevitable incorporation of Bury St Edmunds until 1606 when through Letters Patent this transpired. A Corporation as was formed comprising of 37 members of whom there was an Alderman, 12 Capital Burgesses and 24 Burgesses of the Common Council. Annually, the Corporation elected four Assistants from the Borough's Magistracy and the positions of Town Clerk and Recorder were created.

Between 1684 and 1688 the Corporation was governed by a new Charter which meant that the Crown had the right to nominate members and led to changes in the members being retitled the Mayor, Alderman and Burgesses of Bury St Edmunds.

The next 150 years saw many developments in the town and considerable social change. Population grew to 7,135 in 1757 and although there were many signs of affluence, poverty was equally evident. The latter half of the century saw the removal of the town gates to improve the highway access for carriages. Laws passed in 1811 empowered Improvement Commissioners to watch, pave, light and clean the streets. Gas was introduced to the town in 1830; the brewing industry, banking and shops began to prosper. In 1827 the decision was taken to build a new Cattle Market but about 300 people petitioned against its removal from the Corn Market.

Reform was very much at the heart of public feeling – 12,000 people (half of whom were classified as 'poor') attended a festival and dinner at the cricket ground.

The Municipal Corporation Act 12835 brought about significant changes to local government, not least the provision of a Council of elected members composed of a Mayor, Recorder, six Aldermen and 18 Councillors representing the three wards of the town. This was another change that was not accomplished without some degree of problem and resistance – the previous administration was deeply in debt and Alderman Abrahma Gall, wanted to sell the town's assets to relive the debt. He wrote to the Town Clerk declining to give up the maces, chain and property of the Corporation until he had the authority of Act of Parliament for doing so.

On New Year's Day 1836 the first Town Council meeting was held pursuant to the new Act and after the election of Aldermen was adjourned until the next day when Mr Francis King Eagle was elected mayor, to hold office till the November meeting of the Council. Mr Eagle was a bencher of the Middle Temple, an eminent tythe lawyer and first judge of the County Courts for Suffolk. He had been an unsuccessful candidate for Bury St Edmunds at the first election after the passing of the Reform Bill of 1832 and was described as a very active politician in the interest of 'reform', especially in local matters. He died in 1856, aged 72 years.

Traceable roots of the Town Council include a commemorative stone plaque on the gable end of a property in School Yard testifying, 'This entrance to the cattle market made by order of the Town Council August 1852 J.P. Everard Esq. Mayor'.

Further reference to the Town Council can be found beneath the 'Pillar of Salt' traffic sign on Angel Hill which was designed in 1935 by Basil Oliver, 'Architect to the Bury St Edmunds Town Council'. This is now a listed monument, and it is thought to have been the Country's first internally illuminated street sign.

The Local Government Act of 1894 set up urban and rural district Councils. This resulted in the establishment of Clare RDC, Thingoe RDC and Haverhill UDC. Parish Councils were instituted to replace the Vestries. The Urban sanitary authorities were abolished, so in Bury, its functions were transferred to the Corporation that took on the powers of an urban district council but retained the status of a borough.

Bury St Edmunds was formerly the county town and administrative centre of West Suffolk, an administrative county of England created in 1889 which survived until 1974 when it was rejoined with East Suffolk to create a Suffolk-wide administration. After the local government reorganisation in 1974 Bury ST Edmunds did not have a Town Council but the town's viewpoints were represented through the Bury St Edmunds Town Area Forum.

In 2003 across Suffolk the Council Tax was increased by around 18% on average leading to considerable public unrest. On 01 April 2003 Bury St Edmunds Town Council was inaugurated with its precept through Council Tax of £13.95 per year. Its first elections of this era took place in May of that year.

The Quadricentennial celebrations in 2006 commemorated all that had gone before in the 400 years since King James I granted the Charter of Incorporation to Bury St Edmunds in 1606. At a Civic Service and Choral Evensong held in the town's Cathedral, Lord Phillips of Sudbury gave a moving and apposite address as a guest of honour, exhorting the young people of today to participate fully in their communities towards a better and brighter future for all. Having been 'lost' in the local government reorganisation of 1974, the Town Council's Coat of Arms were re-established by the College of Arms under Royal Warrant.