

Royal Charters – a brief history

The Institute of Chartered Secretaries and Administrators (ICSA) was founded in 1891 and incorporated by Royal Charter on 4 November 1902. Its Patron is Her Majesty The Queen. A Supplemental Charter was granted in 1971.

The grant of a Royal Charter remains one of the few personal rights of The Sovereign and it is also one of the oldest. The Privy Council, which acts on behalf of The Sovereign in this connection, can be traced back to the fourteenth century with origins in Norman times. One of its most ancient functions has been the preparation of Charters. Samuel Johnson's Dictionary of the English Language published in 1828 includes in its definition of a charter:

'A Charter is a written evidence of things done between man and man. Charters are divided into charters of the king, and charters of private persons. Charters of the king are those whereby the king passeth any grant to any person or more, or to any body politick ... chartered - invested with privileges by charter' privileged.'

Over the centuries, the function of a Royal Charter has steadily changed. In medieval England, it signified royal approval by awarding some monopoly power; then it became a more accessible form of incorporation, granting a legal monopoly for business or control; finally in modern times the Charter has assumed new dignity by affording a different level of incorporation. For the past 100 years, incorporation for commercial purposes has been available under the Companies Acts. Consequently, a Charter has come to represent, for professional organisations, a distinguishing mark, acknowledging supremacy in a particular field and the ability to provide a sound public service.

There are currently around 50 chartered professional bodies, of which approximately half obtained their Charters before 1900. The Institute's appears to have been the first of this kind to be granted last century.