The history of Aberystwyth was tied up in a bootlace when George Eyre Evans began his detective work to find out about the town's past.

Eyre, a former Union Minister, came to live in Aberystwyth in 1898 and immediately set about researching its local history.

He was intrigued when told that somewhere or other were the original documents kept by the Aberystwyth Court Leet, the self-elected body of burgesses who controlled local affairs before there was ever a town council. He set out to find them.

Eventually, Evans's searches bore fruit when he came across a bundle of 111 documents tied together by a leather bootlace. He was amazed to find they were the records of the Court Leet from 1693 to 1785, with many gaps where sheets had been lost or destroyed.

In his own words, they were "dusty, torn, crumpled and unsorted" and his first task was to put them in the chronological order and to mend sheets so as to make every scrap of writing visible.

They covered a wide variety of subjects, from local women who were common scolds, to the regulation of market tolls and the unauthorised removal of the town wall stones.

The Court Leet met twice a year and the assembled burgesses made "presentments", that is to say, they declared or "presented" a particular complaint which meant something had to be done about it. They could also fine people for being a nuisance or breaking local regulations, though they did not deal with crime as such, which was the prerogative of the magistrates. In reality, the number of burgesses was controlled by the local gentry in order to secure their nominee in the Cardigan Boroughs parliamentary seat.

Eyre Evans also had in his possession the records of the Court Leet from 1807 until 1834, when it was abolished and replaced by

He was resigned to the fact that he would have to complete the book without filling the gap between 1785 and 1807 when "quite accidentally the missing bundle, which no-one had ever seen, revealed itself."

At the time, the Town Clerk was Arthur J. Hughes, a local solicitor whose job as town clerk was only part-time. He had an office in the town and in 1902 it was moved to Baker Street. When Mr. Hughes's staff were clearing out a roomful of old papers from the old offices, they found the bundle covering the period 1785 to 1807.

Poor old Evans was thrilled at the discovery of something he had sought systematically in the town, for they had not been seen by any living person known to him.

He then had to make a long list of additions which were printed as an appendix to his book. In particular, it enabled him to complete the list of Mayors in a more or less continuous run from 1659.

Evans was quite blunt about the way the unique documents had been treated. He said there had been "gross, inexcusable negligence," and pointed out that some documents copied a few years previously by David Ardwyn, headmaster of Aberystwyth, had been lost.

Clearly much of the blame attached to Mr. Arthur J. Hughes, who had been Town Clerk since 1850. After Evans's discoveries, the documents were properly bound and placed in the Town Hall safe, and are now in the National Library of Wales.

Only 390 copies of Aberystwyth and its Court Leet were produced and they are now very different to come by. Fortunately, the public library has several copies. Evans made sure all the major Welsh libraries had copies and he also sent copies to Oxford, Windsor Castle, Manchester and the Guildhall Library, London — plus one to the Royal Library in Berlin.