

HISTORY OF PARISH COUNCILS

English parishes have originated from the manors which were coterminus with the ecclesiastical areas. They originated in “an era when money was seldom used and trade an abnormal activity, when agriculture was primitive, when the countryside was nearly empty of inhabitants and largely virgin, and when no effective central authority existed to enforce daily order; the manor was simultaneously a collective farm, a unit of local administration and police and a defensive organisation. Its inhabitants were the lord and his family, his retainers, headed by the steward, and the free and unfree tenants; and they were bound to each other by a network of obligations and services”.
(Local Council Administration by Charles Arnold-Baker)

As the manorial system declined, so the influence, wealth and responsibility of the Church increased. In the Parish Church, the body of the building was the parish hall and this became the only sheltered meeting place for the inhabitants. These meetings were held under the direction of the parson for the social and administrative purposes of their religious life and came to be held in the vestry of the Churches.

In time, it was the Church and the monasteries in particular, who administered the only generally recognised system of poor relief. By 1601, however, this voluntary system had become unworkable and power was given to the Church to levy a poor rate. By the Napoleonic Wars, however, the select vestries, especially in urbanised areas, were beginning to administer huge amounts of money – in 1819 the rate levied in the aggregate exceeded £10 million a year (in real terms about a hundred times the amount precepted in 1966-67).

At the same time, the countryside was becoming transformed by inclosures and private ownership spread as commoners of the manor were compensated for their extinguished rights with small-holdings and allotments for food, stone and recreation. With these inclosure awards came the first documentation for parish administration. The Church Rate was abolished in 1868, thus reducing parish administration to a minimum.

Gladstone's government passed the Local Government Act 1894. Uproar was caused at the time by two simple principles contained in the Act. Firstly, the creation of institutions having a civil origin, status and affiliations – the Parish Meeting and the Parish Council; and secondly, the transfer of the civil functions of the older parish authorities to the new institutions. As a result the Church was excluded from formal participation in local government and the traditional functions of the parish, which had always had a 'Christian' complexion, were to be administered by laymen.

During the next 60 years, Parish Councils fell into obscurity. In 1894, the leaders of the village were the squire, the parson and the schoolmaster. This influence was derived from their traditional prestige, superior education, relative wealth and in a hierarchical society, social standing.

The difficulties of Parish Councils at this time can be highlighted by a number of factors:-

- Parish Councils began their existence without the co-operation of the influential.
- On their creation, Parish Councils obtained their revenue mainly from rates on agricultural land. In the 1870s the long decline of agriculture, which only ended with the Second World War, began thus reducing revenue. It is interesting to note that within 18 months of their creation, agricultural land was de-rated by 50% without compensation.
- Between the World Wars, various Parliaments from time to time, saw fit to give new functions to Parish Councils but at the same time, reduce their financial assets. Their spending powers were reduced (again without compensation) by further de-rating.

At the end of the Second World War and during the 1950's a variety of legislation was passed to reform the Parish Council system. In 1969 the Royal Commission Report on Local Government under the Chairmanship of Lord Redcliffe-Maude was published which proposed, among other things, that the minor or local council was to be empowered on a parochial scale to do what it pleased for it's people. The Labour Government of the day accepted the Report but was then overthrown. The following Conservative Government inherited the Report and the undertaking to reform local Government, where the improvement in the position of local Councils was taken for granted.

The passing of the Local Government Act 1972 gave Parish Councils the framework in which they exist today.

On 31st March 2002, England contained about 10,200 Parishes. These geographical units vary widely in area, population and resources, English Parish populations vary from single figures to nearly 49,000; areas from a few to nearly 100 square miles; and regular expenditure from a few pounds to £2,000,000.

If you are interested in further reading on this subject, please contact the Parish Clerk.