

BEFORE 1822: THE VESTRY

By the Tudor period, an informal system of local government had evolved, whereby each parish ran its own affairs through a meeting of the ratepayers, those who had enough property to vote and pay rates, under the chairmanship of the rector, vicar or curate. These meetings were normally held in the church vestry. In this way, the meeting itself became known as 'the Vestry'.

Although the Vestry became the governing body of every community, it was never set up by law. However, it acquired legal responsibilities during the time of Elizabeth I, particularly with the Poor Law Act of 1601. The Vestry now had to appoint two of its members as Overseers of the Poor, who would look after those who were poor but incapable of work and find work for those who were able-bodied but had no work. The Vestry would levy whatever rate was needed to carry out these duties to their fellow-parishioners. Each parish would be expected to look after its own parishioners – and not those of any other parish.

The earliest records we have in Farndon date from 200 years later, around 1800. The system was still much the same after all that time. The Vestry chose from amongst its numbers each year

2 Overseers of the Poor

2 Overseers of the Highway

A constable

2 Churchwardens (one chosen by the Rector/Curate).

The Overseers of the Poor had a lot of work to do. They had to keep careful accounts, which then had to be approved by the Justices of the Peace at Kettering. They handled large amounts of money – around £500 a year, the equivalent of something like £40,000 today. A rate would be levied on all those who qualified by the value of property they owned or rented. Then payments were made to individuals who had no other means of support; or for particular circumstances, such as births, deaths or medical needs; or to able-bodied men who had no work and were employed 'on the round', going from farmer to farmer, with their pay subsidised by the parish. The Overseers also administered the benefits of the village charities, organising free coal once a year for the poorer households.

The parish owned a number of houses, which were let at low or no cost to poorer residents and the Overseers had to see that repairs to these cottages were carried out.

The Overseers of the Highway had a more limited task but an important one. The parish was responsible for the state of the roads running through it, so the main task was ensuring drainage was satisfactory and getting gravel for the surfaces. A rate would be levied for whatever work was thought necessary. Most entries in their accounts are payments to men 'for getting gravel'.

The Constable had to have his appointment confirmed by the Justices of the Peace. His task would mainly be to keep an eye on rowdy behaviour at the pubs and possible thefts. When there was a definite crime, his job was to take the case to the Justices, who dealt with most cases at the Petty Sessions. More serious cases were sent up to the Quarter Sessions or even the Assizes.

The Churchwardens were part of the administration in a way they are not today. There was no separation between civil and church administration. So when money was needed for repairs or improvements (such as new pews), a rate was levied on all qualified ratepayers, as in the case of the roads or the welfare of the poor.

There was no District Council and no County Council. The parish was almost an independent state, with a great deal of responsibility for its own administration. There were a few occasions, however, when the Justices of the Peace had to check that accounts were in order or that suitable men were appointed constables. The only tier of authority above the parish was the Quarter Sessions. The magistrates at these sessions not only judged court cases but also gave orders for major infrastructure projects, such as the repair of bridges and issued licences to publicans. Needless to say, these magistrates were not elected and would come from the upper reaches of society.

At a national level, democracy as we know it did not exist. At **general elections**, which occurred more frequently than nowadays, those property owners or tenants entitled to vote had to go to Northampton to cast their vote. Voting was spread over a four-day period. The secret ballot did not yet exist, and a record was kept of how people voted; these Poll Books can be read today, so we know who voted for which candidates.

The notorious 'rotten boroughs' still existed, places with very few voters but entitled to elect an M.P. In this county Brackley and Higham Ferrers both had their own M.P.s. Northampton had two and Peterborough (then in Northants) had three. The whole of the rest of the county had just two M.P.s and voters could vote for one or two of the candidates, as they wished.