

FROM 1822: THE SELECT VESTRY

It's easy to imagine that in many towns and larger villages the Vestry meeting could be crowded and unwieldy. Because of this, there was a gradual change to the Select Vestry, a slimmed-down body like a cabinet, which might be able to come to decisions more easily. It was in 1822 that we find the first mention of a Select Vestry in East Farndon, in the earliest set of minutes that still survive – assuming minutes were ever taken before this date. At this first meeting, six names are given as members of the Select Vestry for that year. It is March 1831 before there is a continuous set of minutes of each meeting.

The years from 1822 to 1834 saw no changes in the parish officers elected; Overseers of the Poor, Overseers (later called Surveyors) of the Highway, Constable, Churchwardens. There was still no distinction between civil and church expenses; all ratepayers (those with property) would contribute so-much-in-the-pound towards church repairs or improvements. Payments were made to the poor when needed, the charity coal was distributed, young men sent out to apprenticeships, gravel was dug for the roads. The Parish owned houses which it let out at low rents to the poorest inhabitants and maintained. Allotments were established on parish land 'for poor labouring men'.

However, a change came with the Poor Law Reform Act of 1834. Parishes were grouped together into Unions and each Union was to have a Workhouse for the poor and destitute of all the parishes in the Union. Some 40 parishes straddling the county boundary formed the Market Harborough Union, with a central Workhouse in Harborough. The Workhouse was completed in 1836 and was where St. Luke's Hospital is now. Oversight of the running of the Workhouse was the responsibility of the Board of Guardians, one chosen by each parish.

From 1836 therefore, the Select Vestry also chose a Guardian, who would be the village's link with the Workhouse. The work of the Overseers of the Poor must gradually have shrunk, but they continued to be appointed; they still had the charities to deal with and it was many years before the parish sold off all the houses it owned. It was necessary to apply to the Board of Guardians to sell off any of these houses, as they provided a supplement to the accommodation in the Workhouse. Much of the Select Vestry's business was concerned with the sale or maintenance of these houses. The parish also acquired some land in Mowsley.

From time to time the Select Vestry made other appointments as required, such as a molecatcher or a pinyard. There was much discussion in the 1860s about the water supply at the lower end of the village, at 'the ancient watering place at the bottom of the hill', known today as The Spring.

In the 1860s the meeting was several times adjourned to the Rectory or the schoolroom, though presumably it was normally held in the church vestry. An interesting entry in the Vestry minutes in 1872 states, 'it was agreed at the request of the Revd F.M. Beaumont to give him permission to remove the gallery, he undertaking to do the necessary alterations and repairs at his own expence [sic] to the satisfaction of the Vestry'. No doubt the words 'at his own expence' clinched the argument.

As regards **General Elections** the national picture changed considerably with the Reform Act of 1832, though it probably did not affect East Farndon a great deal. 'Rotten boroughs', which had MPs although they had in some cases merely a handful of electors, were abolished. This was at least a slight step towards democracy and meant that Higham Ferrers and Brackley no longer had their own MPs. There was only a slight extension of the franchise to a wider electorate, such as some long-term tenants, so the proportion of men (only) who could vote was still small.

The county of Northamptonshire (apart from the borough of Northampton) now had 4 MPs instead of the previous 2. The county was divided into North and South constituencies, with Farndon in the north. Each half elected two MPs. This did not mean much of a change in fact, as in many elections there were only two candidates, unopposed, so there was no need to exercise the privilege of being able to vote. Elections were still held over several days and voters had to go to Northampton. Who you voted for was recorded, despite growing demands for a secret ballot.