

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local government developed out of a general expectation that the monarch and the individual landowner would provide justice. The county as a whole was subject to the authority of the unpaid Justices of the Peace appointed by the monarch from powerful landowners who at a later date could include prominent clergy. These Justices had developed from the old “Keepers of the Peace” who in 1361 were given by statute the power to try minor offenders. This system continued and under the Tudor monarch their duties increased so that they not only controlled the judicial functions of their area but also administrative matters such as licensing of alehouses, control of weights and measures, regulation of fairs and markets etc which would today be dealt with by the local authority. In the East Riding they had the House of Correction in Beverley as a deterrent to the would be transgressors.

At a local level there existed the parishes which consisted of the village itself and outlying land. The boundaries of this civil parish tended to correspond to those of the Church which the local lord provided to serve his estate. As there was a church of sorts in Middleton before the Norman Conquest it is possible that the boundaries of the ecclesiastical jurisdiction and hence the civil parish were fixed at that time.

In the parish itself there existed the Vestry. The name “Vestry” comes from the room attached to the chancel of the church where the vestments were kept and it was in this place that those prominent individuals who made decisions about village matters met. Here again the decisions of the Tudor monarchs gave more duties to the Vestry. No records have survived for the Vestry in Middleton though it may have operated in conjunction with the Manor Court, records of which exist until the early 20th century and deal with estate matters. However in common with other places it would have appointed officers to carry out the parish’s legal obligations. There were four principal posts:

Churchwardens:

These had responsibilities for the maintenance of the Parish Church and other sundry duties. This position was regarded as being an important and dignified one without burdensome duties and was relatively popular. Not so the others.

Surveyor of Highways and Overseer of the Poor:

These posts could generate considerable work and involve troublesome relations with neighbours and were consequently unpopular.

Parish Constable:

This was the least popular of all as the duties were wide and onerous and would only have appealed to the sturdiest of souls.

It was however possible to avoid these post by being an important person in the village, by naming a deputy or paying a fine into parish funds.

In addition to those officers some parishes had the service of a Field Master to deal with agricultural matters.

Alongside these there existed the Parish Clerk who was appointed for life and could receive certain fees. The names of certain Parish Clerks in Middleton are known at the dates given:

William Rudd	1770	(Parish Register)
William Hood	1805	(Parish Register)
Philip Iveson	1822	(Directory)
James Brown Letherington	1872	(Directory).

Names of Churchwardens from 1716 are given in the Glebe Terriers housed in the Borthwick Institute.

It is probable that change in this method of local administration which existed throughout the country would not occur until the Parliamentary system altered and in the latter part of the eighteenth century there was reason to believe that some reform of national government would take place and the prime minister, William Pitt the Younger was in favour of limited change. However with the advent of the French revolution in 1789 and the subsequent Napoleonic wars the establishment clamped down on all reformist notions. In the years immediately following the defeat of Napoleon in 1815 the ruling classes, anxious to retain their power and privileges in a time of post war turbulence did, if anything, tighten their grip. After much agitation and many false starts however Parliament passed the 1832 Reform Act which cautiously heralded the much more significant reforms of the second half of the century necessary in a country experiencing massive social and economic upheavals. Even in a rural backwater like the East Riding the old functions were to be taken away from the village by successive acts of Parliament.

First came a massive shake up of the old poor law in 1834. Relief which had been given at village level, with a workhouse in North Dalton was now to be administered by a paid overseer in charge of parishes grouped in a "Union" which in 1867 opened a purpose built workhouse in Driffeld. Similarly a paid overseer was appointed under the Highway Act of 1835 to supervise the maintenance of roads in grouped parishes.

Policing, as we have seen had been carried out by the unpaid parish constable and this worked in a fashion at a time when transport was primitive and the village hierarchy by knowing all its inhabitants created a situation in which itinerant lawbreakers would stand out. To aid punishment Middleton had at its disposal a set of stocks which it is said were last used in June 1854. As a last resort county authorities could call on special army units to deal with mass disorder – more often used in counties which experienced severe agricultural or industrial disturbances.

After many years of opposition by the penny pinching authorities a county police force was established in 1856 providing the area with professional officers instead of the unpaid amateurs. Major B Granville-Layard was the first Chief Constable.

By the late 1880s the government's preference for creating local boards for specific purposes without an overall controlling authority was creating administrative chaos. This was partly solved by two further Parliamentary Acts which resulted in the setting up of the East Riding County Council in 1889 and the Driffeld Rural District Council in 1894. The County Council continued local rule through the landowning classes but at the same time providing an element of democratic control which however poorly exercised at first did hold out the promise of change.

The secret ballot had been introduced in 1872 and agricultural labourers given the vote in 1884 but one East Riding landowner, Sir Charles Strickland, sceptical of his men's ability to make a rational choice told his labourers on the 17th October 1885 when a general election was approaching "if you wish to vote, vote for someone whom you know to be honest and a gentleman."

The conservative nature of the county area however did ensure that the composition of the local council retained much of its landowning character until it was replaced by the unloved Humberside County Council in 1974. It should be stressed that the county council in its early days on a miniscule budget and with restricted duties and staff was in stark contrast to the present all embracing high tech council founded in 1996 and very much a product of the post Thatcher legacy.

The Rural District which acted as a second tier brought greater local control over matters such as sanitation.

The third tier was the Parish Council which replaced the Local Government functions of the Vestry although the office of overseer was to persist with ever diminishing duties until 1925 with Arthur Dooks being the last person to fill the post. The Vestry itself was to deal solely with ecclesiastical matters.

In November 1894 the Driffield Times reported “Tuesday night will be memorable in the history of the rural parishes of the East Riding and in fact of every part of England. In the East Riding alone no less than 114 Parish Councils have been called into being and on Tuesday night in every one of the parishes entitled to elect a Parish council a public meeting of the inhabitants was held for the purpose of electing representatives from among their number to compose the Parish Council”.

In Middleton the meeting took place in the schoolroom under the Chairmanship of Edmund Dooks. As the number desiring to serve well exceeded the number of councillors allotted by law (11) an election was held in December of that year. The following is a list of those seeking election together with the number of votes polled and it shows the stiff competition of this first contest:

Arthur Brooksbank	Justice of the Peace	58	Thomas Norman	Shoemaker	24
Wm Wilson	Farmer	54	Henry Belt	Joiner	23
Wm T Hornby	Farmer	52	Wm Chance	Whiting Manufact.	22
Wm Hotham	Nurseryman & Seedsman	52	John R Moate	Rural postman	19
Wm Petch	Joiner	51	George H Brown	Farmer	17
Edmund Dooks	Joiner	48	George G Waley	Carpenter	17
Alfred E Towse	Labourer	45	James Thompson	Butcher	15
Wm Wright	Veterinary surgeon	44	George Abraham	Platelayer	13
Wm Thompson	Blacksmith	40	John Richardson	Farmer	12
Robert Wm Witty	Farmer	40	Joseph Witty	Gardener	12
David B Soanes	Grocer & Draper	31	Wm Byass	Platelayer	11
Henry D Blanchard	Rector	27	Wm H Hesslewood	Tailor	10
John Dove	Blacksmith	26	Martin H Robson	Platelayer	9
Wilsh Crowe	Gentleman	25	George Johnson	Platelayer	8
Wm R Scruton	Farmer	25	Henry P Day	Saddler	3
Henry Simpson	Roper	24	Philip J Imeson	Sexton	2

However writing 40 years later Sir Robert Ensor refers to the disappointment which set in when he says “ Many people are still alive who can remember the enthusiasm with which the first parish councils were elected, and the cruel disillusionment when they found that almost everything which they had a mandate to do was beyond their purses”.

It is significant that Colonel Brooksbank the squire, was top of the poll and perhaps surprising that he did not immediately bag the position of Chairman – that distinction went in January 1895 to Robert William Witty who scored 9 votes to the Colonel’s 2. William Wright was vice chairman and Mr A Dooks was clerk. Colonel Brooksbank was chairman for a few months in 1897 and his son Captain Brooksbank held the position from 1910 until his death in 1917. It is also interesting to note that Wiliam Petch who did much for Methodism in the village and elsewhere was amongst the successful candidates at the first election. Mr Sharp of the York Union Bank was made treasurer.

In the early days the matters discussed by the council included pits, provision of allotments, charities, pumps, lighting, guide posts and street sweeping – not much different from present concerns. Despite there being much less traffic, in 1923 Messrs G T Eastwood & D B Soanes proposed and the Parish Council agreed that the East Riding Council be asked to adopt a speed limit for motor traffic through the village not exceeding 5 miles per hour. Another familiar request made in 1912 was for more police supervision.

Other items of interest from the minutes include:

20 October 1914 – Resolved that a public meeting be held in the school room on the 27 October to discuss if any Belgian refugees should be provided for in the village

War Savings - 1917

Canvass of National Service

Effort to kill rats and sparrows to conserve food

14 June 1926 - Request to County council to use water from the village pump for the steam roller (In 1944 the Parish Council received complaints that the pond was overflowing up to the houses after heavy rain which probably lead to its reduction in size and the creation of the village green in 1953).

During the Second World War the Parish Council met in the ARP room at Manor Farm.

The work of the County Council should not be forgotten and at the Feast day in June 1939 Alderman Beachell praised the Council for providing the village with water and electricity (He also praised Neville Chamberlain and Lord Halifax for their peace efforts.)

In 1940 the Parish Council noted the provision of 10 council houses by the County Council to be named South Drive and in 1948 more houses from the same source to form Millfield Garth.

In October 1944 the Parish Council which had continued to meet in the ARP room at Manor Farm during the war considered the acquisition of a playing field for the village as a memorial to the men and women serving in the Second World War and in May 1945 they considered the final peace celebrations and the setting up of a committee to raise money for the playing field – (in 1950 the football and cricket pitches were ready for play).

The government confirmed the position of Parish Councils in 1972 and in recent years their work has considerably increased - in part because there are many more interest groups and quasi local government organisations seeking Parish involvement.

Let the last word on the significance of local government in affecting change in every day life rest with East Yorkshire's foremost novelist, Winifred Holtby, whose novel "South Riding" with its fictional local background explores tradition versus progress and idealism versus corruption with an added romantic interest. As she states in the preface:

"What fascinated me was the discovery that apparently academic and impersonal resolutions passed in a County Council were daily revolutionising the lives of those men and women whom they affected.

The complex tangle of motives prompting public decisions, the unforeseen consequences of their enactment on private lives appeared to me as part of the unseen pattern of this English landscape".