



Account of Purley on Thames

The Parish Vestry

The Background

The Vestry may be defined as the corporation of clergy and laity as the governors of a parish. In simple terms today this means the rector acting with the Parochial Church Council and since the Local Government Act of 1894 the vestry has been stripped of any Civil powers. It was not always thus.

The ancient parish vestry had a very distinct administrative role to play within the community. The two chief roles were to maintain the fabric of the church and to distribute alms to the poor and needy. In most parishes however the vestry was the only source of education and as well as teaching it acted as letter writer, solicitor and filing clerk for the whole village, usually including the lord of the manor.

In the early days the parish priest acted virtually alone, guarding his rights to tithes and other benefits. He would be assisted by laymen acting as servers, acolytes etc and there would be a sexton to dig graves and perform the manual labour around the church. These lay assistants would have little or no say in what went on, this being the domain of the bishop who would simply tell his clergy what to do. The maintenance of the church building fell chiefly upon the local patron who would enlist the help of the congregation as and when it was required. The distribution of alms was handled very simply, the money was given to a monastery or similar foundation, either directly as they acquired the patronage of the church or indirectly to the bishop. Purley for instance was required to pay 2s per annum to the Abbot of Reading and 20s to the Prior of St Edmund's College in Salisbury who acquired the patronage in the mid 14th century.

The formation of the Vestry

Gradually however almost every church acquired Churchwardens who assumed the day to day responsibilities and a clerk who acted as teacher as well as assisting the priest at services.

After the Reformation the parish vestry became more and more an integral part of the administrative machinery of the country. The dissolution of the monasteries had removed the principal means of distributing alms and the Elizabethan Poor Laws put the onus back onto the vestry. Legislation also required churches to keep registers of christenings, marriages and burials and to make regular reports on many subjects.

Initially the vestry was 'open', This is, every freeman in the parish had the right, in fact the obligation to attend meetings of the vestry. However from the end of the sixteenth century the Vestry came to consist of a small number of the dominant personalities in the parish. They were elected for life, elections taking place when one of their number either died or left the parish. This became known as the 'Select Vestry'. Select vestries were able to be founded by a simple vote of an open vestry and between 1693 and 1716 there were many attempts to do away with them and return to the open system. (ref 505)

From the church's point of view they meant that control could be retained by the Church of England and that dissenters and others could not take over parish affairs as they frequently did in towns or where the vestry was still open. In the 18th century many bishops issued faculties to form select vestries but this was in fact illegal and not within their power. (ref 505)

Parish Officers

There was a meeting of the Vestry each Easter to elect churchwardens but they also met at other times laid down by law to elect certain of the parish officers. These appointments had to be confirmed before a Justice of the Peace and it was usual for this to be done and the appointee sworn in at the next appropriate court which could be either a Court Leet or a Court Baron. These officers served for a year and there could be very severe penalties for not carrying out the duties properly so the jobs were not always sought, but often imposed with every man taking his turn. (ref 505)

For most offices the fact that a person had taken it on was taken as proof of 'settlement' and an Act of 1691 confirmed this. Thus for a relative newcomer to the parish it was a good insurance policy for him to take on an office in case he were later to fall upon hard times. (ref 505)

The Churchwardens

The office of Churchwarden is a very ancient one dating from the early years of the twelfth century. They originated from the need to administer small amounts of money earned by the church from renting land or loaning out implements which were quite separate from the glebes and tithes administered by the rector. Gradually they came to be responsible for the laities share in the repair of the fabric of the church building and to look after monies left to the church for the welfare of the poor or other charitable causes. They were required to keep accounts and report on their stewardship to the annual vestry meeting at which they were elected.

Both men and women served as churchwardens although in the last three centuries, women have not played as full a role as they did in earlier times. Only Lady Sykes who served as churchwarden around the turn of the twentieth century is recorded in rolls at Purley as a woman. The norm was two wardens; but often there were as many as four and occasionally there was only one person prepared to serve as was common for Purley between 1750 and 1900. In many churches the custom grew for the rector to appoint one and the laity the other and hence the titles vicar's warden and people's warden which appear elsewhere. This is because the rule is that the laity elects and the rector confirms the appointment and the practice came about when the two parties could not agree and so had to reach a compromise. However this never seems to have been the custom at Purley and anyway there was no difference in status once appointed. In addition it was required that the wardens were sworn in by the archdeacon at the annual presentment ceremony.

The duties of the wardens grew over the years to encompass the care of the fabric of the church and its contents, administering and raising money for the care of the poor, reporting moral crimes to the appropriate authorities and generally making sure that the incumbent did his job.

Many of the jobs were later transferred to the overseers of the poor and further duties became the province of the local authorities which were established when the powers of the Ecclesiastical and Civil parishes were separated.

The Roll of names of churchwardens for Purley goes back to the early part of the 17th century and is almost complete.

Haywards

Haywards were originally manorial officers and were concerned with regulating the affairs of the open field system. By Tudor times they had become 'Fieldmasters' or 'Field Reeves' and had occasionally subordinates such as the 'Pinder', the 'Common Keeper' or the 'Hedge Looker'. (ref 505)

Surveyors of the Road

An Act of 1555 the vestry had to meet on September 22nd to appoint a Way-Warden whose job it was to look after the roads. This office later became known as the 'Surveyor of the Road' In 1835 another Act redefined the date of appointment to make it coincide with that for the election of

Overseers. (ref 505)

A Surveyor had to be a person of substance. By an Act of 1772 this was defined as owning lands worth £10 or occupying lands worth £30. This latter figure was reduced to £20 in 1825. (ref 505)

Overseers of the Poor

The 'Overseers of the Poor' probably originated as the 'Collectors of Parochial Alms'. An Act of 1572 established the office more formally and also defined the role of the 'Supervisor of the Labour of Rogues and Vagabonds'. The great Poor Law Act of 1597 combined these two offices, and the overseers became the Executive Officers of the Vestry. The office remained until the local government reform of 1925. There were no specific qualifications save that he be a 'Substantial landowner'

Constables

Constables had been in existence since the 13th century and technically were chosen by the manor to look after law and order within a settlement or township. The Constables Act of 1842 required the vestry to appoint a constable between 27th Feb and the 24th March and this usually was made to coincide with the Easter Vestry meeting. To qualify for office a man had to occupy lands or tenements rated at £4 or more. (ref 505)

Tithing Men

A tithing was a group of ten or so men who were bound together to be responsible for each other's good behaviour. What this meant was that if one of them defaulted on a duty or obligation then the others could be made to perform or pay up.

Usually they appointed one of their number as their spokesman and he had the title of 'Tithing Man'. A further development saw this office as the representative of all the tithings in a village at the Court Leet and they became a sort of assistant constable. It is in this latter role that the lists of Tithing men for Purley have been compiled.

The Parish Clerk

The parish clerk was usually appointed for life and did most of the incumbents chores and secretarial work. He arranged baptisms, weddings and funerals, he collected fees and tithes and was responsible for educating the children of the parish. Many of his duties were later hived off to form the offices of sexton and Sunday School Superintendent.

He often performed many of the secretarial duties for the other officers such as the overseers and constables and it was not uncommon for him to also be the clerk to the lord of the manor or his steward.

For a considerable period between 1500 and 1800 it was the incumbent himself who usually performed these duties and if he didn't then it fell to the curate. Towards the end of the 18th century however a separate person was appointed to cope with the volume of work. Gradually as the responsibilities were transferred to the Unions and later to the District and Civil Parish Councils the work of the clerk was reduced to being secretary to the Parochial Church Council. In recent years the rector has had a separate secretary for one or two days a week.

The Sexton

The sexton was a man engaged by the vestry to do the labouring jobs around the church. He usually had to dig graves, clean the church, cut the grass and do all the odd jobs such as repairing pews. The office was often combined with that of verger.

In recent years this has never been a formal office, jobs like grave-digging have been done by

contractors and others such as grass cutting have been done by volunteers. In recent years Doug Fossey has done much of this work which has included building walls around the church.

The job of cleaning the church has remained a paid office and in recent years Gladys Morris has performed this role acting also as vergers for funerals and weddings and sacristan generally.

The Vergers

The office of vergers was very much one of an attendant or usher. They would escort the gentry to their seats and, where necessary, open the doors of the pews for them. They would often be responsible for ringing the church bell to summon people to the services and receiving them at the door.

They had a staff of office, called the 'virge' which was a slender wand usually with a silver or brass figure at the end. This was carried before the rector in processions, like the mace for civic occasions was carried before the mayor in a borough.

In recent years this office has virtually disappeared but many of the duties have been taken over by the sidesmen who receive people at the door, hand out hymn and service books and take the collections to the altar.

Church Briefs

Purley has had a long tradition of generosity to those less fortunate than themselves outside of the Parish and appeals meet with a generous response. This generosity was not always so spontaneous. In mediaeval times a well organised system of 'Briefs' was functioning whereby the Pope or a Bishop would issue a brief to support a particular cause and provided the mechanism for collecting money, usually via the archdeacon. All parishes were expected to pay their due share. When Pope Nicholas sent out his brief for the support of the Eighth Crusade he demanded a world wide assessment of parishes to form the basis for future payments.

Henry VIII stopped the Pope from issuing briefs in England in 1536 although bishop's briefs continued until the 17th century. Henry had been issuing his own briefs under Letters Patent since 1533 and an elaborate system of collectors was established. Briefs were used as an early substitute for insurance, thus when someone suffered an unexpected loss eg by fire or shipwreck, he could petition the King for the issue of a brief, which if authorised was printed and despatched to all the churches in the counties and towns named. The king also appointed an underwriter or undertaker to collect the money. (ref 342)

The clergy were supposed to read the brief to their congregations on Sundays. The churchwardens collected the money which was usually handed over to the archdeacon with the brief endorsed with the amount collected. The archdeacon passed these to the Clerk of Justices for the County who took his cut and sent the remainder to the undertaker or underwriter. Underwriters would have guaranteed a fixed payment to the appellant and they were able to pocket any excess. Undertakers however usually agreed to take a fixed percentage and hand over what remained whether greater or lesser than the amount requested. On occasions fees were fixed in amount but these were very unpopular with undertakers who would usually not bother to print and despatch the brief. (ref 342)

The system was very unpopular and clergy often used either not read the briefs at all or save them up and read several in one go adding an appeal for funds for the parish church at the same time. When the money did not come in a second or even a third brief might be issued listing those parishes which had already contributed. Eventually most parishes adopted an approach whereby the money was simply taken out of parish funds and handed en bloc to the archdeacon at the time of the annual visitation. The system was abolished by an Act of 1836.

The last recorded payment of briefs for Purley was made at the visitation of August 23rd 1826 when

the churchwardens paid over 13/6 for nine briefs. (refs 342, 50)

After the Restoration the Briefs and the amounts collected were listed in the parish register. There were 64 recorded for Purley between 1669 and 1683 when the recording ceased. During this time £13-0-7= was collected for such purposes as the rebuilding of St Pauls (12-0), Redemption of slaves in Turkey (£1-16-6) and for the rebuilding of the centre of Blandford Forum destroyed by fire to which Purley contributed 11d. (ref 27)

20th Century Changes

The Local Government Act of 1884 finally stripped the Vestry of its remaining Civil Powers and effected a separation between Church and State. The vestry continued as a self perpetuating oligarchy, dominated by the Squire, Major Storer. When he died in 1902 there was a vacuum which could not be filled by his daughter Leila. Robert Saunders and Charles Hodgkin of Purley Lodge soon established themselves in control of affairs and together with Lady Sykes of Westfield House, exercised a powerful lay influence for many years.

The Parochial Church Councils Act of 1921 set up Parochial Church Councils with electoral registers and proper annual elections and all the residual powers of the Vestry were transferred to it where they have remained until today.

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