

A Short History of Parish Councils

The present system of Parish Councils and Parish Meetings was established by the Local Government Act 1894, although the parishes and their functions are much older.

Originally the Lord of the Manor would hold Courts to manage the land, rotate agriculture and regulate agricultural jobs.

As the manor courts declined, the influence, wealth and responsibility of the Church increased. Inhabitants began to meet together under the parson's direction for the social and administrative purposes of their religious life. Such meetings were often held in the Vestry after which they came to be named.

In 1601, the legislators conferred upon vestries the power of levying a poor rate. The nineteenth century saw a major overhaul of the local government system, which in the 1820's was notorious for inefficiency and corruption and half a century later was notorious for inefficiency and complication. Twenty years of legislation and experiment were required to straighten it out.

The copingstone of the new edifice was the Local Government Act 1894, which took a year to pass and excited much controversy both in Parliament and outside. Gladstone's government had to deal with over eight hundred amendments.

The Act of 1894 created institutions having a civil origin, status and affiliation - the Parish Meeting and the Parish Council. It transferred 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.

All rural parishes have a Parish Meeting consisting of the local government electors for the parish. Parishes with a population of 200 or more local government electors had a separate Parish Council. Parishes with between 150 and 200 local government electors could have a Parish Council if the Parish Meeting so requested. Parishes with less than 150 local government electors may have a Parish Council if the Parish Meeting so resolves and the District (or Borough) Council so order. Rockingham falls within this latter category.

With thanks to Rockingham Parish Meeting