

Vestry Meetings

Compiled by Graham Davies (Cornwall Records Office Online), May 2013.

As parishes acquired civil responsibilities, the parish 'vestry' meeting assumed overall supervision, especially of poor relief and road maintenance. The minutes generally record ecclesiastical and secular activities of the meeting such as the appointment of parish officers, settling rates and auditing accounts.

Vestry administration was reformed by the 1818 and 1819 Vestry Acts, which attempted to regulate procedures for attendance and voting at meetings, and legalised payment of officials. However, the vestry's civil responsibilities were greatly reduced in 1834 when Poor Law Unions were set up, and the establishment in 1835 of Highway Boards removed the direct responsibility for road maintenance. Compulsory church rates were abolished in 1868 and the office of parish constable disappeared in 1872. In 1894 all the surviving civil responsibilities of the vestry meeting were transferred to Parish Councils

Overseers of the Poor

The office of overseer was created in 1572 to collect alms for the relief of paupers. The Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601 stated that two or three householders were to be overseers each year, together with (ex officio) the churchwardens. They were to collect the parish poor rates and be responsible for the relief of poverty within their parish. They were appointed by the parish Vestry Meetings, which also decided the amount of rates payable, audited the overseers' accounts and took decisions on the administration of the poor law.

The responsibilities of the overseers included payment of outdoor relief, care of the inmates of the parish poor house, and apprenticeship of pauper children. They were directly responsible to Justices of the Peace, who issued removal orders and settlement certificates and took "examinations" (sworn statements) of vagrants. Disputes between parishes were settled in The Court of Quarter Sessions.

The parish was responsible for care of the poor until the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act established Poor Law Unions.

Highway Surveyors

The 1555 Highway Act made parishes responsible for the upkeep of roads within their boundaries.

They were supervised by the Justices of the Peace, who frequently reported parishes to The Court of Quarter Sessions for not maintaining their roads. Surveyors were appointed, also known as Waywardens or Stonewardens. Their duties included viewing the roads, fixing days for statutory labour, and collecting "compositions" from parishioners (i.e. payment in lieu of labour). Their responsibilities were gradually superseded by the Turnpike Trusts and Highway Boards.

Parish Constables

Although originally manorial, the constables were appointed by the Justices of the Peace, and were responsible for the maintenance of law and order within the parish.

They attended the Justices at The Court of Quarter Sessions and executed their warrants. Their responsibilities included the enforcement of removal orders, looking after the parish stocks, supervising church attendance by recusants, and the administration of local militia. The office was abolished by the 1872 Parish Constables Act.