

Parishes - Definition

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

The parish was used as a unit both of ecclesiastical and civil government (see Parish Administration, Parish Councils, Parish Constables). Parish boundaries were established by the early middle ages and survived with little alteration until the 19th century, when a number of new parishes were created in the more populous areas.

Parish Administration

The parish became increasingly important as the main unit of local civil administration outside the boroughs in the 16th century, as the importance of manorial courts declined. In particular, the Tudors gave to the parishes considerable judicial and administrative duties, which remained more or less intact until the 19th century.

Parish Councils

Parish Councils were established by the 1893 Local Government Act to take over what civil responsibilities the vestry meeting still held. The larger parishes were to have Parish Councils, and the smaller parishes had Parish Meetings, with similar duties. These councils were to be elected by universal suffrage of the ratepayers.

In many cases, the administrative boundaries of the new 'civil' parishes were the same as the old ecclesiastical parishes, but some new civil parishes were created, and there have been a few subsequent boundary revisions and amalgamations (for details see Youngs, F C, 'Guide to the Administrative Units of England: Southern England').

Records may include minute books (some containing pre-1894 Vestry Meetings minutes), documents relating to Poor Law Unions, burial boards, wartime invasion committees, allotments, footpaths and rights of way, local celebrations, village greens, playing fields and recreation rooms.