

A VERY BRIEF HISTORY OF C19 LOCAL GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS

The traditional framework

At the start of the C19, there was nothing resembling what we would now recognise as the key institution of local governance – the elected, multi-purpose local authority. Instead local affairs were in the hands of three long-established institutions.

The **Justices of the Peace** were the over-riding form of government at county level. They had far wider powers than their present-day counterparts, dealing not just with criminal cases but with a wide range of regulatory functions, exercised through their quarterly meetings (the Quarter Sessions). Although appointed by the Crown at county level, from the propertied gentry, in practice they operated in smaller local groupings and through more frequent petty sessions; in a vast county like the West Riding, even the Quarter Sessions were held in several places. Until 1868 Huddersfield was within the Upper Agbrigg petty sessional division, while today's 'North Kirklees' areas would have been in Lower Agbrigg or Morley. These were sub-divisions – 'wapentakes' – of the West Riding; a combined Agbrigg & Morley wapentake had split into three as the population grew.

Secondly there was the **parochial system**. Nationwide, the parish had been the traditional unit of grass-roots local government, both ecclesiastical and secular, for the best part of a thousand years. But northern parishes tended to be large and for administrative purposes were divided into **townships**. These were sub-divisions of the wapentakes – 36 in Upper Agbrigg for example – and their vestry or ratepayers' meetings elected various officials, including highway surveyors and overseers of the poor. In some townships there was a further sub-division into **hamlets** – Huddersfield township, for example, had five.

Intertwined with the parishes, the country was also divided into **manors**, traditional units of land ownership going back to early medieval times. The manors of Huddersfield and Almondbury were, famously, owned by the Ramsden family. Other important manorial estates included the Dartmouth and Radcliffe estates in the Colne Valley; the Beaumont estates to the east of Huddersfield; the Saville and Thornhill estates in the north; and there were other smaller estates elsewhere. Many were sub-manors of the large Manor of Wakefield or Honour of Pontefract, which covered the area between them. In medieval times manor courts dispensed justice on many minor matters and some, including the courts leet and baron of the Ramsden estate at Almondbury, were still active in the first half of the C19, appointing constables and other minor local officials and sometimes coming into conflict with the township authorities.

Ad hoc reform

These traditional institutions were increasingly unable to cope with the strains of urbanisation in the first half of the C19, and new bodies began to emerge on an ad hoc basis to take on particular roles. A common model was a body of **Commissioners** established by Act of Parliament for a particular purpose. For example, Huddersfield had Commissioners of Lighting, Watching & Cleansing from 1820, and Waterworks Commissioners from 1827. Other groups of Reservoir Commissioners were established in the 1830s, for example at Holme [Valley] and Deanhead. All of this followed the model, established in the C18, of the **turnpike trusts**, which developed the major roads of the district from the 1750s to the 1820s.

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Importantly, under the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, the administration of poor relief was taken out of township hands and brought under **Boards of Guardians** of Poor Law Unions, comprising elected members and JPs. The Huddersfield Union corresponded to the Upper Agbrigg wapentake, minus the Saddleworth area which the latter had included; further east were the Dewsbury and Wakefield Boards.

Municipal reform

Over the centuries some important towns had become incorporated by Royal Charter as boroughs, with a governing corporation; but these were usually self-appointed, and often corruptly confused public and private business. In today's West Yorkshire, only Leeds had a corporation before 1835.

In that year the Municipal Corporations Act reformed the ancient boroughs, putting them on an elected footing (albeit with a restricted franchise), and enabled other towns to opt for **borough** status if their ratepayers agreed. This road was eventually taken by Dewsbury (1862), Huddersfield (1868), Batley (1869) and Spenborough (1955).

Before that, however, under the Public Health Acts of 1848 and 1858, townships could opt – or in some cases were required – to establish a **Local Board**, largely for sanitary purposes. Over 50 of these were established across today's 'Kirklees', often on a tiny scale, from the early 1850s; many became **Urban District Councils** in 1894; and subsequent mergers reduced the number of these to seven by 1974, when these were combined with the four Boroughs to form Kirklees Metropolitan Council. In the days of the smaller authorities, there were also often joint boards and committees for particular functions.

Non-municipal bodies

The tendency from the mid-C19 to mid-C20 was to bring ever more local functions under the aegis of elected local authorities (though arguably the reverse has applied over the last 70 years). But even in the C19 there remained important exceptions. Separate elected **School Boards** operated from 1871-1904 under the 1870 Education Act, and the poor law Boards of Guardians continued from the 1830s until 1929.

A treasure trove for researchers

Although there are gaps, especially in the pre-municipal period, a large proportion of these bodies left behind records which are now deposited with West Yorkshire Archive Service, and their catalogue can be searched at <http://catalogue.wyjs.org.uk/>. County-wide records such as those for Quarter Sessions are held at Wakefield but the 'Kirklees' bodies' records are held at the Huddersfield office. Many thousands of individuals served on these bodies over the decades and much can therefore be discovered about their roles in public life.

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