

## HILDERSHAM PARISH COUNCIL: Origins and present day role

“An Englishman’s home is his castle”, so the saying goes. If this is not literally true, it is nevertheless still the place where most people enjoy a measure of autonomy greater than in other areas of their lives, where the colour and décor of the individual rooms is their choice alone, as is the decision about how best to budget for a new cooker or three-piece suite. But, when it comes to the surroundings immediately beyond their front gate, many people might feel that they have no say in decisions such as where to place a bus shelter or a litter bin, or the appearance of a proposed new house, or how best to manage a neighbourhood recreation ground or budget for a new community building.

This is why bodies such as local councils – and, in particular, Parish Councils – have such an important role to play, giving local people a measure of control over their immediate locality.

To understand how Parish Councils, including our own Parish Council, Hildersham, came into existence, we have to go right back to the time of Domesday Book, the mediaeval era, when travel was difficult and the centres of power, regional and national, not readily accessible. This brought about a situation where villages did sometimes have meetings about community decisions, although village elders such as the priest and the Lord of the Manor would probably have had most influence on any decisions.

A continuing problem that faced local communities in these times was what to do about the poor of the parish; it appears that Hildersham’s record in this respect was not always exemplary, for, in the 1560s, its churchwardens were accused of failing to ensure that proper collections were being made for the parish poor. By the beginning of the 17th century, the situation had become somewhat more regularized. The groups of village elders had come to form ruling bodies known as Church Vestry Meetings, bodies that were eventually given the task of imposing a local tax known as the Poor Rate, which provided relief for the paupers of the parish.

One notable feature about such taxes is generally their lack of popularity with those who actually have to pay them; in the case of Hildersham, the unwelcome nature of such levies must have reached an all-time low during the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the cost of poor relief suddenly quadrupled compared with what it had been a few years previously. Doubtless there must have been even more complaints a century or so later. Church Vestry Meetings had been gradually taking on other responsibilities such as the administration of local charities and various forms of land management, and, in 1894, Gladstone’s Local Government Act resulted in the transfer of non-ecclesiastical functions to elected Parish Councils. Unfortunately for local householders, however, this meant that they now found themselves having to pay household rates to help support these Councils.

As it happened, Hildersham was judged too small to have its own Council, and had to make do with an Annual Parish Meeting until 1909, when the members of the Annual Parish Meeting finally received the powers of a Parish Council, although only for the purpose of administering parish land. As the century wore on, however, the Hildersham Parish Meeting branched out into such areas as purchasing a recreation hut (the present Village Hall), and

discussing refuse collections and water supplies. Finally, on 23rd November 1954, Hildersham Parish Council as we know it today was formally established, its first members including such names as Ned Allen, Lenny Day, and Kathleen Phillips.

Legislation in the years that followed, including the 1972 Local Government Act, has enabled local councils such as Hildersham to take responsibility for activities such as the provision of:

- Allotments
- Public entertainment, and places for such entertainment
- Places for public meetings
- Footpath lighting
- Litter bins
- Public open spaces

Parish Councils can also be responsible for the maintenance of, e.g.:

- Public open spaces (including village greens)
- Public footpaths and bridleways
- Roadside verges
- Bus shelters

Parish councils are also allowed to undertake any activity that can be described as intended to be of general benefit to the community, provided that the annual expenditure in any one year does not exceed £5.86 per local government elector in that particular parish or community. Parishes set a level for the Parish tax, or “Precept”, an annual charge collected by the District Council on behalf of the Parish. To take one historical example from Hildersham itself, in 1956 the cost of such items as rewiring the Recreation Room and clearing the ditch resulted in a precept of £29 being requested from South Cambs. Rural District Council, an amount met by a 4d. rate on the parish.

Like thousands of other Councils, Hildersham Parish Council continues to work on behalf of the village, giving the local neighbourhood a means of addressing the problems of the present and the challenges of the future. The Council is able to carry on, however, only as long as individual villagers are prepared to support it. During the village’s thousand-year history, many people, their names now lost to us, have given generously of their time and resources in order to safeguard the best interests of the neighbourhood and its longer term survival. Without continuing support, the Parish Council would cease to exist, and responsibility for administering the interests of this small community would pass to a regional council.