

## THE LONG VIEW OF PARISH RESPONSIBILITIES

There's an excellent programme on Radio 4 called The Long View. This looks at topical issues today and compares them with similar situations in the past – which could be 40 or 400 years ago. It's surprising how often we can learn lessons from history.

The current debate about a unitary authority for Bucks made me think about the long view of local authorities, especially as one option on the cards appears to be devolving more responsibility to parish councils. The forerunner to parish councils began in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Based on the ecclesiastical parish, local people were given the power to collect rates from those who could afford to pay, and to use the funds to pay for specific functions. Individuals were elected for a year to carry out these responsibilities; these tended to be the same few people on rotation.

The most important function was to care for the parish's poor and sick, which had been one of the roles of the monasteries before King Henry VIII dissolved them. Poor rates might be raised once or twice a year, sometimes less, depending on the needs of the parish and the economic situation, and one or more local men were appointed as Overseer of the Poor to administer this. Payments might cover such things as a weekly payment to someone too old to work; help to pay for nursing the seriously ill or poor women in childbirth; occasional assistance to families who were unable to make ends meet, for example with fuel or children's clothing; and arranging board and lodging and apprenticeships for orphaned children. No doubt our present parish councillors can appreciate the burden of these responsibilities on the overseers, who had to carry these out in their spare time. At least today these functions have transferred to national and county/district level.

Churchwardens were responsible for the church rate, out of which they paid for the maintenance of the church and its contents. Their funds might also be used to pay for dog whipping – ie expelling dogs which misbehaved in church during services. Sometimes payments were also made for pest control; boys, generally, received pennies for killing birds and animals regarded as vermin. These days, individual householders take responsibility for eliminating pests in house and garden, such as rats, mice and wasps. Perhaps Dorney might revive its interest in this area by collective action to deter the deer which regard our garden plants as their larder?

Another key responsibility of the parish was keeping the local roads in good repair. The Highways Surveyor collected the highways rates and organised the labour, horses and carts which householders had to provide to mend the roads. I wonder sometimes what our forebears would have thought of the state of Dorney's roads today. Might the parishioners of Dorney achieve a better result in maintaining our roads than the present county highways authority, if the budget was devolved back to us? Our parish council has certainly produced an excellent example in taking on grass verge cutting....