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The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

Vestries

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Résumé

With roots stretching back to the Middle Ages, more or less institutionalized parish bodies elected a range of officials, organized church building / maintenance, levied rates from inhabitants and dealt with various local government matters. Depending on custom, membership could be relatively inclusive ('general vestries' of all householders) or exclusive ('select vestries' of 'chief' parishioners). Meetings occurred at least annually in a range of venues, including public houses. As financial burdens rose, vestry powers and perceived abuses attracted much critical scrutiny. From the seventeenth century, English and French authorities exported the system to their American colonies.

Historical evolution

From the late Middle Ages, local ecclesiastical communities in Latin Christianity shouldered a set of canonical duties, typically relating to the building and maintenance of their parish churches and the provisions of items required for worship. Lay representatives chosen for terms of 1-2 years – referred to as churchwardens, *marguilliers*, *vitrici*, *Kirchenpfleger* and other regional terms – looked after the funds raised for these purposes as well as pious bequests and other communal resources. Their accounts and general performance were in turn supervised by annual assemblies of householders resident within the parochial boundaries as well as smaller bodies known as ‘masters’, ‘auditors’ or ‘vestries’.¹ In early modern England, where parishes acquired official local government duties, such committees became near-universal and frequently contested. Alongside religious observances, therefore, administration and politics provided further occasions for church sociability.

For England, the principal source materials are dedicated ‘vestry minutes’ surviving for the early modern period; see e.g. the editions, with helpful commentary, for the London parishes of [St Mary Colechurch](#) (1613-72) and for [SS Dionys Backchurch, Clement Danes and Botolph Aldgate](#) (from the 1690s).² Further information derives from the accounts submitted by [churchwardens](#) and [overseers](#), parish ordinances (St Stephen, Bristol, regulated its vestry as early as 1524),³ vestrymen diaries, poor relief documentation and extra-parochial records like central legislation, legal proceedings, pamphlets and satirical prints. Most secondary work on early modern parish government still draws on the Webbs’ monumental investigation from the early 1900s,⁴ which can now be supplemented with a rapidly expanding literature on poor relief⁵ as well as specialized studies of vestries in particular regional and chronological contexts.

From the 1530s and culminating in the Elizabethan poor law of 1597-1601, England’s emerging state appropriated parish infrastructure for local government purposes, including highway maintenance, the control of vermin and selected military duties. With a few exceptions (e.g. statutes of 1601 on accounting duties, 1663 regarding the exclusion of dissenters and a more concerted, if belated, reform programme known as the Sturges Bourne Acts of 1818/19 regulating the summoning of meetings, the keeping of records and the weighting of votes in line with financial contributions), however, the practicalities of implementation were left to individual communities supervised by Justices of the Peace. The whole system, essentially unaltered until 1834, was run by unpaid amateurs with funds raised from charitable donations, rents and casual income, but above all mandatory rates. Given this leeway, vestry minutes ‘may contain orders upon almost any subject under the sun’. (Tate 162) On the other hand, those who paid the locally set levies naturally monitored communal finances very closely, making each parish a kind of ‘ratepayers’ republic’ where issues like participation, integrity and accountability were often hotly debated. (Eastwood 43)

The principal bone of contention was membership. From a sociability perspective, it naturally mattered who was ‘in’ and who was ‘out’. Rather than showing a linear trend towards greater exclusivity, the situation in England varied across space and time. By the time of a survey for the City of London in the 1630s, the picture was very heterogeneous. Around 50 vestries had become select in the preceding decades (claiming custom or episcopal approval), although

their legal basis remained uncertain. Other parishes operated mixed systems (where some gatherings involved just a few parishioners and others a larger number), but no fewer than 45 still regulated *all* matters by open assemblies of all householders.⁶ Post-Restoration attempts to restrict participation to Anglicans willing to sign the Act of Uniformity were not universally successful and, after the Toleration Act of 1689, Protestant dissenters could officially participate in local government.⁷ A comparative study found ‘mixed systems’, i.e. locally specific blends of ‘democratic’ and oligarchic principles, in most places, concluding that ‘decision-making power within the parish after 1600 continued to rest with an assembly of rate-paying householders, [with] select vestries ... the exception rather than the rule’.⁸

At Pewsey in Wiltshire, for example, where half of the ratepayers listed in 1705 held a major parish office at some point between 1690-1720, ‘[t]he number of those participating in the ... vestry was also high: forty-six different lay signatures subscribed to [its] resolutions’. Even female involvement can be found. At Tempsford in Bedfordshire, Ann St John – the Lady of the Manor – attended meetings 1674-94 and took the chair when the rector was absent.⁹ In many towns and villages, therefore, vestry meetings brought a significant number of inhabitants together on a regular basis.

Concern over the right kind of regime increased after the Glorious Revolution, with parishioners as well as pamphleteers debating financial charges, (mis-)allocation of funds and possible cronyism / corruption on the one hand and mob rule on the other. No lesser figure than Daniel Defoe denounced the ‘foul and illegal Methods now taken by certain crafty and avaricious Persons’ in suburban London communities, while the author of *The Select vestry* countered that selective membership was the only way to ‘prevent the Disorder which is natural to Variety of Opinions’.¹⁰ Particularly in rapidly growing parishes like Manchester, vestry meetings engaged huge crowds in heated exchanges, members suspected of malpractice faced virulent attacks (both in person and in print) and parochial business could become severely disrupted. Such behaviour clashed with period ideals of public comportment, not just Christian charity but also fashionable notions of civility and politeness, prompting inner-communal divisions and proceedings in secular as well as ecclesiastical courts. Liverpool, in contrast, found a viable combination of annual assemblies, fixed-term executive committees and salaried officials, yet the system lacked firm legal foundations.¹¹

At St Saviour, Southwark, just south of London, related arguments spanned several generations: a select vestry received episcopal approval in 1566, survived a series of attacks (by disenfranchised ratepayers rather than a revolutionary lower sort) in the early seventeenth century but eventually fell in 1730, after which elections of officials reverted to an ‘open poll’.¹² As an eighteenth-century parish history explains:

‘For a number of years ... the affairs of this Parish were conducted by thirty persons, who claimed the privilege of representing the whole parish ...: they appointed church-wardens and au[di]tors out of their own body, and usurped the disposal of the whole of the church revenues, until the year 1730; when ... after a contest of some warmth, they resigned their power to the parish at large ... and delivered in their accounts ... There seems to have been much care taken to enter [into the vestry book] every thing relative to the abolition of a Body, who ..., there is reason to suspect, greatly misapplied the monies

Meeting occasions, sites and participants

In terms of frequency, the minimum was an annual gathering around Easter, but by the late 1700s – when poor relief expenses grew particularly strongly – many vestries met monthly. (Eastwood 43) Apart from customary areas in church, venues included public houses, with associated hospitality costs causing further concern. At St Lawrence, Winchester, where new officers were chosen at the White Hart on 4 April 1766, expenses of over £7 included ‘A Ham, Fowls, quarter of Lamb, Salets, Appel Pyes, Bread Butter and Chees ..., Beer ..., Punch, [a] Dozn and one Bottles of Wine [and] Tobacco’, not to mention 8 broken glasses (Fig. 1; Tate 173). As this case and the featured print illustrate, such lavish provision for selective parties at inns and taverns – often described as ‘devil’s altars’ – contrasted both with the deprivations of the resident poor and the inclusive sacrament of the Eucharist administered (in theory) to all local members of the Anglican community in the house of God. It was also a striking departure from the medieval precedent of [church ales](#), where women of the parish had brewed large supplies of fermented beverages for general sale on customary occasions such as summer feasts or saints days. Specially appointed wardens often paid for minstrels and other entertainments with a view to maximizing the proceeds for the communal purse. Everybody from near and far had been welcome to take part in these revels, usually very lively affairs which post-Reformation clergymen and civic authorities of a ‘Puritan’ persuasion increasingly frowned upon.



Fig. 1: Laurie & Whittle, 'A Vestry Dinner', 21 April 1795, The British Museum, 518692001, ©The Trustees of the British Museum. In this satirical print, six members of a parish vestry enjoy a lavish dinner, while a thin man holding a paper inscribed 'Spare me a Bit your Worships' is pushed back by a beadle.

Exclusive gatherings also increased the risk of shady deals and inequitable decisions. On 24 March 1763, the diarist and parish official Thomas Turner from East Hoathly (Sussex) recorded his embarrassment after a vestry meeting at

'Jones's [alehouse] to make a poor rate [with Mr. Porter, the rector, and six other members present, i.e. a small group of senior inhabitants]. We stayed till near 1 o'clock quarrelling and bickering about nothing and in the end hardly did any business ... [How] do I blush to say what artifice and deceit ... was used by some (who would think it cruel and unjust to be called dishonest) to conceal their [true assets] ... I ... look upon that man, be him who will, that endeavours to evade the payment of his just share of taxes to be ... withholding from the poor what is their just right, and above all sinning

against a positive command of our Saviour of doing to others as we would be done unto ... ‘

On 10 April 1765, in contrast, Turner ‘went to Mr. Joseph Burges’s [landlord of the King’s Head], where there was a public vestry holden for to settle the yearly accounts of the overseers’.¹⁴ East Hoathly clearly operated one of the ‘mixed’ systems encountered above. In terms of sociability regimes, this meant that a relatively large proportion of parishioners were able to participate in annual audit meetings (to review how their financial contributions had been used), but not in the day-to-day running of communal affairs, which formed the prerogative of a more circumscribed group.

By the 1820s, based on his own negative experiences at Helpston in Northamptonshire, poet-pauper John Clare coined the satirical phrase ‘parish state’ for what he saw as a system serving the class interests of an (inadequate) ratepayer elite:

‘Churchwardens Constables and Overseers
Makes up the round of Commons and of Peers
With learning just enough to sign a name
And skill sufficient the parish rate to frame
And cunning deep enough the poor to cheat
This learned body for debatings meet.’¹⁵

Beyond England

Similar parish bodies operated in other regional contexts. In and around Dublin, Anglican vestries ran two parallel strands: Protestants only attended the Easter meetings held for the election of churchwardens, while members of the Catholic majority participated in some local government business.¹⁶ Across the Atlantic, the vestry-equivalent of the *fabrique* acquired similar duties in New France, where it replaced the feudal *seigneurie* as the main unit of organization well into the period of British rule.¹⁷ When hundreds of Québécois petitioned the House of Commons for improvements to their constitution in 1784, they appeared by parishes, thus testifying to a universally high degree of communal organization in the province (Fig. 2).



Figure 2: List of signatories – including a *seigneur*, notary and several military officers – arranged by parishes in *Petitions from the Old and New Subjects, Inhabitants of the Province of Quebec, 1790*, p. 40-41. Reproduced with kind permission from a copy kept in Rare Books and Special Collections, McGill University Library, Montreal (OCTAVO 12229).

Further south along the American coast, small pools of chief inhabitants ran the vestries in Maryland and Virginia. Here again, the Anglican church relied on mandatory levies, albeit this time the respective units were pounds of tobacco!¹⁸ A purpose-built [vestry house from 1766](#) survives at St George's, Harford County/MD), while the proceedings of meetings covered familiar ground. In the vestry minutes of St Helena, South Carolina, we find the usual mix of construction expenses, purchases of church ornaments and elections of officials (with quite a few refusals to serve), supplemented by a protracted lay campaign to get rid of an unpopular minister in the 1750s.¹⁹

Overall, vestries provided 'political' occasions for a wide spectrum of parish sociability in the long eighteenth century. While heterogeneous in their constitutions and subject to critical scrutiny, these powerful bodies afforded relatively humble parishioners a substantial say in local affairs.

1. For early developments in England see Beat Kümin, *The Shaping of a Community: The Rise & Reformation of the English Parish c.1400-1560* (London: Ashgate, 1996), esp. chapters 2, 6.
 2. An early set starting in 1542 is documented at Addlethorpe (Lincolnshire): William E. Tate, *The Parish Chest: A Study of the Records of Parochial Administration in England*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 16.
 3. F. F. Fox, 'Regulations of the Vestry of St. Stephen in 1524', *Proceedings of the Clifton Antiquarian Club* (vol. 1, 1884-88), p. 193-206.
 4. Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *English Local Government*, vol. 1: *The Parish and the County* [first published: 1906] (Hamden, Conn., 1963); a more recent survey in David Eastwood, *Government and Community in the English Provinces, 1700-1870* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997).
 5. See esp. Steve Hindle, *On the Parish: The Micropolitics of Poor Relief in Rural England 1550-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), Steven King, *Sickness, Welfare and the English Poor 1750-1834* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), Brodie Waddell, 'The rise of the parish welfare state in England, c.1600-1800', *Past & Present* (vol. 253, n°1, 2021), p. 151-194, and Peter Collinge and Louise Falcini (eds.), *Providing for the Poor: The Old Poor Law 1750-1834* (London: University of London Press, 2022).
 6. Julia F. Merritt, 'Contested Legitimacy and the Ambiguous Rise of Vestries in Early Modern London', *Historical Journal* (vol. 54, 2011), p. 25-45. The 1636 survey is Lambeth Palace Library, Carte Miscellanea, vol. vii.
 7. For ensuing local tensions see Carys Brown, *Friends, Neighbours, Sinners: Religious Difference and English Society 1689-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), p. 79-82.
 8. Paul Seaward, 'Gilbert Sheldon, the London vestries and the defense of the Church', in T. Harris et al. (eds.), *The Politics of Religion in Restoration England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 49-73; Brian Chapman Dudley, "'The Constitution of This Realm": Political Decision-Making, Office-holding, and Religious Change in England's Parishes, 1559-1700' (PhD University of Virginia, 2012), p. 92 (quote).
 9. Donald A. Spaeth, *The Church in an Age of Danger: Parsons and Parishioners, 1660-1740* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 100 (Pewsey); Tate, *Parish Chest*, p. 173 (Tempsford).
 10. Daniel Defoe, *Parochial Tyranny: or, Select Vestries become the Plague of the People* (London: Printed for the use of those Parishes that find themselves Oppres'd by unjust Governors, 1719), p. 1; *The Select vestry justified* (London: J. Bouquet, 1754), p. 21.
 11. Mark Knights, 'The ambiguities and vagaries of popular control: Trust and parochial corruption in early modern England', in John Sabapathy and María Ángeles Martín Romera (eds.), *Popular Control*, special issue of *Journal of Social History* (forthcoming, c. 2023); S. and B. Webb, *English Local Government*, vol. 1, Book 1 (includes a discussion of Liverpool).
 12. The disputes are analyzed in Chapman Dudley, 'Decision-Making', p. 98-120.
 13. Matthew Concanen and Aaron Morgan, *The History and Antiquities of the Parish of St Saviour's Southwark (Deptford-Bridge, 1795)*, p. 168-169.
 14. David Vaisey (ed.), *The Diary of Thomas Turner 1754-65* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 267-268, 318.
 15. *The Parish: A Satire*, ed. Eric Robinson (Harmondsworth: Viking, 1985), p. 63.
 16. Maighr  ad N   Mhurchadha (ed.), *The Vestry Records of the United Parishes of Finglas, St Margaret's, Artane and the Ward, 1657-1758* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007), p. 15, 18.
 17. Frank Albert Abbott, *The Body or the Soul? Religion and Culture in a Quebec Parish, St-Joseph-de-Beauce, 1736-1901* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016), p. 37.
 18. See the studies by Gerald E. Hartdagan and William H. Siler under 'further reading'.
 19. A. S. Salley Jr. (ed.), *Minutes of the Vestry of St. Helena's Parish, South Carolina 1726-1812*, 2nd ed. (Columbia, 1958), p. 31., 92ff, 130, 141, 186.
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[Select Vestries \(1719\)](#)