

VILLAGE HISTORY LESSON PART 8

We complain about potholes. Well, so did our Tudor ancestors. One of the first Acts of Parliament to impinge directly on the village was the Highways Statute of 1555. In Easter week every parish had to elect "two honest persons" to serve as the Surveyors of Highways and be responsible for the upkeep of those highways within parish boundaries that ran to market towns. Before Harewood Bridge was built (1729) this probably just meant the roads to Knaresborough, Wetherby and the ford over River Wharfe at Netherby.

The Surveyors would announce when maintenance work was to be carried out and for four days the whole parish was to work on the highways. Every person keeping ploughland had to provide a cart or wain equipped for the work and two able-bodied men. Every other cottager and person free to labour¹ was to send themselves or a substitute able-bodied labourer to work for the four days, on a penalty of 12*d* per day apiece. All labourers had to provide their own equipment and work for eight hours each day upon the roads.

Care of the poor and sick was first formalised in 1535: it was laid down that there should be relief for the "impotent," work for the able-bodied, apprenticeships for the children and the idle whipped. Who do we know in the latter category? These activities were at first financed by voluntary alms, until in 1601 the Poor Law for the first time placed responsibility firmly on the parish to raise the funds needed by collecting the rate, with fines for recusants (of whom there were two in Kirkby Overblow).

At this time the church vestry meeting provided the occasion for appointing the Surveyors, constable and overseers of the poor as well as levying the highway rate. These parish officials submitted their accounts which were presented to magistrates to be "allowed". So this is the origin of the Parish Precept that you see added every year to your Council Tax bill. And just try being a recusant for that.

This system of local government survived till Victorian times when the provision of community services accelerated with County Councils created in 1888 and the Parish Council in 1895.

Next time: punishment and riot..

Part 7 quiz question: where was the old smithy? Unsurprisingly, behind Forge Cottage just down from the school.

Part 8 quiz question: if you were arrested for being drunk and disorderly outside the Shoulder of Mutton, where were you taken?