

Local Government since 1834

Between 1834 and 1894 local government at parish level was gradually reformed; during the same period municipal corporations were also modernised; and in 1889 county councils (with separate county borough councils in large towns) took over most of the administrative work of the court of quarter sessions. The changes were piecemeal and conservative in approach, so that the traditional units such as counties, boroughs and parishes survived, even if their powers and duties were altered.

The first and most important change came with the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, which divided England and Wales into about 630 poor law unions. These were groups of parishes, in each of which a workhouse was to be built. The unions did not respect county boundaries but grouped parishes around their nearest market town. Thus in north-east Derbyshire most of the old hundred of Scarsdale was put into a union based on Chesterfield, but parishes which looked in other directions were allotted to unions whose workhouses were in Sheffield, Worksop and Mansfield. In Derbyshire, as in other counties where the poor law had been administered through townships rather than parishes, unions were made up of the smaller units, which henceforth were often called 'civil parishes' or 'poor law parishes'. Occasionally townships in the same parish might be put in different unions, as happened

in Bolsover, where Bolsover township became part of Chesterfield union but Glapwell was put in Mansfield union.

The unions, with their elected 'guardians' (the equivalent of modern councillors), salaried officers, regular minuted meetings, audited accounts and close control from central government, became the prototype for all later local authorities. The unions were also given a range of additional duties, including the registration of birth, marriage and death and responsibility for public health in rural areas not served by other bodies.

These 'other bodies' were elected boards established under either the Public Health Act of 1848, which was adopted only by a limited number of large towns, or the Local Government Amendment Act of 1858, which was much more widely adopted. Local boards provided a limited range of public health services, such as drainage, sewerage and building control. In the 1860s there was also progress towards establishing elected highway boards in place of the old parish surveyors.

Between 1871 and 1875 three Acts went some way to rationalising the system. Local boards became known as urban sanitary authorities; elsewhere the poor law guardians remained responsible for public health but sat separately as a rural sanitary authority. At the centre the Local Government Board, whose president sat in



Figure A Members and officers of Bolsover urban district council, photographed in the 1920s or 1930s.

Parliament, supervised the local authorities responsible for both poor law and public health. After 1871 new urban sanitary districts were created as communities grew: thus in 1893 the ratepayers of Bolsover (the township, not the parish) voted to establish a board for their town.

In 1894 the sanitary authorities were renamed urban and rural district councils. Rural sanitary areas were divided along county boundaries, so that where a union included parishes in more than one county, each group of parishes became a separate rural district. It was in this way that Clowne and Blackwell rural districts came into existence, made up of the Derbyshire parishes of two Nottinghamshire unions. Also in 1894 elected parish councils were set up in rural parishes with a population of over 300; all parishes acquired parish meetings with very limited powers. The system was modified in the 1930s when boundaries were reviewed and some small districts and parishes abolished. It was at this time that Bolsover UDC lost its eastern ward to Blackwell RDC.

More radical reform was delayed by the Second World War and a long debate as to how best to organise local government. Eventually, in 1972 an Act grouped urban and rural districts into larger units (many of which chose to be known as 'boroughs'), leaving only three councils in north-east Derbyshire after 1974: Chesterfield, North East Derbyshire and Bolsover, the latter including the old UDC and Clowne and Blackwell RDCs.

Meanwhile, elected county councils were established in 1889 and large towns were made county boroughs, in which a single council was responsible

for all services. Judged a success from the start, the counties took over schools under an Act of 1902, replacing the boards serving individual parishes set up from 1870 onwards. Derbyshire quickly emerged as an excellent local education authority, tackling the very different problems of the rural west and the industrial east with sustained vigour. This is illustrated in Bolsover by the campaign of building after 1903 and the reorganisation of the senior schools in the 1930s. This tradition of a progressive authority served by outstanding officers was maintained after the 1944 Education Act greatly widened opportunities for those county and county borough councils that had the wit to seize them.

The second major change came in 1930, when the poor law unions were abolished and the guardians' powers and duties transferred to county and county borough councils. Although hospitals were removed from local authority control when the National Health Service was set up in 1948, the work that remained grew greatly in importance, especially after 1970, so that today most people, if asked what their county council does, would probably name education and social services first.

Derbyshire, like most shire counties, was not greatly affected by the Local Government Act of 1972, apart from losing some planning powers to district councils. A more fundamental change since then has been the expansion of the regional offices of central government and the channelling of public money, for example for regeneration in the former Derbyshire coalfield, by a route that includes Brussels and Nottingham as well as Whitehall and Matlock.



Figure B Photograph of the headquarters of Bolsover District Council today. The original house on the site (Sherwood Lodge) stands to the left of a large extension opened in 1994.