

Five hundred years ago, the church was central to the life of the nation. The building dominated each village or town, and the organisation was responsible for most aspects of day-to-day life. In return, tithes, rates and fees were paid to the parish at a time when government taxes were rare and unpopular.

In the Middle Ages, most community meetings took place in the vestry; prominent yeomen or tradesmen were annually elected as churchwardens, sidesmen, overseers and surveyors, while the parish employed constables, a clerk and a sexton. The elected posts were mainly unpaid and were responsible not only for the upkeep of the church but for looking after the poor, for the allocation of open-field furlongs and commons grazing to farmers, for the building and maintenance of bridges and highways, and for law and order. Church courts were held in the nave of parish churches, hearing cases not only of religious observance but of morality among the community, especially sexual conduct.

The vicar was often the only literate member of the community and was usually the man who wrote wills and saw to their execution. Any schooling of children was probably conducted by the clergy, in the porch or transept of the church. Every working person paid tithes to the church, which also took fees for rites of passage – baptism, marriage and burial, and other ‘spiritualties’, or collections. Parishioners were responsible for the upkeep of the building and churchyard, apart from the chancel, which fell to the vicar. This distinction reflected the fact that the chancel was isolated by rood screens from the nave, and that religious services took place in seclusion, while the rest of the church hosted parish meetings, including the convivial ‘church ales’ or beer parties held on holy days.

Protestant and especially Puritan regimes did much to diminish the role of the church in the administration of law and order, but it wasn’t until the 1830s that parish government made way for district and national administration. Today, many churches lie empty during the week. Some allow their naves to be used for concerts and other events, but the air of sanctity still hangs over them. Might lessons be learned from history, and communities be encouraged to use their churches less reverentially, and more often?

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