

INTRODUCTION

In the 18th century there were three different strands of local government. First there were the manors. There were many manors in Chiddingstone, each of which kept records of courts, and rentals. Each property in a manor paid an annual quitrent which remained fixed over time, even though money depreciated. Example : Ryes, 19 acres, manor of Chiddingstone-Burgherst, quitrent 1s 9d. Manorial records often shed light on the succession of ownership of a property , including genealogical relationships.

Secondly there were hundreds and boroughs. Chiddingstone lay in the hundred of Somerden, which had two parts, north and south of the river. Boroughs were subdivisions of the hundred and most of Chiddingstone lay in the borough of Frienden. However some parts , mainly towards the west, lay in the boroughs of King's Borough and Stanford Borough, which extended into neighbouring parishes. Magistrates appointed for each borough a borsholder (= borough elder) or petty constable; there was also a high constable for the hundred or half hundred. These officers were drawn from the local population of substantial men and were unpaid. They were responsible for dealing with local crime and had duties such as drawing up lists of men in their area liable for duties such as jury service at the Assizes in Maidstone. (Grand Jury decided if an indictment was valid, Petty Jury decided if the defendant was guilty). Bridgewardens also appear to have been appointed by magistrates for the borough.

Thirdly there were parishes, originally the area served by a priest, but more recently the basic unit of local government. The magistrates appointed annually two overseers of the poor, in the case of Chiddingstone one for north of the river and one for south. There were also two churchwardens , one appointed by the rector and one by the parishioners. This committee of four ran the parish affairs and every man of substance could expect to be called upon to serve in one capacity or another once or perhaps more than once. The overseers and churchwardens kept accounts which are extremely useful, The income accounts list all the property owners in the parish and their rateable values; much can be learned by tracing these from year to year. In this survey I have incorporated the overseers' accounts from 1784 to April 1819 and also 1821; the labour was very great and I will not be doing it for any further surveys I might make of Chiddingstone. Chiddingstone and Hever are remarkable in that they have preserved their overseer' records for several centuries. I have not here made use of the churchwardens' or surveyors' accounts.

In 1796 by the Speenhamland decision, which was adopted in Chiddingstone, it was agreed that instead of fixing minimum wages for poor labourers, the practice was to be to raise workingmen's income to an agreed level, the money to come out of the parish rates. This enabled employers to keep wages at a low level, so that the workingmen became paupers needing relief from the rates. The level of rates was consequently

raised, forcing many smaller farmers into bankruptcy. All this can be seen in the Chiddingstone record.

Chiddingstone possessed several poorhouses and the records show that there was a steady flow of flour, yeast, vegetables, meat, fat hogs, tea etc, as well as wood and coal, into the poorhouses so that the standards were far better than as described by Dickens. Naturally the parish did not want to support people who were not entitled to be supported and so all workingmen had to have a defined parish of settlement. If a person intruded into a parish or a girl produced an illegitimate baby they would be taken to the Petty Sessions meeting at Sevenoaks to determine which parish was responsible for them. In the case of illegitimate children the father was identified and made to pay up. Settlement examinations are an excellent source of information on the poor and in our area the records begin in 1812. In my work the word "Examination" implies the Petty Sessions, often in contemporary speech referred to as "sittings". At a higher level were the Quarter Sessions meeting at Maidstone and these have also been used.

Other sources used in this work include:

Parish registers. If no parish is stated assume that Chiddingstone is the parish. I have a suspicion that not all births were registered.

Wills. Mostly Prerogative Court of Canterbury (PCC) but sometimes Peculiar of Shoreham (PS).

Newspaper reports. The Maidstone Journal was founded in 1786.

More information might be found in my companion work on Places in Chiddingstone.

I don't suppose that my family reconstructions are more than 90% accurate. It is very easy to stumble when two or more people have the same name. However I hope this work is useful to genealogists as a starting point, or to provide detail that would otherwise be very time consuming to access. I have been at it for more than 35 years and I live close to the various locations where information is stored.

Lionel Cole