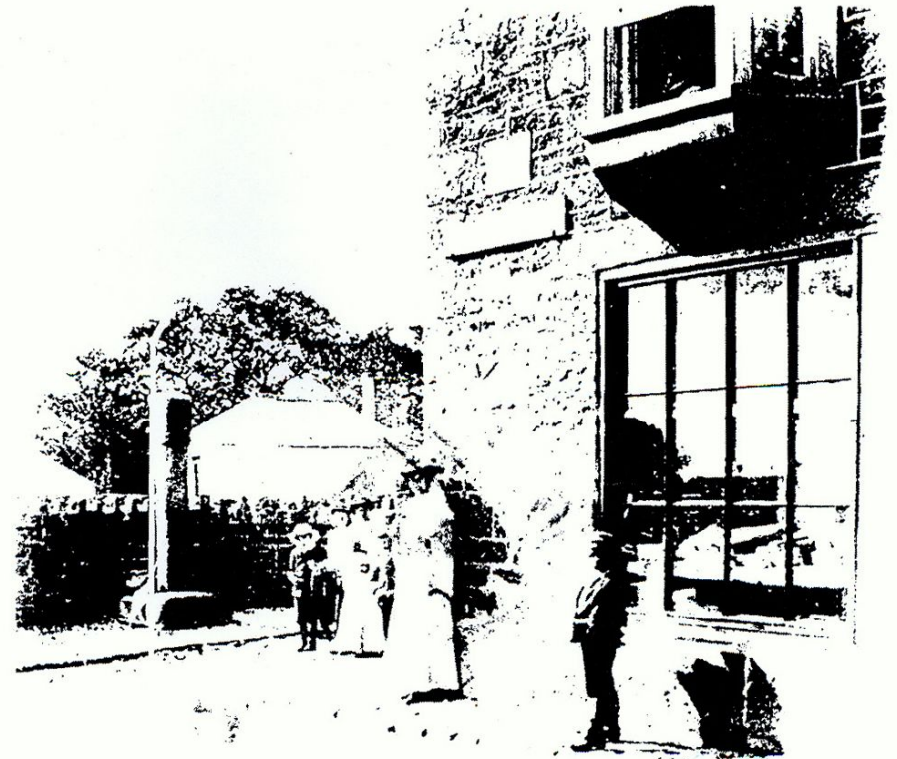


**ST ERTH PARISH COUNCIL CENTENARY
1895 - 1995**



**THE CROSS AND POST OFFICE
AUGUST 1905**

A Century for St Erth Parish Council
1895-1995

This is not intended to be a history of the St Erth Parish Council during the hundred years of its existence but an account of what led up to 1895 with the implementation of the so-called "Parish Councils" Act and the situation at the present time. The Act was very radical for its time and many believed that it would see the end of rule by "parson and squire" in the countryside.

Cedric Appleby

Introduction

The members of St Erth Parish Council hope that this booklet on the century of St Erth Parish Council will be of interest to all.

Our thanks for compiling this historical record must go in the first place to Mr Cedric Appleby, a local historian who must have spent many hours and travelled many miles in his researches, also all those who gave nay assistance to him.

In the period covered by this booklet from 1086 to the present day you will find many interesting points, and we as the present Council hopes that we have the Parish as much at heard as did our predecessors.

Reading through we think you will find that the earlier Councils or Vestries were as busy with Parish business and problems as we are today.

John Roberts
Chairman of St Erth Parish Council

Before 1895

The first real light to be shed on the administration of this part of West Cornwall comes from the Domesday Survey of 1086. The present parish of St Erth had not yet been formed. St Erth people lived in the County of Cornwall which was ruled over for William the Conqueror by his Sheriff, Turstin, who also happened to possess Gurlyn which was the manor in which many St Erth people lived. They would have lived in the Hundred of Conerton which was also the principal manor of the district. Conerton covered an area which corresponds to that which the present Penwith District covers with the addition of a great deal of land to the east. (Conerton itself has now disappeared under the sands but is believed to have been near the present village of Gwithian). They would have also lived in a smaller area called a Tithing. The principal ones in the parish area were Gurlyn and Trewinnard but there were three other tithings which were partly within the later boundaries. County Hundred and Tithing formed a “three ties” system for military, police and taxation purposes but it must be remembered that the people, both slaves and tenants, were also under the jurisdiction of the Manor with all its obligations and courts.

All this took care of the temporal lives of the people but their spiritual concerns were very much in the hands of the parish administration. What that administration was in the years before about 1160 when St Erth Parish was formed is very much a matter of speculation. Perhaps we came under the jurisdiction of St Michael’s Mount or St

Buryan. From about 1160, the present boundaries were formed and the rector of the parish was the Dean and chapter of Exeter Cathedral. A vicar was appointed to care for the new parish. Then, at some point, Checkmasters or, as they are now known, Churchwardens, were appointed to care for the church. These were laymen who would also keep an eye on the vicar. In the late Middle Ages evidence appears of regular meetings between the parish clergy and the churchwardens to discuss matters affecting the church. These gatherings may well have been joined by others who were involved in the work of the church. These meetings came to be known as “vestries”.

The later Middle Ages also saw the breakdown of the manorial system and much social unrest. There were bitter struggles under the Tudors as royal power asserted itself with many setbacks until the time of Elizabeth. At this period Justices of the Peace began to play a key role in the local administration. These were appointed by the Lord Lieutenant of the County and were men of substance. The County JPs were the leading gentry, who met regularly to discuss how they were to enforce the Law in the countryside, to decide policy and to hear complaints and reports.

Meanwhile, for sometime before this, the parish vestry had taken over the task of dealing with the poor, policing and the repair of roads. There is some uncertainty as to why so much secular administration came into the hands but the parish was a very convenient unit and every person was compelled to attend the parish church. The

Justices appointed or approved of Overseers of the Poor, Waywardens (to look after highways) and Constables. At St Erth, the vicar with the Churchwardens would preside over meetings of the vestry but the Justices had to power to dictate and have the final say as far as secular matters were concerned. Clergy would often be Justices themselves as well as some of their parishioners who would attend the vestry.

There were no acts of Parliament to control the way in which vestries worked. In some cases they followed local custom. The chances were that the clerk or the chairman had read one of the handbooks on the subject and many vestries followed a similar pattern to that at St Erth. Sometimes meetings of all the ratepayers (full vestries) were called and done some matters Parliament could demand that. Usually it was the vicar, the Churchwardens and the officers who met with a few leading parishioners who constituted the normal vestry meeting. In the seventeenth century we have records of them meeting in this way at St Erth, passing the accounts and finally sending them to Marazion or Penzance to be "seen and approved" by the Justices. Taking office was, in many parishes, imposed on unwilling candidates who were glad to relinquish it after one year.

Vestries concerned themselves with a wide range of matters and this was true of St Erth. They discussed the repair of musical instruments used in the church, the sundial, the painting of the constable's staff and the appointment of a parish surgeon. They helped a farmer, in 1817, to prosecute a sheep-stealer who was sentenced

to death at Launceston. With the expansion of the mining industry in the parish much nineteenth century business was taken up with the need to widen roads and to repair and renew bridges. St Erth Bridge was important enough to be a County matter and its problems were regularly discussed at the Quarter Sessions of the County Justices.

The parish constables acted under the authority of the justices to apprehend and detain criminals and to deliver them up for trial. As in the "Westerns" parishioners could be called upon to pursue those wanted for crimes. In 1856 policing in the countryside fell into the hands of the County police Force and St Erth became part of a regular "beat" for a paid constable and later a policeman became resident. There was also the need to defend the parish against invasion and the vestry was expected to organise defence forces. Davies Gilbert of Tredrea, Sheriff of Cornwall, during the wars with France which began in 1793, attempted to organise, through the vestry, a plan to defend St Erth against raids by privateers. In difficult times lists of able-bodied men were drawn up for the militia through the vestry and some lists survive for St Erth.

A great deal of the vestry's work was concerned with the poor, always a pressing issue with the increase in unemployment and poverty which nineteenth century fluctuations in trade brought about. Poor rates for farmers, industrialists and better-off house-holders rose steeply at times. Desperate remedies were tried including the subsidising of farmers' wages through the rates and in 1817 ratepayers' money was invested in Wheal Squire

Mine in order to create employment. The unpopular practice of placing pauper children on farmers and householders as apprentices was resorted to. In order to ease the burden on the parish absconding fathers were pursued, paupers from other parishes were sent back where they came from and battles were fought to keep others out. All this involved much litigation and transport costs. The parish also helped families to emigrate and take up land in Canada and Australia.

Until 1840 the parish had its own workhouse but this closed and was offered for sale when the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act was implemented and St Erth belonged to the Penzance Union of parishes with its workhouse at Madron. Those who were not to be relieved in their own homes went to Madron but the parish still had to pay for their upkeep. St Erth was represented on the Board of Guardians which managed the Union locally. Savings were made, poor-rates fell and the benefits of the system were felt by all save the poor themselves, who, until well within living memory, dreaded the workhouse. The parish still relieved those who did not qualify for the workhouse. It is also important to remember that the new arrangement was under the control of the civil servants at Somerset House and not the justices.

The earliest meetings of the St Erth Vestry may well have been in the church. In 1816 they met in "the house of John Morgan". This was almost certainly the "Star Inn". Later meetings were held in the old charity school which was demolished sometime after 1841. In May 1821, they met on Bosworgey Hill, being a site meeting to discuss the

widening of the road there because of increased mine traffic. In January 1827 the "Vestry" Room is mentioned for the first time as a meeting place. Some old accounts mention a poor house in Rocklose in 1676 and in 1686 a parish house.

The Need for Reform

The nineteenth century saw an increasing demand for the reform of those institutions which were deemed to be undemocratic, inefficient, unaccountable to the public and were seen to be refuses of the privileged or vested interests. Reformers saw both the Church of England and the administration of the countryside as being preserves of these. The fact that institutions had lasted for many centuries did not excuse them from drastic reform and even abolition. "Medieval" government would not do in a country which had become very industrialised, much more democratically minded and, by 1890, receiving the benefits of universal education. The rule of parson and squire would no longer be tolerated and it was the parish vestry which effectively combined both. Parliament had already undergone reform and so had the larger towns. Added to this Nonconformity was strong and they resented rule by an Anglican body. In Cornwall Methodism flourished and chapel people, by 1890, identified themselves with Nonconformity.

The nineteenth century had seen the rise of so many bodies which administered affairs which had once been the responsibility of the justices and the vestry. These all differed from each other in powers, functions, areas,

qualifications and mode of election. These all had the power to tax the rate-payer for different purposes and their functions overlapped and there was constant extravagance in time and money. It was a chaotic situation and the reformers felt that the vestry was useless and obstructive. Clearly something had to be done to bring order in to local government. One the whole justices worked hard and had a high sense of duty to the community as were the vestries and their officials but they were now felt to be out of place in the modern age.

The “Parish Councils” Act

The Bill began its passage through Parliament in 1893 and there was much opposition. Amendment after amendment was proposed and Mr H Fowler, president of the Local Government Board, who presented the Bill, fought hard to defeat many of them though not all. What emerged was, nevertheless, radical for the time.

Opposition came from the landed gentry who feared that they would lose their influence in the countryside. In 1893, much if the land belonged to relatively few landowners and most people who lived in St Erth would have been leaseholds or direct or indirect tenants of a handful of such landlords. Much opposition came from those who feared that the Church of England would lose its influence and much of its charity work. The setting up of elected bodies to run parish affairs must be seen as the completion of a “three tier” system of local authority. The County Council, already established, stood at its head. This took over the work of many of the bodies which had

been set up. District Councils were set up to cover those areas which corresponded with the Poor Law Unions. To avoid confusion with Penzance Borough council our District Council was called West Penwith. County and District Councils were elected by the ratepayers and had wide powers.

All parishes were to have a Parish Meeting under the Act and their populations exceeded 300 they would have a Parish Council as well. Parish Councils were to have no less than five members and no more than fifteen. The number was to be determined by the County Council which would take the size of the population into account. The councillors were to be elected each year at the Parish meeting and the council would choose its own Chairman at the first Council meeting from among its own members.

With certain exceptions, any person, male or female, was entitled to stand for the Council. The exceptions were concerned with criminal records, bankruptcy, receipt of poor relief and employment in local government. The age at which they could both stand and vote for Council was 21. The twentieth century was well advanced before Parliament reached this stage of democracy!”

The Parish Meeting under a different Chairman had to meet once a year but more often if need arose. In addition to voting for Councillors they nominated certain parish officers and could arise issues which would be added to the Council agenda. The Council had its own officers including a clerk and overseers. The valuation of

property and income for tax purposes was one of its more time consuming roles which generated a great deal of business.

Parish Councils were enabled to many things, among which were:

1. To appoint Overseers and Assistant Overseers.
2. To light the streets.
3. To provide a fire engine.
4. To acquire land for children's playgrounds and recreation.
5. To prevent the stoppage of footpaths.
6. To provide village halls, libraries, baths and wash houses.
7. To complain to the District Council about filthy dwellings.
8. With the consent of the landlord to utilise any well, spring or stream within the parish to supply the village with water.
9. To deal with filthy drains, ponds and ditches injurious to health.
10. To acquire land for allotments.
11. To appoint charity trustees for those charities not specifically for church purposes.
12. Responsibilities over burials.

On a rate which was not to exceed 3d in the pounds (1.5p) or, only if the Parish Meeting approved, 6d (2.5p) in the pound there was not a great deal of scope for the Council to do everything which it was enabled to do. Many of the above activities were later shared with or taken over by County and District Councils.

The Parish of St Erth was divided between St Erth Urban which was that part within the Urban District of Hayle and St Erth Rural which is the part that we are concerned with. With a population of 130-7 the County Council fixed the number of Councillors at eleven and was entitled to send three representatives to the District Council. These three also acted as the representatives of St Erth on the Penzance Board of Guardians. The Penzance Poor Law union remained until 1929 but its Board of Guardians now consisted of elected representatives.

Although the Parish Council did not have any legal existence until 1895 they did meet in 1894 having been elected by the Parish Meeting to prepare for their official existence in the following year.

Parish Meetings

The first minutes book of Parish Meetings which runs from 1895 for a period for about 60 years records little more than the annual election of councillors. However, pressing issues did come up from time to time such as the water supply for the village, the state of the river, the building of council houses and the organisation of the celebrations for Coronations and the ending of two World Wars. A major issue which attracted a great deal of publicity in the press was the "parents strike" of 1957 when Cornwall county Council refused to provide free transport for the large number of children in the parish who lived within the three mile limit of Hayle School.

Parents refused to send their children to this newly opened Secondary School.

The District Council

By 1894, Penwith District Council had been formed and our representatives were J Rogers Morgan, farmer, Treloweth; Matthew Osborne, farmer, Gurlyn, and George Richards, farmer, Porthcollum. Having been elected to the District Council they were also the St Erth representatives on the reconstituted Penzance Board of Guardians which, until 1929, managed the Madron Workhouse and the running of the Poor Law administration of the Penzance Union.

The First Councillors

Although there are records of Council meetings in December 1894 the Parish Meeting Minute Book begins in December 1895, and shows the following councillors elected out of the thirty two who stood. Voting was by show of hands and names are given in order of votes cast for them.

Matthew Osborne, Farmer of Gurlyn and District Councillor.

James Gilbert who had the ironworks at Battery Mill and was a leading Methodist.

John Rogers Morgan, Farmer, Treloweth. He had also been elected to the District Council.

Richard Hodge Paynter, Manufacturer, Mellanear.

William Goldsworthy, Farmer, Trewinnard.

John Hocking, Farmer, Tregethas.

James Stevens, Blacksmith, Churchtown.

Richard James Allen, Assurance Agent, Churchtown.

Henry Harvey Trevithick, Merchant (partner in the import firm of Harvey, Trevithick and Polkinghorne).

Francis Daniel Harvey, Engineer (of Harvey & Co, Hayle Foundry) of Hayle.

John Vincent, Farm Labourer, Trewinnard Mill.

The vicar of St Erth, The Rev C R D Carter, had stood but just failed to get the required number of votes.

It could be said that the Council represented the main industries of the parish which, in 1894/5, were farming and Harvey & Co's foundry at Hayle, though the latter was now a shadow of its former self.

Early Council Work

Much of the early business concerned the state of the river and there was some difficulty in trying to establish who was responsible for the essential work that had to be done. It was a problem which lasted well into the twentieth century and it was not unusual for houses in the Chenhalls Valley to be flooded after heavy rainfall. In November 1894, the Wesleyan schoolmistress wrote in the school log:

“The weather has been worse than for a long time. Only a few children able to leave their homes. The valley has been full of water and many of the houses are flooded.”

The banks of the river belonged to a number of landowners and the Council through its clerk could be involved with a great deal of correspondence and negotiation but without a great deal of real power if the landlords proved to be obstructive. This was a common problem where rivers were concerned and underlined the need for a body with over-riding powers such as the National Rivers Authority has today

The state of footpaths was often complained about and farmers were approached. On at least one occasion a farmer refused to do the work specified by the Council and suggested that the Council did it themselves. This was raised at a Parish Meeting with the result that volunteers came forward!

Greater difficulties were found when the Council tried to obtain and near the village by approaching the owner of Lanuthnoe, Mr Newton, to let his land to them. He did not seem to be very willing and nothing was done. The land would have been for allotments. In March 1909, in response to a form, the Council informed the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries which wanted to know what they were doing about obtaining land for allotments that:

“The parish council ... have no land to let as allotments and have not taken any proceedings under the acts nor received any requests for allotments.”

In fact, at a later date, a parishioner showed interest in obtaining an allotment but failed to submit the required forms.

Rates were assessed by a committee and, not surprisingly, its clerk received letters from ratepayers questioning its conclusions. In several cases people found themselves paying what they thought was an excessive increase and sometimes they complained that neighbours with more valuable properties paid less than they did.

The Parish Council was left with one charity to administer which they put into the hands of a committee chaired by the vicar and consisting of the churchwardens and three other members. In 1904 the fund of the “Unknown Donor’s Charity” which was the interest on the rent from two fields (OS 170\1) in the occupation of Mr G Ivey stood at £5.7s.4d (£5.37p). Instead of distributing bread to the poor, as specified by the terms of the charity, the committee felt it more appropriate to give £3 to the “deserving poor” of the parish and £1 to help a consumptive go to Bournemouth.

Although the Act enabled the Parish Council to obtain a fire engine there is no evidence that it considered the purchase of such a sophisticated vehicle. Nevertheless the Council was in possession of two well illustrated catalogues from Merryweather and Shoad and Mason, fire engine makers. The probability is that these were sent unsolicited to the councils soon after the Act. It is unlikely that the Council could have afforded one of these and probably the engine at Harvey & Co was deemed adequate to cover the parish and situated in that part most likely to have fires.

There is also no record of the Council setting up a library but, at the turn of the century, there was a Reading Room. It seems to have been furnished with popular illustrated magazines which readers could take out for two days and the register shows that it was well used from 1899 to 1901.

“ST ERTH IS NOT WHAT IT WAS!”

For those whose memories can go back forty years or more change has been evident and perhaps often alarming in the parish. The population of the village has changed in many ways. Farming has changed in the farms have got bigger and the number of farmers and farm-workers have declined. Those who are employed usually find their work outside the parish. There are more retired people than there were and a greater number were born outside the parish than there would have been forty years ago. It is often said that many of the old St Erth families have gone.

Fortunately, unlike some Cornish villages, St Erth has not become a place which almost entirely consists of second homes with a complete loss of shop, post office and public transport. There are young families and the population has grown and the expansion of the Primary School is very welcome these days.

Those who elected our first Parish Council in 1895 would also have felt that they too had witnessed alarming changes. Within the same time-span mining had ceased to provide the amount of employment that it once did.

Many familiar faces had departed for distant parts of the world to obtain work. Much of the heavy industry in the town of Hayle was now a shadow of its former self and many St Erth people had lost their jobs there. The railway had brought great changes and the local craftsmen found it difficult to survive in a changed situation where mass-produced products could more easily be obtained.

During the intervening years between 1895 and the more recent past the Parish Council, which had begun with such high hopes, soon found that much of its power was passing to County and District Council as well as other bodies which had greater financial and other resources. The Council found that even relatively straight forward projects were impossible because of legal restrictions. Council business was derided as the “politics of the parish pump”. (For far too long St Erth people had depended on that piece of equipment and it would have frequently appeared on the agenda!) However good and hard working our councillors were, the Parish Council was seen to be ineffective and could only act as a “persuasive voice” which was easily lost at County and District level where more powerful voices and more pressing needs could command more attention. Other functions were lost such as Poor Law responsibilities in 1929 and the rather onerous task of assessing and collecting land and other taxes.

It would be invidious to mention names of those who served the Council during these years but the name of Mr F H Maddern springs to mind as one who for so long served as Clerk.

THE PARISH COUNCIL TODAY

The feeling that the real decisions affecting the parish were taken in Westminster, Truro and Penzance and not at parish level did not encourage interest in parish Council work in those years leading up to the Local Government act of 1972. This apathy has still to be overcome today. The Act of 1972 was an attempt by Parliament to give more power to the local community than it had before. The result has been that the Parish Council now has greater powers to acquire land, raise money and embark on projects. It also has a far greater say in planning matters.

The 1895 Act did not envisage war memorials. The focal point for Remembrance Day services has been the cross erected in the churchyard by Mrs Helen Carter, the widow of Major Herbert Carter VC. This is in memory of her husband who died on active service but she particularly wished that those men of St Erth who had been killed so far in the First World War should also be commemorated on this memorial. It was dedicated in 1917 but, sadly, several more names had to be added by the end of that war. Later those from the parish who died in the Second World War were added to the list. The cross is of Forest of Dean stone.

The parish had money available for a war memorial and it was recently decided to refurbish the lower floor of the Vestry as a "Memorial Room" in which meetings could be held as well as classes for adults. The Council also did a great deal to restore the fourteenth century lantern cross

outside the Post Office. Other projects are in hand including the development, re-opening and promotion of St Erth's considerable rights of Way network, upgrading of street lighting, redevelopment of the Playing Fields and a BMX track which has resulted from a deputation to the Council from some young people of the parish and a village hall.

The Council still retains its important role of representing the views of parishioners to the larger Councils as well as dealing with day to day matters raised. Complaints are made from time to time about dog nuisance, street lights "on the blink", traffic through the village, hedge trimming or the lack of it, and irritating incidents of vandalism. Occasionally an issue will evoke widespread concern and even attendance at council meetings. Among such recent issues have been sites for travellers, the smell emanating from the sewerage works (this has again pervaded the atmosphere at times during the recent hot summer) and a proposed wind farm near the boundary with Gwinear. With criminals more mobile there have been spates of burglaries.

The Council is always faced with the problems of balancing the needs of the residents and the commercial interests of industry, especially these days that of tourism. The river with its rich wild life is a great asset but here too there are conflicting interests between development and conservation.

THE PRESENT COUNCIL OCTOBER 1995

In its first years the Parish Council consisted of mostly farmers and trade people with one or two railway workers, farm workers and those who described themselves as “gentlemen”. There were no women members.

In 1894 County Councillor John Vivian explained the workings of the new Parish Councils’ Act and raised a laugh when he suggested that a male councillor in the new Council could well be called to order by his wife! In the social climate of the time this could well have been nervous laughter from male members of the audience and the prospect of women in politics was too dreadful to contemplate on the part of many husbands. (“Cornish Telegraph” 5\7\1894). In spite of the Act it was nearly a hundred years before St Erth Parish Council elected its first woman Chairman in May 1993. This was Mrs Ann White.

The full list of the St Erth Parish Council is as follows:

Chairman: Mr John Roberts
Vice Chairman: Mr Tom Crellin MBE

Mr Nigel Britton
Mr Michael Eddy
Mrs Vida Ellis
Mrs Joyce Hodge
Mr Eslea Lashbrook
Mrs Diane Little

Mr Idris Stone
Mr David Taylor
Mrs Ann White

Employed by the Council

Clerk: Mr Peter Wilson
(Mrs Margaret Wilson takes minutes in a voluntary capacity.)
Part-time Caretaker: Mr Tim Culmer

Representative on the County Council (Cornwall)

Mr Tom price

Representative on the District Council (Penwith)

Mr Peter Badcock

Acknowledgements and Sources

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Cedric Appleby