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Local Government in Epsom and Ewell

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Town Clerk



The Town Hall, The Parade, Epsom

Before Incorporation

PRIOR to 1848 the public bodies primarily concerned with the condition of the Epsom district were the Surveyor of Highways and the Poor Law Guardians. Their powers were very inadequate and in 1848 the inhabitants of Epsom presented to the then General Board of Health a petition praying for the Public Health Act of 1848 to be applied to the Parish. This Act was the first of the great public Health Acts to be passed and it enabled local Councils (or local Boards of Health as they were then known) to be elected for the purpose of securing better local government. It is interesting to recall that Epsom was the first unit in Surrey to which the Public Health Act, 1849, was applied, and with the exception of Kingston-upon-Thames, Guildford and Godalming, it was the oldest district in Surrey to be administered as a separate local government unit.

The first election of the Local Board of Health was held on the 2nd May, 1850. There were 22 candidates for the nine vacancies. The voting papers were delivered and collected by the local constables. William Harsant, chemist and druggist, topped the poll with 236 votes, and James Pierson collected only 113 votes. The first meeting of the Board of Health was held on the 13th May, 1850, when Sir Richard Digby Neave was elected Chairman. The acting clerk

to the Board was William Everest who was also Clerk to the Magistrates. The Bench soon indicated, however, that they felt the two offices were wholly incompatible. Accordingly, he gave up his office of Clerk to the Board. The first Clerk was .J. T. Gatton - who was succeeded by George White, a solicitor - in 1853. According to the Minutes, the first major tasks facing the Board were a main drainage scheme, street lighting, and the provision of an adequate water supply. In fact, the present site of the waterworks in East Street was purchased in 1853. In July 1853 the Board instructed the clerk to procure a hammer for the use of the chairman! The ratepayers soon expressed their dissatisfaction with the progress and cost of the schemes relating to main drainage and a water supply. A committee of ratepayers presented a memorial to Lord Palmerston - the Secretary of State - intimating that "they were desirous to promote sanitary improvements in the town but at the same time they feel great anxiety not to be made the victims of theorists or of untried schemes emanating from unskilful men.

This brief glimpse into the history of the Corporation's predecessors indicates that the same problems were being considered by the Local Board of Health just over 100 years ago as confront the council today. The same anxieties were being expressed by the ratepayers !

The Urban District of Epsom was constituted in 1894 and continued as such until 1933 when it was extended by the Surrey Review order, 1933. By this order the major part of Ewell and a large part of Cuddington were added to Epsom. Prior to this order coming into operation Ewell and Cuddington were parts of the Epsom Rural District, which was abolished by the Order. In 1934, appreciating the importance of their new partner, Ewell, the council decided to alter the name of the district to the Urban District of Epsom and Ewell. In 1936 the council felt the time had arrived when the Urban District should take steps to achieve the natural ambition of all progressive local government districts, namely, to secure the incorporation of its inhabitants, having regard to the size, population, and rateable value of the district and the important position it occupied in relation to the general local government of Surrey and the many valuable assets and undertakings it possessed. Accordingly it was decided to petition His Most Excellent Majesty in Council for the grant of a charter incorporating the urban District a Municipal Borough. The charter was subsequently granted on the 29th September, 1937.

The Incorporation

In their Petition the District council referred to their record of sound and economical administration and stated that it was the ambition of the inhabitants to secure increased status so that they could increase their sense of civic duty and responsibility to the advantage of all sections of the community. Upon incorporation, the former Urban District council which consisted of thirty members presided over by a Chairman, was replaced by a Council comprising ten Aldermen and thirty councillors (representing 10 wards), and the first citizen of the new, Borough was, of course, the Mayor. The Borough was granted a coat-of-Arms and extensive regalia was contributed by many generous and public spirited townspeople.

The incorporation of the inhabitants took place at a time when the development of the enlarged district was at its height. Houses were being erected at the rate of about 1,500 per annum; the population was increasing at the rate of between 5,000 and 6,000 persons each year. The new Fire Station in Church Street, Epsom, had just been completed, and steps were being taken to widen the second portion of Epsom High Street from the Charter Inn to the railway bridge in East Street. The provision of a Swimming Bath on land off East Street was

being pursued with energy. The acquisition of land to complete the Hogsmill River Side open Space was being undertaken and the Council were providing the additional recreation facilities which would be required to serve the ever increasing population of the Borough.

The large scale development which was proceeding was a strain upon the Corporation's sewage disposal facilities and the council were confronted with the prospect of constructing an entirely new Sewage Disposal Works to serve the Borough or to take part in a joint scheme with neighbouring authorities for the disposal of sewage. They adopted the latter proposal and accordingly the foundations of the Hogsmill Valley Joint Sewerage Scheme were laid.

Nonsuch Park had just been acquired and opened and the council were busily engaged with their neighbours, the Sutton and Cheam Corporation, in administering this lovely Park and Mansion House. The Epsom and Walton Downs Regulation Act was passed in 1936 and this placed upon the council the responsibility for appointment of six of the ten conservators responsible for regulating and controlling nearly 600 acres of Epsom and Walton Downs.



The Council Chamber

All these and other activities brought many outstanding and important matters before the new council for consideration and the council rose to the occasion with zest and determination. The Borough as we know it to-day was being wrought into shape. Amongst all this bustle and activity the council were not unmindful of the debt of gratitude which they owed to the charter Mayor (The Right Honourable J. Chuter Ede, C.H., J.P., D.L., M.P.) for his outstanding services to the Borough and the former Urban District, and in grateful recognition of his services they conferred upon him the Honorary Freedom of the Borough at

a ceremony which took place at the Mayoral Dinner on the 5th June, 1939. The charter Mayor thereby became the first Honorary Freeman of the Borough.

The War Years

When war broke out in September, 1939, the civil Defence Services were mobilised. There was a splendid spirit of co-operation and goodwill amongst the Burgesses, and the difficulties of bringing in the emergency arrangements were soon overcome. All the normal activities of the council came to a standstill, the Burgesses were issued with National Registration and Food Rationing Cards, and they settled down with a grim determination to meet and see through the aerial onslaught which they knew could not be long delayed. The first incident occurred in the Borough in September, 1940, and the Services took the strain and emerged from their first ordeal quietly and confidently. The Battle of Britain opened with the formation of the Local Defence Volunteers, subsequently renamed the Home Guard, and as elsewhere throughout the country there was no lack of volunteers.

The Borough suffered heavily from bombing from 1940 to 1944, and the total number of persons killed by enemy action was 33; 384 persons were seriously or slightly injured, there were 200 serious incidents involving the destruction of 192 houses, and 413 houses were seriously damaged. Over 12,000 houses were slightly damaged. Many high explosive, oil and flying bombs fell on the Borough; thousands of incendiary and a large number of anti-personnel bombs were dropped.

From the outbreak of war there was a splendid response to the "Dig for Victory" campaign and the Borough Council provided some 2,300 wartime allotments. In order to keep up the morale and spirit of the people the Council organised "Holidays at Home" programmes in 1942, 1943 and 1944. Furthermore, the Burgesses contributed no less a sum than seven million pounds towards National Savings.

As a fitting memorial to those men and women of the Borough who laid down their lives in the conflict, their fellow men and women have seen fit to perpetuate their memory in a Book of Remembrance housed in a memorial feature in the entrance of the Town Hall which contains the names of 332 citizens. The Memorial was unveiled by The Worshipful the Mayor of Epsom and Ewell (councillor R. Langley Mitchell, MA., LL.B.) and dedicated by the Bishop of Kingston (The Right Rev. William Gilpin, M.A.) on the 1st May, 1956.

The Post-War Years

In the wider sphere of government the Coalition which had carried on the government of the country during the war was dissolved and Parliamentary Elections were again the order of the day. In the recasting of constituencies which followed, Sutton and Cheam were severed from the Epsom constituency, leaving the Borough and the Leatherhead Urban District and a part of the Esher Urban District to form the Epsom Constituency. This readjustment gave the Borough more direct representation in Parliament. Moreover upon a subsequent review the portion of the Esher Urban District was removed from the constituency. The council were eager to take up again their ordinary peacetime activities with a view to making up the leeway lost by more than five years of war, but the economic condition of the country was such that capital and other restrictions were imposed upon development and only the most necessary schemes were permitted to proceed.

The policy of the central Government so far as Local Authorities were concerned was changing and there was a tendency towards much greater centralisation with the result that during the period 1945-48 radical alterations occurred and a number of services previously operated by the council were transferred to other authorities including town planning, but under a delegation agreement the council act as agents for the county council in almost all local planning matters. In housing matters, however, the council's responsibilities very much increased in view of the serious post-war housing shortage among all classes.

During this post-war period revised welfare and Health Services were set up by the county council under new legislation, and the council were represented on the committees which administered these Services' So far as Education is concerned, they are represented on the Central Divisional Executive which came into being as a result of the scheme prepared by the County Council under the Education Act of 1944.

In 1947, Civil Defence was resuscitated and volunteers came forward again in large numbers to offer their services.

The wisdom of the council in acquiring properties over the years in different parts of the Borough now became manifest for they were able to provide accommodation at nominal charges for many well-established voluntary organisations and also those which had sprung up during the war, thereby encouraging many voluntary workers to continue and expand their activities.

At this time close attention was being paid to the development of the open spaces, gardens and recreation grounds, which were acquired before the war. Epsom common was controlled and regulated; Ewell Court Recreation Ground (a King George's Field) was laid out, Auriol Park (another King George's Field) was partly laid out. More gardens and flower beds were established and they provide a profusion of colour throughout the area, enriching and beautifying the amenities of the district.

In the early part of 1952 the Burgesses were filled with sorrow and grief at the passing of their beloved Sovereign, King George VI, and they conveyed to Her Majesty The Queen and to the Royal Family their heartfelt sympathy in their immeasurable bereavement. They also conveyed to Her Majesty The Queen their loyal and sincere salutations upon her Accession to the Throne and the coronation was celebrated by the Burgesses with much rejoicing on the 2nd June, 1953.

Towards the end of 1954 there was relaxation of control over building and other development and private enterprise again entered the field of housing but on a much reduced scale as the Green Belt provisions had substantially curtailed the amount of land available for development. The Council and the other constituent authorities of the Hogsmill Valley Joint Sewerage Board were successful in persuading the Government to permit the Joint Sewerage Scheme to proceed, and recently the Council have secured approval to the provision of a light industrial site at Longmead to meet the needs principally of non-conforming users in the Borough.

The centenary of the setting up of the Water Undertaking was celebrated in 1953, and in the same year the Council conferred upon His Honour Judge J. Tudor Rees, in recognition of his public services, the Honorary Freedom of the Borough at a ceremony which took place at the Town Hall on the 24th April.

In 1955, the Corporation acquired the remainder of the rights in the Manor of Epsom including the Epsom Market and the Fair Green, and the Corporation became the Lords of the Manor.

In 1955, the Borough secured increased representation on the County Council, the three existing Divisions being readjusted to make four Divisions.

The most cordial relations have always existed between the Corporation and adjoining local authorities, and the co-operation which exists between them and the County Council has in no small measure contributed to the smooth and efficient working of the local government of the Borough.

The year 1958 witnesses the coming-of-age of the Borough and the Council are making arrangements to celebrate the event with a full programme of civic and social functions, and the presence of the Charter Mayor will add greatly to the happiness of the occasion.

Whilst the activities of the Borough since incorporation have not been on a spectacular scale - the intervention of the war and subsequent economic restrictions have prevented this - it is fair to say that the selfless service and solid work contributed by many public-spirited Burgesses have moulded into shape a Borough of which we can be justly proud. It is hoped that in the years to come our successors will draw inspiration from the pattern which has been set so that they may prove themselves worthy inheritors of a Borough whose motto is "None Such."