

By Henny Shotter

Money matters....

as one John Westover, resident of Lenham Parish, had to learn in 1830.¹

We are all familiar with the work of the Parish Council. However, before 1860 there were no civil parishes in existence. The affairs of the village were seen to by ‘The Vestry’.² The Vestry was associated with the church. The name of this committee stems from the room, ‘the vestry’, where the committee originally met. The documents from these meetings were kept in the Parish Chest.



The Lenham Parish Chest (photo created by Mike Palmer, Phtorasa Free HD photos)

One of the members of the Vestry had to be the Parish Priest, who was normally the chairman, and the other members were ‘people of standing.’

¹ The events in this article are based on Vestry documents held in the Kent Archives under number 224/8 ‘Vestry and PCC (18th-19th Century)

² If you are interested in the topic, Wikipedia is a good first source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vestry>
There is also a very good book : W.E. Tate: The Parish Chest:A Study of the Records of Parochial Administration in England

John Westover (born in 1804 in Lenham)³ came from a family 'of standing', who had moved from Smarden to Lenham one generation earlier. His father, after whom he was named, was born in Smarden but is buried in Lenham churchyard.⁴

The family must have had a good reputation in Lenham. Proof of this is a plaque to the memory John Westover's, uncle, Thomas, and his wife Rebecca in the church near the altar. The inscription actually reads that he was a 'much respected resident of this parish'.



³ Thank you to Alison Rush for sharing her family research with us.

⁴ Grave number 93, see churchyard survey

We don't know whether Thomas Westover or John Westover sen. served on the vestry. If they did, it was outside of the period we looked into.

However, it was a matter of duty and honour to be a member of the Vestry for a certain time at least. As with the work of a parish council today there could be many hours of unpaid work involved. One of the most important tasks of the Vestry was to look after the poor.

Lenham was very fortunate in so far as it had a workhouse. Even poor people from other parishes were sent to the workhouse in Lenham and their home parishes made a payment on the person's behalf. The matters of the workhouse were overseen by the overseer⁵. In Lenham there was so much work that the overseer had an assistant.

In 1830, twenty-six year old John Westover applied for this position. On the 2nd June 1830 he was employed by the Vestry. His salary was fixed at 50 pounds a year and he had to demonstrate that he had securities worth 300 pounds. Things didn't go well. John Westover failed to present the workhouse accounts to the Vestry. On several occasions he was seriously reprimanded, but the accounts were still not forthcoming. Finally, at the Vestry meeting of the 13th December 1830, John Westover was dismissed. He was criticised for the 'unfinished state of the accounts' and the 'slovenly manner' in which he kept them and the 'unsatisfactory mode in which he conducted the great affairs of the parish.' Things became even more serious on the 24th December, when the Vestry threatened to take John Westover to the magistrate.

We don't know why John Westover failed so terribly in his duty, but we assume that he was simply unable to keep the books. We also don't know what happened to him afterwards or how he made his living. We only know that a year later, on 23rd December 1831, his sister bailed him out. She paid 160 pounds to discharge John Westover of defalcation of the accounts. The payment was accepted.

The Westover family stayed in Lenham for many years and made positive contributions to the village. In later years the landlord of the Chequers Inn was a Thomas Westover.

John Westover, the overseer seems to have been the black sheep of the family!

⁵ The Lenham's overseers' accounts are held in the Kent Archives and give a fascinating insight in life in the workhouse

