

A Parish Council for Winchelsea

On Monday night (29th November), a public meeting was held of those who live or work in Winchelsea to discuss the proposal that the Town should have its own parish. Almost 70 residents attended. Various aspects of the proposal were discussed, including whether Winchelsea could afford to be a parish on its own. Financial projections prepared for the meeting showed that in fact Winchelsea residents would probably be better off and certainly no worse off financially in a separate parish.

The point was also made that the parishing of Winchelsea would have no impact on the ecclesiastical parish boundaries or on the status of the Mayor and Corporation (who are purely ceremonial and protected by their status as a charity under an Act of Parliament)

The meeting was told that Winchelsea had originally been incorporated in the parish of Icklesham in 1886 against the will of the the people of the Town. Until then, the local government of Winchelsea had been provided by the Corporation. When the Corporation was deprived of its civil powers by the Municipal Corporations Act, Winchelsea had expected to have its own parish council, but was frustrated by the use of the Divided Parishes Act of 1882 to annex Winchelsea into the new parish of Icklesham. The Divided Parishes Act was supposed to allow aggrieved residents to protest but this opportunity was denied to Winchelsea. Legal challenges failed in the face of the fait accompli.

The current demand for a separate parish of Winchelsea is not however based on an historic grievance, but the argument that the parish of Icklesham has grown too large and too diverse to adequately represent the special interests of any of the four wards. Back in 1886, the parish consisted of just Winchelsea and Icklesham. Winchelsea Beach did not exist and Rye Harbour was just a hamlet. Now there are four sizeable and very different settlements spread over a wide area. The Local Government Commission's guidelines say that *"...a Parish should reflect a small, distinctive and recognisable community of interest with its own sense of identity."*

In 1999, Rother District Council undertook a Review of Parish Boundaries. Almost 130 residents wrote to the District Council asking for Winchelsea to be parished and only eight against. Residents wanted to know why Rother District Council has sat on the request for so long. An overwhelming majority of those present at the meeting supported the proposal to press the District Council to hold a referendum in each of the four wards of Icklesham Parish asking each ward to decide its own future.