

EAST HAM: PROBLEMS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND RELATIONS WITH THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT BOARD

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SUMMARY

As the population of towns and cities grew during the nineteenth century, so central government gradually devolved more responsibility to local authorities to achieve a more efficient ordering of services and amenities within the locality. This paper illustrates two aspects of the process: the problems faced by councillors in East Ham as the powers of the local authority developed, together with the solutions they worked towards during the early years of the growth of local autonomy; and the relationship that existed between the civil servants in Whitehall and the locally elected councillors.

THE EARLY GROWTH OF EAST HAM

East Ham became a local government district in 1878 under a Local Board which held its first meeting in 1879, after complaints were made by the Woolwich Board in 1877 over the bad state of repair of the roads adjacent to their own parish¹. The formation of the Local Board thus began as a response to the beginnings of the urbanising process.

There developed a constant demand for housing, local services such as sewerage, rubbish collection and street lighting, and a host of amenities taken so much for granted today (for example the provision of parks, swimming baths and libraries). As a result, improvements had to be made in administrative practices, finance and accountability, the provision of effective services, control of building and local trades and constant attention had to be given to the health of the community. The process was by no means a smooth one. Although the Local Board gradually spent more money as their period of tenure progressed, as illustrated in Fig. 1, they could not anticipate the boom of the latter part of the decade 1890–1900 and

the pressure that such expansion entailed, as shown in Fig. 2.

GROWTH TO 1890

It was during what W. Ashworth (Glass 1964, 61)² describes as the first growth of the Essex suburb that the foundations of local government were laid. Mostly 'laid out as market-garden' in 1876, (Thorne 1876, 160) East Ham had already obtained a railway link to Fenchurch Street Station as far back as 1859; the line initially carrying Londoners to the pleasure gardens at Rosherville (Welch 1963, 1). Acting as a dormitory suburb once the industrial expansion of West Ham and Stratford had taken place, East Ham had no need of industry to encourage people to take up residence. The advantages of improved transport, shorter working hours and falling prices meant that large numbers of people could take a house in the suburbs and commute into the City (Powell 1973, Vol. VI, 14–16).

Land let on a yearly basis allowed landowners to take advantage of the increase in value as development took place, and this resulted in the expansion of resi-

Year	Estimated ¹ Expenditure	Liabilities ²	Poor Rate			General District Rate		Total rates in the £	
			Net Poor Rateable Value	Rate in the £		Net General District Assessable Value	Rate in the £	East Ham Parish	Little Ilford Parish
				East Ham Parish	Little Ilford Parish				
	£	£	£	s. d.	s. d.	£	s. d.	s. d.	s. d.
1879 ³ -80	3,153		33,661	2 6	1 9	18,451	3 0	5 6	—
1880-81	1,702 ⁴		40,071	2 4	1 9	24,094	3 0	5 4	—
1881-82	4,126		49,401	2 6	3 3	28,262	3 0	5 6	—
1882-83	4,923		53,885	2 2	1 10	34,720	3 0	5 2	—
1883-84	5,578		58,170	2 6	1 8	37,964	3 0	5 6	—
1884-85	5,157		79,290	2 0	3 4	48,350	2 4	4 4	—
1885-86	4,893		83,176	2 6	2 0	50,335	2 0	4 6	—
1886-87	5,711		86,569	2 0	3 2	53,250	2 0	4 0	—
1887 ⁵ -88	6,907		101,592	2 10	2 5½	73,393	2 0	4 10	4 5½
1888-89	6,909		106,540	2 6	3 1	77,782	1 10	4 4	4 11
1889-90	6,110		108,862	2 10	2 10	82,425	1 8	4 6	4 6
1890-91	8,293		113,015	3 2	2 10	88,418	2 0	5 2	4 10
1891-92	8,884		127,721	3 2	3 0	98,478	2 0	5 2	5 0
1892-93	10,085		136,069	3 2	3 4	105,859	2 0	5 2	5 4
1893-94	15,320		155,030	3 4	3 6	120,296	2 4	5 8	5 10
1894-95	19,089		168,288	3 2	3 10	130,955	2 4	5 6	6 2
1895 ⁶ -96	25,181		183,499	3 7	4 0	143,788	3 1	6 8	7 1
1896-97	30,793		197,893	4 4	3 4	156,344	3 1	7 5	6 5
1897 ⁷ -98	36,895	11,772	233,238	3 10	3 5	205,627	3 3	7 1	6 8
1898-99	33,926	10,682	248,593	4 0	3 10	222,584	3 0	7 0	6 10
1899-00	41,487	15,881	281,363	4 0	3 10	255,636	3 0	7 0	6 10
1900 ⁸ -01	53,998	26,740	341,088		4 9	315,796	3 6		8 3
1901-02	57,652	38,948	365,887		4 10	340,664	3 10		8 8
1902-03	64,982	60,529	412,992		5 6	388,837	4 0		9 6
1903-04	72,585	75,098	443,609		5 3	414,399	3 10		9 1
1904-05	81,560	38,023	464,955		5 6	435,938	4 0		9 6

1. Obtained from minute books and relevant year's Abstract of Accounts from 1899 when the estimated expenditure began to be notified in the yearly Abstract of Accounts. Until this time, estimated expenditure figures were only given in the minute books.

2. This column gives details of the liabilities at the end of the accounting period from the date they were first included. They were added to the estimated expenditure to determine the rate.

3. The East Ham Local Government District was constituted on the 6 December 1878.

4. The figure for this year is not complete because the estimates are not given in the minute book dated 12 October 1880, p. 153.

5. The Rural Sanitary District of Little Ilford was included in the East Ham Urban Sanitary District on the 29 September 1886.

6. The Urban District Council was constituted 31 December 1894.

7. The 20% allowance on the rateable value formerly made to owners in respect of the General District Rate was discontinued, and the occupiers rated direct, under the provisions of the Public Health Act (sec. 211).

8. The Parish of Little Ilford was amalgamated with the Parish of East Ham, by Order of the Local Government Board from 1 April 1900.

Table made up from: Urban District of East Ham, Abstract of Accounts, 1 April 1904-8 November 1904, p. 403.

Fig. 1 Statement of rates levied.

The following figures have been taken from the minute books of the Local Board and Urban District Council. The numbers are for permission given by the authority, hence they do not necessarily represent the number of buildings actually erected during the periods shown. Also, I have not distinguished between iron churches built on a site and then pulled down later to make way for a more permanent building.

Year	Houses	Shops	Shops and Houses	Churches	Schools	New Streets
1880	189	3	4	1		5
1881	912	5	12			6
1882	488	20	25	1		17
1883	267					1
1884	308	4	7			5
1885	217	3	14	2		2
1886	284	1	7	1		3
1887	385		35	2		6
1888	475		24	3		11
1889	329		26			8
1890	429		17	2		18
1891	529		72	2	2	
1892	546		26			10
1893	598		55		1	6
1894	1,036		39			13
1895	767	6	59	1		2
1896	1,151	4	77			6+
1897	1,880		70	2		26
1898	2,229	5	106			17
1899	1,609	8	98		1	13
1900 ¹	649	8	25	1		11

1. This figure is incomplete because one book of minutes is missing.

Fig. 2 Building figures 1800–1900

dential development on a large scale and at such a pace that industry and obnoxious trades had little chance to establish themselves in East Ham. The social make-up of East Ham and the entrepreneurs attracted to the area may have had some impact on this development; John Bethell was one notable entrepreneur. A surveyor and auctioneer whose grandfather lived in Didsbury, Lancashire and whose father moved to South Woodford (Burke 1980, 254) he lived locally and acted as land agent, surveyor and auctioneer on behalf of the British Land Company³. Influencing the local politics of both West and East Ham, he became a knight in 1906, baronet in 1911 and, after supporting the National

Government as a Member of Parliament for East Ham, retired from politics by moving to Bushey in Hertfordshire.

The expansion of East Ham can be further divided into two within the second phase suggested by Ashworth (Glass 1964, 65): from 1870–90, during which urban development had begun on a small scale when growth was not exceptional, enabling the Local Board to gain experience in local government; and the decade 1890–1900, when expansion grew dramatically, as did the number of problems facing local government. Development was to continue to such an extent that 'Apart from the road pattern hardly anything remains in East Ham that is older than the 19th century, except the

ancient parish church' (Powell, 1973 Vol. VI, 3(b)).

THE LOCAL BOARD

The period up to the formation of the Urban District Council has been divided by Powell (1973, Vol. VI, 20) into two. Between 1879–86 street levelling, paving and drainage were carried out; and between 1886–94 the system of main drainage was constructed and Plashet Recreation Ground purchased. Throughout this period the main burden fell upon W. H. Savage, the Board's Surveyor, who carried out all public works and inspected new private buildings to ensure they conformed to the by-laws.

The main preoccupation of the Board centred around the enforcement of the building by-laws, which at times proved to be an onerous task. Houses were erected without notice, or without plans having first been deposited, or before drains were constructed⁴. The problems culminated in a physical assault on the Surveyor in 1891⁵. It would appear that this assault brought the clash between builders and Board to a conclusion, for opposition subsided to such an extent that minor problems were solved by refusing planning permission after the 1890s.

As a result of the Local Board's work, the basic infrastructure was in place for an expansion that was to be one of the most dramatic in England during the last decade of the 19th century.

FACTORS AFFECTING DECISION MAKING

Population: with the formation of the Urban District Council in 1895, a turning point was reached in the affairs of local government in East Ham. It was the growth of population that caused these changes—noted by Humphreys (Price-Williams 1885, 437) in 1885, which

1801	1,250
1811	1,386
1821	1,511
1831	1,658
1841	1,650
1851	1,737
1861	2,858
1871	5,009
1881	10,706
1891	32,718
1901	96,018
1905	121,428
1911	133,487
1919	131,008
1921	143,246

The population figure for 1921 was not exceeded. By 1939 it had dropped to an estimated 127,600 and fell during the Second World War to a low of 75,230 in 1941. By 1949 it reached 122,000 and fell gradually to 104,070 in 1964.

Figures obtained from Parliamentary Papers.

Fig. 3 The population of East Ham

increased dramatically during the last decade of the century, as Fig. 3 illustrates.

The combined increase in the population in West and East Ham gave Essex the largest increase in population between 1881–91 of any other county at 36.3% (Low 1891, 546).

Consequently, by 1897 East Ham was one of the six District Councils to have a population exceeding 50,000, a fact that local people were fully aware of (*East Ham Echo*, 15 October 1897, 4(a)), and a factor that the Council was to continue to use as a justification for increased expenditure as the decade wore on.

Property values: accompanying the increase in the population was a commensurate increase in land values: 'Happy they who own the land of East Ham! They have but to sit still and be made rich without any exertion' reported the *East Ham Express* (24 February 1894, 4(h)) when plans were submitted for 148 houses to be built. The high cost of land was a further factor the Council constantly referred to in their dealings with the Local Government Board, and which

was commented upon by the *East Ham Echo* (27 November 1896, 5(a-b)):

The continued demand for building land in the neighbourhood and the firm prices readily offered to acquire it must astonish even many who are closely associated with landed property, and who have watched the rapid development of the district during the past few years. I believe I am right in stating that there is scarcely a single square inch of land not acquired for building purposes in the whole parish of Little Ilford, in which a decade ago market gardens flourished abundantly. It is noteworthy, too, that the land, though undeveloped, appreciates in value to the extent of five per cent per annum—that is to say, to purchase a plot of land here and leave it untouched is a better investment than consols.

With such a lucrative property market it was not surprising that at least nine councillors were involved in speculation, several of whom held office as chairmen of the Works Committee at various times (Powell, 1973 Vol. VI, 21).

URBAN DISTRICT COUNCIL

A marked change is clearly indicated when looking at the first page of the Council's minute book. A formality that had not been evident before pervades the new minutes to such an extent that the reader immediately registers a new body at work in the old meeting chamber.

PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

Electoral practice: surviving documentary evidence suggests that it was common practice for officers of the Board to act as proxy for voters, thus ensuring the return of Board members favourable to those already elected, until John Bethell raised the issue after the 1892 elections. Political manoeuvring ensured that the issue was successfully evaded for almost a year, although the practice was finally discontinued in 1893⁶.

However, immediately the Urban District Council had been elected, the issue of improper electoral practice was again

raised by John Bethell over the conduct of the returning officer, C. E. Wilson the Town Clerk. The issue concerned the successful return of Mr Langham, an old standing member of the Local Board, over Mr Carte, an architect, by six votes and a suggestion that the impropriety of the past had returned. No record of this incident clouds the minutes of the Council's meeting, although it was given coverage by the *Echo* (11 January 1895, 3(c)). Also, no further mention was made until elections were due to be held in 1896 when Mr Wilson refused to act as returning officer, having performed the task throughout the life of the Local Board,

It is interesting to note that Mr Wilson never acted as returning officer again and Mr Carte was voted in at this election.

Council officials: the practice of council officials retaining several positions simultaneously was also raised when the new Council was elected. This issue was taken up by the *Echo* in January 1895 with reference to Mr Wilson who was also Clerk to Barking Council. However, it was not until the following year, when the whole question of whether the time had arrived for the Council to have a permanent staff was referred to the Finance Committee, that an attempt was made to regulate the system of control and accountability between officials and councillors.

Having had the matter passed on to them, the Finance Committee instructed the Clerk to prepare a report giving details of the duties and wages of the office staff, for it was usual for officials to control their own staff and retain a number of positions because professional salaries were not sufficient to ensure a man could earn enough in relation to his status. As the business of the Council expanded, Mr Wilson registered his willingness to pass the burden on in return for an adequate salary. In November 1896 he received £200 per annum, which was increased by 1898 to

£300 per annum⁷ and the Council finally succeeded in taking the Clerk's department under its own wing later that year.

In such a way the practice of electioneering and control of public affairs, entrusted to one or two officials, gave way as rural East Ham retreated against the rapidly growing suburban environment and the ramifications of such changes.

Finance and accountability: concern centred around the fact that the Council was rarely in credit with the bank. Bank balances had been recorded in the minutes from June 1895 and the records show that the Council was frequently overdrawn. There were two reasons for this state of affairs: the General District Rate and Private Street Improvements took longer to collect than was necessary, and bank loans were contracted before they were authorised. The former was solved by employing more collectors and monitoring their collection rates but the latter problem proved more intractable because the cause was related to the need for speed of action during a period of high growth.

An accountant was appointed in April 1896, and lost no time in suggesting changes. During the course of the next four years control of expenditure was tightened considerably. At first, the four main officers—Surveyor, Accountant, Clerk and Medical Officer of Health had to present to their respective committees a list of goods required from time to time, but a change in 1897 required that each committee should consider its own expenditure in future, submitting their estimates to the Accountant at six-monthly intervals. Further refinements took place by which the Accountant furnished each committee with a statement of expenditure in comparison to what was estimated, and by 1899 a storekeeper and timekeeper had been appointed.

Tinkering with the control mechanism and remodelling the accounts did not,

however, alter the large overdrafts at the bank. Although the Finance Committee recommended that plans and estimates in respect of loans applied for were to be completed and sent to the Local Government Board without delay⁸, the problem continued to be one of obtaining finance for projects before the subsequent public inquiry would allow the expenditure anticipated. This is illustrated in the District Auditor's report for the year ending 31 March 1897. He disallowed £2,665 10s 11d against the Treasurer for the massive deficit the Council had accumulated: a total of £18,163 14s 8d⁹. To a large extent, this debt resulted from the Council executing private street works in advance of obtaining Local Government Board sanctions for loans. In the words of Mr G. T. Goodringe, the Council Treasurer and general manager of the London and South Western Bank, overdrafts in anticipation of loans being approved had 'been adopted for some years past and until recently it was not questioned and it has been impossible in one year to work off a deficit and obtain a balance'¹⁰. John Pease, who carried out the audit the following year, acknowledged:

That bearing in mind the rapid development of the Urban District of East Ham, the General District Rate made by the Council should be of sufficient amount, not only to meet the estimated liabilities, but to provide an ample margin for possible contingencies, involving extraordinary expenditure¹¹.

This aspect of the Council's work brought its members into frequent conflict with the Local Government Board during the latter part of the 1890s, and is dealt with more fully below.

Furthermore, as time progressed and expenditure increased, the Council had to employ more people to maintain control over increased services and work, as the auditor's report for 1900 pointed out¹². So the new Council had to cope with a faster

rate of population increase, leading to the need for more Council spending, which in turn led to the discovery of faults within their system of accountability and control, faults that were only gradually rectified as time and experience wore on.

RELATIONS WITH THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT BOARD

Problems with administrative jurisdiction, lack of administrative uniformity, irregular inspection by the Central authority and the ineffectual response to the Public Health Acts led to the formation of the Royal Sanitary Commission in 1868 to report on the problems facing local government (Redlich and Hirst 1970, 158). The legislature reacted to the uncompromising conclusions of the Commission by bringing together the various bodies involved in controlling Local Authorities into one centralised authority in the form of the Local Government Board in 1871 (Smellie 1950, 67).

However, the executive control thus established with a minister at the head of the Local Government Board was, in the opinion of Keith-Lucas (1977, 19), 'only a hesitant and somewhat ineffective step towards establishing a central authority and national standards of services'. This first step in creating an effective central authority faltered because of financial meanness and reaction against the tactless pressure for centralisation espoused by Edwin Chadwick which aroused a great deal of hostility and resentment (Keith-Lucas 1977, 20). In consequence, local authorities were to struggle for some time before clear lines of authority were defined between the various local agencies, as discussed briefly in Part IV.

In the absence of the ability to control by withholding central funding, the concept of an independent form of local government as described by Edward Jenks (1919) illustrates the nature of the

early relationship between the Local Government Board and local authorities. Although established by statute, the distinguishing feature of local government lay in its independence from the centre rather than being subject to the centre as part of a hierarchical form. In such a way, in the words of Edward Jenks (1919, 15) 'each organ is free to act as it pleases within its authority', and control was exercised in a critical or censorial way which in turn was by no means absolute, and the relationship was described by Josef Redlich (1903, 246) as 'not one between a superior, who deals in uncircumscribed imperatives, and inferiors, who yielded unconditional administrative obedience. It would be far more true to say that for bureaucratic subjection and centralised omnipotence Parliament has substituted the principle of inspectability'.

In consequence the Local Government Board functioned as a controlling agency in relation to the Poor Law, public health and over local government in general. Those powers concerning local authorities covered a range of areas, including the following: regulating the territorial organisation within a local authority; providing orders to regulate procedure at elections; requiring local authorities to furnish statistics; controlling, where necessary, the appointment and dismissal of those officials whose salaries were partly paid by the Treasury and generally ensuring that the business of the local authorities was restricted to the purposes and within the limits prescribed by Parliament (Redlich 1903, 283-288). Furthermore, the Local Government Board exercised statutory rights of confirmation or refusal in respect of those powers that local authorities were empowered to provide, such as local loans or by-laws (Redlich 1903, 247). Control over the quasi-legislative regulations conferred

upon Councils, such as connecting private drains with public sewers, regulating the width of streets or the height of new buildings, to name but a few (Redlich 1903, 290), was exercised by means of the financial authority vested in the Local Government Board. This financial supervision took two forms: the central audit, which was an exercise that necessarily took place after the event, and of greater importance, the need for local authorities to have loans sanctioned by the Local Government Board (Redlich 1903, 293). As a result, it was primarily when the Local Government Board exercised these financial controls that the relationship between it and the local authority were effectively illustrated.

The particular relationship between East Ham and the Local Government Board centred on the pace of change witnessed by the increase in population and the local authorities response to that increase. It was complicated by the perceived need for speed by the councillors of East Ham, which in itself was not helped by the lack of administrative support, the development of which progressed as the pangs of growth continued throughout the decade.

The composition of elected councillors of East Ham show that a good many businessmen were involved in running the district. Led by John Bethell, a progressive, the tenor of the work they undertook proved to be an extension of his own business methods. In his book on East Ham, Alfred Stokes (1933, 187) emphasised John Bethell's qualities and their impact on East Ham:

His business acumen and ability, his foresight have helped in the forming of our borough, and had he had his way it would have been better than it is today in many ways.

Also, the *Stratford Express*, in their obituary on 1 June 1945, described him as 'not

patient with inefficiency or unbusinesslike ways'. It was this attitude, combined with the need to act swiftly in a property market that was rising quickly, that helped cause some of the problems the Council experienced with the District Auditor at the end of each year. At the same time, the Council was attempting to provide amenities and services for an expanding population in a district which was shedding its rural character for a suburban one, while trying to keep rates down to a level affordable by all living within the district. It would appear that councillors and their staff were able to cope, but the Local Government Board did not always agree with the methods adopted.

One of the stumbling blocks between local and central government lay in the perception each had over the need for land. In their anxiety to have the work completed, the Council continually tripped over themselves in their haste, for plans and estimates were rarely sent automatically by the Clerk with requests for loans until August 1898. As a result time was wasted with Local Government Board requests for the necessary details as each loan was applied for.

This sense of frustration was illustrated by the Board's seeming lack of speed when it came to initiating public inquiries, which were often followed by a period of waiting prior to the loan being sanctioned. To a certain extent this was also due to the Council's impatience, although the men at the Local Government Board did not fully appreciate the intentions of the Council, however well meaning the councillors may have been. For instance, the purchase of Rancliffe House actually took place on 22 May 1895 with an agreement of sale between Colonel Ynyr Burges and the Council, which included the payment of interest if not complete within six months¹³, but the Clerk did not write to the Board until the following day to set

the inquiry process into motion. As time passed the Council became quite desperate, finally obtaining the Board's sanction after writing and explaining the need for urgency because a third extension to purchase had been refused.

The cost of land encouraged speed on the Council's part as the decade drew to a close, and it became apparent by 1897 that the Board had resigned itself to making requests as to whether the Council had already purchased the land in question. It is possible that the Board accepted this situation because a certain amount of sympathy may have existed for East Ham among the Board's officers. Colonel Smith in his report on the need to make up 80 private streets at one time in 1897 stated 'I drove round and visited nearly all the above roads; the whole district shows signs of marvellously rapid growth and streets have sprung up evidently quite recently'¹⁴.

However, a clash occurred between the Local Government Board and East Ham Council in relation to the motivation that led men to the area, namely the cost of land and its inexorable increase in value. It occurred over the purchase of a site for the proposed isolation hospital. The Council's Surveyor, who had put his resignation to the Council in February 1899 had also, by the 25th of the month, successfully negotiated with the Council to sell land for the erection of the hospital. A few days after the public inquiry, in a letter from Mr Wilson with respect to the suggestion that an independent valuer ought to value the site, the Clerk stated:

Two surveyors, namely, Mr J. H. Bethell and Mr J. H. Carte who have the largest practice in the neighbourhood, are both of them Members of the Council, and both have advised the Council to accept the terms . . . Messrs Bethell and Carte have in their hands several estates in this district, and, although knowing the wants of the Council, have never suggested that they could advise any of their clients to sell land for this

purpose at the price of this, or indeed at any price . . . In the opinion of the Council there is no valuer in the district whose valuation they would take in preference to that of Messrs Bethall and Carte¹⁵.

This deal provided the Surveyor with two lump sums: £9,500 from the sale of the land and a further £4,350 for land sold for dwellings to be built for the hospital¹⁶. This was probably the only method by which the Council could give a 'golden handshake' to a former loyal employee, and it is interesting to observe that the Board backed down, allowing sanction for the loan once the Council promised not to use the hospital for cases of smallpox¹⁷.

On the whole, relations between the Council and the Local Government Board were workmanlike. Rarely did the Board insist on a particular policy, but the records show that the East Ham Town Clerk regularly sent letters to the Board complaining of delays which the Council could have helped to avoid if the ground work had previously been effected, as Redlich and Hirst (1970, 298) pointed out:

Local authorities often complain of the round-about methods of the department, and its exasperating 'red-tapism' is constantly criticised in Parliament and the Press. It may be conceded that many of these complaints are not altogether ill-founded. The slow-paced bureaucratic walk of the Local Government Board, even when it is not merely in which a local authority, often comprised of business men in a hurry, likes to push through its business.

A further source of frustration to the Council was the way in which the Board carried on its business. This illustrates the disparity between the speed with which local businessmen wished to undertake solutions to problems and the pace at which Whitehall worked. It also indicated the differences between the methods that each adopted. This is shown via the nature of the course taken by the Council in sending deputations to discuss issues

face-to-face, rather than through a series of letters. Requests for such discussions were refused by the Board on the grounds that any problems ought to be put in writing¹⁸, but to men of action this was not enough. It was by the use of such deputations that action was attempted over the issue of trains for working men, showing how much effort the members of the Council were prepared to expend in helping with one of the many problems that faced them during these years. Thus the relationship between the two bodies was such that the District Council carried out policies very much as it pleased.

CONTROL BY CENTRAL GOVERNMENT—THE OMNIBUS ISSUE

There were times when the members of the Council felt aggrieved by petty rules which they did not consider fair. One such was the constant need for various committees to visit works being carried out in the district prior to Council meetings. For men working a full day, this aspect of their Council duties was not always a pleasant or easy one, and as the number of works and therefore visits increased, there developed an interest in obtaining transportation for Council use.

First mention of purchasing an omnibus was in 1895 during the first few months of the Council's life. The Council proceeded cautiously over this issue by asking the Local Government Board whether they were empowered to make such a purchase. After sending two letters, the Board refused to allow the expenditure and stated that they would not reconsider the position¹⁹. Not to be deterred, a committee of the entire Council decided to refer the matter to the Works Committee with powers to act.

The Works Committee reported to the following Council meeting that it had considered the Board's reply, but the minutes

give no indication as to whether any decision had been made. The account in the *Echo* on 8 October 1897 (6(c)) amplifies the official record, however: it was reported that Councillor Keys mentioned the cost of hiring an omnibus (16 shillings each time) and suggested that the Council could have purchased one over and over again by this time:

Councillor East: 'Will you sign the cheque?'

Councillor Keys: 'Oh! I don't mind! I know what these surcharges are. I move that the surveyor be instructed to procure one.'

Councillor Knight: 'It is agreed later on.'

This exchange illustrates that the central issue was the possible imposition of a surcharge on the individual councillors signing the authorisation. The comment made by Councillor Keys signified how such surcharges were treated by this time, because such disallowances were remitted in the past after a suitable letter of apology and explanation. Hence the reason for the lethargic response by the Works Committee and their decision to refer the question back to the full Council.

East Ham Council were not the only authority to face such problems. Willesden Urban District Council wrote to East Ham Council with a view to sending a deputation to wait upon the President of the Local Government Board over this very issue, a suggestion that met with agreement, but apparently no further action²⁰. Finally, a full meeting of the Council in committee decided to purchase an omnibus in December 1897²¹.

This disregard of the Board's directive was duly observed by the District Auditor and a surcharge was consequently levied against the Council. The Clerk was requested to send a routine application of remission to the Board²², but feeling obviously ran very high over this issue because the Clerk wrote a long letter to the Board. The tone of this letter contained the culmination of several years of

constant adverse criticism levied against the Council. It contained indignation over the lack of appreciation for the difficulties overcome and it contained frustration over the lack of sympathy shown by the Board for a seemingly trivial payment which would help the councillors in the performance of their duties. It was a typed, eight-page resumé of the work carried out by both Local Board and District Council since 1878. The Clerk spared nothing. The information he gave was comprehensive and clearly illustrated that the growth of the district had been catered for in a responsible way²³.

Despite an attempt made by a handful of local objectors, the Board eventually allowed the expenditure, emphasising disagreement with the purchase²⁴.

The Council may have succeeded in obtaining an omnibus without incurring a surcharge, but the Local Government Board would not tolerate any further expenditure relating to it after they finally decided to remit the disallowance. Consequently, the audit of 1900 disallowed £18 12s 6d in respect to the repair and painting of the omnibus²⁵, known locally since 10 September 1897 as the 'Black Maria', according to the *Echo*.

In this case the Council was seen to be unsure of the ground it was treading. Before opposing the Board, it felt a need to sound out the possibility of obtaining the use of an omnibus with due permission, but when it was not forthcoming, councillors decided to go ahead and purchase one with the knowledge that all previous disallowances were eventually remitted. Their mistake, having convinced the Board not to surcharge them for the omnibus, was that they appeared to have too little regard for the minority of ratepayers who later complained with more effect, thereby reinforcing the previous policy decision of the Board.

RESPONSE TO CENTRAL GOVERNMENT—DIRECT EMPLOYMENT

On Saturday 21 October 1893 (4(h)) the *East Ham Express* noted that the Local Board, backed by the East Ham Owners and Ratepayers Association 'resolved on Tuesday evening to add to the ranks of the unemployed', a change which the writer put down to Mr Savage, whose 'pronouncement on the question caused several members, who meant to vote against the proposal, to alter their minds and vote for it, and led others to abstain from opposition'. But this change in policy was no doubt a response to the receipt of a circular letter from the Local Government Board requesting authorities to direct their efforts in finding work for the unemployed²⁶, a request the Surveyor no doubt used in evidence to encourage such a move. By the following February Mr Savage reported that the Local Board had spent £483 extra on 'useful labour during the past few weeks'²⁷ and made such a favourable report in July, that it was resolved to carry out all future works without contractors. The main advantage for the Surveyor rested on the supervision he gained—a point not lost on the members of the Local Board²⁸.

Contradicting earlier remarks about creating unemployment in the district, by 1896 the *Express* (18 April 1896, 5(c)) was reporting on the success achieved in carrying out the Council's work with direct labour. It was estimated that £1,000 had been saved in one year and an unfavourable comparison was made with West Ham: 'In West Ham the Works Department has been a costly failure; in East Ham it appears a complete success'.

The basis of this achievement was founded on fair wages. In 1891 the Local Board had agreed to pay workmen on the roads a minimum rate of 18 shillings per week²⁹, the Outdoor Committee rec-

ommending an increase in a workman's wage from 5d to 6d per hour in the following year³⁰. This policy was followed up in 1895 when the Council decided to ensure that contractors paid the specified union rates of pay for any work they contracted for³¹, a policy enforced against one contractor in 1896³².

Further improvements were introduced with an eight-hour day, 48-hour week for all men engaged in the Council's employ in 1895³³, and a letter from the Secretary of the East Ham branch of the Gasworkers and General Labourers Union over the question of employing men at trade union rates was treated seriously enough to request the Secretary to attend the next meeting of the Works Committee to discuss the issue³⁴. As a result of this meeting, the hours and rates of all Council employees were reviewed and the necessary adjustments were made³⁵, an exercise the Council conducted throughout the decade at regular intervals.

This success was also reported in the 26th November 1896 edition (Vol. V, No. 200, 1127(a)) of *London*:

All the municipal work of the District Council is undertaken by the Department, which works on the eight hours system, and pays trade union wages . . . they have 200 men continually at work, much larger in proportion to population than the L.C.C. employs.

The reasoning behind the increase in rates for workmen and reduction in hours was based on the principle that they worked long enough already. In March 1895 when proposing to increase wages, John Bethell emphasised that the workers' call to work longer hours was essentially a request for money because that was the only method by which they could achieve a rise in pay.

In such a way the Council demonstrated that they could employ direct labour with higher wages and a shorter working week at a lower cost and more

efficiently than contractors. Whether due to central government pressure in wishing to provide unemployment relief, which the Council readily responded to during 1895, or in the quest for economy in combination with the need for adequate control over the quality of work, the employment of direct labour proved to be profitable. In the short-term, relief was provided to the unemployed; in the long-term, ratepayers achieved value for money and the Surveyor was able to ensure quality of workmanship.

RESPONSIBILITY AND POWER

The growth from Rural Sanitary District to Local Board and further to Urban District Council was not always a smooth path whereby powers were transferred from one authority to another together with the responsibilities acquired. Anomalies existed by which the District Council, for instance, could be checked in a policy by the Parish Council, and officers appointed under older statutes could not be removed. Further, in this period of the continuing *ad hoc* development of local authorities, there were many unanswered questions in respect of the duties and limitations of the decision-making process not laid down by Parliament.

Some local authorities sought increased powers through charters of incorporation as their size increased, but every power gained was conceded only after a great amount of effort in time and expensive paperwork. The first time a discussion over the need for extra powers took place was at a meeting between Leyton, Walthamstow, Wanstead, Barking and East Ham over the question of whether to ask Parliament for the extra powers that West Ham Local Board had obtained by the West Ham Local Board Extension of Powers Act 1884. This discussion did not lead to any action, however, and thereafter, East Ham attempted to come to

terms with the problems it faced in isolation.

In essence a change in attitude had occurred by which elected councillors considered they were the representatives of an expanding electorate, and demanded control of local affairs accordingly. One of the problems was reflected in the method by which officers were appointed. The office of Collector of the Poor Law Rates was an appointment for life made before the formation of the Local Government Board in 1879 to John Dennison. The Local Government Board confirmed the appointment in July 1895³⁶ after previously stating that the Board was not in a position to reverse it³⁷. As a result of being rebuffed in their request for powers to appoint overseers, such appointments came to be regarded as irritating irregularities that the Council continued to attempt to bring within their own sphere of influence. Hence the Council made several attempts before succeeding in their aim of making both new and old functions more accountable to the elected body.

Although opposed by John Dennison, new collectors of the rates were appointed, and bowing to local pressure, he eventually agreed to amend his original contract. When appointed on 4th July 1867³⁸, he took a poundage on the collection of the rates as was usual, and in a letter to the Council he gave the poundage he received since 1890³⁹:

end March 1890	£160	16s	8d
1891	£199	19s	7d
1892	£228	13s	11d
1893	£204	8s	5d
1894	£421	13s	0d
	<hr/>		
	£1,215	11s	7d
	<hr/>		

The *Echo* reported on 8 February 1895 (3(e)) that Councillor Murty pointed out

that these sums of money would satisfy two or three people whose needs were greater than Mr Dennison's, for he was also an architect, surveyor and agent to Colonel Burges. By April he accepted a salary of £300 per annum in lieu of commission⁴⁰, and had also offered to let the Council appoint two officers to collect the General District Rate⁴¹. The Council thereby achieved a greater degree of control over the rate collection, but they continued to dislike the fact that he remained in office for life. This was an annoyance to which the Council addressed two clauses of the Improvement Bill it promoted in 1898.

Many of the problems East Ham faced over the question of the Council's authority were codified in the Bill, and in a final attempt to remove John Dennison, a compromise was reached by which future appointments were to be made by the Council. This led to his resignation in September 1898, and he left the area six months later with a pension, granted by the Council under the terms of the Act, of £460 per year⁴².

The Bill also covered the following: the reinforcement of building regulations, the provision of powers to allow for the running of tramways, the supply of electricity and provision of water. Of more importance was the authority to consolidate the rates. Overcoming an attempt by the Local Government Board to slow the Council down in implementing the scheme⁴³, agreement was reached with the overseers concerned and an initial saving of £403 was reported within the first six months⁴⁴.

With the passage of the Improvement Bill, the Council consolidated the experience of a number of years' building supervision into statute and aided the further expansion of local government from District Council to Municipal Borough in 1904 and County Borough in 1915. The

District Council was responsible for breaking with the old system of life appointments and introducing a greater sense of local accountability based on the voters, rather than the paternal view by which local notables knew what was best and acted accordingly.

CONCLUSION

The acceleration in pace and expenditure as time progressed ensured complaints from past members of the Local Board, even though they were responsible for one of the problems later authorities inherited—overdrafts to cover the purchase of land before such an expenditure was sanctioned by the Local Government Board⁴⁵. Furthermore, they did not appreciate the removal of the prerequisite they voted themselves in 1882 by allowing cottage-owners who let their properties to be rated at a reduced estimate of four fifths of the annual rateable value⁴⁶, a decision which brought in an extra £66,000 per year according to the *Echo* (9 April 1897, 7(b)).

Owen A. Hartley (1971, 440) observed that 'There had never been any settlement about which tradition, which model, is the preferred one' in the relationship between central and local government relations. The case of East Ham during the last decade of the nineteenth century provides evidence to suggest that the Council was, however, in the words of E. P. Hennock, (1982, 39) 'largely independent of central government'. Certainly some of the letters sent to the Local Government Board by the Clerk would indicate an intolerance bordering on insolence which the editor of the *Echo* applauded on 3 November 1899 (6(d)), when he discussed the remittance of the disallowance over the purchase of the omnibus, in which he described the Board's 'pompous' letter as 'an amusing epistle'. This illustrates the historical change which Hennock refers

to (1982, 38) by which the classes recently incorporated into the constitution were no longer prepared to allow the traditional ruling elite to hold sway over local affairs.

The climate of nineteenth-century local government in East Ham illustrates the point that Hennock (in Dyos, 1968, 319) made on the financial position most found themselves in:

before the introduction of massive Treasury grants the precarious financial basis of English local government meant that in the growing towns successful administration required among other things a marked flair for business, and that it was essential in order to achieve anything to be able to think adventurously about finance.

It was through careful planning that the purchase of a central site for the town hall, for instance, was achieved despite the added cost due to the slow process followed by the Local Government Board in allowing the sanction of the loan, although it was never taken up due to the short repayment period specified. Eventually the finance for both the purchase of the land and the cost of building the town hall was provided for by clauses in the Improvement Bill.

Councillors were occasionally frustrated by the slower pace adopted by the men at the Local Government Board, but were also checked in their actions before committing themselves to projects which would have led to future complications. Civic pride in the form of an omnibus with the Council's coat of arms decorating the panels represented the beginnings of a change 'from the comfortable, exclusive ease of the dining-club into the chill, impersonal world of the ruled-feint ledger; the buildings themselves say so'; (Martin in Dyos 1968, 158) a move highlighted by the building of the Town Hall.

Thus, despite the private interests of the members of both the Local Board and the District Council—or perhaps because of such interests, they succeeded in estab-

lishing and consolidating local government within a tightly controlled financial framework which proved to be largely independent of central government.

NOTES

1. PRO, WHUC No 137 October 1877 to April 1878, Woolwich Local Board of Health to LGB 6 December 1877 (779/78).
2. see also Powell, 1973, volume V, 1–92.
3. The British Land Company plc only have a few plans from this period left to indicate John Bethell's activities.
4. EHLBM, 13 July 1880, 123; 10 January 1882, 308.
5. EHLBM, 17 November 1891, 56 and 66–67.
6. EHLBM, 21 February 1893, 394–5.
7. EHUDCM, 20 October 1896, 110–111 and 3 November 1896, 145; Abstract of Accounts 1898–99, 222. See Powell, vol VI, 20–1, for a systematic account.
8. EHUDCM, 1 December 1896, 239.
9. PRO, WHUC No 137 SPEHU 1897, Extract of Report by C. L. Hockin, District Auditor, 114991/1897 (121453/97).
10. PRO WHUC No 137 SPEHU 1897, letter from G. T. Goodring, 2 October 1897 (139482/97).
11. PRO WHUC No 137 SPEHU, assistant district auditor's report, 20 August 1898 (107475/98).
12. PRO WHUC No 135 SPEHU, auditor's report for the year ending March 1900 (129540 5 November 1900), 5.
13. PRO WHUC No 137 SPEHU 1893–1896, copy of sale of agreement, 3800/96.
14. PRO WHUC No 137 SPEHU 1897, report of Lt Col A. C. Smith, RE 17 June 1897, 7 (54479/97).
15. PRO WHUC No 137 SPEHU 1897, EHUDC to LGB, 27 October 1899 (136360/28 Oct 99).
16. EHUDCM, 6 February 1900, 234.
17. PRO WHUC No 137 SPEHU 1899, EHUDC to LGB, 6 December 1899 (136360 M 1899).
18. EHUDCM, 4 February 1896, 412.
19. EHUDCM, 21 September 1897, 123.
20. EHUDCM, 7 December 1897, 383.
21. EHUDCM, 21 December 1897, 1.
22. EHUDCM, 6 July 1898, 183, and as reported in the *Echo*, 8 July 1898, 7(c).
23. PRO WHUC No 137 SPEHU 1898, EHUDC to LGB, 21 July 1898 (100834/98).
24. PRO WHUC No 137 SPEHU 1899, LGB to EHUDC, 20 October 1899 (157965 F 1898).
25. EHUDCM, 1 February 1900, 216.
26. EHLBM, 17 October 1893, 120.
27. EHLBM, 20 February 1894, 192.
28. EHLBM, 17 July 1894, 291.
29. EHLBM, 15 September 1891, 20–21.
30. EHLBM, 21 June 1892, 217–8.
31. EHUDCM, 5 March 1895, 110–11.
32. EHUDCM, 23 June 1896, 139.
33. EHUDCM, 19 March 1895, 166.
34. EHUDCM, 3 December 1895, 273.
35. EHUDCM, 17 December 1895, 319–320.
36. PRO WHUC No 137 SPEHU 1893–1896, LGB to EHUDC, 27 July 1895 (80632 B 1895).
37. *ibid.*, LGB to EHUDC 24 May 1895 (61653 C 1895).
38. PRO WHUC No 137 SPEHU 1893–1896, EHUDC to LGB, 21 June 1895 (80632/95).
39. EHUDCM, 19 February 1895, 89–92.
40. EHUDCM, 23 April 1895, 211.
41. EHUDCM, 7 May 1895, 259.
42. EHUDCM, 6 June 1899, 395.
43. EHUDCM, 7 February 1899, 395 and 21 February 1899, 26.
44. EHUDCM, 7 November 1899, 368–376.
45. EHLBM, 11 October 1887, 5.
46. EHUDCM, 6 April 1897, 116.

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EHUDC	East Ham Urban District Council
EHUDCM	East Ham Urban District Council Minutes
LGB	Local Government Board
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