

## **Village Echoes**

### **Lathes, Hundreds & Parishes**

Lathes were subdivisions of Kent at the time of the Kingdom of Kent (616-825 AD). The jurisdiction of each lathe was wide-ranging and included judicial and administrative functions and the raising of aid and subsidy for the local militia. At the time of the Domesday Book in 1086, seven lathes were recorded in Kent. However, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century the number was reduced from seven to five, with Goudhurst forming part of Scray Lathe, which stretched from the Sussex border to the north Kent coast. Scray Lathe was further divided into Upper and Lower Divisions. The lower division covered a wide area encompassing, in addition to Goudhurst, such places as Appledore, Woodchurch, Biddenden, Benenden, Tenterden, Marden and Cranbrook.

At the same time as the lathes were subdivided into hundreds, their judicial and administrative roles were reduced. In respect of judicial functions, some were taken over by the courts in the hundreds (the Hundredal Courts) with others being taken by the County Justices sitting in Petty and Quarter Sessions. Scray was the only lathe in Kent to be divided for the purpose of the Quarter Sessions. As Goudhurst fell within the Lower Division of Scray, the Quarter Sessions were those for West Kent and held at Maidstone: those for East Kent were held at Canterbury. The judicial role of the hundreds declined from the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Today Goudhurst falls within the area of Tunbridge Wells Borough but, before the creation of boroughs and districts in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Goudhurst came within the areas of three separate hundreds. Part of Goudhurst was in Cranbrook Hundred, part within the Hundred of West, or Little, Barnfield (roughly the part of the Parish covering Chingley and Combwell and running to the border with Hawkhurst Parish), and the greater part of the Parish within Marden Hundred.

On the administrative side, hundreds were used for taxation purposes and to administer the censuses undertaken between 1801 and 1841. Also, from 1832 to 1885, they were grouped together to form parliamentary constituencies. Between 1832 (The Reform Act) and 1868, Goudhurst was in the West Kent Constituency, which was defined as being those hundreds that were in the lower division of the Lathe of Scray along with the lathes of Sutton-at-Hone and Aylesford. From 1868 until 1885 Goudhurst became part of the Mid-Kent Constituency, which was defined as those hundreds in the lower division of the Lathe of Scray along with the Lathe of Aylesford.

Below the hundreds, but arguably more important in many ways, was the parish. Today the parish is the lowest tier of local administration; below both Tunbridge Wells Borough Council and Kent County Council. However, that structure is, in historic terms, relatively recent. Until the second half of the nineteenth century, county councils and district/borough councils, as administrative bodies, did not exist and most local governance was in the hands of parish councils. There was no split between civil parishes and ecclesiastical parishes, so Goudhurst Parish would have dealt with church matters as well as civil matters, such as collecting the poor rate. The only distinction was that parish civil matters were dealt with by the vestry, the meeting of which was chaired by the vicar.

Although lathes and hundreds have not been formally abolished, they have no functions today. However, the parishes are still important in terms of local administration although their powers are much less extensive than they once were.

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