

County Council Elections in Surrey: The First Sixty Years 1889 to 1949

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I. Introduction

We believe that it is essential that whoever shall be the representatives of the constituencies on the county councils should be checked by a healthy test of direct contact with those who elect them.¹

These were the words of Charles Richie, the President of the Local Government Board, on introducing the Local Government Bill to the House of Commons in 1888. The legislation promised a radical change in the nature of county government in England. One key element of the change was the application of 'the principles of representative democracy'.² Prior to this reform, which had the support of both the Conservative Government and the Liberal Opposition, county government had been the responsibility of 'the Court of Quarter Sessions, which functioned as a court of criminal jurisdiction and an organ of local government'.³ This meant, in effect, that counties were governed by magistrates, who were formally appointed by the Crown on the advice of the Lord Chancellor, with the Lord Lieutenant playing a key role in the process by nominating suitable candidates. Not surprisingly, as one of Surrey's historians, David Robinson, observes, the magistracy was 'a social elite of landowners and local business and professional men'.⁴

Under the provisions of the Local Government Act 1888, the bodies responsible for governing the counties were to be constituted on a similar basis to municipal borough councils. This meant that three quarters of the members of county councils were to be elected members and the remaining quarter aldermen, chosen by the councillors. However, notwithstanding the noble aspirations of the architects of these reforms, after an initial flurry of interest and engagement, the elective principle,

in the sense of regular contests, failed to take root in most counties for many decades. One of these was Surrey where the vast majority of seats were uncontested until after the Second World War. Why this should have been the case is not entirely clear? Nor indeed, if most seats were uncontested, what accounted for the contests which did take place? It is with these – and similar questions – that this paper is primarily concerned, with its focus on the period between 1889 and 1949.

Possibly because of the absence of contests, county council elections have attracted relatively little interest from historians.⁵ Consequently, an underlying aim of this paper is to show that even though the competitive element may have been conspicuous by its absence, contests that did occur offer some fascinating insights into the nature of county politics. Although the focus is on a single county, some of the underlying themes are likely to be echoed elsewhere.

The second section of the paper provides a summary of the rules governing county elections from their inception until 1949. The third offers an overview of the situation in Surrey with some suggested reasons for the absence of contests. The fourth examines the various types of contest which did occur. In the final section some general observations about the nature of local democracy at county level are made.

II. Rules governing county elections

From the outset the basic geographical unit for county elections was formally known as a 'division', as opposed to a ward or constituency. Although the term 'constituency' is sometimes used, this can give rise to confusion with parliamentary elections. Throughout their existence county councils have operated on the basis of one member per division.⁶ Unlike boroughs and some other elected bodies at the time when county councils were established, notably boards of guardians and school boards, there was no provision for multi-member divisions.

The number of councillors and hence divisions for each county was initially set by the Local Government Board, which also decided upon 'their apportionment between each of the boroughs which have sufficient population to return one councillor and the rest of the county'.⁷ Boroughs with populations which entitled them to more than one councillor were privileged to the extent that they decided how the divisions should be constituted. Elsewhere within the county responsibility for determining the boundaries of divisions, for the first elections, was exercised by Quarter Sessions. Thereafter, the county council was given responsibility for making alterations to the boundaries of divisions and, when necessary, increasing their number, although all changes had

to be formally approved by the Local Government Board and its successor bodies.⁸

In deciding the boundaries of county divisions, quarters sessions and county councils were required to take account of a number of factors. In the words of the statute,

The division shall be arranged with a view to the population of each division being, so nearly as conveniently may be equal, regard being had to a proper representation both of the rural and the urban population and to the distribution and pursuits of such population and to the area, and to the last published census for the time being, and to the evidence of any considerable change of population since such census.⁹

While the language has changed, the principles enshrined in the 1888 Act have not, thereby ensuring a degree of continuity. In other words, while equality of population is the key criterion for determining the boundaries of electoral divisions, this can be modified to take account of other factors. Although not mentioned in the quotation above, these include respecting, wherever possible, the boundaries of lower-tier local authorities.¹⁰

Another element of continuity is that, unlike the borough councils on which county councils were modelled, a system of complete rather than partial renewal has always operated. Thus, instead of a third of the seats being filled on an annual basis, county elections were held once every three years until 1974.¹¹ By-elections were arranged as and when necessary to fill casual vacancies.¹² The major cause of such vacancies was the election of councillors by their fellow members to the aldermanic bench, which occurred at relatively frequent intervals.¹³ Other reasons were the resignation of councillors before their term of office had expired and the death of sitting councillors. Casual vacancies occurring within six months of the next triennial election were filled at that election rather than a by-election. A process of co-option was used to fill wartime vacancies arising between 1915 and 1918 and 1939 and 1945.

Throughout their existence the mode of election for county councils has always been 'first past the post'. Despite a variety of modes which had operated during the nineteenth century, such as the cumulative vote¹⁴ and plural voting,¹⁵ so far there has never been any experimentation with the voting system for county councillors.

While the rules relating to electoral areas and mode of election have not changed, to any great extent, since 1888, those prescribing who has the right to vote and to stand for election to the county council have, in

the sense that they have gradually become more democratic and inclusive. With respect to the franchise, from 1889 to 1919, the key piece of legislation was the County Electors Act of 1888. Under its provisions, there were two main categories of county electors: (i) burgesses, that is those qualified to vote in municipal elections,¹⁶ and (ii) ten pound occupiers, those entitled to vote in parliamentary elections under the Registration Act of 1885.¹⁷ This meant that, despite the franchise having been extended during the nineteenth century, in a county like Surrey only about twelve per cent of the population was initially eligible to vote in county elections. Interestingly, this included any unmarried women, namely spinsters and widows who held the prescribed qualifications in their own right.

The franchise for county elections was substantially extended in 1918, under the provisions of the Representation of the People Act, and standardised with that for other types of local election. However, it remained limited to men who occupied land or premises in the requisite area and to women who were at least thirty years old and either occupied land in a similar manner to men or were married to a qualified man.¹⁹ The age restriction for women was removed in 1928, thereby making the qualifying age for both sexes 21. The county franchise eventually became universal in 1945.²⁰

Like the franchise, the rules governing the qualifications for membership of county councils gradually became more inclusive during the period under review. These were initially based on those for borough councils,²¹ but in addition included three groups who were destined to play an important part in county elections, namely (i) ministers of religion, both Church of England and dissenting; (ii) peers owning property in the county; and likewise (iii) parliamentary voters who owned property in the county.

At the time of the establishment of county councils the position of duly qualified women was unclear, since despite earlier legislation where references to the male gender were held to include females, subsequent court cases had 'muddled the water'. As far as county councils were concerned, the eligibility of women for membership was regularised by legislation in 1907,²² which provided that they should not be disqualified by sex or marriage. This was confirmed by the County and Borough Councils (Qualification) Act 1914, under which any person of either sex who had resided for a whole year in a county and was qualified to vote was eligible for council membership. Thereafter, men and women were treated on an equal basis. Under the 1918 legislation, anyone eligible to vote was entitled to stand for election. In addition, anyone owning land within the county was qualified to be elected although not to vote. Any

remaining restrictions were removed in 1945 when the county franchise became universal.

With respect to the actual conduct of elections, responsibility was exercised by second-tier authorities on behalf of the county council. Thus, it was the returning officers of municipal boroughs, urban districts and rural districts who had the task of receiving nominations; organising the election, where necessary; and reporting the results. Significantly, the rules relating to county council elections did not make provision for the formal recording of the results at either county or national level. Consequently for the purposes of this paper it has been necessary to use a variety of sources, including local newspapers and council records, to piece together the electoral record for Surrey.²³

III. Overview of county elections in Surrey

The first county council for the administrative county of Surrey,²⁴ consisted of 57 councillors and nineteen aldermen. Of the 57 councillors, three each were allocated to the Boroughs of Kingston and Reigate respectively and two to the Borough of Guildford.²⁵ A scheme for distributing the remaining 49 councillors was prepared by the Finance Committee of Quarter Sessions, 'after consultation with various local bodies'. Details of the scheme which was accepted in its entirety are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Distribution of county councillors in 1889

Area	Type of authority	Population in 1881		No of Divisions
		sub-totals	Total	
Chertsey	Rural Sanitary Authority	27137	36439	6
Egham and Thorpe	Rural Sanitary Authority	9302		
Croydon	Rural Sanitary Authority	-----	21570	3
Dorking	Local Board	6328	15452	3
Dorking	Rural Sanitary Authority	9124		
Epsom	Rural Sanitary Authority	19013	41107	7
Epsom	Local Board	6916		
Sutton	Local Board	10334		
Carshalton	Local Board	4844	20031	4
Farnham	Rural Sanitary Authority	15501		
Farnham	Local Board	4530		
Godstone	Rural Sanitary Authority	17692	20479	4
Lingfield	Rural Sanitary Authority	2787		

Area	Type of authority	Population in 1881		No of Divisions
		sub-totals	Total	
Guildford	Rural Sanitary Authority	29307	31812	6
Godalming	Municipal Borough	2505		
Hambledon	Rural Sanitary Authority	-----	16322	3
Kingston	Rural Sanitary Authority	9825	26920	4
Surbiton	Local Board	9416		
East Molesey	Local Board	3289		
New Malden	Local Board	2535		
Ham	Local Board	1855		
Wimbledon	Local Board	-----	15950	2
Reigate	Rural Sanitary Authority	-----	11697	2
Richmond	Urban Sanitary Authority	-----	19066	3
Richmond	Rural Sanitary Authority	-----	14567	2
Total			291412	49

Within each area, divisions were defined in terms of the lower tier of local authority. For much of Surrey these were, as the table indicates, the rural sanitary authorities, which comprised the poor law unions minus any urban area in which a local board of health had been established. Each union consisted of a number of civil parishes. Consequently, most electoral divisions were initially groupings of such parishes. For illustrative purposes, the three Dorking divisions were defined as follows:

Dorking Urban Electoral Division – The District of the Dorking Local Board.

Dorking Rural Electoral Division – The Parish of Dorking (excepting the District of Dorking Local Board), the Parish of Effingham, the Parish of Mickleham

Capel Electoral Division – The Parish of Capel, The Parish of Newdigate, the Parish of Ockley, The Parish of Abinger, The Parish of Wotton.²⁸

Between 1889 and 1949, the number of divisions increased from 57 to 77 due to population growth and the process of suburbanisation. In Table 2, the election years when changes first took effect are shown together with a distribution of divisions classified according to their geographical status. Four categories have been used for this purpose. Metropolitan divisions were those in that part of Surrey which was absorbed into Greater London in 1965 and non-metropolitan divisions were those in the remainder of the county. Urban divisions comprised areas which at the time were served by municipal boroughs or urban district councils,

and rural divisions consisted of areas served by rural district councils.²⁹

Table 2: Classification of electoral divisions

Year	Total	Metropolitan		Non-Metropolitan	
		Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
1889	57	11	8	9	29
1904	59	15	5	19	20
1913	68	21	7	22	18
1928	70	29	1	22	18
1934	77	37	0	30	10

As can be seen, thirteen new divisions were created in the years up to 1934. This was mainly on a piecemeal basis. Nearly all were in those parts of the county that were close to London and experienced rapid increases in their population. Thus, in 1904 Merton became a separate division and South Wimbledon was divided into two divisions.³⁰ The process continued in 1913 with Barnes, Beddington, Coulsdon, Mitcham, Sutton, Surbiton and Woking each acquiring an additional division and Wimbledon two more.³¹ By 1928, Merton and Mitcham in metropolitan Surrey had become large enough to warrant them each being allocated a further division.³² These additions, notwithstanding, there were still enormous disparities between the electorates of the largest and smallest divisions. For example, by the early 1930s four divisions had electorates of over twelve thousand³³ and five electorates of less than 3000.

In 1934 electoral divisions were comprehensively revised following the county review process, which had resulted in substantial changes to the pattern of district councils and their boundaries. The original intention was to keep the number of divisions at seventy, with urban divisions having a population, on average, of fifteen thousand and rural divisions, twelve thousand. However, in trying to ensure that, as far as possible, the integrity of district boundaries was respected, it was found necessary to make provision for 74 divisions in the initial proposals (see Table 3).

Subsequently, the urban districts of both Carshalton and Sutton and Cheam argued successfully for an additional division. Moreover, the proposals for the urban districts of Chertsey, Egham and Woking generated a considerable amount of opposition, not least because they had been combined for the purposes of allocating divisions, unlike anywhere else in the county (see Table 3). This meant that a number of the proposed divisions crossed district boundaries and one even comprised parts of all three districts.³⁶ As the interested parties could claim, in this

Table 3: Initial proposals for electoral divisions following the county review 1933

rural districts			urban districts		
name	no	average pop	name	no	average pop
Bagshot	1	11129	Banstead	2	10391
Dorking and Horley	2	9402	Beddington and Wallington	2	13125
Godstone	2	11850	Carshalton	2	14375
Guildford	3	10019	Caterham and Warlingham	2	11250
Hambledon	2	9973	Chertsey	5	13839
Total	10		Egham		
municipal boroughs			Woking		
name	no	average pop	Coulsdon and Purley	3	13241
Barnes	3	14147	Dorking	1	14934
Godalming	1	11261	Epsom	3	11654
Guildford	3	11521	Esher and the Dittons	2	16203
Kingston on Thames	3	13703	Farnham	2	11319
Reigate	3	11600	Frimley and Camberley	1	16532
Richmond	3	12647	Haslemere	1	11635
Wimbledon	4	14881	Leatherhead	1	16466
Total	20		Merton and Morden	4	13641
			Mitcham	4	14215
			Surbiton	2	15094
			Sutton and Cheam	3	16115
			The Maldens and Coombe	2	11702
			Walton and Weybridge	2	13318
			Total	44	

part of the county the principle of respecting the integrity of district boundaries had not counted for much. Eventually, after the matter had been referred to the Minister of Health, it was agreed that these three districts should have six divisions, in total, with three being allocated to Woking.³⁷ Thus, after much wrangling the outcome was a revised total of 77 divisions, which remained unchanged until 1952, when three new divisions were created.³⁸

Turning to the number of contested elections, Table 4 provides a summary of the number of divisions and contests for the eighteen triennial elections held during the period up to 1949. As illustrated, although there was a relatively large amount of interest and electoral activity in 1889, it was not sustained.

Table 4: Surrey County Council triennial elections 1889-1949

Year	Date	Day	Divisions	Contested		Uncontested	
				No	%	No	%
1889	15 January	Tuesday	57	27	47%	30	53%
1892	8 March	Tuesday	57	16	28%	41	72%
1895	5 March	Tuesday	57	14	25%	43	75%
1898	2 March	Wednesday	57	8	14%	49	86%
1901	2 March	Saturday	57	9	16%	48	84%
1904	2 March	Wednesday	59	12	20%	47	80%
1907	2 March	Saturday	59	16	27%	43	73%
1910	2 March	Wednesday	59	7	12%	52	88%
1913	3 March	Monday	68	14	21%	54	79%
First World War							
1919	3 March	Monday	68	14	21%	54	79%
1922	2 March	Thursday	68	11	16%	57	84%
1925	2 March	Monday	68	11	16%	57	84%
1928	2 March	Friday	70	5	7%	65	93%
1931	5 March	Thursday	70	10	14%	60	86%
1934	1 March	Thursday	77	20	26%	57	74%
1937	6 March	Saturday	77	20	26%	59	74%
Second World War							
1946	2 March	Saturday	77	62	81%	15	19%
1949	9 April	Saturday	77	64	83%	13	17%

Despite some fluctuation, the number of contests remained relatively small right up until 1946. In percentage terms, the range was from a low of seven per cent in 1928 to a high of thirty in 1892. A similar pattern prevailed with respect to by-elections as the data in Table 5 indicate.

In the main candidates tended to eschew formal designations other than their status or occupation, such as gentleman or solicitor, and indeed were not permitted to use 'political' terminology in the descriptions which appeared on ballot papers. It was generally assumed that they were Independents and in press reports of elections it was relatively rare for reference to be made to 'political' affiliations.³⁹ Nevertheless, as will be illustrated in Section IV of the paper, politics in its broadest sense of differences of outlook and stance on local issues was a feature of many county elections. This became far more overt and extensive after 1945.

Both Tables 4 and 5, highlight the significant increase in the number of contests that occurred after the Second World War. Indeed, the first two post-War elections of 1946 and 1949 marked a transition to a far more competitive environment. In both elections, the percentage of

Table 5: Surrey County Council by-elections 1889-1949

Period	No	Cause				Contested ²		Uncontested ²	
		Alderman	Resignation	Death	Other	No	%	No	%
1889-92	5	5	0	0	0	1	20%	4	80%
1892-95	11	2	5	3	1	4	36%	7	64%
1895-98	10	5	3	2	0	4	40%	6	60%
1898-01	5	1	1	3	0	0	0%	5	100%
1901-04	10	4	3	3	0	4	40%	6	60%
1904-07	6	3	3	0	0	3	50%	3	50%
1907-10	14	6	8	0	0	3	21%	11	79%
1910-13	12	7	3	2	0	3	25%	9	75%
1913-15	10	5	2	3	0	3	30%	7	70%
1915-19 ¹	12	2	6	4	0	---	---	---	---
1919-22	12	7	4	1	0	3	25%	9	25%
1922-25	7	2	2	3	0	1	14%	6	86%
1925-28	10	6	2	2	0	2	20%	8	80%
1928-31	12	4	2	6	0	3	25%	9	75%
1931-34	11	3	5	3	0	4	36%	7	64%
1934-37	14	7	4	3	0	6	43%	8	57%
1937-39	11	6	2	3	0	5	45%	6	55%
1939-46 ²	41	16	12	13	0	---	---	---	---
1946-49	10	6	4	0	0	6	60%	4	40%

Notes

¹ For most of the First World War and the whole of Second World War county elections were suspended with vacancies being filled by co-option.

² In a few cases it has not been possible to obtain details of every by-election and a judgement has been made as to whether or not it would have been contested. For periods where this is the case the figures are shown in italics.

contested divisions was just over 80 per cent compared with an average of seventeen per cent during the inter-war period.⁴⁰ As was pointed out at the time, mostly in a critical manner, the principal driver for change in this respect was the decision of the Labour Party in 1946 to put up candidates in most divisions.⁴¹ In its editorial, the *Surrey Advertiser and County Times* made clear its unhappiness about this move:

Next week more than 60 Labour candidates will appeal to the electors in the ...[77] county divisions and will make no effort to conceal their intentions to carry their political predilection into the council chamber. This is nothing new in some parts of the country, but it is the first time the Red Flag has been hoisted so widely in Surrey. We

deplore it, but the challenge must be faced by the electors who have the last word.⁴³

Although Labour had contested a small number of divisions during the inter-War period, and met with some success,⁴³ this was the first time it had participated so extensively.

Post war elections notwithstanding, what might account for the low number of contested divisions for most of the period covered by this paper? In looking at the distribution and nature of contested and uncontested elections for clues a few observations can be made. First, quite a number of the divisions which experienced no contests at all in the period to 1934, namely Capel, Dorking Rural, Godalming Rural, Shere and Wonersh, remained predominantly rural in character. This suggests, perhaps, that deferential attitudes towards those in positions of authority, which were likely to be more firmly entrenched in rural areas, played a part. Nonetheless, some rural divisions, such as Chobham and Lingfield, both with five contests out of a possible fourteen, did see a relatively high level of electoral activity. Moreover, some of the divisions where there was a complete absence of contests, which included Richmond South, Surbiton No 2 and Sutton West, were either urban or suburban in character. That said, electoral contests were more likely in urban areas with Leatherhead (seven out of fourteen), Woking North (ten out of seventeen) and Guildford No 2 (six out of fifteen) leading the way.

A second observation is that there was a greater likelihood of a contest when a vacancy arose than when sitting councillors wished to continue. This point is illustrated by the data in Table 6.

New councillors were far more likely than sitting councillors to face a contest. Of the 239 occasions between 1889 and 1937 when new councillors secured their seats at triennial elections, in just under fifty per cent of cases they faced a contest.⁴⁴ This compares with an equivalent percentage for sitting councillors of just under ten. The pattern continued after the war with 93 per cent of new councillors being involved in contests and 76 per cent of sitting councillors. Thus, incumbency can be said to have 'inoculated' the councillor concerned from having to face the trouble and expense of a contest.

Interestingly, in the case of by-elections when, by definition, new councillors were being chosen, the percentage of contests was about thirty – somewhat lower than that for triennial elections. One reason was a tendency for possible candidates to withdraw when it became known that someone else was standing coupled with the desire to avoid the cost of an election or perhaps the ignominy of defeat. One very

Table 6: Turnover of councillors

Year	Sitting Councillors				New Councillors		
	unopposed	contest	Total	defeated	unopposed	contest	Total
1892	31	7	38	3+1 ¹	10	8	18
1895	35	5	40	3	8	9	17
1898	42	4	46	3	7	4	11
1901	41	3	44	2	7	6	13
1904 ²	42	3	45	5	5	9	14
1907	39	10	49	3	4	6	10
1910	48	2	50	0	4	5	9
1913 ²	43	4	47	1	11	10	21
1919	39	3	42	6	14	11	25
1922	50	1	51	0	7	10	17
1925	48	4	52	1	9	7	16
1928 ²	55	2	57	1	10	3	13
1931	54	5	59	0	6	5	11
1934 ²	44	5	49	3	12	16	28
1937	50	11	61	4	7	9	16
1946	9	25	34	4	4	39	43
1949	10	36	46	12	3	28	31

Notes

¹ One of the contests resulted in a dead heat and the acting returning officer refused to give a casting vote. Thus the seat remained vacant for 3 years. Further details are provided below.

² The total number of councillors was increased in 1904, 1913, 1928 and 1934.

illustrious withdrawal occurred in the spring of 1930, when a new councillor was required for the Worplesdon division, following the election of the sitting member, Sir Philip Henriques to the aldermanic bench. As the *Surrey Advertiser and County Times* reported:

When the vacancy occurred Lord Onslow was approached and consented to become a candidate. His lordship was not at the time aware that efforts were being made to secure the services of Capt. E.H. Tuckwell with a view to establishing another link between the Guildford Rural District council [of which he was a member] and the County Council, and closer co-operation between the two bodies. When Lord Onslow learned this he decided to withdraw in Capt. Tuckwell's favour.⁴⁵

Not surprisingly perhaps, even peers of the realm were reluctant to

participate in what were perceived as unnecessary contests.

In another case, the candidate withdrawing took the trouble to explain his reasons by means of an election notice in the local newspaper. This was William Connolly who was initially going to stand for the March 1901 vacancy in Reigate North East. When it became known that his friend Major K O Foster was also intending to stand he announced that he had 'agreed to retire...desiring that nothing should interfere with the friendship that exists'.⁴⁶

A third observation concerns the local political culture. Here political conflict, as represented by local electoral contests, was seen as unnecessarily divisive rather than healthy dose of local democracy. Such a position was adopted by much of the local press, which was quick to criticise anyone who appeared to be injecting political divisions, especially those based on national cleavages, into the county electoral arena. As the following quotation from the *Surrey Advertiser and County Times* during the run up to the 1910 elections illustrates, the press and leaders of the council appeared to be of one mind on this matter:

From the first there has been a determination to keep party politics out of the county council, and that determination has been a wise one. Successive chairman from Mr Leicester-Penrhyn [chairman from 1889 to 1894] onwards, have congratulated the council that they knew no [party] politics, and have declared that their work has gone more smoothly and has been the better performed for that reason.⁴⁷

Three years later this stance was reiterated:

At almost every election of the Council this question of politics is raised in one quarter or another. Three years ago it was suggested that at Weybridge and Chertsey politics were being introduced. There is unquestionably a very strong feeling throughout the county in favour of keeping the County Council free from the taint of party, but it is not surprising that here and there is an undercurrent of political feeling. It is all to the good, however, that no candidate has yet made an appeal to the electors on purely political grounds. It shows that the strength of feeling against the introduction of party politics is recognised and respected.⁴⁸

As will be seen later, these comments somewhat overstated the position as far as non-partisanship was concerned. Nonetheless such sentiments were still much in evidence in 1946 as the hostility towards the Labour Party, expressed in the earlier quotation from the *Surrey*

Advertiser and County Times, illustrates. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the paper went on to claim that: 'Those who are opposing socialists...are unquestionably convinced that party politics have no place in local councils'.⁴⁹

The ideal of consensus was also in evidence at the level of the individual division. Here unopposed candidates were often seen as personifying the common interests of the community they sought to represent. Thus, in 1893 when it was necessary to fill a vacancy in the Godstone division the candidature of the Revd. Borradaile was reported in terms that clearly suggest this notion of unopposed candidates symbolising the essential unity of the local community:

He has the support of all the leading inhabitants of the division, both clergy and laity, without distinction of politics including prominent Liberals, such as the Hon Pascoe Glyn, and prominent Conservatives, such as Mr Gerard HoareHe is not a very strong party politician, and deprecates the introduction of party politics into county council elections....At present no other candidate has come forward and it is hoped that a contest will be avoided: there is certainly no ground for one.⁵⁰

Whether such sentiments were shared by all the inhabitants, or even electors, of Godstone is impossible to gauge from the available evidence. What is known is that no other candidates did come forward to force a contest.

In a number of other cases, this supposed unity was reflected in the selection of past or present presiding officers of lower tier authorities to fill county council vacancies. Thus, in September 1922, a vacancy in Dorking Urban was filled by Mr Atlee the late chairman of Dorking Urban District Council. As the *Dorking and Leatherhead Advertiser* reported, 'There were no expectations of any further nominations for the district, and Mr Atlee's election was desired by everyone'.⁵¹ Other examples include the mayor of Richmond, A Howitt, who was the sole candidate for the vacancy in Richmond North, following death of the sitting member, J J Bisgood, in the spring of 1927 and likewise, the mayor of Reigate, T Newell, who succeeded Canon F C Davies, the vicar of Reigate, in Reigate West, following his death in 1929.

A fourth observation relates to the cost of elections. Some potential candidates withdrew because they were concerned about the expense of a contest. This related to both the administrative costs associated with the election and the expenditure that candidates might incur on election notices in newspapers, the booking of halls for meetings and the trans-

port of electors to the polls. On occasions, where a contest had been expected but did not materialise the press emphasised the amount saved. For example, in August 1935, it was reported that: 'The [unopposed] return of Mr Palmer [for Merton West] will save the ratepayers at least £100 in election expenses'.⁵² Given such attitudes, what price county democracy?

A final observation is based on contemporary comments concerning the lack of interest in county elections and hence competitiveness. For example, in his analysis of the 1889 county council elections, Dunbabin quotes the views of Sir John Dorrington, the first chairman of Gloucestershire County Council, who 'held that the public would never be interested in administration ... [and] might soon "grow tired of the new toy"'.⁵³ This viewpoint was echoed, to some extent, in the *Surrey Advertiser and County Times*' observations on the 1910 elections:

There is undoubtedly considerable apathy with regard to County Council matters, an apathy which is very much to be regretted. It is probably attributable to some extent to the fact that the work of the County Council does not, at first sight, appear to affect the well-being of the community as nearly as the purely local Rural District and Urban Councils.⁵⁴

Although the county council's role was increasing in importance, it would seem that it was perceived as being remote and consequently of less importance than the more local borough and district councils, which often did attract greater interest.

Alongside the small number of contested elections, another indicator of the lack of interest was the phenomenon of low turnouts. This continued even when there was a substantial increase in the number of contests. As data from Table 7 illustrate, although some historically high turnouts were recorded in the period prior to the First World War, when the franchise was restricted to less than twenty per cent of the population, thereafter turnouts were often very low (below thirty per cent) for both triennial and by-elections. This was often commented upon in press reports. For example, the *Surrey Comet* headlined its report on the 1946 elections: 'Only one in four voted. Usual apathy at county council polls'.⁵⁵ Similarly, in reporting a Wimbledon East by-election held in April 1935, the *Wimbledon Borough News* highlighted 'Election Apathy' and the fact that only twenty per cent went to the poll.⁵⁶ However, while the press might bemoan the lack of interest it could be said to have contributed to this by generally seeking to depoliticise county council elections.

Table 7: Surrey County Council features of contested triennial elections 1889-1949

Year	Contests	Candidates			Sitting members ¹		New members ²	Turnout	
		2	3	3+	Re-elected	defeated		highest	lowest
1889	27	24	3	0	9	3	18	88.4	32.8
1892	16	14	2	0	7	4 ³	8	78.0	44.6
1895	14	10	3	1	5	3	9	71.3	42.8
1898	8	8	0	0	4	3	4	73.3	31.9
1901	9	9	0	0	3	2	6	61.0	23.6
1904	12	10	2	0	3	5	9	59.0	24.3
1907	16	16	0	0	10	3	6	73.9	37.0
1910	7	7	0	0	2	0	5	72.3	51.4
1913	14	13	1	0	4	1	10	72.5	9.2
First World War									
1919	14	13	1	0	3	6	11	47.7	9.4
1922	11	10	0	1	1	0	10	52.4	9.3
1925	11	9	2	0	4	1	7	43.6	15.6
1928	5	4	1	0	2	1	3	39.7	11.4
1931	10	10	0	0	5	0	5	40.6	14.9
1934	20	17	3	0	5	3	16	43.6	10.3
1937	20	18	2	0	11	4	9	42.0	11.1
Second World War									
1946 ⁴	62	58	4	0	23	4	39	38.1	9.4
1949	64	62	2	0	38	12	28	59.5	24.2

Notes¹ In 1889 the sitting members were serving magistrates.² Including those who defeated sitting members.³ Including the councillor for Reigate Western division who was involved in a dead heat which was not resolved and the seat remained vacant until 1895. See the main body of the text for further details.⁴ The low percentage turnouts in 1946 were due, in part, to very bad weather. It has also been necessary to estimate many of the turnouts due to incomplete data.

Notwithstanding the limitations, those contests which did occur were often fought with vigour. In so doing, they showed that, in certain circumstances, some life could be blown into the embers of county democracy.

IV. Types of electoral contest

In seeking to analyse the character of, and to categorise, the contests

which did occur, a number of difficulties arise. First, local newspapers as the major source of information vary considerably in the amount of detail they provide and, to some extent, in their political viewpoint. Second, as mentioned earlier, many candidates did not indicate whether they were standing on behalf of any particular organisation, political or otherwise, or simply on their own account.

Nonetheless, despite the difficulties, it is possible to present an outline of the nature of the contests. Before looking at the more subjective evidence, it is worth considering some of the quantitative features. Table 7 summarises the data relating to the number of candidates in each contest; defeats of sitting councillors; and turnouts.

As can be seen, the vast majority contests were between two candidates. Having three or more candidates was an extremely rare occurrence. Likewise it was very unusual for sitting councillors to be defeated. Turnouts varied considerably between divisions in individual years. Over time, however, there was a tendency for turnouts to fall: ironically, the more extensive the franchise, the lower the turnout.

From the available evidence, at least four main types of contest can be identified. Despite hostility from various quarters, by far the most common were those that can be labelled partisan in the sense that the protagonists represented 'political' organisations that adhered to differing political philosophies and/or adopted different positions on issues of public policy. While it was this type of contest which came to the fore with the Labour Party's decision in 1946 to participate far more extensively than had previously been the case, it was not unknown during the earlier periods.

Even though Dunbabin identified Surrey as one of fourteen counties in which 'politics ... seem to have been rare or absent' in the 1889 elections,⁵⁷ his assessment does need to be qualified a little.⁵⁸ In the early years of the county council there were, in certain areas, radicals who saw county elections as an opportunity to challenge the status quo. This was in spite of the antipathy of the press and many members of the local political elite to party politics at county level mentioned earlier. Even though he finished bottom of the poll in a three horse race, a good example is William Belcher who contested Wimbledon South in 1895 as a candidate of the Independent Labour Party and Social Democratic Federation. One of his opponents was Octavius Beatty, the sitting member, who adopted the Progressive label. On this occasion he was defeated by the Conservative, T C Summerhays.⁵⁹ Other candidates who represented the Progressive cause included W Folkard, who unsuccessfully contested Barnes in 1895,⁶⁰ and James Morrison, who won a by-election in Richmond Central in June 1914.⁶¹ In so doing they were

taking their lead from London where identifications with distinctive political viewpoints were far more pronounced. Indeed, vigorous contests between different party groupings were a feature of London County Council elections right from its establishment in 1889. Initially these were between the radicals 'under the portmanteau "Progressive" label...[and] the Conservative party in the guise of "Moderates"'.⁶² Thus, not surprisingly perhaps, the metropolitan influence was strongest in those parts of Surrey which were adjacent to the County of London.

Although relatively rare, partisan contests between Liberal and Conservative candidates were not unknown in the early years of Surrey County Council. One good example of such a contest was the dramatic 1892 election in the Reigate Western division. Here the sitting councillor Francis Edward Barnes, who was described as a Gladstonian Liberal, was opposed by J Seex, a Conservative, and both received 500 votes, representing a turnout of 70.8%. When a dead heat occurred the law empowered the Returning Officer to give a casting vote, however, but he refused. The resulting impasse led to the matter being raised in the House of Commons in the form of a parliamentary question at the end of March from Sir W Foster the MP for Derby, Ilkeston:

I beg to ask the President of the Local Government Board whether he is aware that at the recent election for a member of the Surrey County Council, Reigate, Western Division, the Returning Officer refused to give a casting vote, and sent writ back, "No Election:" "F.E. Barnes, 500; J. Seex, 500;" and whether he will order a fresh election, or state what steps will be taken to remove the deadlock?

The response of the President – still Charles Ritchie – was to confirm the fact, and identify the appropriate legal resort:

It appears to be a matter of regret that the Returning Officer did not exercise the power conferred upon him by Statute of giving a casting vote in a case of equality of votes; but under the circumstances I apprehend that, if it is desired that a further election should be held, the only course is to apply to the High Court for the issue of a mandamus for the purpose.⁶³

Barnes did apply – eventually – for a mandamus to the Mayor of the Borough of Reigate (as Returning Officer), commanding him to hold an election for the western division. The case was heard on 6 February 1893, with the *Surrey Mirror* reporting that

The Court refused a rule for a mandamus, as nearly twelve months had elapsed, and as there were no affidavits by the inhabitants of Reigate asking for an election, the Lord Chief Justice observing that he did not see why the ratepayers should be put to the expense of an election which they did not seem to want.⁶⁴

Thus, the seat remained unfilled and the population of Reigate Western unrepresented until the next triennial election in 1895. Not surprisingly Barnes stood again and on this occasion his opponent was Frederick Budgen. After a lively contest, Budgen won with a narrow majority of 53 votes. However, for Barnes, this episode had a relatively happy outcome since three years later Budgen retired. Barnes was unopposed, and held the seat until his retirement in 1907.

During the inter-War period, although not necessarily partisan contests in the conventional sense, there were quite a number of elections where the protagonists were members of and/or received support from organisations at opposite ends of the political spectrum. On the right, these included the Middle Classes' Union [MCU]/National Citizens' Union [NCU], and the National Farmers Union, and, on the left, the Co-operative Movement. An example of one such contest was a by-election held in the Reigate North East division during November 1932. Here the two candidates were Gilbert Prentice Chisholm, a member of the NCU, and Miss E E Allen, who was assisted by members of the Co-operative Movement. In the event, Chisholm won easily.⁶⁷

At the same time, many non-Labour candidates had the support of ratepayers' associations, which were particularly active in many parts of the county. Difficulties could sometimes arise when more than one candidate was associated with an association. A particularly extreme example of this occurred in October 1934 when all three candidates in the Mortlake division by-election were members of the Barnes, Mortlake and East Sheen Ratepayers' Association. Not surprisingly, on this occasion, the Association adopted a strictly neutral position and did not 'adopt' any of the candidates. Interestingly, although the election did not involve a conventional left-right split it was still vigorously contested and closely fought as far as the two candidates who topped the poll were concerned.⁶⁸ Other divisions where ratepayer associations were particularly active on the county election front included Carshalton,⁶⁹ Leatherhead,⁷⁰ Mitcham,⁷¹ and Woking.

Having the support of the local ratepayer's association, however, was not necessarily a guarantee of electoral success. For example, in the Woking South by-election of July 1938, which was initially going to be a three way contest, the candidate adopted by the Woking Ratepayers'

Association, Captain F Emerson, failed to secure nomination.⁷² The ratepayers' association then transferred its support to another candidate, Vivian Powell, who was defeated by Conrad Samuel.⁷³

According to contemporary press reports the first 'modern' partisan contest between a Labour and openly Conservative candidate, was the Sutton and Cheam East by-election held in January 1939. As reported at the time,

The seat was rendered vacant by the elevation of Miss E.M. Hoole as a county alderman and local Conservatives took the opportunity to emphasise the agitation for adoption of official candidates for future Borough Council elections, a policy which is at the moment frowned upon at divisional headquarters.⁷⁴

On this occasion, the Conservative, J H Curtis Nelson, defeated his Labour opponent, Mrs B E Ransom, by 717 votes.

As indicated earlier, however, it was not until after the Second World War that contests of this kind became the norm. In David Robinson's words, 'the end of the [Second World] War brought party politics to the fore. 1946 was the first election at which there was a clear fight between the Conservative and Labour parties in most divisions'. Strictly speaking, the majority of the 1946 contests were between Labour and Independent candidates. By the triennial election of 1949, however, the pattern of Labour versus Conservative was firmly established.

The reason for Labour's more extensive involvement in county elections at this time was clearly articulated by H E Weaver, the Labour candidate for Caterham East, at an election meeting organised by Caterham Residents' Association. He argued that:-

Elections of any kind should be fought on policy and not on personal groundsLabour had a clear idea of policy so they were putting up candidates at all local elections to pursue that policy. The attitude of the Independents seemed to that of "laissez-faire" or letting things drift.⁷⁵

Alongside this must be set the fact that the Labour party undoubtedly had 'the wind in its electoral sails' having won a landslide victory in the general election of 1945 and secured a net gain of 1348 seats in the November 1945 municipal elections.⁷⁶ That said, much of Surrey was hardly promising territory for Labour candidates. It had only won two of the twelve constituencies which comprised the administrative county of Surrey, Mitcham and Wimbledon.⁷⁷ Moreover, its share of the total

votes cast in all twelve constituencies was only 39.8 per cent.⁷⁸ At the local level, while Labour secured a majority of seats on Mitcham borough council it was still very much in the minority elsewhere. Nonetheless, it undoubtedly felt the need to put down a marker. In the event, its haul of thirteen seats,⁷⁹ which represented a net gain of seven,⁸⁰ was something of Pyrrhic victory, especially since five of the Labour candidates were unopposed.⁸¹

In reaction to the Labour Party's intervention, the Conservative Party reassessed its stance. In 1946 a small number of anti-Labour candidates had stood as Conservatives⁸² or in a few cases, Independent Conservatives,⁸³ but in the main the designation Independent was retained. By 1949, however, the majority of the non-Labour candidates from the right of the political spectrum, 58 out of eighty (73 per cent), adopted the designation Conservative. Of these, ten had previously stood as Independents, thereby confirming the impression that most Independents were either members of the Conservative party or sympathetic to it. That said there were a few exceptions, and in three instances sitting Independents were defeated by Conservatives in three way contests which also involved a Labour candidate. One of these, in the Molesey division, had been in 1946 and the other two in Purley and Surbiton North were in 1949.⁸⁴ In other divisions the Conservative Party chose not to force the pace of change and was content to 'play the long game' as far as the replacement of Independents by 'openly' Conservative candidates was concerned.

With the national political mood shifting against the Labour Government, the party lost ten of the thirteen seats it was defending in 1949.⁸⁶ Significantly on this occasion all but one of the Labour held divisions saw a contest.⁸⁷ The pattern of Labour versus Conservative established in 1949 was to last until the emergence of the Liberal Party as a force in county elections during the 1960s and 1970s, when three way contests became a relatively common occurrence. Thus partisanship in county elections was became the present-day norm.

A second type of contest was in some respects a sub-set of the first. It was characterised by the interplay of political and/or religious differences over such issues as temperance, the provisions of the Education Act of 1902 and county council spending levels. It is noticeable, for example, that in press comments on the backgrounds of candidates in early elections reference was sometimes made to their religious affiliation, whether nonconformist or established church, and where they stood on the issue of temperance. For example, in 1889 H W Maynard and James Triggs, candidates in Wimbledon North and Wimbledon South respectively, were described as temperance candidates and by implication noncon-

formists. By contrast, James Triggs' successful opponent, R B Fenwick, received 'great help from the Church party in his division.'⁸⁸ Significantly neither of the temperance candidates performed particularly strongly.⁸⁹

However, that is only part of the story as far as South Wimbledon was concerned. Here the most vitriolic part of the campaign concerned the intervention of the local vicar on the side of one of two 'Church' candidates, Fenwick, and the expression of his profound opposition to the other, T C Summerhays. As the *Surrey Advertiser* reported:

On Saturday morning, the electors of South Wimbledon received copies of a letter which the Vicar of South Wimbledon (Rev. C. Pickering Clarke) had addressed to the joint secretaries of Mr Fenwick's Committee in which he dealt with the merits of the arguments for and against Messrs Summerhays and Fenwick. In this document the Vicar says: "Purity must be the lifeblood of the County Council. The faintest report that a candidate comes forward for election in order to secure his business interests or those of a friend or of a party, or for his own aggrandisement, or the sake of notoriety, will nullify all the good we look for from this revolution. I should not trouble you with this letter had I not noticed that the local press, such as it is, favours so markedly Mr Summerhays' candidature and indulge largely in anonymous vituperation of Mr Fenwick. Mr Summerhays has afforded us no insignificant proof of his tone of mind and temper in the way that he has questioned the statement of our common friend, Mr Rudolf, and threatened him with legal proceedings for a supposed slander, in the manner in which he has passed over without apology the disgraceful behaviour of his friends and adherents at the Drill-hall meeting, in his strange explanation of the damaging disclosures made at the meeting of Jan. 9 and his connections with the *Surrey Independent*, and in his practice of throwing dust in the eyes of the electors by extravagant promises on matters which have not yet been entrusted by Parliament to the County Council. I for one can have no hesitation in saying that Mr Fenwick is out and out the best man to represent South Wimbledon at the County Council".⁹⁰

While some of references may not be entirely explanatory, there is no disguising the antipathy felt by the vicar towards Summerhays. Although the electoral impact of the vicar's intervention cannot be exactly measured, it is significant, perhaps, that Fenwick won with a respectable majority of 245, representing nineteen per cent of the total poll.

Nonetheless, there was to be a sting in the tail. Fenwick was

subsequently elected to the aldermanic bench and Summerhays announced his candidacy for the ensuing by-election as did the vicar. Thus, the by-election was very much a 'needle match' between the two adversaries. As contemporary press reports indicate, the contest generated a enormous amount of interest and excitement, with Summerhays, designated 'the people's candidate', emerging as victor by 320 votes, 23.6 per cent of the poll. Such was the strength of feeling generated by the contest that, following the declaration of the result, Summerhays was chaired to his home with the crowd singing "See the conquering hero comes". One discordant note was that some of the victor's more exuberant supporters burnt an effigy of the vicar, an action for which Summerhays apologised in a letter to the press.⁹¹

As this example shows, politics and religion clearly remained a potent mix. Likewise, in the *Richmond Herald's* territory, its report of the 1889 elections asserted that they were

the chief subject of talk during the week and it is mentioned as a noticeable fact that successful candidates at Richmond, Mortlake and Barnes had the support of the Church [of England]. The Vicar of Richmond nominated Mr Skewes-Cox, and was one of Mr Cave's assentors, the Vicar of Mortlake proposed Mr Davies, and the Rector of Barnes wrote in favour of Mr Keene.⁹²

Although the religious affiliations of the defeated candidates are not clear from the available evidence, at least one of them, Mr Cockram in Richmond, was particularly associated with the 'temperance party' which suggests that he was a nonconformist.

Contests with strong religious overtones were also in evidence in the early years of the twentieth century. A good example was the by-election held in Guildford No 2 division in August 1903 when the controversy over the 1902 Education Act was at its height, in particular the issue of public funding for church schools which was generally opposed by nonconformists. There were three candidates two of whom were Congregationalists. However, one of these, J F Gammon, who topped the poll,⁹³ was the nominee of Guildford Free Church Council and was formally adopted by the Citizens' League.

In the triennial elections of 1904, the defeat of Joseph King, the sitting councillor in Haslemere, was explained by reference to 'his utterances on the education question and to some extent his participation in the passive resistance movement'.⁹⁴ Interestingly, in its comments on the elections as a whole the *Surrey Advertiser* felt moved to comment that 'we believe we are correct in saying every new member has promised to

observe strict impartiality in regard to the administration of the Education Act'.

Contests sometimes arose over policy issues which were not directly related to either partisanship or religious affiliation. In the 1913 election a number of candidates aligned themselves with a vigorous attack on the level of county council spending. The most outspoken of these was H C Baggallay, who sought to unseat the sitting councillor, David Sparvell, in Frimley. According to the *Surrey Advertiser and County Advertiser*, he 'had not hesitated to arraign the council for extravagance in administration in several directions'.⁹⁵ He was also critical of the fact that, as he put it in one of his election addresses, four council committee chairmen 'rushed to Camberley to protect their follower, and try to prevent the free and independent ratepayers from returning a councillor pledged to economy who will oppose them in their extravagance'.⁹⁶ However, Baggallay was ultimately unsuccessful, failing by 68 votes. Likewise, other candidates who were critical of high levels of council spending, such as C.E.H. Masters in Guildford No 2 division, were unsuccessful. Most of the sitting councillors, whether or not they were involved in contests, sought in their election addresses to justify and explain the reasons for the increases in council spending. Mention was made of the growth in road traffic and the commensurate expensive obligations placed on county councils by central government.

In commenting on the 1913 elections, *The Surrey Advertiser* expressed surprise that there were so few contests, given that county council expenditure had been a particularly contentious issue during the preceding three years:

On Monday next the ninth County Council of Surrey will be elected. Perhaps, however, it would be more correct to say that the remainder of that body will then be chosen for...no fewer than fifty-four of the sixty-eight councillors have already been returned without opposition. There are only fourteen divisions in which there are contests a surprisingly small number when we remember the frequency and the warmth with which the policy and expenditure of the premier [I] county authority have been attacked in the last three years.⁹⁷

Thus, at this time even a major county wide election issue such as spending and rate levels failed to overcome a general reticence as far county electoral contests were concerned.

Until party politics became the norm, most policy-driven contests tended to be related to local rather than county wide issues. A good example of this was the 1931 contest in Barnes and Mortlake Central,

which was billed by the press as the 'Austin-Jackson duel'.⁹⁸ The candidates, who were both members of Barnes Urban District Council, took very different positions on the Mortlake improvement scheme. This had been included in the Surrey County Council Bill, which was working its way through Parliament. Samuel Jackson, who was defending the seat, opposed the scheme, while William Austin, was in favour. Although the latter had the support of the previous county councillor, George Bates, who was now a county alderman, and received sympathetic treatment from the *Richmond Herald*, he was still unable to wrest the seat from the incumbent.⁹⁹

A third type of contest was that triggered more by the, often friendly, rivalry between the personalities involved than anything else. One good example was a series of contests between Dr Robert Howard and Dr Henry Chester in the Frensham Division. On no fewer than three occasions, 1895, 1898 and 1901, they fought each other. Howard won the first and Chester the subsequent two.¹⁰⁰ A second example was the contests between Dr Sackville Davis and a variety of opponents in Leatherhead. Davis contested every triennial election between 1892 and 1907. He succeeded on two occasions, but failed in the other four.¹⁰¹ As these examples illustrate, a number of the very few defeated councillors saw this as a blow to their pride and self-esteem and took steps to remedy the situation at the next available opportunity, generally three years later, thereby precipitating another contest. Such elections, however, were relatively rare and although personality differences might surface in electoral contests other considerations were often to the fore.

A final type of contest were those which could be seen as territorial in nature in the sense that candidates 'represented' the interests of, or drew support disproportionately from, different parts of a division. In its report of the by-election in the Egham division in March 1896, the *Surrey Advertiser and County Times* observed that the successful candidate, William Paice, resided in the centre of Town Ward, from where he derived considerable support from 'residents of all shades of political and religious opinion'. By contrast, the 'chief strength' of his opponent Mr King was in Englefield Green, 'where he received much encouragement'.¹⁰²

Likewise, territorial factors appear to have been at work in the Frensham by-election held in April 1920. In reporting the contest the *Surrey Advertiser and County Times* made reference to the fact that

Mr A.L. Leon had the advantage of having entered upon his campaign several days before Sir Walter Napier was approached with a view to becoming a candidate and was stated to have been promised

the co-operative and Labour vote on the *Hindhead* side [emphasis added]. On the other hand, Sir Walter could count on his own personal popularity in the *Churt* and *Frensham* district [emphasis added], where he resides, and his relations with Labour as chairman of the Advisory Committee of Employment Exchange for the district.¹⁰³

In the event, Sit Walter Napier had an easy win.¹⁰⁴ However, it is interesting to note that, even at this early stage, it was felt necessary in the press report to draw attention to the relationship which each candidate had with divisional 'labour interests'.

V. County democracy?

In the early 1930's, having considered the county electoral record at the time, the distinguished academic commentator on local government, William Robson, wrote: 'It is obvious that the spirit of democracy has not penetrated county government, no matter how broad based the legal franchise may be'.¹⁰⁵ To what extent does this verdict apply to the county and period covered by this article? What can be learnt about the nature of democracy at county level from studying the electoral record for the first sixty years of democratic county government? Were the aspirations of the architects of the Local Government Act 1888 realised?

At first sight, it would seem that the rhetoric of Charles Richie with which this article began was not matched by the reality until after the Second World War and even then turnouts in county elections tended to be lower than those in other electoral contests. Until 1946, the vast majority of county councillors were not 'checked by a healthy test of direct contact with those who elect[ed] them', or at least not through the processes of electioneering and campaigning. Of course, they may have had contact at other times and by other means, such as the formal and informal networks to which they belonged. Nonetheless, insofar as vigorously contested elections are indicative of the democratic health of communities, local as well as national, Surrey, like many other counties, was found wanting. Moreover, even when there were contests these were triggered more by the political situation within a particular locality, rather than the desire to shape policy at county level. Thus, the concept of a county-wide election campaign only emerged after national political parties came to contest county elections on an extensive and systematic basis. However, this resulted in the outcome being more dependent on the political situation at national rather than county level; hence Labour's very poor showing in the county elections of 1949.

Does this mean that county democracy was a sham? Not necessarily,

since arguably anyone who was duly qualified could have stood for election had they chosen to do so. The fact that so few took advantage of the opportunities for putting themselves forward for election could have been due to general satisfaction with the status quo and the performance of councillors. This, however, presupposes that anyone who might feel moved to contest an election had adequate resources of their own to fund a campaign, or could secure the backing of an organisation, and – probably critically – had the time to devote to county council business should they secure election. It is, of course, impossible to quantify the extent to which the ambition to stand was thwarted by insufficient means. All that can be said is that with growing affluence in the period after the Second World War the number of contests and average number of candidates per contest increased significantly, but by then most were closely affiliated with political parties, and could presumably draw on their resources too.

Throughout the period covered here, there seems to have been a meeting of minds, if not a conspiracy, between the media and the county political elite. As has been illustrated, local newspapers were keen to uphold the notion of non-partisanship in county elections and were quick to criticise actions which they saw as destabilising in this respect. Clearly such a stance was political in the sense that it favoured the status quo and was supportive of the established order. Competition in the county election arena especially that of a partisan nature was, to some extent, distrusted and seen as an alien import. Yet competition and choice are the very essence of democracy and without them something vital is missing.

It is of course easy to adopt a completely negative view of the efficacy of county democracy, at least until 1946, and with some justification. However, that would not do full justice to the contests which did occur. These demonstrated that, when conditions were favourable, elections could perform the classical functions of political education and political recruitment. They provided opportunities for issues to be aired; for sitting councillors to be held to account; and for aspiring councillors to present their credentials. Of course the extent to which these functions were fulfilled varied, but there were sufficient examples to indicate that county democracy was not entirely a chimera. Elections, however, were often, in the words of Gyford, 'an enjoyable ritual' for the candidates and their supporters, 'an anointing for the councillors, and an act of civic piety for the more conscientious citizens' who took the trouble to engage with the campaign and vote.¹⁰⁶

VI. Conclusion

As the foregoing account has shown, during the first sixty years of its existence elections for Surrey County Council were characterised by elements of continuity and change. While the 'first past the post' voting system remained unchanged, the franchise was extended on a number of occasions until eventually, in 1945, every resident aged 21 and over acquired the right to vote and stand for election. Other significant changes included the shift from a situation in which a majority of electoral divisions were predominantly rural in character to one in which most were urban or suburban, thereby reflecting geographical trends, together with a decline in turnout accompanied by a substantial increase in the number of contested divisions, especially from 1946 onwards.

Interestingly, despite its proximity to London, Surrey did not experience anything like the intensity of partisanship which characterised London County Council elections in the period covered by this paper. In this respect, Surrey had more in common with its neighbours to the east, south and west. This assertion, however, needs to be backed up by more detailed investigations into the similarities and differences between Surrey and neighbouring counties. At present the empirical basis for doing so remains patchy, but as this article has demonstrated, notwithstanding the comparative rarity of contests county council elections do offer some fascinating insights into the nature of local democracy in the UK, and raise some important research questions concerning its conception and subsequent development.

Notes

I should like to place on record my thanks to Dr Alan Crosby for reading an early version of this paper and making some very helpful suggestions.

1. *Hansard 3rd Series*, Vol. 323, (1888), Col. 1654.
2. J Redlich and F Hirst, *Local Government in England*, 2 Vols (1903), II, p.12.
3. D Robinson, *Surrey Through the Century 1889-1989* (1989), p.2.
4. *Ibid.*
5. One notable exception is J Lee, *Social Leaders and Public Persons. A Study of County Government in Cheshire since 1889* (1963), which includes an analysis of county elections and their significance for the political life of the county. See also J P Dunbabin, 'Expectations of the new County Councils, and their realization', *The Historical Journal*, VIII, 3, (1965), esp. pp.357-69, for a wide-ranging discussion of the first county council elections.
6. In a few boroughs, including Reigate, there were multi-member divisions for the first elections where the council had not decided in time how to divide their area for county election purposes.
7. Local Government Act 1888, sec 2 (3) (a).

8. The Local Government Board was superseded by the Ministry of Health on 24 June 1919 as the department responsible for local government. In 1951 the newly formed Ministry of Housing and Local Government took over the local government responsibilities of the Ministry of Health.
9. Local Government Act 1888, sec 51.
10. In the wording of the Local Government Act 1888, sec 51, 'electoral divisions are to be so formed as not to overlap an urban sanitary district, ward, or rural sanitary district'.
11. Since 1974 they have generally been at four-yearly intervals.
12. The legislation, however, provided that vacancies which occurred within six months of the ordinary retirement date should be filled at the next triennial election.
13. Of 223 casual vacancies that occurred in Surrey between 1889 and 1949, 97 (43%) were due to sitting councillors being elected to the aldermanic bench.
14. For school boards.
15. For boards of guardians.
16. At the time the burgess qualification was twelve months' occupation of a house, warehouse, counting house, shop or other building in the borough, one year's residence in the borough or within seven miles, twelve months' rating, and payment of rates up to the previous 20 January.
17. Here the qualification was twelve months' occupation of any land or tenement in the area of £10 yearly value, 6 months' residence within seven miles, twelve months' rating and payment of rates up to the previous 5 January.
18. Surrey's population at the time was approximately 550,000 and the county electorate 63,300.
19. At the same time, the disenfranchisement of paupers was abolished.
20. Under the provisions of the Representation of the People Act 1945.
21. That is, it was necessary to be a burgess (see endnote 7) or if qualified to be a burgess in every respect except residence to live within fifteen miles of the borough.
22. Qualification of Women (County and Borough Councils) Act 1907.
23. A handbook of Surrey county election data, covering the period 1889 to 1974, is currently being compiled by the author.
24. That is the geographical county less (a) those parts which were included in the new county of London, namely the areas which were to form the metropolitan boroughs of Battersea, Bermondsey, Camberwell, Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth), and (b) the borough of Croydon, which acquired self-governing status as a county borough under the provisions of the 1888 Local Government Act.
25. In the case of the other borough, Godalming, its population did not warrant the allocation of even a single councillor, so it was combined with part of the parish of Godalming that was south of the River Wey to form an electoral division. Richmond did not receive a charter of incorporation until 1890.
26. Based on a table from *The Personnel of the First Surrey County Council. Biographical sketches of the aldermen and councillors composing the first county council for Surrey* (1889).
27. Some unions crossed county boundaries. For example, Egham was in

- Windsor (Berkshire) union.
28. Full details of the 1889 electoral divisions and subsequent revisions will be included in the handbook mentioned in endnote 23.
 29. Urban district councils and rural districts councils were established under the provisions of the Local Government Act 1894.
 30. Order dated 11 November 1903.
 31. Order dated 13 February 1913.
 32. Order dated 11 May 1927.
 33. These were Carshalton (with 15,906 electors on the 1932 Register); Maldens and Coombe (14,306); Merton No 2 (16,029); and Mitcham South East (15,648).
 34. These were Capel (with 2915 electors on the 1932 Register); Dorking Rural (2797); Godalming Rural (2554); Lingfield (2997); and Ripley, Merrow and Send (2839).
 35. For a detailed discussion see R Ottewill, 'Redrawing the boundaries: The politics and outcomes of the county review process in Surrey 1929-33', *Southern History*, 26 (2004), pp.100-27.
 36. This was Byfleet, which was to comprise one ward from Egham urban district (Virginia Water); one ward from Chertsey urban district (Outer); and three wards from Woking urban district (Byfleet, North Horsell, Pyrford).
 37. This still meant that one division straddled the Egham – Chertsey boundary.
 38. The new divisions were in the municipal borough of Surbiton and the urban districts of Esher and Leatherhead. Between 1934 and 1952 the only significant changes to the divisions were the redrawings of divisional boundaries in the municipal boroughs of Sutton and Cheam, Epsom and Ewell, Mitcham and Reigate to accommodate alterations to their ward structure. The total number of divisions was unaffected.
 39. This was also the case for many municipal borough, urban district and rural district council elections.
 40. The percentages of contested divisions in subsequent elections were 1952, 71%; 1955, 71%; 1958, 70%; 1961, 69%; 1965, 82%; 1967, 88%; and 1970, 68%.
 41. In total, there were 62 official Labour candidates. There was also one 'unofficial' Labour candidate, who stood in Guildford South West.
 42. *Surrey Advertiser and County Times*, 23 February 1946.
 43. By 1946 Labour held seven divisions. These were Carshalton North East, Guildford North West, Merton South East, Merton West, Mitcham West, Richmond South and Sutton and Cheam North. However, the last of these was vacant since the member, Mrs M Walkden, had recently been elected to the aldermanic bench. Two other aldermen, James Chuter Ede and E R Simmonds, were also members of the Labour party.
 44. The exact figures were 118 contested and 121 uncontested elections. Thus, contested elections comprised 49% of the total.
 45. *Surrey Advertiser and County Times*, 22 March 1930.
 46. *Surrey Mirror*, 22 March 1901.
 47. *Surrey Advertiser and County Times*, 26 February 1910.
 48. *Ibid.*, February 1913.
 49. *Ibid.*, 23 February 1946.
 50. *Surrey Mirror*, 18 February 1893.

51. *Dorking and Leatherhead Advertiser*, 16 September 1922.
52. *Wimbledon Borough News*, 16 August 1935. Ironically, Mr Palmer was a supporter of the Labour Party.
53. Dunbabin, *op. cit.*, p.375.
54. *Surrey Advertiser and County Times*, 9 March 1901.
55. *Surrey Comet*, 6 March 1946
56. *Wimbledon Borough News*, 5 April 1935
57. Dunbabin, *op.cit.*, p.361.
58. Although it is difficult to be absolutely certain, from press reports it would appear that out of the 27 contests in 1889, about five or six were political in Dunbabin's terms. These were the contests in Barnes, Reigate (two seats) and Richmond (three).
59. The full result was Summerhays, 994 votes (53.4%), Beatty, 817 (43.9%) and Belcher, fifty votes (2.7%).
60. *Richmond Herald*, 8 March 1895.
61. *Ibid.*, June 1914. Interestingly, James Morrison's agent was James Chuter Ede who had won a county council seat at Epsom in a by-election held in April 1914.
62. K Young and P Garside, *Metropolitan London. Politics and Urban Cange 1837-1981* (1982), p.59.
63. *Hansard 4th Series*, Vol. 3, (1892), Col. 147.
64. *Surrey Mirror*, 11 February; see also *The Surrey Advertiser and County Times*, 11 February 1893. The case, formally referenced as *The Queen v the Mayor of Reigate*, was heard in the Queen's Bench Division before the Lord Chief Justice and Mr Justice Cave.
65. The MCU was established in March 1919 to defend members 'when threatened either by bureaucratic or by industrial tyranny'. In December 1921, the MCU's 330 branches voted to change its name to National Citizens' Union. A key motive for doing so was to broaden its appeal. At the time its principles were stated as being: 'Retrenchment and economy in national and municipal [including county] administration. Opposition to the nationalisation of industries. Resistance to Socialism and Communism. Consistency in public policy, stability in public finance, and peace in industry', *The Times*, 7 March 1919 and 19 December 1921.
66. For example, the National Farmer's Union gave its support to Robert Allee the successful candidate for Haslemere in the 1922 election. This was the only contest in the period covered by this paper when there were four candidates.
67. The results were: Chisholm 901 votes (77.7%) and Allen 258 votes (22.3%).
68. The three candidates were E Middleton, 764 votes (47.0%); P Hamilton Hughes, 729 votes (44.9%); C G W Crawford, 131 votes (8.1%).
69. In the 1931 triennial election the sitting councillor and successful candidate, Ernest Rickards, had the support of both the municipal league and ratepayers' association. Following his election to the aldermanic bench in 1933 his successor Arthur Champness had the support of the Carshalton Municipal and Ratepayers League.
70. In 1934, James Farmer, the chairman of Leatherhead Ratepayer's Association, was elected unopposed to represent the Leatherhead division, which he did until his elevation to the aldermanic bench in October 1946.

He was succeeded by A E Murrells, who had the unanimous support of 'the Residents' Associations of the four wards in the district', *Dorking and Leatherhead Advertiser*, 15 November 1946.

71. For example, William Giles, the successful candidate in the Mitcham East division by-election held in November 1935, was 'a representative of the East Ward Ratepayers' Association', *Mitcham and Tooting Advertiser*, 14 November 1935.
72. *Surrey Advertiser*, 23 July 1938.
73. The full result was: Samuel, 843 votes (60.7%); and Powell, 545 votes (39.3%).
74. *Sutton and Cheam Advertiser*, 2 February 1939.
75. *Purley and Coudon Advertiser*, 1 March 1946.
76. Labour Party Conference, 1946.
77. The other constituencies were, in alphabetical order, Carshalton, Chertsey, Eastern, Epsom, Farnham, Guildford, Kingston-upon-Thames, Reigate and Richmond.
78. The full figures were Labour 263,691 votes (39.8%); Conservative, 337,065 (50.9%); Liberal 58,539 (8.8%) and Others 3225 (0.5%).
79. Labour won the following divisions: Barnes and Mortlake Central, Carshalton North East, Godalming, Guildford North West, Merton Central, Merton South East, Mitcham East, Mitcham North, Mitcham South, Mitcham West, Sutton and Cheam North, Sutton and Cheam West, Wimbledon South.
80. The two divisions it failed to hold were Merton West and Richmond South.
81. These were J V Strudwick in Carshalton North East; D Fido in Mitcham North; J Fitch in Mitcham West; S J Barton in Sutton and Cheam North; and Mrs M A Bradley in Sutton and Cheam West.
82. In Coombe, Guildford North West, Malden, Molesey, Mortlake, Richmond Central, Richmond North, Richmond South, Sutton and Cheam East and Sutton and Cheam South.
83. In Kingston North, Kingston South and Surbiton South
84. The full results for the 1946 election in Molesey were: A C Willson, Conservative, 4030 votes (65.3%); H G Scaffer, Labour, 1340 votes (21.7%); J Machell, sitting Independent, 802 votes (13.0%). The results for the 1949 contest in Purley were: F G Kerswell, Conservative transferred from Coudon division, 5418 votes (68.7%); S W Pascall, sitting Independent, 1357 votes (17.2%); and E E Friedel, Labour, 1114 votes (14.1%). In Surbiton North the results for the 1949 contest were: W E Dommett, Conservative, 6823 votes (76.1%); Mrs . Woodgate, sitting Independent, 1510 votes (15.5%); and F J Grimme, Labour, 1396 votes (14.7%).
85. These included Beddington, Dorking, Godstone East, Godstone West, Leatherhead, Reigate Central and Wallington.
86. These were: Barnes and Mortlake Central, Godalming., Merton Central, Mitcham East, Mitcham North, Mitcham South, Mitcham West, Sutton and Cheam North, Sutton and Cheam West and Wimbledon South. It retained Carshalton North East, Guildford North West and Merton South East. Although Labour was to perform more strongly in some of the subsequent elections, its best performance in 1958 only resulted in a total of nineteen council members out of 83.

87. Guildford North West.
88. *Surrey Advertiser and County Times*, 19 January 1889.
89. In Wimbledon South, Triggs finished bottom of the poll in a three way contest. The full result was: Fenwick, 685 votes (53.2%); Summerhays, 440 votes (34.2%); Triggs, 163 votes (12.6%). In Wimbledon North, H W Maynard fared even worse, securing just 11.9% of the votes cast in a contest involving two other candidates.
90. *Surrey Advertiser*, 16 January 1889.
91. *Ibid.*, 16 February 1889.
92. *Richmond Herald*, 18 January 1889.
93. The full result was: Gammon, 466 votes (50.7%); A F Asher, 326 votes (35.4%); J Cable, 128 votes (13.9%).
94. *Surrey Advertiser and County Times*, 5 March 1904.
95. *Ibid.*, 1 March 1913.
96. *Ibid.*
97. *Ibid.*
98. *Richmond Herald*, 28 February 1931.
99. In the circumstances, Jackson had a relatively easy victory securing 925 votes (58.4%), as against 659 votes (41.6%) for Austin.
100. The 1895 results were: Howard, 335 votes (59.2%), and Chester, 231 votes (40.8%). In 1898, Chester secured, 419 votes (54.1%), and Howard, 356 votes (45.9%). In 1901 the results were: Chester, 517 votes (65.7%), and Howard, 270 votes (35.3%).
101. Davis won in 1895 and 1901
102. *Surrey Advertiser and County Times*, 4 March 1896.
103. *Ibid.*, 10 April 1920.
104. The figures were: Napier, 959 votes (66.4%), and Leon, 485 votes (33.4%).
105. W. Robson, *The Development of Local Government* (1931), p.156.
106. J Gyford, *Local Politics in Britain* (1976), p.132