

# The Role of Local Authorities IN THE EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF THE GAS INDUSTRY

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The Gas Light and Coke Company obtained its powers to supply gas in London by Act of Parliament in 1810 and by Royal Charter in 1812. However many other companies, particularly unincorporated companies established by Deeds of Settlement and lacking their own identity in law, acted as contractors to bodies who already had the necessary powers.

One major group that did have the power to carry out public lighting were Improvement Commissioners. Acts for their establishment had become frequent from the end of the eighteenth century. Typical was the 1789 Act 'for paving the several streets, public passages and places within the Town of Chelmsford, and Hamlet of Moulsham, for cleaning, lighting and watching the said town and hamlet and for removing and preventing nuisances, annoyances and encroachments therein'.

The Chelmsford Gas Light and Coke Company was an unincorporated company formed in 1819 whose first trustees and their relatives included names that were involved

in many aspects of town life, including acting as improvement commissioners, and it is perhaps not surprising that the company were awarded a public lighting contract by the commissioners as well as one for lighting the local gaol. The commissioners obtained a new act in 1822, which gave them specific powers to 'dig trenches, lay mains and carry out all the works required to light streets, lanes, squares or passages, and to manufacture and supply gas themselves, or contract for its supply, as they saw fit'. Under the new act the commissioners themselves took responsibility to ensure leaks were attended to and to prevent the pollution of watercourses by waste from the gas process. Such a pattern of a company obtaining an initial contract for public lighting has been identified as the norm, with an indication that a cheap supply of gas to public lamps was often made a condition on companies for the privilege of disturbing paving for mains laying. It is recorded that, with the significant exception of Manchester, improvement commissioners services of lighting were almost inevitably let out to contractors. The 1832 Lighting and Watching Act gave general powers to local authorities to secure adequate gas lighting.

Records of the Chelmsford Commissioners no

longer exist, but the minute books of its successor, the Local Board of Health, show that the relationship with the gas undertaking was not always good. In 1854 acrimonious correspondence was exchanged between the board and the secretary of the gas company, Jabez Church, over the basis of the company's accounts for public lighting. Although the local board did not exercise the right to undertake its own gas manufacture, the minutes show that tenders for public lighting at this time were invited on a six monthly basis. However the Chelmsford Gas Light and Coke Company were the only organisation submitting tenders.

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