What was the local government?

In most cases, the main unit of government on the ground was the county. Although the county administration was in theory headed by the sheriff, the key official in local government throughout the sixteenth century was the Justice of the Peace, or JP, responsible both for low-level criminal justice, and for a multiplicity of administrative tasks. Although the JPs were appointed by the Crown, they were invariably drawn from the more senior gentry, plus a few nobles and churchmen.

How did local government change?

The number of JPs in each county greatly expanded over the century, from an average of around ten to around forty to fifty. This reflected a great expansion in their work. Commissions e.g. ecclesiastical causes, for grain supply, for recusants, for Jesuits, for musters were staffed by gentry men too.

One important innovation in Tudor local government was the lieutenancy. Under this system, a single individual, usually a nobleman, was created lord lieutenant of the county by royal commission. In the 1550s, this was used primarily to keep order in the counties during a period of rebellion, instability, frequent changes of rule and religious tension. It was revived for the crisis of the Northern Rebellion of 1569-70, and made permanent during the Elizabethan wars of 1585-1604, when it became an important way for the State to mobilise resources for the war from the counties.

How stable was local government?

The regime was strengthened by recruiting the gentry into the work of government, and it was also remarkably cheap, since JPs were unpaid. On the downside, since the JPs were not dependent on the Crown for their income, they were not necessarily loyal to the crown, particularly if the gentry in a particular county stuck together. More importantly, the gentry, as a class, did not necessarily share the same interests as the Crown. This meant that the JPs needed careful supervision.

How successful was local government?

Unsuccessful: The English were unused to the constant level of taxation demanded by the Spanish war, and since it was the gentry who assessed tax, they simply under-declared their own taxable wealth. Income from the main form of taxation, the subsidy, steadily declined. This was a key structural problem and it was never confronted. The regime relied instead on a combination of half-measures: borrowing, forced loans, economising and selling Crown lands.

Successful: By the time of the Elizabethan wars, troops were raised by the lieutenancy under royal commission. The defence forces were also transformed by the creation in the 1570s and 1580s of the ‘trained bands’, which imposed a much greater degree of organisation and training on the county militias. Over the sixteenth century the Crown’s military strength ceased to be based on an armed nobility, and became instead a national militia system, organised by the lieutenancy and effectively carried out by the gentry. One effect of all this was that the Crown was left with much more control over the legitimate use of violence.