

Electoral Rolls or Registers in England

Electoral Rolls or Registers

It has been said that, "Electoral rolls are rather like census records, with the difference that they are compiled and published annually". That has been true since 1928, though without an exact address more than a little time may be needed for a search. From 1918, and more so since 1928, they show all the adult members of the household, both male and female. However, unlike the census, they never show place of birth or details of children under the age of 18.

Electoral rolls or registers can be used to discover the date of a man's first appearance at a certain address and when he leaves it, and to see what other adult members of the family were at that address. After 1918 this may include the name of his wife. The entry for an address at which an illegitimate child is born may reveal much about the family circumstances at that time. When young people first appear, their ages may be estimated (and thus their birth dates) and when elderly people disappear their death dates may perhaps be assumed. From 1950 onwards the names of those who will become 21 during the coming year are included and, from 1970, the birth dates of those who will become 18. Before 1918 the registers give a fairly precise indication of the family's property holdings.

When dealing with a family with a frequently encountered surname this extra information can indeed be used like a census to help to identify other family members, to trace their descendants and to locate their birth, marriage and death dates in the General Register Office indexes, though the problems mentioned below must be taken into account.

The right to vote was given to an increasingly wide body of people, commencing with the great Reform Act in 1832. The main provisions of the various Acts as they affected England and Wales are as follows:

1832

The Reform Act of 1832, apart from redistributing parliamentary seats so as to give better representation to the industrial towns in the north, did not greatly increase the number of those who had a right to vote. They remained in two categories: the county and the borough voters.

In the counties the right was still restricted to those owning (or at least having a life interest in) land worth at least forty shillings a year, but to these were now added copyholders (holding land from a manor) worth at least £10 a year and those who had leases for more than 20 years on property worth at least £50 a year.

In the boroughs the old voting rights [described in the article on Poll Books] were retained for the lifetimes of those concerned. To their number were now added householders paying a rent of at least £10 a year, provided that they had been in occupation for at least 12 months, paid poor rate and assessed taxes, and lived within seven miles of the borough.

This Act defined a number of additional categories of voters such as beneficed clergymen, irremovable schoolmasters, parish clerks and sextons, and certain classes of mortgagees, annuitants, trustees, etc. By its provisions many middle-class tenant farmers and shopkeepers gained the vote, but the artisan and agricultural labourer (and women, of course) continued to be excluded.

It was this Act which first required lists of persons with voting rights to be compiled and published annually (and be open to public inspection) and since 1832 no person has been able to vote unless their name is on the printed electoral register. Initially a charge of one shilling was charged for registration. A very few lists of those entitled to vote had been published before 1832 but these are usually found mentioned in the bibliographies of poll books.

1867

An Act in 1867 greatly increased the numbers eligible to vote, particularly in the boroughs where the right was given to all householders (owners and tenants) who paid rates and to lodgers in unfurnished accommodation paying at least £10 a year. In the counties all males with freehold, copyhold or leasehold property worth at least £5 a year and occupiers of lands or tenements who paid a rent of at least £12 a year now became eligible. During the debate on the Act much hilarity was caused when one noble lord handed in an amendment that no person should be given the vote who could not read and write, but his handwriting was so illegible that the clerk at the table was unable to decipher it.

This article deals with central government or parliamentary elections only, but from 1869 a few women are first found on the electoral register (if they had the right property qualifications) as having a vote in local government elections. Registers of voters in local elections were amalgamated with those for parliamentary elections in 1878 in the boroughs and in 1885 in the counties. The introduction of the secret vote in 1872 had practically put an end to the publication of poll books but before 1872 a printed poll book may sometimes double as an electoral register and show the names of those eligible but who did not vote.

1884

A further reform put forward by Gladstone in 1884 introduced uniform qualifications for counties and boroughs and gave the vote to all male inhabitant householders, to occupiers of lands and tenements worth at least £10 and to lodgers paying at least £10 a year. The old forty-shilling freehold rights were retained for inherited land or that acquired by marriage, as were the rights of freemen in boroughs. Those who occupied a dwelling house by virtue of any office, service or employment were also given the vote. Whitaker's Almanack said that this Act "gives a vote to almost everybody who cares to possess one" and it is sometimes said that most men over the age of 21 now appeared on the electoral register but the figure was in fact not much above fifty per cent.

The principle of "one man, one vote" advocated by James Stansfeld was heavily defeated in the House of Commons in 1891. The right of women to vote at certain local elections was not widely exercised and

led some thinking women to oppose the extension of that right to parliamentary elections. In 1889 the magazine *The Nineteenth Century* [not in FHL] organised an appeal against female suffrage as "distasteful to the great majority of the women of the country, unnecessary and mischievous both to themselves and to the State" and published in its August issue the names of the first 1,000 women who subscribed to that view. This interesting list, not often mentioned by historians of the suffragette movement, contains several well-known names and those of many young ladies at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, and Girton College, Cambridge.

1918

No electoral registers were published in the years 1916 and 1917, but the important 1918 Act, recognising the part that men and women had played in the First World War, abolished the property qualifications and gave the vote to men at 21 and women at 30, that right being dependent on six months' residence or occupation of business premises worth £10 a year. The women had to be householders or the wives of householders or to have been to university. Men with qualifications in more than one constituency had, since 1832, been able to vote in each, but in 1918 this right was limited to two constituencies: that of their place of residence or business and/or that in which they had graduated.

From 15 October 1918 to 1926 the electoral registers were compiled twice a year. Those absent in the armed forces when the 1918 and subsequent lists were compiled are shown separately at the end of the polling district in which they normally lived in an Absent Voters' List. They could vote either by post or proxy. The entries show their home address, unit, rank and number, and form an important source of that information. Conscientious objectors were deprived of the vote from 1918 to 1923.

The 1918 Act resulted in a three-fold increase in the numbers qualified to vote. The main qualification being age, the rights of freemen and liverymen to vote at parliamentary elections in the boroughs were now finally abolished.

1928

The 1928 Act gave the vote to all adults at the age of 21. In the 1930s women were described in the register as either "Miss" or "Mrs". No electoral registers were published for the years 1940-1944.

1948

In 1948 the principal of "one man, one vote" was accepted in an Act which abolished the separate representation of the universities and the second vote of graduates, as well as the additional vote of those who owned businesses in premises other than their homes. From 1949/50 until 1969 the names of those who would reach the age of 21 in the first half of the year are marked with a "Y" in the register.

1969

The 1969 Act reduced the qualifying age from 21 to 18 and the date of birth of those reaching that age in the coming year has since been shown in the electoral register.

Arrangement of Electoral Registers

The basic lists of the householders in each parish were originally prepared by the overseers of the poor. They made their own enquiries and took details from the rate books. A revising barrister then heard complaints from those who had been omitted and from those who objected to the inclusion of others and the printed version was prepared from his signed list.

The electoral registers prior to 1915 are undoubtedly easier to use, being compiled by constituency, then by ward and polling district and then by township, before being arranged in alphabetical order. There may, however, be quite separate sections for each category of qualification (such as the owners and occupiers) and these can easily be overlooked. Early lists sometimes show only the first forename but usually the name "at full length, the Surname being first", appears. The "Place of abode" is followed by the "nature of the qualification" and a "description of the qualifying property". Before 1915 some people who lived in the boroughs, but did not qualify to vote there, may have had a qualification to vote in a county area and they then appear in the electoral roll for that county. At all times lodgers and those staying only temporarily at an address may not appear.

However, there was a growing tendency in the 19th century to arrange the lists in the larger towns by street and house number and after 1918 this became obligatory, the electoral registers being arranged by polling district or ward, and then by street or road. This arrangement is a major drawback for the genealogist and even with a street index a search may take a great deal of time. There should, however, be a composite index showing which streets and parts of streets are in each polling district.

Another problem is to find which constituency covers a particular street or area of a large town and boundary changes may complicate a search over several years. These details may most easily be found from the small-scale maps in F.W.S. Craig, *Boundaries of Parliamentary Constituencies 1885-1972* [not in FHL]. A valuable gazetteer of constituency coverage and changes is provided by Richard H.A. Cheffins, *Parliamentary Constituencies and their Registers since 1832* (British Library, 1998) [not in FHL]. In London the London County Council's *Names of Streets and Places* shows the constituencies in which they fall: any edition to 1912 [FHL 942 X22sp, Q book] will show those for 1885-1915, the 1929 edition those for 1918-1948 and the 1955 edition [FHL 942.1 E5n] those for 1949-1954.

From 1832 (in boroughs from 1842) to 1939 the lists usefully contain both home address and the qualifying address when these are different, and may lead to the home address when only the business address is known (perhaps from a trade directory).

The electoral register, which came into force on varying dates over the years, had a qualifying date that was 31 July from 1832 to 1918 (but 15 July in 1878-1885) and subsequently varied considerably. The register then remained valid until the next list was published. For the genealogist the qualifying date is the most important as the person may have died or moved away after that date.

Wiki articles describing online collections are found at:

England Cheshire Register of Electors (FamilySearch Historical Records)

England Norfolk Register of Electors (FamilySearch Historical Records)

Copies of Electoral Registers

By Act of 1843 copies of all county electoral registers were to be deposited with the Clerk of the Peace of the county concerned. The Local Government Act of 1888 continued that requirement, copies being sent to the Clerk to the County Council. Apparently no provision was made for the permanent retention of the electoral registers of the borough towns. By Act of 1868 copies of both were sent to the Home Office but these were destroyed after two years "because of their enormous bulk".

As a result, not all early electoral registers survive. As already mentioned, none were compiled in the years 1916-17 and 1940-44. Most searches should start in the main local studies library or county record office. Their holdings are detailed in Jeremy Gibson, *Electoral Registers 1832-1948*; and *Burgess Rolls* (The Family History Partnership, 2008) [FHL 942 A3gje] that covers England, Wales and Scotland. It includes lists for borough elections (the 'Burgess Rolls'), sometimes preceding 1832, and, from 1888, for local government elections.

The national collection in the Official Publications Department of the British Library, 96 Euston Road, London NW1 2DB, provides the only complete run of electoral registers for 1937 and 1938 and from 1947 onwards. Holdings are modest before 1885, good from then to 1915, modest again from 1918 to 1932 and very poor for the mid-1930s. A British Library reader's ticket is needed, and 48 hours' notice is required to see registers before 1984. A very helpful leaflet, *Finding Electoral Registers in the British Library*, is available. No searches can be made by post. The collection is listed in the books by Jeremy Gibson and Richard Cheffins mentioned above.

Indexes of Registers

Even before the Second World War some London boroughs began to compile indexes of the surnames of electors in their areas. With the advent of computers the practice became widespread in the 1980s, the current electoral register being produced in most areas both alphabetically by surname and in street order. The alphabetical lists were extremely valuable in the location of lost individuals and formed a useful basis for one-name studies. However, they were seized upon by commercial firms for the promotion of a wide range of products and by the end of the 1980s, as a result of complaints, some libraries were withdrawing them from their shelves.

A recent case under human rights legislation found against the local authority in Wakefield for selling its register to commercial companies. As a result, electoral registration officers were in 2002 instructed to make two versions. The "full register" shows the names and addresses of those entitled to vote and may only be used for certain specified purposes, but the "edited register", from which you may choose to have your name omitted, can be sold and used for any purpose. Both are amended monthly.

A national version of the electoral register containing some 27 million names from the edited register, along with some 15 million names and addresses from residential and business telephone directories, may be found on the Internet at <http://www.192.com> and may be purchased on CD ROM. This is the 2008 Version 14. Older versions contained many more names; the 2002 Version 8 contained 44 million from the electoral rolls and 17 million from telephone directories.

Bibliography

Jeremy Gibson, Electoral Registers 1832-1948; and Burgess Rolls (The Family History Partnership, 2008) [FHL 942 A3gje].

Richard H.A. Cheffins, Parliamentary Constituencies and their Registers since 1832 (British Library, 1998; new edition in preparation) [not in FHL].

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