

## **Electoral Registers**

### **Historical Background**

Registers of parliamentary voters (commonly called electoral registers, electoral rolls or voters' lists) first began to be systematically kept as a result of the Reform Act of 1832. Before this, constituencies had been unequal, and electoral qualifications varied from district to district. Some areas of the country had been entirely unrepresented in Parliament, whereas ancient boroughs had returned two Members of Parliament to the House of Commons, even those that had dwindled in size and importance (these were the notorious 'rotten boroughs'). The grouping of boroughs had meant that there were many more representatives from the south and east of the country, at the expense of the new industrial towns of the midlands and the north, and the boroughs had returned approximately three times as many Members of Parliament as the counties.

Most people had recognised that reform of Parliament was of paramount importance, since much-needed reforms in other administrative institutions such as the church, the universities and the Law Courts were unlikely to come about until Parliament itself had been reformed. The electoral system as it stood had given the landed aristocracy an unacceptable hold over the House of Commons, which needed a wider basis for its authority. The obvious remedy lay in extending the franchise (enabling more people to vote) and redistributing parliamentary seats.

### **The Reform Act of 1832**

The Reform Act of 1832 created a uniform franchise in the boroughs. Male owners and occupiers of property worth £10 in annual value were able to vote. Franchise in the counties was given to £10 copyholders (those paying £10 per year on copyhold land) and £50 leaseholders, while the long-standing voting rights of 40 shilling freeholders were upheld. This added about 217,000 voters to an electorate of 435,000 in England and Wales.

Prior to the Reform Act, Devon had returned 26 Members of Parliament - two county members, two for the city and county of Exeter and two each for the boroughs of Ashburton, Barnstaple, Beer Alston, Dartmouth, Honiton, Okehampton, Plymouth, Plympton, Tavistock, Tiverton and Totnes. The Reform Act cut the number of Members of Parliament from Devon to 22, and split the county into two divisions - North and South - each returning two Members of Parliament. The boroughs of Beer Alston, Okehampton and Plympton were disenfranchised, so that they were no longer represented by their own Members of Parliament. Ashburton Borough and Dartmouth Borough lost one of their two Members of Parliament, and two Members were given to the new Borough of Devonport.

### **The Reform Act of 1867**

The Reform Act of 1867 extended the franchise (the number of males eligible to vote) further so that male householders of property rated at £5 or more in the boroughs and £12 or more in the counties were then able to vote. This added about 1 million voters, though many men in Devon were still ineligible to vote. The Act reduced the number of Devon Members of Parliament from 22 to 15, and created a new Eastern Division returning two Members of Parliament. The boroughs of Ashburton, Dartmouth, Honiton and Totnes were disenfranchised (they were no longer represented by their own Members of Parliament), and the borough of Tavistock lost one of its two Members of Parliament.

### **The Franchise Act of 1884**

The Franchise Act of 1884 established a uniform £5 voting qualification for both borough and county constituencies, thus raising the U.K. electorate (still entirely male) from about 3 million to 5 million. Large boroughs continued to return two Members of Parliament while the rest of the country was divided into single-member constituencies. The number of Devon Members of Parliament was reduced from 15 to 11, and eight new divisions were created to replace the former three (North, South and East Divisions). These new divisions were Ashburton, Barnstaple, Honiton, South Molton, Tavistock, Tiverton, Torquay and Totnes, each returning one Member of Parliament. The boroughs of Barnstaple, Tavistock and Tiverton were disenfranchised, and therefore lost their own Member of Parliament, and Exeter, Plymouth and Devonport each returned one Member of Parliament.

### **The Representation of the People Act of 1918**

Following the First World War, the Representation of the People Act of 1918 extended the householder franchise of 1884. Though hailed at the time as 'democratic', this Act still gave the vote to only three out of every five adult males, and no women. A simple six-month residency qualification was introduced for men, and votes were given to women over thirty, but only on the old occupancy basis.

Nevertheless, this Act added more voters to the register than all its predecessors put together. There were now 13 million men and 8.5 million women eligible to vote. A redistribution of Parliamentary seats occurred. This was aimed at creating uniform-sized constituencies, each of about 70,000 voters and each returning one Member of Parliament. A common franchise was established for both parliamentary and local elections. The number of Devon Members of Parliament was maintained; the Ashburton Division was abolished, but because of the growth of the city of Plymouth the three Plymouth districts of Devonport, Drake and Sutton were given one Member of Parliament each.

### **Representation of the People Act of 1928**

The process of democracy was completed with the Representation of the People Act of 1928, which lowered the voting age for women to 21, with the same six-month residency qualification as for men. This added about 5 million voters to the register.

### **Description of Electoral Registers**

Before 1832 there had been no comprehensive lists of voters; the electorate was small in most boroughs, so it was not considered necessary. Following an Act of 1780, the payment of land tax had been confirmed as a voting qualification, and duplicate land tax assessments were deposited with the Clerk of the Peace, for the purpose of electoral registration. Therefore, in the counties, most voters could prove their qualification by producing receipts for payment of land tax.

The increased franchise (the increased number of males eligible to vote) from 1832 made a list necessary, and the duty of compiling these electoral registers or voters' lists was given to the overseers of the poor in each parish. Annual lists of eligible voters were to be deposited with the Clerk of the Peace, who produced printed registers from them.

**1832-1914** - One printed volume was produced annually for each division, arranged in alphabetical order of polling district, and of parish within each district. This is what you will expect to find when looking at these registers. An index at the front gives the number of voters in each parish, in each district, and the total number in the division. The register of voters is arranged in alphabetical order of surname within each parish, although from 1885 the electoral registers for towns were arranged in alphabetical street order instead. There are five columns on each page, recording electoral number, full name, residence, nature of qualification, and name of property. The residential and property information may only give the name of a street or the general area.

**1918-1939** - There are four columns on each page, recording electoral number, franchise qualification for (a) parliamentary and (b) local government elections, name and address.

**1945 onwards** – These are bound or unbound printed sheets arranged by constituency and in alphabetical order of parish within the constituency. There are two columns: electoral number and name and address.

Boroughs are included within the divisional lists, but there are separate registers for the City and County of Exeter from 1843.

Electoral registers were not produced during the two World Wars. Therefore, there are no electoral registers for the latter years of World War 1 (1915–1917) or World War 2 (1940–1944).

### **Electoral Records Held at Devon Heritage Centre**

The separate collections of electoral registers previously held at the former Devon Record Office and the former Westcountry Studies Library have been amalgamated into one collection.

Devon Heritage Centre holds electoral registers for all divisions from 1832 to 1914. Some very early registers do not survive, but the gaps have been filled by overseers' lists (1833-35, 1837, 1838 South Division, and 1840 North Division). Many of the 19<sup>th</sup> century electoral registers have been filmed, and are available on microfiche, on open access in the searchroom.

After the First World War, Plymouth and Devonport were no longer part of the Tavistock Electoral Constituency. A new constituency covering Plymouth and Devonport, and represented by three members of Parliament (for Drake, Sutton and Devonport) was created. We have almost no electoral registers for the Plymouth constituency after 1914 at the Devon Heritage Centre.

After the Second World War, the earliest electoral registers we hold are for the Constituencies of Exeter and Torquay, with a qualifying date of January 1945. Following this, we hold electoral registers for all Devon electoral constituencies except Plymouth with a qualifying date of June 1945. For the years 1946 and 1947, we only hold electoral registers for the Constituencies of Exeter and Torquay. From 1948 the coverage again becomes more complete, although there are a few gaps in our collection.

We hold some electoral registers dating up to 2002, but none more recent than that. Up to 2002, electoral registers contained the names of all voters. However, since 2003, after regulations changed, two versions of the electoral register have been produced:

- Full Electoral Register
- Edited Electoral Register

Registers are now compiled in machine-readable form by local authorities. Data files of the edited version of the register have not been transferred to us; they can however be purchased by commercial firms, who compile databases comprising the contents of all the registers for the country. These databases can be searched by personal name, but a fee is charged. One of the online sites offering this service is mentioned below. Find My Past also has a searchable database of the electoral register from 2002-2014 available on its website

## **Electoral Records held at the British Library**

The British Library has the national collection of electoral registers from 1832 to the present day. The collection is complete from 1947 onwards, but patchy before the Second World War.

According to their website, access to electoral registers held in the British Library is subject to restriction for 10 years after publication, to comply with legislation on Representation of the People and Data Protection.

The British Library holds the full version of the printed registers for all constituencies from 2003 onwards. More information about Electoral Registers is available on the British Library website at <https://www.bl.uk/collection-guides/uk-electoral-registers> .

## **Electoral Registers Online**

Some historical electoral registers are now available on commercial genealogical websites such as Find My Past and Ancestry. Some of Devon's older electoral registers have been now been published online. There is generally a charge for accessing full information from these online electoral registers, though searching indexes may be free.

### **Find My Past**

Find My Past and the British Library have worked together to digitise historic registers for the period 1832-1932 held in the Library's collections. Access is available free of charge in the British Library's reading rooms and through the Find My Past website - either at Devon Heritage Centre, North Devon Record Office or other centres where free access is offered. Access is also available at home, to Find My Past subscribers .

U.K. electoral registers dating from 2002 to 2014 are also searchable on Find My Past. Coverage will change each year as more current registers are added. See the website at <http://www.findmypast.co.uk> .

### **Ancestry**

Ancestry has worked in partnership with the London Metropolitan Archives to digitise their London electoral registers from 1832 to 1965. Full access is available to subscribers only.

### **192.com website**

Historical electoral registers on this commercial website date from 2002 to 2014. You may search the index free of charge, but must subscribe in order to access full details. The latest electoral register on this website includes the names and addresses of those UK residents over the age of eighteen who have registered to vote and who have not opted to be removed from the edited version of the electoral register. Since 2003, 192.com has only published the edited electoral register annually. 2002 was the last year the full electoral register was available.

The current electoral roll is published on 192.com at the beginning of the year and updated quarterly. See the website page at <http://www.192.com/people/electoral-roll> .

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