

REGISTERS OF ELECTORS

INTRODUCTION

Various lists of people able to vote in national and local elections have been compiled over the years. The qualification for local elections varied not only from time to time but from one place to another. The names of the lists also varied – poll book, burgess list, freemen list, electoral register. If looking for the possible mention of an ancestor, it is best to ask a particular Record Office what it holds.

PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

Poll Books

Poll books recorded the names of men who voted in Parliamentary elections and for whom they voted. They were introduced in 1696 when sheriffs were first required to compile records of the poll in county elections. They are usually divided by parish. They listed parish of residence and, in some cases exact addresses plus, if different, the address of the property that gave a man the right to vote. Few survive from before 1711, when an Act required poll books to be deposited with the Clerk of the Peace. They were discontinued when the secret ballot was introduced in 1872 so the last general election for which true poll books exist is that of 1868. Most manuscript poll books were destroyed in 1896 but many had been printed by local publishers and it is these which can now be consulted, where they survive.

Electoral Registers

Under the Reform Act of 1832 an annual register of persons entitled to vote, still mostly male property holders, was required to be kept. They listed every person qualified to vote, give addresses and, before 1918, details of the property giving the qualification. They were compiled every year, except for 1916/17 and 1940-44, and are now mostly to be found in local record offices.

The franchise for elections to Parliament was extended in 1832, 1867, 1884, 1918 and 1928. In 1832 about a million men, the roughly one in ten who were owners or tenants of land worth at least £10 a year, were able to vote. The 1867 Reform Act extended the franchise to about 2½ million men, owners of property worth £5 a year or tenants paying £12 a year. In 1884 men over 21 who were householders, or lodgers paying £10 a year, representing over half the male population including most agricultural labourers, were able to vote. Heads of households in shared houses, adult males living with parents and soldiers in barracks were however still excluded. The Representation of the People Act of 1918 abolished the property qualification and extended the franchise to all men over 21 and women over 30 who were householders or the wives of householders. In 1928 all women over 21 were enfranchised. Plural voting (business owners and university graduates could vote in constituencies other than that of residence) was abolished in 1948. In 1969 the minimum age was reduced to 18 for men and women.

Examples from the electoral register for Norfolk 1885-1887:

Ownership voter	Golden, Robert	Haynford	Copyhold house and land	Chequers Street
Occupation voter	Buck, John	Haynford	Dwelling-house	Farm house near the Chequers

Freemen and Burgess Rolls

From medieval times most cities and boroughs were governed by a body of men known as freemen, who had been granted the freedom of the city or borough and had a number of rights and privileges. A burgess (or burgher) was an inhabitant of a borough (or burgh). Freemen and Burgess Rolls, or Lists, recorded their names. They were often entitled to vote in Parliamentary as well as local elections. Many more people are included in Freemen and Burgess Rolls than in Electoral Rolls. Lists of Freemen continued into the 20th century.

Freemen were usually members of a guild or livery company, who kept their own lists, so names of freemen may in appear in two separate lists.

LOCAL ELECTIONS

Poll books and electoral registers were also prepared for local elections. Prior to 1832 there were no fixed qualifications for the local franchise, eligibility for which depended on local circumstances and tradition. Women who had the necessary property qualifications and who paid rates could vote in local elections from 1869. Until 1918 the registers for local elections differed from those for national elections.