

# London Metropolitan Archives

Information Leaflet Number 10

## Electoral registers at London Metropolitan Archives



## **Introduction**

Electoral registration was introduced by the Reform Act of 1832 and, since then, electoral registers have been compiled annually with the exception of the years 1916, 1917 and 1940 to 1944 when none was produced. London Metropolitan Archives holds the most comprehensive collection of electoral registers for the London and Middlesex areas. They cover the former counties of Middlesex and London to 1963, the latter extending east as far as the river Lea, west to Hammersmith, north up to Hampstead, Islington and Hackney, and south to Wandsworth, Lewisham and Woolwich. From 1964 the holdings of electoral registers encompass the area within the present boundaries of Greater London.

## **Who could vote and when**

It is important to bear in mind that before 1928 the number of people eligible to vote in elections was restricted. Before 1867 in urban areas and before 1884 in rural areas most men could not vote and would not appear in the register. No women could vote in parliamentary elections before 1918.

Until 1884 there were two types of franchise: the borough and the county. In county constituencies, men over 21 who owned freehold land worth 40 shillings a year and over were qualified to vote. Before 1832 the borough franchise varied according to local custom. For example, Westminster, which was the only parliamentary borough in Middlesex at that time, had a 'scot and lot' franchise which qualified all men paying poor rates.

### **1832 Representation of the People Act (2 & 3 Will IV c.45)**

For county voters the main qualification remained the holding of freehold property worth 40 shillings a year. However, the vote was extended to include £10 copyholders, £10 leaseholders (whose leases were for sixty years or more), and £50 tenants. The borough franchise was standardised in 1832 by giving the vote to owners of property worth £10. But in certain ancient chartered boroughs such as Westminster, this meant that fewer people than before could now vote. Therefore, it was enacted that anyone entitled to vote prior to 1832 might retain that right provided he remained resident in the same borough. Three new parliamentary boroughs were created within Middlesex - Finsbury, Marylebone, and Tower Hamlets.

### **1867 Representation of the People Act (30 & 31 Vic c.102)**

The borough franchise was now given to every man who had, 'during the whole of the preceding Twelve Calendar Months been an Inhabitant, Occupier, as Owner or Tenant, of any Dwelling House within the Borough, and has ... been rated as an ordinary occupier in respect of the premises so occupied ...' The occupation franchise

was also extended to lodgers in boroughs. Some working class men in urban areas were now able to vote for the first time. Chelsea became a parliamentary borough and Tower Hamlets was divided into two parliamentary boroughs - Hackney and Tower Hamlets.

### **1884 Representation of the People Act (48 & 49 Vic c.3)**

The 1867 Act was applied to the counties in 1884. The distinction between the county and borough franchise was effectively abolished, and every male householder was now eligible to vote. However, half the men in the country were still unable to vote due to a clause in the Act which stated that 'Where two or more men are owners either as joint tenants, or as tenants in common of an estate in any land or tenement, one of such men, but not more than one shall ... be entitled to be registered as a voter.' Therefore, adult sons living at home or heads of households who shared houses were not eligible to vote. The following year the number of parliamentary boroughs in Middlesex excluding the City of London and Westminster was increased to sixteen. The remaining part of Middlesex was divided into seven parliamentary divisions.

### **1918 Representation of the People Act (7 & 8 Geo V c.64)**

This Act enabled all men over 21 to vote. Women were allowed to qualify if they were local government voters, or the wives of local government voters provided that they were over 30.

### **1928 Equal Franchise Act (18 & 19 Geo V c.12)**

Women over 21 became eligible to vote under this Act.

### **1948 Representation of the People Act (11 & 12 Geo VI c.65)**

This Act abolished the business premises and university seats qualifications to vote which ensured that no person had more than one vote.

### **1969 Representation of the People Act (17 & 18 Ez II c.15)**

The voting age was lowered to 18 years of age (this became effective from 1971). This Act also stated that those becoming eighteen during the period covered by the annual electoral register will have the date on which they reach their eighteenth birthday inserted in the register and they are able to vote from that date.

## **The local government franchise**

The restrictions placed on those able to vote in parliamentary elections were not imposed on local government elections. The 1832 Municipal Corporations Act (5 & 6 Will IV c.76) gave the local government vote to all male occupiers of any house provided they had been rated. This ratepaying franchise did not include the working

class until 1850 when the Small Tenements Rating Act stated that labourers' dwellings were to be included in the rate books. In 1869 the Municipal Corporations Act was amended to include unmarried women. As a result, men and women without a parliamentary vote are nevertheless included on the electoral register.

## **Types of records**

### **Electoral registers**

Electoral registers are lists of voters able to vote in parliamentary and local government elections. They are arranged by constituency and divided into polling districts. The 1918 Representation of the People Act (7 & 8 Geo V c.64) enforced the practice of listing voters by street and then house number. Before this, some registers may be found to list voters' names in alphabetical order within each polling district. Prior to 1918, electoral registers provide details of the voter's residential address, the qualification entitling him to vote and the nature and location of the qualifying property, and also details of properties which the voter owned but which were rented out to tenants. As voting qualifications became less restricted, fewer details were needed on the registers, and after 1945 only the voter's name and address began to be included.

There are three dates associated with each register: the qualifying date, the date when the register comes into force, and the date on which the register is replaced. The qualifying date is the most important for the purpose of tracing ancestors or missing persons because it establishes residence on a particular date. From 1832 the qualifying date was normally either June or July with the register coming into force at the end of that year. From 1953 the qualifying date became October with the register coming into force in February.

### **Overseers' returns of electors**

The Reform Act of 1832 directed parish overseers to prepare the electoral registers which were compiled from returns. These returns can be considered the 'raw material' from which electoral registers were produced. London Metropolitan Archives holds overseers' returns for Middlesex from 1847 to 1882. The returns are arranged in annual bundles by polling district. The names of electors are listed alphabetically within each parish giving the place of residence and the address by which the elector has gained his vote. Overseers' returns are particularly useful for dates for which there are no surviving electoral registers.

### **Poll books**

Poll books are lists of voters at a given election, usually accompanied by details of the residence and occupation of the voter, and also indications of which candidates they voted for. The format of most poll books lists voters as they turned up at the Hustings,

and as elections took place over forty days a lengthy search is required in order to locate a particular individual. Their value is limited by the fact that they only include those people who actually voted rather than all who were eligible to vote, and they were not produced annually but only exist for election years. Unlike electoral registers, many of the poll books held at London Metropolitan Archives are the original manuscript copies, although the library holdings do contain a number of printed poll books. In 1872 poll books were brought to an end by the Secret Ballot Act (35 & 36 Vic. c.33).

## Summary of holdings

### Poll books

- Ancient County of Middlesex:  
**1749/50, 1768/69, 1802, 1806** (MR/PP)

- Ancient County of Kent:  
**1847** (3.81 KEN)

- City of London:  
**1796** (3.8 CIT)

Further lists of voters in ward, parliamentary and county elections, chiefly 19<sup>th</sup> century in date, survive in City of London ward and parish collections. For further details see *London Rate Assessments and Inhabitants Lists in Guildhall Library and the Corporation of London Records Office* (Corporation of London, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, rev, 1968). A copy is available at the Information Desk.

- City of Westminster:  
**1749, 1774, 1780, 1784, 1788, 1790, 1796, 1802, 1806, 1818, 1819, 1820**  
(WR/PP)  
**1749, 1818, 1841** (3.81 KEN)

### Electoral registers

#### Ancient County of Middlesex

- County constituency: Electoral registers, **1832/3, 1842/3, 1861/2** (3.81 MID)  
**1883-1885** (MR/PER/C)
- Overseers' returns of electors, **1847-1882** (MR/PEO)

Parliamentary boroughs (see list of Middlesex Registers of Electors at end of London Wide Elected Bodies):

- Bethnal Green, **1885-1889** (MR/PER/B)
- Chelsea, **1873-1889** (MR/PER/B)
- City of London, **1832, 1835, 1837, 1855** (3.8 CIT)
- Finsbury, **1832/3, 1865/6** (3.8 FIN)

**1873-1889** (MR/PER/B)

- Fulham, **1885-1889** (MR/PER/B)
- Hackney, **1873-1889** (MR/PER/B)
- Hammersmith, **1885/6-1889** (MR/PER/B)
- Hampstead, **1885/6-1889** (MR/PER/B)
- Islington, **1885-1889** (MR/PER/B)
- Kensington, **1885/6-1889** (MR/PER/B)
- Marylebone, **1873-1889** (MR/PER/B)
- Paddington, **1885/6-1889** (MR/PER/B)
- St. George Hanover Square, **1885/6-1889** (MR/PER/B)
- St. Pancras, **1885-1889** (MR/PER/B)
- Shoreditch, **1885/6-1889** (MR/PER/B)
- Strand, **1885/6-1889** (MR/PER/B)
- Tower Hamlets, **1832, 1833, 1834/5-1837/8, 1839/40-1854/5, 1856-1865/6** (3.8 TOW)

**1873-1889** (MR/PER/B)

- Westminster, **1839, 1840, 1844, 1847, 1850/1, 1851/2, 1858/9, 1864/5, 1865/6** (3.8 WES)

**1873-1889** (MR/PER/B)

### **Administrative County of Middlesex**

- Parliamentary divisions: Brentford, Ealing, Enfield, Harrow, Hornsey, Tottenham, Uxbridge **1885/6-1915** (MR/PER/C)
- Parliamentary divisions:
  - Acton, Brentford and Chiswick, Enfield, Finchley, Harrow, Hendon, Spelthorne, Twickenham, Uxbridge, Wood Green **1918-1939** (MR/PER/C)
- Parliamentary boroughs: Ealing, Edmonton, Hornsey, Tottenham, Willesden **1922-1939** (MR/PER/C)
- Parliamentary constituencies:

- Acton, Brentford and Chiswick, Edmonton, Enfield, Finchley, Harrow, Heston and Isleworth, Hornsey, Southall, Spelthorne, Tottenham, Twickenham, Uxbridge, Wembley, Willesden, Wood Green

**1945-1965** (MR/PER/C)

### **Administrative County of London**

Parliamentary constituencies:

- Electoral registers, **1890-1963** (LCC/PER/B)

### **Administrative County of Buckinghamshire**

- Parliamentary division of South Bucks, (Wraysbury, Horton, Iver, Denham), **1956, 1958-1965** (MR/PER/C/1266-1274)

### **Administrative County of Hertfordshire**

- Incomplete parliamentary divisions (most contain: Barnet, East Hertfordshire, Hertford, South West Hertfordshire), **1950, 1954, 1960-1965** (MR/PER/C/1275-1284)

### **Greater London**

Parliamentary constituencies:

- Electoral registers, **1964-1986** (GLC/PER/B)

**1987 to 1999** (PER/B)

### **Absent Voters Lists**

The 1916 Representation of the People Act (7 & 8 Geo V c.50) ruled that members of the armed forces should be listed in separate registers under the constituencies in which they normally lived. The Absent Voters Lists enabled servicemen and women to vote by proxy or by postal application when away from home on active service. They record the civilian address of the absent voter, but more importantly they give service numbers and regimental details. London Metropolitan Archives holds the following Absent Voters Lists:

- Balham and Tooting: **1932**
- City: **1937, 1939**
- Deptford: **1932, 1939**
- Fulham: **1920, 1921, 1924, 1926-1929, 1931, 1932, 1935, 1937**
- Holborn: **1932**
- Islington: **1924**
- Lewisham: **1918, 1924**

- Southwark: **1919**
- Streatham and Putney: **1934**
- Wandsworth: **1918-1920**

In addition to these separate registers, from 1918 to 1949 for the area under the jurisdiction of the London County Council, absent voters are marked in the normal civilian register of electors with an 'a', and from 1949 to 1979 they are indicated by an 's' for Service voter. For the area covered by the Middlesex County Council, London Metropolitan Archives does not hold any separate absent voters lists, but these voters are nevertheless incorporated into the normal registers.

## **How to trace an individual**

Many of the registers of electors held by LMA have been digitised and indexed by Ancestry from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to 1965. However if you fail to find the individual in whom you are interested and you know where they were living and they were likely to be registered to vote, it may be worth searching the registers of electors at LMA.

Your first step in tracing an individual should be to find the correct constituency of the area and period in which you are interested. For the period up to 1885 you should establish in which parish, hamlet or extra parochial district the individual lived. You can then consult the tables at the front of the lists of the Electoral Registers for the County of Middlesex (near the beginning of London Wide Elected Bodies) to find out the correct polling district of the area for county elections, and whether the parish was located in a borough.

From 1885 it is possible to use the London County Council *Names of Streets and Places in the Administrative County of London* which provides the constituency in which each street lay in the former county of London. There are four consolidated editions dated 1901, 1912, 1929 and 1955. There are no finding aids for the period from 1955, but Bartholomew's Reference Atlas is a useful guide for finding out in which borough a street is situated. An index to constituencies in the administrative county of Middlesex can be found in the 1955 Gazetteer of Middlesex which is located behind the counter in the Information Area. A guide showing in which constituencies areas and parishes in Middlesex were situated can be found at the front of the lists of Electoral Registers for the County of Middlesex (near the beginning of London Wide Elected Bodies). Between 1890 and 1945 there were many changes to the local government and parliamentary boundaries within Middlesex and the arrangement of the lists of electoral registers by the present London Boroughs can be misleading for the period before 1945.

To help to find an address within an electoral register, some registers contain street indexes. If you are having difficulty in finding the address in which you are interested

and the register contains no street index, check the lists of electoral registers in the Information Area to see if a register for your area for another year contains an index. It is also possible that the register for another constituency within the same borough as your area contains street indexes for the whole borough.

## Holdings of electoral registers elsewhere

The British Library holds a collection of electoral registers which are virtually complete from and including 1947. Before that date their holdings are modest, but the only dates for which they have no registers are 1939, 1945 and 1946.

The various London and Middlesex local history collections also hold electoral registers. A guide to registers held at various offices around the country can be found in *Electoral Registers Since 1832 and Burgess Rolls* by Jeremy Gibson and Colin Rogers (3.8 GIB).

Electoral registers for the City of London from 1832 onwards are held by Guildhall Library, Aldermanbury, London EC2V 7HH. Guildhall Library also holds an extensive range of poll books covering most areas of the United Kingdom, as well as the London area. Identification must be shown prior to the consultation of rare books at the library.

The Surrey History Centre holds a very good collection of electoral registers from 1832 for all constituencies in the county which includes before 1889 the part which was at that date incorporated into the County of London, as well as the area which later became part of Greater London.

## Reading List

GIBSON, JEREMY and ROGERS, COLIN *Electoral Registers since 1832 and Burgess Rolls*. 2nd Ed. Federation of Family History Societies, 1990. (3.8 GIB)

GIBSON, JEREMY and ROGERS, COLIN *Poll Books c.1696-1872: a Directory to Holdings in Great Britain*. 2nd Ed. Federation of Family History Societies, 1990. (3.8 GIB)

KEITH-LUCAS, B. *The English Local Government Franchise: a Short History*. Oxford, Blackwell, 1952 (11.92 KEI).

PUGH, MARTIN *The Evolution of the British Electoral System, 1832-1989*. The Historical Association, 1990. (11.9 PUG)

VINCENT, J.R. *Pollbooks: How Victorians Voted*. Cambridge University Press, 1967. (11.91 VIN)

Published in July 1998, updated January 2009, March 2010 and February 2012 by 10  
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