

Poll Books, Burgess Rolls and Electoral Registers

Censuses were only taken every 10 years and so trying to find out where our ancestors were in the intervening time or before the censuses were taken can be a challenge. This is where Poll Books and Electoral Registers can help.

However, not everyone was listed but the information below should be able to point you in the right direction.

What are they?

Poll Books

These list the men who voted in Parliamentary elections and who they voted for. The secret ballot did not come into force until 1872 and so the voting was public knowledge.

Burgess Rolls

Burgess or Freeman's rolls listed the Freeman of a city or borough and these men were often entitled to vote for the Parliamentary representatives of that city or borough.

Electoral Registers

Introduced in 1832, these listed everyone who could vote in Parliamentary elections and the lists have been compiled every year since then with the exception of 1916-1917 and 1940-1944.

Who could vote?

The most important thing to remember is that not everyone was entitled to vote, but gradually over the years, more people were given the right to do so.

In the countryside, from 1429, if you were male, over the age of 21 and owned freehold land to the rentable value of 40 shillings a year, then you could vote. As you can imagine, there were not that many people to whom this would apply. However, cities and boroughs had their own varied customs, mainly relating to the Freeman of those cities and boroughs.

As mentioned above, not everyone had the right to vote, but the following key dates of Reform Acts will show you who this was expanded to and their qualifying conditions.

1832 – only men were eligible to vote

Counties: Freeholders with property worth 40 shillings a year; Tenants renting property at £10 a year; £10 leaseholders with at least 60 year leases; £50 leaseholders with at least 20 year leases; Any tenant paying more than £50 a year.

Boroughs: The traditional franchise of each borough, which changed according to the borough, with the addition of householders (whether owners or tenants) of property assessed as worth £10 or more a year.

1867 – only men were eligible to vote

Counties: Any owner or leaseholder of property rated at £5 a year or tenant of a property rated at £12 a year

Boroughs: Every adult male householder resident for a year and heads of families lodging in unfurnished rooms paying £10 a year in rent.

1869 - Women who were rate payers were allowed to vote in local elections.

1884 - The regulations for both Counties and Boroughs were brought into line.

The vote was awarded to:

Every adult male householder resident for a year and heads of families lodging in unfurnished rooms paying £10 a year in rent.

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.

But, still excluded were heads of householders who shared houses, adult males living with parent(s), soldiers in barracks and women.

The vote was then awarded to:

1918 - All males over the age of 21; women over 30 who were householders or wives of householders (6 women in 10).

1928 - Every resident or owner over the age of 21.

1969 - Everybody over the age of 18.

Where can you find the information?

Some electoral registers and poll books are available on commercial websites for a fee. Local County Archives should have copies for their area. There is a collection of Electoral Registers from 1947 onwards at the British Library.

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If you are having problems in finding a particular record or are too far away to pop in and have a look, someone else might be able to help you. Register for FREE at <http://www.genealogy-specialists.com/> and post details of your ancestor and where you think they might be. The members will do their utmost to help you find them!

Within their **Family History Bookshop**, Parish Chest has a complete section that is dedicated to *Poll Books, Voters Lists and Almanacs*. It is broken down by county and country and lists all the products that are relevant to that particular area. Take a look on [www.paritychest.com](http://www.paritychest.com) to find the region in which you are searching.