

UK electoral registers and their uses


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WHAT ARE ELECTORAL REGISTERS?

Electoral registers are lists of names of those entitled to vote at an election during the lifetime of the register. Their formal name is 'Register of Electors' but they are more commonly known as electoral registers; they are also frequently called electoral rolls or lists, or voters' registers, rolls or lists. The term 'electors' lists' or 'list of electors' is also found but, in law, this has a special meaning. These are the provisional lists of electors produced some months before the definitive register that can be checked by interested parties for accuracy and potential alteration. They can be produced either as a draft electoral register or in the form of three lists - List A, the current register; List B, names to be added; and List C, names to be deleted. In neither form are electors' list held by the British Library.

The registers are compiled by local authorities and are produced for units called 'Polling Districts' which aggregate to form parliamentary constituencies (polling districts from different local authorities are frequently combined for this purpose). The same polling district register is used for elections of representatives at every level of government from Parish Council to European Union.

D I S T R I C T O F W Y R E F O R E S T	
	
WYRE FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL	
	
Polling District	-- AA - BEWDLEY EAST
European Parliamentary Constituency	-- WEST MIDLANDS REGION
Parliamentary Constituency	-- WYRE FOREST
County Electoral Division	-- ROCK & BEWDLEY
Ward	-- BEWDLEY
Parish	-- BEWDLEY
Parish Ward	-- EAST
 R E G I S T E R O F E L E C T O R S 1 9 9 9 (QUALIFYING DATE 10TH October 1998) IN FORCE 16th February 1999 to 15th February 2000	

The register above indicates that it was compiled by the District of Wyre Forest and is the register for Polling District AA - Bewdley East.

Alone or in combination with those in other polling districts, the electors listed are eligible to elect a parish councillor for East Ward of Bewdley Parish ('Wards' are the constituencies for most local government elections), a district councillor for Bewdley Ward of Wyre Forest District, a county councillor for Rock and Bewdley Division of Worcestershire, an MP for Wyre Forest at Westminster, and an MEP for the West Midland Regions for the European Parliament. Where other levels of government exist as in London, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales the unit or division for electoral purpose will also comprise one or more polling districts, none of which is ever split between two such divisions. In the description that follows, registers will be described in terms of (UK parliamentary) constituencies and, indeed, are usually bound as such.

WHAT EXISTS

Electoral registration was introduced in 1832 and registers have been issued for each parliamentary constituency every year since then, with certain exceptions.

Registration was suspended in both World Wars and there are no registers for 1916 and 1917 (1915-17 in Scotland) and from 1940 to 1944 inclusive.

From 1919 to 1926 inclusive there were two registers a year called the 'Spring' and 'Autumn' registers. There were also two registers in 1945 and 1946; in addition to the regular registers in October, there was a special register in May 1945 for the general election and a supplementary register of service voters in March 1946.

There were also two registers in 1868 and 1885. The January registers in both years were supposed to last the calendar year but were superseded in both cases by new registers on revised constituency boundaries in November. The latter registers lasted until the end of the following year and are identified as '1868/69' and '1885/86'; otherwise registers are identified by the year in which they came into force even if they span part of two years.

As a consequence of the *Representation of the People (England and Wales) (Amendment) Regulations 2002 (SI 1871)* and corresponding legislation for Scotland and Northern Ireland, two versions of the register were produced from 2003. The full version of the register contains the names of all voters and is used primarily to support the electoral process. Public access to it is strictly controlled. The edited version of the register is available for sale for commercial use for direct marketing, advertising, etc. It omits the names of electors who have exercised their right to opt out to protect their privacy.

WHAT THE BRITISH LIBRARY HAS

Under the *Representation of the people* legislation, the British Library has received a complete set of electoral registers for the whole of the United Kingdom (England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) from and including 1947. From 2003 the Library holds the full, but not the edited, version of the register. It also has a complete set of registers for 1937 and (except for Northern Ireland) for 1938. Apart from a few Scottish constituencies, the Library has no registers for 1932 to 1936 and 1939 and, apart from some Northern Ireland and the same few Scottish constituencies, it has none of the four registers issued during 1945 and 1946.

For the period 1832 to 1931, only a general indication can be given of the British Library's holdings which nevertheless total some 20,000 registers - it is modest to 1885, good from then until 1915 and modest again from 1918 to 1931. A complete inventory of the British Library's holdings is listed in *Parliamentary constituencies and their registers since 1832* which also lists non-parliamentary registers (burgess rolls, jurors lists, valuation rolls, etc.) and poll books held by the Library.

WHAT REGISTERS CONTAIN

Separate registers are produced for each constituency. Up to and including 2002, these listed everyone entitled to vote within them. From 2003, two versions of the register are being produced: full and edited. The edited version is available for sale and omits names of electors who have exercised their right to opt out to protect their privacy. Details have always included names of electors, surname and first forenames as a minimum, and 'place of abode' (not necessarily whole addresses) and, until 1948, the nature of the qualification to vote. A certain amount of additional information may be included. Nowadays this is mainly the date of the birthday for those reaching voting age during the life of the register but formerly jury service qualification and status as an absent voter

were indicated and sometimes other details. For several years from 1918 service details of absent voters were often provided and, from 1885 to 1915, for those qualified on the lodger's franchise, the landlord's name (or, more usually, the landlady's), the weekly rent and the number of rooms rented were included.

Parliamentary registers have doubled as registers for local government elections for more than a century and some people without a parliamentary vote are nevertheless to be found on the register. At present this mostly means peers, and aliens who are European Union citizens but formerly more people fell into this category. From 1869 women ratepayers (a rarity until the reform of married women's property law) had the municipal vote and increasingly appear on electoral registers in that capacity until they received the parliamentary vote, partially in 1918 and fully in 1928. From 1951 those coming of age within the lifetime of a register have been included in it, at first (1951-68), partially in a complicated system of 'Y' voters; since then, when the voting age was reduced to 18, all attaining that age have been entitled to be included.

HOW THEY ARE ARRANGED

Until 1918 electoral registers were compiled by parish overseers or overseers of the poor and the arrangement was at first in alphabetical order of voters, parish by parish. This began to change in 1878 when it was permitted (later required) to merge parliamentary registers with burgess rolls (the registers for municipal elections). The latter were effectively lists of ratepayers and, as rates were then collected door-to-door, their arrangement was in street order and gradually parliamentary registers followed this pattern.

Since 1918 the principal division of parliamentary registers has been the Polling District. The arrangement within polling districts is normally by street in alphabetical order within which properties are in street order. In remote rural areas where 'street' order is not meaningful the arrangement is alphabetically by voter within the smallest local government unit, parish or community in Great Britain or the townland in Northern Ireland. There are no alphabetical indexes of voters.

Because of these arrangements, it cannot be emphasised too strongly that **printed electoral registers are of very little use in tracing named individuals**. Without an address or at least a fairly precise locality for the whereabouts of the person sought, it is generally best to use alternative directories arranged by name. For older registers that is all there is available but it may be possible to search the current (or near current) registers by name electronically.

Although there are no indexes to the names of voters, some registers have alphabetical indexes to street names but even these have their pitfalls. Firstly, many registers lack street indexes altogether but, where they exist, they have been compiled, like the registers themselves, by local authorities with all that this implies. If a constituency straddles two authorities, there will be two indexes or, if there is only one, it will only be to a part of the constituency. Equally, if two or more constituencies, in whole or in part, fall within a single local authority then, if there is a street index, it will indiscriminately cover all the constituencies concerned.

As the index cannot be split, it is the Library's practice in these circumstances to bind it with the constituency that comes first in the alphabet. Thus, if 'Borchester' Council produces a street index covering constituencies of Borchester East and West, it will be

bound with Borchester *East*; and if either constituency extends beyond the borough's boundary, streets in those parts would not be indexed. In some cases there are street indexes only to polling districts but, as the registers for these are only a few pages long and arranged by street in alphabetical order, such indexes are redundant.

IDENTIFYING THE CONSTITUENCY

Before anyone can discover whether the British Library has the register required, it is necessary to identify the constituency concerned. To do this, one must first establish the period for which registers are needed. Since 1832 boundary revisions have taken place in 1867 (1868 in Scotland), 1885, 1918, 1948, 1955, 1970, 1983 and 1995 and there was a partial revision in 1944 when seats with electorates of over 100,000 were split in two or more.

Each revision was the work of a Boundary Commission which generally published maps. The Boundary Commission reports containing these were issued as parliamentary papers and can be consulted in that set but duplicates are on the ERR Shelves (formerly in the Electoral Register Room), now part of the Quick Reference Collection in the Social Sciences Reading Room.

Until 1948, when permanent commissions were set up to report at regular intervals, Parliament could alter Commission recommendations but generally the Commissions' maps are reliable indications of the spatial extent of constituencies. It is seldom necessary to consult the Acts of Parliament or Statutory Instruments that put the boundary changes into effect but, if required, the legislation concerned is also available on the open shelves of the Reading Room.

The main source

The basic procedure is to pinpoint the place sought in an atlas of Britain or a street atlas of urban areas and compare it with the relevant boundary commission map to find the constituency wanted. There are good selections of street atlases on the reference shelves of the Reading Room but readers may find it a wise precaution to bring their own. If registers for a given area need to be consulted for a period that spans a boundary revision then the process must be repeated for 'before' and 'after' the revision.

This process is laborious and some of the boundary commission maps are hardly adequate for the purpose but it is still essential to verify the constituency one way or another as the name alone cannot be relied upon. The post-town of an address or the registration district name on a marriage certificate may be different from any constituency name of the period. Worse still, it may be the *same* as an actual constituency but with widely *different* boundaries. While it is essential to verify the constituency, there are sometimes easier ways of doing this.

Alternative sources

F.W.S. Craig's *Boundaries of parliamentary constituencies 1885-1972* contains descriptions of constituencies in terms of contemporary local authority areas and maps for each revision for the period covered. The maps are small-scale and outline only,

bordering on diagrams, but they are often sufficient alone or together with the descriptions of constituencies it contains to identify what is wanted. Similar information for the 1983 revision can be found in Crewe and Fox's *British parliamentary constituencies* and for the 1995 revision in Rallings and Thrasher's *Media guide to the new parliamentary constituencies*. Both revisions are covered in different editions of Waller's *Almanac of British politics*, the 5th edition for the 1995 revision and earlier ones for the 1983 revisions.

For Inner London (the old LCC area), the simplest way to establish the constituency required between 1885 and 1954 is to consult one of the LCC's *Lists of streets and places*; the 1900 or 1912 edition for constituencies for the period 1885-1915, the 1929 edition for 1918-48 and the 1955 one for 1949-54. In each edition there is a column for parliamentary constituencies and this information is given for every street. In some editions, for long streets like the Edgware Road or the Old Kent Road that ran through several constituencies, house-number spans are included for each constituency.

If the parish is known or can be established for the locality sought, Frederic Youngs' *Guide to local administrative units of England* in two volumes (Northern and Southern) is invaluable. It contains a section of 'Parliamentary Constituencies' but it is the 'Parish' section arranged by county that should be consulted. This indicates the constituencies in which the parish was successively placed with dates and, if the parish was newly created or abolished, it will indicate the parish that formerly or subsequently contained it. If the constituency reference is to a sequence (e.g. *Parl. Seq. 3*) one must refer to the start of the county's Parish section where the sequences, used to save space when several parishes share a common history of parliamentary representation, are given.

Parishes can be identified, among other ways, through the *Census Index of place names* (1918 ed.) or the 1973 *Municipal year book* for parishes as they existed before the local government reorganisation of the early 1970s. Both of these are at ERR on the Quick Reference Collection shelves. There is no equivalent to Youngs' *Guide* for Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.

Find Your MP [<http://findyourmp.parliament.uk/commons/>] is a free and easy-to-use Internet service which searches by post code to find current constituencies.

Royal Mail's Post Code Finder [<http://www.royalmail.com/>] can be used to establish the full code for any address. Click through from its homepage, or use the link provided by Constituency Locata.

FINDING THE REGISTERS

Once the constituency or constituencies that are wanted have been established by whatever means, then *Parliamentary constituencies and their registers since 1832* should be consulted to find out if the British Library has the registers and, if so, what are the relevant pressmarks. The names of the constituencies given in this list are the official names derived from the legislation establishing them or from the registers themselves with three exceptions.

Pre-1948 constituency names took the form of 'Parliamentary County (or Borough) of .', which has been abbreviated to PC or PB and inverted so that, for example, the 'Parliamentary County of Kent' becomes 'Kent PC'.

Secondly, the many counties that take their names from their county towns have always been officially called 'County of [name of town]' though less formally they are better

known as '[name of town]-shire', so County of Worcester is the formal name of Worcestershire and this extends to a number of counties where the shire form has evolved somewhat (County of Chester/Cheshire; County of Lancaster/Lancashire or County of Southampton/Hampshire). In all these cases the -shire form of the county name has been preferred (Lancashire PC not Lancaster PC).

The final exception concerns Lincolnshire (or County of Lincoln) for the period 1918 to 1948. The ancient threefold division of the county was as Parts of Lindsey, Parts of Holland and Parts of Kesteven. These divisions were made separate administrative counties in 1889 and separate parliamentary counties in 1918 and their formal names were 'The Administrative [or Parliamentary] County of the Parts of Lindsey [or Holland, or Kesteven]'. Lincolnshire's Parts are not well known as Yorkshire's Ridings and unlike the latter, the parent county's name is not incorporated in that of the parliamentary county (e.g. East Riding of Yorkshire). Nevertheless, for convenience, they are entered as 'Lincolnshire, Parts of Lindsey PC' etc., even though Lincolnshire does not officially appear in their names.

AVAILABILITY OF REGISTERS

All the registers listed in the 'Registers held' column of *Parliamentary constituencies and their registers since 1832* are available for consultation and extracts from most of those issued up to and including 2002 can be copied. Other, more expensive, forms of reproduction are normally available when fragility or size of the register makes ordinary photocopying impractical. From 2003 the Library holds the full version of the registers only. These can only be consulted under supervision in the Reading Room and copied solely by means of hand-written notes. No form of photographic, mechanical or electronic copying is permitted by law. The law also prohibits the Library from disclosing any information from these full versions over the phone or in writing. Enquirers must visit the Reading Room in person. The Library has an on-going programme of filming pre-War registers and registers already filmed, identified by pressmarks prefixed 'SPR.Mic.P. .', may normally be consulted only on film. If the register is not available from the British Library, there may be other sources and this is particularly important for current registers.

Although the British Library receives new registers from the 35,000 polling districts as they are issued, the sorting and binding of these registers for permanent preservation is a year-long process. If readers have an immediate need to consult a range of current registers, they will have to consult the set at the Social Survey Division of the Office for National Statistics at Titchfield in Hampshire (where registers are available approximately six weeks after publication). If they want to see individual registers they can do so at local public libraries or at the office of the local Electoral Registration Officer (ERO). In the light of the access restrictions introduced from 2003, enquirers should consult the ERO to ascertain local access arrangements for the full registers. Locations of earlier registers can be traced in Gibson & Rogers' *Electoral registers since 1832* ., 2nd ed. (1990) but, if nothing is listed there and the British Library has no copy, it may well be that no copies of the register sought survive.