

Somerset Archive and Record Service



Information Leaflet

ELECTORAL REGISTERS

Introduction

This leaflet explains what electoral records are available, what they contain, and changes in the law relating to the franchise.

Poll Books (Ref. Q/REP)

From 1696 lists of 40 shilling freeholders were drawn up by parish and recorded in poll books. From the 18th century they were usually based on Land Tax returns (Q/REL). Early poll books give freeholder's name, abode, situation and description of freehold, names of occupiers/tenants and election candidates, and a mark of the vote cast. After 1832 descriptions of the voter's abode and property cease. Poll books for 1714, 1807, 1818, 1826, 1832, 1835 and 1837 are held at the Somerset Record Office.

Electoral Registers (Ref. Q/RER)

From 1832 registers of those eligible to vote were compiled by parish and arranged by the year in which they came into force. Initially this was carried out by the Clerk of the Peace, using lists drawn up by overseers of the poor. The County Council then had responsibility until 1972, when District Councils took over.

Who could vote?

Prior to 1918 women were not allowed to vote at parliamentary elections. Until the 19th century voting rights were based on amounts and type of land/property held. Before 1832 constituencies were unequal, and electoral qualifications varied. In counties men aged 21-70 with freehold property worth at least 40 shillings a year could vote at local and parliamentary elections and were eligible for jury service. Borough qualifications varied depending on terms in the Charter of Incorporation and local customs. Therefore, some areas were completely unrepresented whereas ancient boroughs could return two MPs, even those that had diminished in size and importance (the 'rotten boroughs'). The franchise was gradually extended by the following Acts:

1832 Reform Act

- Register of electors established.
- 40 shilling freeholders retained their right to vote.
- Borough franchise extended to occupiers (owner or tenant) of property with an annual value of £10.
- County franchise extended to copyholders paying £10 annual rent, tenants paying £50 annual rent, leaseholders (20 years) of land worth £50 a year, and leaseholders (60 years) of land valued at £10 a year.

1867 Reform Act

- Borough franchises extended to all householders paying rates and lodgers paying £10 annual rent (with 12 months residence qualification).
- County franchise extended to occupiers (owners or tenants) rated at £12 a year who paid poor rates, and those with lands worth £5 a year. By 1869 a third of all adult males were eligible to vote.

1884 Reform Act

- County franchise extended to all householders paying rates and lodgers paying £10 annually (with 12 months residence qualification).
- A service or occupation franchise was included for those with lands or tenements worth £10 a year. Around 40% of adult males and all women still did not have the vote.

Representation of the People Acts

- **1918:** Vote given to all men over 21 and to women over 30 who were ratepayers or wives of ratepayers.
- **1928:** Vote given to all women over the age of 21.
- **1969:** Minimum voting age for men and women lowered to 18.

Those disqualified from voting

- Aliens unless naturalised since 1870.
- Peers (and peeresses after the 1963 Peerage Act).
- Lunatics and those in prison.
- Policemen (until 1887) and postmasters (until 1918).
- Election agents and others paid to assist at elections (until 1918).
- Families receiving public assistance (until 1918).
- Commissioners and government revenue collectors (until 1918).
- Those convicted of election bribery (for five years thereafter).
- World War I conscientious objectors from 1918-1923.

Additional information

- No registers exist for 1916-17 or 1940-44 due to the World Wars.
- From 1919-1926 and 1945 registers were issued in both Spring and Autumn.
- Service details of absent voters were given for a few years from 1918 (in separate registers for 1918-1919) and Armed services personnel were listed in their normal home constituencies.
- Registers give a qualifying date by which voting rights are established in that constituency • Between the qualifying and operative dates voters may have died or moved • People moving to a constituency after the qualifying date will not appear in the register • From 1885-1915 details of landlords, weekly rent and number of rooms rented were often noted for those voting under the lodger's franchise • Registers may list people eligible to vote at local government elections (eg. women ratepayers who had the municipal vote from 1869) • Later registers may note birthdays for those reaching voting age during the life of the electoral register.

Arrangement and contents of electoral registers

1832-1915: Annual printed volumes for each parliamentary electoral division or constituency. From 1843 constituencies were arranged alphabetically by polling district (by hundreds prior to this) and then alphabetically by parish (larger parishes may also be divided by ward). Voters are listed alphabetically by surname according to their vote entitlement. From c.1889 voters are also divided by elector categories or 'divisions' to show in which elections they could vote. There are 5 columns: electoral number, name, abode (may not be the parish in which the qualifying property is located), nature of voting qualification (eg. freehold land, freehold house, leasehold tenement) and a description of the qualifying property which entitles them to vote (name of property, street, etc). Registers should contain an index at the front giving the number of voters in each parish, each district and each division.

1918-1939: Arranged by parliamentary division/constituency and alphabetically by polling district, parish/ward and surname (larger parishes/towns are listed alphabetically by street). Until 1920 they are divided by type of election. Registers give electoral number, voting qualification for local government and parliamentary elections (until 1948), and full name and address.

1945-1973: Arranged alphabetically by polling district, then by parish and ward. Two columns: electoral number *and* name and address. Larger parishes/towns are listed alphabetically by street.

1974 onwards: Arranged by district council and divided into constituencies, polling districts, parishes, etc. List voters in parishes administered by the district council (who can be responsible for parishes in several constituencies). Street indexes exist for registers from the mid 1990s.

2003 onwards: Full and edited versions exist. Edited versions omit names of those who have opted out in order to protect privacy. Full registers under 10 years old must be consulted in person as the Record Office is not permitted to disclose any information from these over the phone or in writing. Not all full registers have yet been deposited (check for details). Full editions of these registers can be consulted at the relevant district council offices.

Constituency Maps: Maps showing in which constituency/district council a parish belonged are available in the searchrooms.

What registers are held?

- Pre-1974 Somerset (except the City of Bath).
- Somerset and North Somerset, 1974 onwards.
- Bath parishes for 1832-1915 only (Bathwick, Lyncombe and Widcombe, St James, St Michael, St Peter and Paul, Twerton, Walcot and Weston).

Which registers are not held?

City of Bath from 1918: Registers for period 1918-1990 held at Bath and North East Somerset Record Office, tel. 01225 477421. Later registers held by the Electoral Services Office, Bath, tel. 01225 477497.

Wansdyke/Bath and North East Somerset, 1974 onwards: Registers up to 1990 held at B&NES Record Office. Later registers held by the Electoral Services Office, Bath.

Where else can electoral registers be seen? Copies of all electoral registers for Somerset are held at The British Library (website: www.bl.uk). Copies of the most recent electoral registers (full editions) can be seen at the relevant district council offices.

Copying

- Registers for 1832-1900 are on microfiche and printouts can be made.
- Photocopies can be made from unbound registers for the period 1901- 2002 (scans or photographs of entries from bound volumes may be possible).
- Copies cannot be made of entries from full editions of registers (2003 onwards) other than by making hand written notes.

Contact details

Somerset Record Office
Obridge Road
Taunton
TA2 7PU

Tel : 01823 337600 (Appointments)
01823 278805 (Enquiries)
01823 325402 (Fax)

Website : www.somerset.gov.uk/archives

Email: archives@somerset.gov.uk