

Electoral Registers

This leaflet explains what electoral records are available, what is in them, and changes in the law relating to who could vote and when.

Poll Books (Ref. Q/REP)

From 1696 lists of 'forty-shilling freeholders' were drawn up by each 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 names, where they lived, what they did and descriptions of any freehold they had, the names of occupiers/tenants and election candidates, and a mark of the vote cast. After 1832 descriptions of the voter's abode and property stopped. Poll books for 1714, 1807, 1818, 1826, 1832, 1835 and 1837 are held at the Somerset Heritage Centre.

Electoral Registers (Ref. Q/RER)

From 1832 registers of people who could vote were compiled by each parish and arranged by the year they came into force. To start with, 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?

Before 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 people held. Before 1832 constituencies were unequal, and electoral qualifications varied. In counties men aged 21-70 with freehold property worth at least forty shillings a year could vote at local and parliamentary elections and were eligible for jury service. Borough qualifications varied depending on terms in their Charter of Incorporation and local customs. This meant that some areas were completely unrepresented, while ancient boroughs could return two MPs, even ones that had diminished in size and importance (these were known as 'rotten boroughs'). The franchise was gradually extended by the following Acts:

1832 Reform Act

- Register of electors established;
- Forty-shilling freeholders kept 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 people 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.

People disqualified from voting.

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

Other information

- No registers exist for 1916 to 1917 or 1940 to 1944 because of the World Wars;
- From 1919 to 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 to 1919) and Armed services personnel were listed in their normal home constituencies.

2003 onwards:

There are full and edited versions. Edited versions miss out the names of people who have opted out to protect their privacy. Full registers under 10 years old must be consulted in person as the Heritage Service is not allowed to disclose any information from these over the phone or in writing. Not all full registers have yet been deposited – please check for details. Data in the full registers can only be used for research purposes and not for commercial activities.

Constituency Maps:

Maps showing which constituency/district council a parish belonged in are available in the searchroom.

What registers are held?

- Pre-1974 Somerset (except the City of Bath);
- Somerset and North Somerset, 1974 onwards
- Bath parishes for 1832 to 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 1918 to 1990 are held at Bath and North East Somerset Record Office: (01225) 477421
- Later registers are held by the Electoral Services Office, Bath: (01225) 477497
- Wansdyke/Bath and North East Somerset, 1974 onwards: Registers up to 1990 are held at Bath and North East Somerset Record Office. Later registers are 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). You can see copies of the most recent electoral registers (full editions) at the relevant district council offices.

Copying

- Registers for 1832 to 1900 are on microfiche and you can make printouts
- You can make photocopies from unbound registers for the period 1901 to 2002 (scans or photographs of entries from bound volumes may be possible)
- You cannot make copies of entries from full editions of registers (2003 onwards) apart from by making handwritten notes.

Somerset Archives & Local Studies
Somerset Heritage Centre
Brunel Way
Norton Fitzwarren
Taunton
Somerset
TA2 6SF

Tel: 01823 278805 (enquiries)
Tel: 01823 337600 (appointments)
Email: somersetarchives@swheritage.org.uk
Website: www.swheritage.org.uk/somerset-archives

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