

LONDON ELECTORAL HISTORY – STEPS TOWARDS DEMOCRACY

1.1 INTRODUCTION & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The *London Electoral History* website contains three central elements:

Firstly: the massive new London Electoral Database (LED), with nearly 340,000 records of voting behaviour for all elections within metropolitan London for which individual voting records survive between 1700 and 1850; plus nearly 133,000 rate book records.

Secondly: a complete user's guide to the LED with an account of its creation, its sources; the electoral framework; its contested elections; and the social and occupational classifications adopted within the LED; *and*

Thirdly: a companion compilation of Metropolitan Polls, showing the summary results for 873 recorded contests within the metropolis between 1700 and 1852 – relating to all levels of politics, from parliamentary elections to civic contests and as many as 595 local ward elections within London (including many previously unknown elections, as such as those for minor civic positions, like the two bridge masters of London Bridge).

1.1.1 The unfolding project

The research behind this website began when the three authors pooled their respective interests in eighteenth-century socio-economic classifications (Penelope Corfield), urban historical psephology (Edmund Green), and historical databases (Charles Harvey) to institute an interdisciplinary and inter-institutional research project. It began with studies of urban occupations and voting patterns in eighteenth-century Westminster. And this stage now substantially expands the research focus to cover the whole of metropolitan London, with the aid of funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (see acknowledgement in 1.1.2). The wider project has taken a long time to mature. But the process has been challenging, productive, and enjoyable in equal measure.

In effect, the collective sections on *Metropolitan Elections from 1700 to 1850* constitute a disaggregated book of approximately 120,000 words, if read in sequence from 1.1 onwards. The material has, however, been organised for presentation as a website, so that data and themes can be perused topic by topic, as users prefer, whether studying in full – or searching in part – or probing and reanalysing in any combination. The flexibility of the website format and the availability of its search facilities together expand the options. It should be noted that this stage of the project also incorporates and significantly updates the earlier Westminster Historical Database (*WHD*), which was published in book and CD-Rom format in 1998. And the website format allows further information and analysis to be added to the website, in the light of continuing research.

Making the sources available, alongside their analysis, is one of the great innovations that is helping to transform the study of history. Lewis Namier long ago began the *History of Parliament* project (now *on-line*), to reveal individual biographical details of the country's MPs. This LEH project warmly thanks the History of Parliament team, and gratefully acknowledges copyright permission to quote electoral data from this massive resource.

Now several scholarly websites are also challenging their users with the rich abundance of original eighteenth-century documents, accompanied by complete armouries of interpretative guides. Two magnificent examples set the pace: *The Proceedings of the Old Bailey, 1674-1913*, <http://www.oldbaileyonline.org> with a related study by T. Hitchcock and R. Shoemaker, *Tales from the hanging court* (2006); and *London lives, 1690-1800: crime, poverty and social policy in the metropolis*, <http://www.londonlives.org>.

In the case of the London Electoral Database, the metropolitan electors (male) and ratepayers (male and female) fall between the extremes of contemporary social polarities. They were socially 'inferior' to the MPs whom they elected, but generally 'superior' to the poorest criminals who appeared before the Old Bailey court. The LED thus contributes a 'middling' building block for future studies of a multi-layered society in the round. Indeed, as the range of scholarly databases relating to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain continues to extend, the enticing, if testing, possibility of linking multiple databases now beckons.

1.1.2 Funding acknowledgements

In getting to this stage, many public resources have been deployed. It is a pleasure to acknowledge the sustained help that has shown faith in a large-scale, multi-stage project, which has grown at each stage. The research began with Edmund Green's London University PhD thesis 'Social structure and political allegiance in Westminster, 1774-1820' (1992). This received funding from the Social Science Research Council – subsequently ESRC (award no. G00428324159), the Central Research Fund of the University of London, and an award of the Helen Cam Studentship by Royal Holloway, University of London.

The project was then developed into the Westminster Historical Database. This stage received initial pump-priming funding from the Scouloudi Foundation, via the Institute of Historical Research, and then substantial support from the ESRC for the project *Choice and change in a mass electorate: the City of Westminster, 1749-1820* (award no. R000236309). Collateral support came from Royal Holloway's Faculty of Arts and from its School of Management. Then, crucially, major funding for the London-wide extension of the project was awarded by the AHRC (award no. AN5303/APN8485). To all these institutions, the authors express profoundest thanks.

The research team is now affiliated with the School of History, Classics and Archaeology at Newcastle University UK. The School has kindly sponsored the development of the LEH/LED website and the database search engine; and now supports the project's continuing research based upon the rich academic resources that are here made freely available to the academic community and to the public at large.

1.1.3 Personal and professional acknowledgements

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Big research projects such as this one make massive demands and bear fruit only as the result of many people's labours. Their tireless help has been truly indispensable.