

# LONDON ELECTORAL HISTORY – STEPS TOWARDS DEMOCRACY

## 7.9 WESTMINSTER AND SPATIAL CLASSIFICATION

Earth has not anything to show more fair:  
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by  
A sight to touching in its majesty:  
The City now doth, like a garment, wear  
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,  
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie  
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;  
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.  
Never did sun more beautifully steep  
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;  
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!  
The river glideth at his own sweet will:  
Dear God! The very houses seem asleep;  
And all that mighty heart is lying still!<sup>1</sup>

Wordsworth's encomium to Westminster viewed from Westminster Bridge was the more flattering in that he was no city lover. He chose a majestic moment of early morning calm. Yet he also – unusually – evoked the metropolitan bustle and commercial hustle:

... the quick dance  
Of colours, lights, and forms, the deafening din;  
The comers and the goers face to face,  
Face after face; the string of dazzling wares,  
Shop after shop, with symbols, blazoned names,  
And all the tradesmen's honours overhead.<sup>2</sup>

Nowhere in the greater metropolis seemed close to its 'mighty heart' than Westminster, the home of court, government, law, smart shops, theatre, polite society and Soho's red lights, as well as rookeries and slums. Not surprisingly, its electoral contests seemed equally to cut to the heart of the political debates.

The City and Liberties of Westminster constituted a Division of the Ossulston Hundred of Middlesex. (See Fig. 3) It was bounded by Kensington Division to the west, Holborn Division to the north, by the City of London to the east, and by the River Thames to the south.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, the eastern part of Westminster was overwhelmingly urbanised.<sup>3</sup> Westward of Park Lane lay the great crown estate of Hyde Park, extending as far as Kensington Palace. Meanwhile the view southwards from St James's Palace lay across the Green Park, another undeveloped crown estate extending eastwards almost to Whitehall. There on the site of the old Westminster Palace (accidentally destroyed by fire in 1698), a third royal headquarters had been appropriated by the executive in Whitehall and the legislature in the form of the Houses of Parliament. A narrow isthmus of government offices and ancillary services stretched to the area around Charing Cross, where the Strand stretched to the Inns of Court and, through Temple Bar, to the City. Only the southernmost part of the Westminster constituency, around Pimlico, remained as market gardens, although these were soon to be developed by Cubitt's terraces in the early nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup>

Westminster's parliamentary elections had anciently taken place by a show of hands in the open area of Tothill Fields, in the far south-west of the constituency.<sup>5</sup> In the early years of the eighteenth century, the show of hands in Tothill Fields was then followed by the taking of a poll in New Palace Yard, immediately outside the Houses of Parliament.<sup>6</sup> By the middle of the eighteenth century, however, the election took place in the large open area in front of Inigo Jones' church of St Paul, Covent Garden. Here were erected the hustings, which were divided into seven booths, and voters polled at the appropriate booth for their parish of residence.<sup>7</sup> It was not without significance that, as the Westminster contests became more lively, the location of the poll was brought into such a populous and quintessentially urban location.

For polling purposes, the seven spatial areas consisted of the parishes of St Anne; St Clement with St Mary (including the Liberty of the Savoy and part of the Duchy of Lancaster); St George; St James; the united parishes of St Margaret and St John; St Martin; and St Paul with St

Martin-le-Grand. The manuscript poll books, used to create the LED, thus correspond to these polling booths for parishes or groups of parishes.

Some manuscript poll books have not survived, or were unavailable for incorporation into the LED. Sometimes data for an entire parish were unavailable; on other occasions, only some of the poll book records have survived. One of the challenges facing users of the Westminster poll book data from 1788-96, from 1806, and from 1819-20 stems from loss of data. Of itself, data loss is a familiar problem for historians: some may count it a blessing. And yet users familiar only with printed editions of poll books may not appreciate the magnitude of the problems, which are revealed when these sources are compared with their manuscript counterparts. In particular, the contingent factor of data survival tends to exacerbate those problems inherent in record linkage.

Table 87 enumerates the number of records for each Westminster parish at each election in the LED, and indicates in *italic* those parts that have suffered from loss of data.

The stability of Westminster's administrative and electoral framework over time makes it possible for historians to compare both general and individual voting behaviour over time, subject only to the survival of satisfactory data. And such stability assisted in the process of electoral participation, since earlier poll books could be used as canvassing resources in later elections, and established political organisations could apply them to campaigning through time. Hence when political changes came in nineteenth-century Britain, reforms were grafted onto an already familiar constitutional framework of representative<sup>8</sup> (rather than full participatory) proto-democracy.

**Table 87 Westminster poll book records by parish, 1749-1852**

Key:

A = St Anne, Soho

B = St Clement Danes, with St Mary-le-Strand and the Liberty of the Savoy

C = St George, Hanover Square

D = St James, Piccadilly

E = St Margaret, Westminster, and St John the Evangelist

F = St Martin-in-the-Fields

G = St Paul, Covent Garden, with the Liberty of St Martin-le-Grand

Year	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	Total
1749	707	885	1,463	2,112	1,865	1,962	469	9,463
1774	610	971	1,265	1,587	1,137	1,540	404	7,514
1780	681	1,131	1,614	1,773	1,723	1,772	440	9,134
1784	908	1,464	2,325	2,396	2,337	2,265	542	12,237
1788	<i>637</i>	<i>498</i>	2,182	<i>407</i>	2,061	1,889	552	8,226
1790	528	752	1,133	<i>648</i>	<i>679</i>	1,275		5,015
1796	<i>367</i>			<i>284</i>	1,241	888	278	3,058
1802	386	625	766	877	701	1,015	312	4,682
1806	<i>911</i>	<i>1,113</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>1,086</i>	<i>1,036</i>	<i>445</i>		4,611
1818	901	1,219	2,211	2,060	1,554	1,746	447	10,138
1819	<i>489</i>	<i>963</i>	<i>1,334</i>	<i>1,056</i>	<i>1,045</i>	<i>1,510</i>	<i>159</i>	6,556
1820	<i>806</i>	<i>1,182</i>	<i>1,213</i>	<i>1,751</i>	1,477	<i>761</i>	396	7,586
1837	358	624	1,972	1,221	1,013	908	231	6,327
1841	399	572	2,097	1,140	1,232	912	250	6,602
1852	881	1,122	5,502	2,651	2,904	1,457	366	14,883
<b>Total</b>	<b>9,569</b>	<b>13,121</b>	<b>25,097</b>	<b>21,049</b>	<b>22,005</b>	<b>20,345</b>	<b>4,846</b>	<b>116,032</b>

**Note:** Cells containing incomplete data are shown in *italic*. Figures for 1852 include unpolled electors.

**Source:** LED.

**Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge, 3 September, 1802', in T. Hutchinson (ed.), *The poetical works of William Wordsworth* (Oxford, 1904; revised by E. de Selincourt, 1936), p. 214.
- <sup>2</sup> William Wordsworth, *The prelude – 1799, 1805, 1850: authoritative texts*, ed. J. Wordsworth and others (New York, 1979), p. 235.
- <sup>3</sup> Westminster's population in the early nineteenth century was growing less rapidly than that of, say, Marylebone. The population of 152,000 recorded in the Census of 1801 increased to nearly 220,000 by 1841; *BPP* (1843), xxii, p. 466.
- <sup>4</sup> On the market gardens of Pimlico, see M. Thick, *The Neat House gardens: early market gardening around London* (Totnes, 1998).
- <sup>5</sup> The area near Victoria became the site of the Tothill Fields Prison, later known as the Westminster House of Correction (1616-1884); after which the Catholic Westminster Cathedral (1892) was built on the site, reusing the old prison foundations.
- <sup>6</sup> *CJ*, 20, pp. 43-4. The area is now enclosed by railings and inaccessible to the general public, except after a screened entry into the Houses of Parliament.
- <sup>7</sup> For the print by Isaac Cruickshank, entitled 'Westminster election', see Anon., *The poll book ... for the City and Liberty of Westminster* (1818), frontispiece. This print is also described in George, no. 13,003.
- <sup>8</sup> Edmund Burke (1729-97) gave a classic exposition of the theory of representative democracy in his 'Speech to the electors of Bristol' (1774): see E. Burke, *The works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (6 vols, 1854), i, pp. 446-8.