

LONDON ELECTORAL HISTORY – STEPS TOWARDS DEMOCRACY

3.5 THE ELECTORAL FRANCHISE IN MARYLEBONE

By comparison with the pre-reform franchises of Middlesex, the City of London, and Westminster, the right of voting in the borough of Marylebone after 1832 was relatively straightforward. The borough was defined in the Reform Act as being the parishes of Paddington, St Marylebone, and St Pancras.¹ The right of election lay in those whose names appeared on the electoral register in force for the year in which the election took place.²

But nothing so simple would have served the growing profession of election lawyers. Draft electoral registers were made each year, and then the revising barristers would hear arguments about the eligibility to vote of those on the draft registers before producing the official register of electors. So the process of electoral registration, by leaving a ‘clean’ document, actually conceals much of the process which hitherto had been on display. In other words, the process of electoral registration transferred the arguments from the hustings to the courts of the revising barristers.

To get onto the electoral register in Marylebone, an adult man had to show that he occupied property with an assessed rack rent valuation of at least £10 a year. The nature of the property that qualified him to vote was recorded.

Arguments in the revising barristers’ courts would have included whether the property was indeed worth £10 a year; but the only discrepancies between a post-1832 electoral register and its corresponding poll book should be to do with the identity of the voter. Frequently these concerned apparently trivial issues such as discrepancies in the spelling of personal names: but the election lawyers had their jobs to do, and would-be voters were liable to be challenged on these and other grounds.

In practice, things were never quite so clear-cut as even these imprecise,

mutable, and contingent definitions suggest. Before 1832 returning officers retained much discretion in admitting electors to poll. After 1832 arguments persisted about the identity of electors. Even trivial variations between the elector's name and address and that shown on the register would be used to challenge the validity of a vote. Under every system, some people undoubtedly voted who were not strictly qualified to do so.

Notes

- ¹ 2 & 3 William IV, c. 64, Schedule O, no. 23. Although the initial proposal was that the constituency should extend no further north in St Pancras than the Regent's Canal, that boundary recommendation was not implemented.
- ² For electoral registers and the process of registration in general, see R.H.A. Cheffins, *Parliamentary constituencies and their registers since 1832* (1998). For the locations of registers, see J. Gibson and C. Rogers, *Electoral registers since 1832: a directory to holdings in Great Britain* (2nd edn, Birmingham, 1990).