



English Electoral Registers

Ed Storey looks at how this resource can help in locating ancestors from smaller towns and hamlets

ONE GREAT SOURCE OF INFORMATION ON ANCESTORS FROM England and Wales has been the use of city directories. There are many such directories freely available online. Having been frequently published and available in printed form makes these particularly useful.

Still, some limitations of directories soon become apparent. First, in the census returns, we see *Ag Lab* as a frequent profession. This stands for agricultural laborer. Looking at directories, such a designation is quite rare. Many directories were privately printed and sold. A goal was to help shop keepers be found by customers. Such laborers were not much desired, because of their low-income levels.

Further, the city directories were, as their name shows, mostly produced for cities and towns. As the publishers looked at smaller towns and hamlets, printers lost interest because there would be insufficient demand to cover their costs. Both of these factors result in directories being less useful than we might wish.

There is another document that, in part, solves these shortcomings. Electoral registers were produced to provide a list of those eligible to vote. This means that even those in a very small hamlet were included. For purposes of illustration, I am going to mostly use the county of Norfolk on the east side of England.

FindMyPast has Registers of Electors online and might be the best source. MyHeritage and Ancestry have records as well. Within England, counties were divided into divisions for the purpose of voting registration. Norfolk, for example had nine divisions. It might take a bit of trial and error to find the right division, especially as changes occurred over time. It would help to locate your area of interest on the county map to help you make an informed guess. Remember, as well, that there have been occasional changes in county boundaries.

The results will need a bit of study to be most useful. Again, the rules changed over time, with ever more people being eligible to vote. As with directories, itinerant workers were not, at first, able to vote. Only people who owned their own residence or were in a longer-term rental, costing over £12 per year could vote. The rules began in 1832, with county and borough voters often treated differently. There are instances of those renting for over £50 per year being listed with the owners. The £12 both changed over time and seems different for tenant farmers in longer term relationships. 1884 and 1918 were years

in which the rules changed again. Annual elector lists were required to be published annually as early as 1832, but it seems not everyone who was eligible got on the list. In 1915, Charles Seymour wrote about registration issues. His assessment varied from fewer than half being correctly registered shortly after the 1832 act, to most electors in smaller boroughs being registered by 1865.

The details are so varied and changing that they are beyond the scope of this article. If you come to find the registers are particularly helpful, you might want to do some special research for the year and county of your interest. I have seen documents that begin with an index about what page to look at for each village as well as some that dive right in. Further, alphabetization was poor and page numbers can be complicated.

Here are a couple of examples that show what might be learned. The English were very class conscious and the register from 1886 reflects this. The list for each town generally begins with the landowners, called *ownership voters*. The next group, often larger, are *occupation voters*. These folks have sufficient rental or tenant rights to be deemed electors. They are designated as *other than lodgers*.