

Absent Voter Lists

Schedule of Surviving Lists (Revised May 2015)

Accrington	Alnwick & Amble
Angmering	Ashford
Barnsley	Birkenhead East
Birmingham	Burnley
Burton Latimer	Cheshire
County Carlow (Ireland)	Darlington
Dorset	Dundee 1919
Durham	Gateshead
Grimsby & Cleethorpes	Hartlepool
Hertfordshire	Huddersfield
Jackfield & Westwood (Notts)	Kennington & Brixton
Kent	Lancing
Leeds	Leigh
Luton	Manchester
Newcastle-on-Tyne	Norwich
Oldham	Preston
Reading	Rushden
Salford	Steyning
Stockport	Wakefield
Woodchurch (Kent)	Worcester
York	

Archives +

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Absent Voter Lists

The History of the Lists

Previous to 1918 eligibility to vote in UK national elections was restricted to men (and only men) who met certain property owning or leasing qualifications. This effectively disqualified the substantial majority of adults from voting. The Representation of the People Act, which received Royal assent on 6 February 1918, extended the franchise to all males aged over 21 years. It was also extended to women aged over 30 years but if they were either a member of, or married to a member of, the Local Government Register, a property owner, or a university graduate voting in a University constituency. Women would not be granted the franchise on the same terms as men until 1928.

The new entitlement could not have come at a worse time administratively. When the Act was effected, Britain was at war and governed by a coalition, but following the armistice of the previous month a General Election was called for 16 December 1918. Many voters, particularly those who had been newly enfranchised, were absent from home. Most were men who were still serving in the armed forces overseas but there were also both men and women who were engaged in war-related work who were still living away from home. Special arrangements therefore had to be made to enable these voters to exercise their vote.

These arrangements consisted of efforts to send out voting cards to all those eligible to vote, wherever they were stationed. The basis on which the voting cards were distributed was from lists which had been compiled by local voter registration officers from information provided by next of kin in each absent person's household. These are known as the Absent Voter Lists.

Because of the large number and wide distribution of absent voters, the counting of votes was delayed until 28 December in order to allow time for them all to be returned.

The absent voter lists were, owing to the method of their compilation, imperfect and many eligible voters are likely to have been omitted. They are nevertheless lengthy lists. The list for the three Divisions of Salford contains over 23,000 names while that for Leeds contains over 50,000.

Although the first absent voter lists were compiled specifically for the 1918 general election, the circumstances leading to their creation continued for some years after the war and so further absent voter lists were compiled annually from 1919 up to as late as 1923 in some cases.

The survival of absent voter lists has been patchy. Many have undoubtedly been lost and there is no single catalogue of what is available to researchers. If lists have survived, it is likely that they will be found in record offices or large libraries. A list is included below of such lists as are known to survive.

The Format of the Lists

It would appear that no specific format was mandated for these lists and so the layout and content may vary between electoral districts. One common feature is that they are generally arranged by Electoral District and Ward and then by street and house number, much as are the regular registers of electors. The lists were not organised or indexed alphabetically. This is not a particularly troublesome issue if you know the person's home address, but it is more likely that this is not known and a tedious search will be necessary. Some registers have, however, been subsequently indexed by name. A particular local example is the list for Salford, which was indexed by members of M&LFHS. Creation of a similar index is being considered for the surviving Manchester lists.

A typical Salford entry gives the name, service number, rank and regiment of a soldier or the name of the ship on which a sailor was serving. For example, in Bradshaw Street we find at Number 5 James Blinkhorn, a Private, No. 17935 of the 9th Battalion Border Regiment; at Number 11 Fred Bayne 2810 (or Z810) of 66 Wing Royal Air Force and also at Number 11 William Cecil Barton M.Z811, Tel. (Telegraphist?) Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve serving on HMS President IV.

The Value of the Lists

Despite their limitations, absent voter lists can be a valuable resource if you are trying to trace the ancestry of a world war one soldier. The lists can provide a link between a soldier and his home address during a period for which the census returns will not be open to public access until 2022. If the soldier's name and service details are known, the list can lead you to his home address. This can then be searched for in the regular electoral rolls to discover the names of other qualifying adults in the household as well as in other contemporary sources such as rate books and trade directories. Conversely, if the home address is known, the list may provide the soldier's rank, regiment and service number. These details are invaluable as the key to unlock other records such as his service records, particularly if the soldier has a very common name. It may also be useful on occasions that inclusion of a name implies that a man is over 21 years old and a woman over 30.

Where to Find the Lists

There is no single and comprehensive list of known surviving absent voter lists. The following information is based on schedules which appear on the web sites <http://armyancestry.blogspot.co.uk/p/absent-voters.html> and www.1914-1918.net The schedules include absent voter lists which are held in libraries and archives (some of which have been microfilmed) as well as online lists which can be found on both free and pay-to-view web sites. A number of lists are only available on CDROM. The above web sites should be visited to obtain further information on where and how each list may be accessed.

If you are looking for a list for a place not listed overleaf and online searches do not produce an answer, you should contact the major libraries and record offices nearest to the place in question. Local family history societies and online military history discussion forums may also be able to assist with local knowledge.