

## **5) The local government franchise before 1918**

11:44:38The right to vote for local government bodies, and the registration of the right, only affected the parliamentary franchise and parliamentary electoral registration from the passing of the Parliamentary and Municipal Registration Act, 1878. This provided for the joint registration of parliamentary voters and municipal burgesses where parliamentary and municipal boroughs coincided or overlapped, and also had a slight effect on the parliamentary franchise within boroughs. The Municipal Corporations Act, 1882, which consolidated legislation on municipal government, the Local Government Act, 1888, which instituted elected county councils, and the County Electors Act, 1888, which defined the franchise for county council elections, and the Local Government Act, 1894, which created elected district and parish councils, had a more significant effect on the content of electoral registers.

### **Counties pre-1889**

Before 1889 there was no elected body for the county, which was governed by justices of the peace in Quarter Sessions. The members of the boards and other local authorities set up in the nineteenth century (poor law boards of guardians, school boards, improvement commissioners, etc) were in most cases elected by ratepayers, and the parochial rate books therefore formed the record of their qualification to vote. The churchwardens were elected by the minister and parishioners.

### **Boroughs pre-1889**

Note that in this section, borough refers before 1835 to all places with borough status and after 1835 to municipal boroughs (ie places with a municipal corporation). These were not necessarily parliamentary boroughs.

Before 1835 a borough might be governed by a corporation, as at Kingston and Guildford, or by manorial officers as if it were a village, as at Reigate. The right of election depended on the charters, grants, letters patent and customs of the borough itself. The Municipal Corporations Act 1835 (5 and 6 Will IV c76) gave the right of electing councillors to all 'burgesses', defined as male persons occupying houses and shops rated for poor relief provided that the occupier himself had been rated for the past three years, had paid his rates and was an inhabitant householder in or within seven miles of the borough. Existing freemen, and those who became freemen under former charter or customary rights, retained any existing right to the parliamentary vote and to share in property rights or charitable trusts restricted to freemen, but did not, as such, possess any right to elect borough councillors. An Act of 1869 (32 and 33 Victoria c55) reduced the qualifying period to one year and extended to women the right to vote, although married women would not qualify because their husbands would be rated, not themselves. The Municipal Corporations Act, 1882, consolidated the 1835, 1869 and various amending statutes and extended 'burgess' status to women where they were qualified.

### **The Acts of 1888**

The Local Government Act, 1888 (51 and 52 Vict c41) established county councils. The County Electors Act, 1888 (51 Vict c10) extended the burgess qualification (ie occupation of premises and payment of rates) used for municipal elections to persons occupying premises in counties, subject to residence within seven miles of the county (fifteen miles for the County of London). The parliamentary £10 occupation qualification, applicable in counties, also qualified, and was extended to become a qualification for burgesses (NB this referred to land, whereas the burgess franchise required occupation of a building). Thus the county and

borough franchises for local elections were assimilated. A 'non- resident' qualification, which, without giving a person the vote, entitled him to be a county councillor or county alderman, was held by those who were otherwise qualified but who lived between seven and fifteen miles of the county: a person with the ownership franchise was so qualified in any case. Single women possessing the qualification were entitled to vote.

### **The Act of 1894**

The Local Government Act 1894 (56 and 57 Vict c73) established elected parish councils in rural areas. The Act gave the vote not only to single women who were qualified but also to married women who were qualified (ie by occupancy) although a husband and wife could not be qualified in respect of the same property and in practice few married women were qualified. Parochial electors existed even in boroughs, where there was no parish council, and in small villages, with only a parish meeting, because they elected the guardians of the poor for the parish. Rural and urban district councils were elected by the parochial electors for the parishes comprising the district.