

The Newcastle Poll Book

The poll book is a record of the voting in the Newcastle Election of 1780 with additional manuscript notes of the canvass for the 1784 election.

Constituencies usually returned two members to Parliament. Elections were expensive, so the local political elite usually tried to agree who would represent them and avoid a contest. However, if no compromise could be reached, an election would take place. The candidates and their agents would endeavour to canvass every voter to secure the promise of a vote. The promises were listed carefully. Polling took place over several days in booths set up for the purpose and in the presence of the returning officer, usually the mayor or sheriff and his deputies. Each voter would state his qualification to vote. This was open to challenge, as there was no electoral register, and he might be required to take an oath to prove his qualification. He then declared his vote. He could “split” his vote between two candidates or “plump” for one. His vote was recorded in a manuscript poll book, usually with a 1 for each split vote and an X for a plump. A daily total of votes for each candidate was declared. A candidate would withdraw when it became clear that he could not win a seat. The winning candidates were declared after several days of polling. Afterwards, the poll book was often printed, as a record of who had voted for whom and as a useful guide for those canvassing in future elections. Elections were often closely fought and subject to challenge. In those cases, the poll book was useful to those investigating irregular voting. Voters who had not kept promises made during the canvass, or who had simply not voted for a particular candidate could be identified and possibly harassed by, for example, withdrawal of patronage.

The MPs for Newcastle upon Tyne were elected by the freemen of the borough. There were about 2,500 voters, which made it a large constituency. Some boroughs had fewer than 20 voters. For this reason, Newcastle elections were both expensive and an organisational challenge for candidates. The freemen were members of the companies which controlled the trades and crafts of the town, such as the hostmen who controlled the coal trade; the butchers and the cordwainers (shoemakers). Freemen were male and over 21. They became freemen by serving a (usually) seven year apprenticeship, by purchase, or because their fathers were freemen. When an election was expected in 1784, at least one of the candidates used a printed poll book of the 1780 election as a handy list of freemen to canvass. The agents added notes of who had died, who had become freemen since 1780 and how they promised to vote. Canvass notes such as this are not unique, but this example was previously unknown and represents a canvass of the entire borough electorate.

The 1780 election had taken place on 11th September, when the candidates had been Sir Matthew White Ridley, Andrew Robinson Bowes and Thomas Delaval. Ridley and Bowes had won, but Delaval had come last only 50 votes behind Bowes. In 1784, the candidates were Ridley, Bowes and Charles Brandling. Bowes' agents used the 1780 poll book as the basis of the canvass and this is the document which survives. Bowes himself withdrew before the poll began and Ridley and Brandling were elected unopposed.

More information from the constituency's entry on the History of Parliament website, (<http://www.histparl.ac.uk/volume/1754-1790/constituencies/newcastle-upon-tyne>) from which some of this material is taken

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