Poole Absent Voters List – part of the Poole History Online digital project

What are Absent Voters Lists?

The Representation of the People Act passed in February 1918 made special provision to enable people engaged on War Service to vote. This is the first time that legislation had been put in place to cater for mass absentee voting and included members of the armed forces, the Merchant Navy as well as those serving with the Red Cross and similar organisations.

Men and women who were qualified to vote could register to vote. Votes would be cast either by post or by a proxy. As well as being included in the main Register of Electors for each constituency, the Naval and Military voters were also placed in a separate Absent Voters List.

Where are they?

Absent voters' lists are not held centrally and not all remain in existence. This can mean a time-consuming and frustrating search for researchers. Many are stored at local County Record Archives and local museums and History Centres. Increasingly they are being digitised and made available online. The website The Long, Long Trail has useful pointers on the subject and includes links to websites where there are examples of the lists available.

Who was entitled to vote?

For the first time, the Representation of the People Act 1916 allowed enlisted males aged of 19 or over to vote. Before 1918, around 58% of the adult male population was eligible to vote. Eligibility was not simply on the basis of gender and age – there was also a property qualification and men who had university degrees also qualified (potentially for 2 votes if they owned property too – one at the University seat and

one at the property seat). Men who were eligible to vote had to have been resident in the country for the 12 months leading up to the election. This would have effectively disenfranchised many of the men serving overseas. It is not difficult to imagine the political and social unrest which would have likely erupted had men serving at the front been unable to vote whilst people seen to be living safe, comfortable, even prosperous lives at home had one (or more) votes. The new Act sought to remedy this.

Under the new Act, all males aged 21 or over (with the exception of prisoners, peers of the realm and those who had been detained under the Mental Health Act) were entitled to vote. For the first time, there was a new clause allowing a lower voting age, specifically for enlisted men. The minimum age for overseas service was 19, so the new voting age for enlisted men was also set at 19.

Above: Convalescent servicemen with nurses – Poole Museum

For women, the bar was set higher: women had to satisfy a property qualification and be aged 30 or over on 15 April 1918. Despite the restrictions, the Act gave the vote to 8.5 million women and raised the total number of eligible voters from 8 to 21 million. If women aged 21 and over had been given the vote at this time, women eligible to vote would have exceeded males entitled to vote as a consequence of male deaths during the war.

The first election under the new Act was held on Saturday, 14 December 1918, (known as the Coupon Election). In order to be counted in the Election, postal votes had to be received by the Returning Officer by 10am on 28 December 1918, or noon for votes posted to Returning Officers acting for constituencies in Scotland, Ireland, Wales, Devon & Cornwall. The Act also brought in the annual voters register and instituted General Election voting (apart from postal votes) taking place on a single day.

Above: WRNS and sailors at Hamworthy – Poole Museum

How the information was collected

Under the Act those entitled to vote were required to register, just as civilian voters were required to. Most registered to vote by using the prescribed Army forms. These were postcard size and asked for name, date of birth, home address as well as service Information such as number (not officers), rank, unit and so on.

Under the act, the information had to be provided to the civil registration officers. It was also possible to provide the information in a letter to the senior officer. This means of registration particularly applied to those serving in small, isolated units and those whose units were highly mobile. Stocks of the form were sent to and held by Army units almost immediately and the first lists were compiled in April 1918.

On one level, it is extraordinary to think that before the horrors of the Somme, parliament was already making plans for how the political landscape would look after the end of the war. Perhaps more extraordinary is the administrative burden placed by the Army on its own officers and men to ensure that qualified men were registered to vote.

This is April 1918, an awful month for the British Army on the Western Front. The Kaiserschlacht was in full spate and the army unmoored from positions it had, more or less, held for years. The communication problems must have been enormous, making the achievement even more remarkable.

What does Poole's list look like?

The Poole list is a printed document in a book format which is a secondary source compiled from the originally gathered information. Voters are listed by street and house number. There are some manuscript corrections and additions, which all appear to be in the same hand.

The system provided for the Army Records Office to verify the information on the draft list created by the Voter Registration Officer (who would be the Returning Officer during the vote count). Records were continually updated to take account of address changes reported by prospective voters and for corrections arising from the verification process. However, the first lists were notoriously inaccurate and so the system was significantly refined which improved the accuracy of the 1919 lists.

A woman, surely not?

Surprisingly, there is one woman on the Poole Naval and Military list. It is likely that Helen Paterson (as she is listed) is on the military list rather than the nursing list because she joined the French Army as a nurse, This was prompted after she had been recalled from her advanced nursing post by the British because it was considered she was too close to the fighting for a woman (she was also the only female there, which may have been the main consideration).

Charlotte Helene Jessie Paterson (to give her full name) was awarded the Croix de Guerre for her war work with the French. She later returned to Poole and was prominent in local politics and served as a JP. Fittingly, she now has a street named after her, Paterson Close in Oakdale, Poole. It's a shame it took 100 years to recognise her extraordinary life and achievements in this way.

What information is there?

The information is variable in quality. Some voters have what appears to be a great amount of accurate, detailed information including full names, rank, service (including battalion and regiment where appropriate) and number - for those who were not officers (officers were not paid in cash and had no service number which also acted as the pay identity number for other ranks). Some have very little detail – just the name, service and rank. This variation is most likely accounted for because the forms for those serving on what were described as "distant fronts and garrisons" were not completed by the men themselves, but by their commanding officer. It is not difficult to see that the pressure of time, resource, and prioritising the requirements of active war service would result in the return of just the minimum of information required to entitle the man to vote, but nothing more.

For this Project there has been no verification or corroboration of the information in the list with other records (such as service history) and there are no plans to do so at the moment. The idea is to make the information as it appears in the list available to a wide audience for their interest and to be used in their own research. It is intended

to be a digital transcription of the printed list and to provide a location of the home address.

How has Poole Local History Centre captured the information?

4583 names have been transcribed from the original list onto a searchable online format.

Each entry on the Absent Voters List also has a pin on a Google Map to show where the home address on the list is. This has brought its own issues. Some buildings and some streets are no longer in existence. Where possible, we have used the most closely contemporaneous map to locate the site. Some roads are still in existence but have been re-named. Wherever possible we double checked the site of the address against other available sources. Some roads still exist under the same name but have been re-numbered. This is not always easily identified, so there will be some positional errors.

Due to the Coronavirus outbreak and consequent lockdown from late March 2020, the final version has not been put on the Poole History Online website yet.

Interaction with Poole's list of the WW1 service deaths

The list of deaths in WW1 serving personnel for the Army, Navy and Air Force (including predecessors before the Royal Air Force came into existence on 1 April 1918) were listed first.

After the list of the fallen was completed, we added all the names on the Poole Absent Voters list. The list was set up digitally so that any names that were already recorded on the list of the fallen were identified as a name already used. It's surprising how deflating and sad it can feel even at the distance of 102 years to see that a name on the Absent Voters List is someone who has died between the time of collection of their details for the list in around April 1918 and the finalisation of the Absent Voters List after the Armistice on 11 November 1918. Of course, it is well known that the casualty rate did rise significantly in the "final push" between the Spring Offensive on the Western Front and eventual Allied victory.

What use is the information?

Fairly obviously, the Absent Voters List can provide a useful source of information about specific individuals. This may be helpful for people searching for family members, piecing their war service story together from the publicly available sources.

Perhaps more importantly, the List provides a snapshot of the spread and type of war service men from Poole were engaged in during the final year of the conflict. It is not surprising to see senior officers listed at addresses in Canford Cliffs, nor men serving as Privates from the newly built terraced houses of Longfleet, Heckford Park and Parkstone. There are, of course, exceptions to this generality, but very few.

The types of work the men were engaged in was sometimes clearly linked to their pre-enlistment lives: men from farms working with horses; doctors working in military hospitals. However, there are men who learned new skills, particularly working with

new technology which was largely enabled by their war service: driving mechanised transport, flying or servicing aeroplanes, laying telephone cables.

Many undoubtedly will have had their lives hampered, damaged, even ruined by their war service and experiences. Some, though, will have had a range of new experiences – being overseas, living away from parents, learning new skills, which will have positively enhanced their subsequent lives in ways they could not reasonably have imagined let alone achieved without their war service.

<u>What next?</u>

I have identified two particular areas for further research: families listing four or more serving individuals at the same address and also streets where there are high numbers of dwellings listing serving individuals. The former group may provide some insight into the motivations for joining up and the latter may give some clues about the social impact of war service and the consequent absence of males on the locality.

<u>Where is it?</u>

Lastly and most importantly, here is the link to the Poole Absent Voters list at **Poole History Online**

http://www.poolehistory.org.uk/

The Long, Long Trail website has some helpful information to get you started:

https://www.longlongtrail.co.uk/soldiers/how-to-research-a-soldier/finding-soldiers-through-the-1918-absent-voters-lists/

National Archive has some pointers too:

http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/british-army-soldiers-in-service-after-1918/

Norfolk list has a helpful list of abbreviations etc which are not on the Poole list:

https://www.archives.norfolk.gov.uk/Help-with-your-research/Family-history/Electoral-registers/Guide-to-abbreviations-and-further-reading

And for more on Charlotte Paterson

https://ww1poole.wordpress.com/2017/03/08/charlotte-helene-jessie-paterson/

Caroline Powell

May 2020