

Background to Voting (1832-1928)

Constituency: An area containing a body of voters who elect one or more representatives (MP's) to send back to Parliament.

Property Qualification: This meant you had to own or rent property that was worth a certain amount of money to be entitled to a vote.

Post Industrial Revolution

There had been a massive growth of population in industrial and urban areas during and after the industrial revolution. But the constituencies did not change to reflect this. Many of the new big industrial areas Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds had a huge population of over 100,000 but still only got to send one MP back to parliament.

In General Elections before 1832, there were:

Rotten Boroughs: Boroughs which had a very small number of voters for the population but sent back two MP's to parliament. Eg. Old Sarum in Salisbury which had a population of 15 of which 11 were voters, but sent 2 MP's back to parliament.

Pocket boroughs: Boroughs in which the number of voters was small enough that they could all be bribed.

1832 Great Reform Act

Before the 1832 Reform Act only a small percentage of men could vote as the property qualification was quite high. The 1832 reform act lowered the property qualification to allow more men to have the vote. But even after this Act it was still only the upper middle classes (1 in 7 adult males) that had the vote.

Chartists: This led to the chartist movement, where working men through publications, rallies and physical force (riots and strikes) tried to get the vote for all adult males.

Post 1865: Although there were some reform acts after 1865 that increased the numbers of voters; there was still only a small minority that could vote.

1867 Reform Act – changed the property qualification so it allowed an extra 1,500,000 men to vote.

1884 Reform Act - changed the property qualification so it allowed an extra 6,000,000 men to vote. Secret ballot introduced. Before this votes were counted by a show of hands.

1918 – All adult males over the age of 21 allowed to vote. Also women over the age of 30 with a property qualification.

1928 – All adults over 21 allowed the vote except lunatics, criminals and peers.

Today – All adults over the age of 18 allowed the vote except lunatics, criminals and peers.

1865 Election Riots in Rotherham

In 1865, only the rich, factory and land owners could afford to vote. The working men in Rotherham believed that because they worked such long hours in industries that benefited the country, economy and factory owners that they should have a say in the running of the country.

Look at the figures for the population of men, women and children and compare them to the number of voters. Do you think this is fair?

Table showing the population and voters of Southern Division of West Riding Constituency, 1865

Place	Population (Estimate)	Voters on Register	Percent of Population
Barnsley	25,000	1098	4.4%
Dewsbury	45,293	1946	4.3%
Dobcross	7,000	748	11%
Doncaster	21,277	1280	11%
Goole	9,000	329	3.7%
Holmfirth	4,000	636	1.6%
Huddersfield	58,508	1913	3.3%
Penistone	8,110	346	4.3%
Pontefract	11,037	936	8.5%
Rotherham	31,080	971	3.1%
Scissett	10,000	439	4.3%
Selby	6,193	604	9.8%
Sheffield	239,946	8013	3.3%
Sherburn	3,884	290	7.5%
Snaith	14,644	324	2.2%
Tadcaster	2,715	283	10.4%
Thorne	3,371	589	17.4%
Wakefield	43,493	1688	3.9%
Wath	17,127	471	2.8%
Total	561,678	17,908	3.2%

Activities

1. Look at a map of South, North, East Riding and West Riding of Yorkshire and try and find the places in the table. Draw around the area. All this area was one constituency that sent just 2 MP's back to parliament to represent them.
2. Try to find out which constituency you are in today and what area this covers.
3. In your constituency, which party won in the last general election?

The two main parties in 1865 were Liberals and Conservatives:



Liberals: developed out of the rise in industry and the industrial population and were an amalgamation of the Whigs, Liberals and Radicals. They realised that the country had changed and supported reform and giving the vote to some or all of the lower classes. The liberals later developed into the Labour party.

Liberal Beliefs

Free trade – the government should not interfere with trade such as taxes on imports and exports. This left businesses free to import cheap goods from abroad and to sell their own goods cheaply to other countries.

Abolish church rates

Increase the number of voters by decreasing the property qualification

Extend full time education to lower classes



Conservatives: wanted to keep the vote away from the lower classes and keep things the way they were. They believed that the lower classes were uneducated and did not understand politics, so should not be allowed the vote. They believed the House of Commons was already representative of all classes.

Conservative Beliefs

Church rates should continue to be paid [The church was an important institution in Victorian Times and people had to pay a tax for the upkeep of the Church of England and its property]

Foreign Policy – non interference

Education, Religious and Social improvement of the industrial classes, but not full time education.

Activities

1. Pretend you are either a liberal or a conservative candidate and design an election poster telling voters why they should vote for you.

2. Hold a debate [Liberals V. Conservatives] to persuade people why they should vote for you.

3. Investigate the policies of government parties today. What do they think about

Education – E.g. What age should children leave school?

Foreign Policy – E.g. are we involved in any wars abroad?

Health – E.g. Should we have to pay for our own healthcare?

Friday 21 July 1865 (Election Day) – Police Report

09.00 - Polling commenced. Large crowds gathered outside the two parties headquarters: The Ship Hotel (Liberal) and The Crown Hotel (Conservative)

09.00 – 12.00 – There were peaceful demonstrations outside the polling booths the majority of people were wearing yellow ribbons (Liberal Supporters)

12.00 – The crowds were beginning to increase and the streets were becoming dangerously overcrowded. Several attempts were made by Liberal Supporters to force an entrance into the Crown Hotel.

14.00 – Stones were thrown at windows in the Crown Hotel and anyone wearing a blue ribbon (Conservative Supporters) was pelted with stones.

14.30 – An attempt was made by liberal supporters to take possession of the Crown Hotel. 40 policemen tried to keep the crowd back. Bricks and stones were thrown at the policemen and several of them were injured.

15.00 – Several members of the Liberal Committee came to the Crown Hotel and pleaded with the crowd from the windows to stop and disperse. The crowds did not disperse and continued to throw stones.

15.30 – Most of the front windows in the Crown Hotel were broken. The crowd moved on to the Three Cranes Inn and smashed every window there.

16.00-17.30 – The crowd smashed the windows in the Black Horse Inn, Mr Taffinder's Jewellers and Mr Evan's hat and wig shop. The contents of Mr Evan's shop were destroyed and stolen.

17.30 – A plea was made by the Liberal candidates for the crowd to stop the violence and return home. Some of the crowd move down Wellgate towards Moorgate to cause more damage. The 15th Hussars (Soldiers) arrived from Sheffield. The Riot Act was read by a Magistrate.

18.00 – The violence continued in the High Street, Wellgate, Westgate, the Market Place and Church Street. The crowd did not disperse. The soldiers were instructed to clear the streets without the use of force.

19.00 – 20.00 - Several of the ringleaders were arrested by the police. Some of the crowds had dispersed and the police and soldiers had managed to contain the crowds in one area.

20.00 – 21.00 – Order was restored

21.00 – 01.00 The town was in a continued state of great excitement.

30 people were arrested. They were tried at the Yorkshire Assizes.



Rotherham Archives & Local Studies Service, photo 2395

Photograph showing damage to the Crown Inn after the election riots, 1865



Map of Rotherham Town Centre

Activity - On the map trace the route the rioters took and mark the buildings they damaged

Statements at the Trial

Taken from Rotherham Advertiser, Saturday 29th July 1865 - Trial of the Rotherham Prisoners

Frederick Oxley (aged 16) forgerman



“Mr Blackburn briefly addressed the jury on behalf of the prisoner Oxley and commented on his youth.”

“Mr Blackburn then said he wished to call the master, and also the mother of the boy Oxley. Sergeant O’Brien said the prosecution were quite willing, considering the youth and inexperience of the prisoner Oxley (He was too young to know what he was doing), to recommend him especially to the merciful consideration of the Judge.” Frederick

Oxley was later released without punishment.

Thomas Lockwood (aged 25) grinder



“After describing the proceedings at the Three Cranes and Black Horse the learned Counsel remarked that the riot was evidently an organised one...They were evidently under some leadership, and at one time Chester appeared to be captain; whilst at another time Lockwood appeared to take the lead”

“Of the 22 men there were Chester, Crowder, Parker and Lockwood who seemed to be spoken to by several witnesses as being ringleaders...”

George Wainwright (aged 31) grinder



“a portion of the property taken from the shop of Mr Evans [Hat and Wig Maker] had been found in the prisoner Wainwright’s possession”

“The prisoner George Wainwright was then arrested on a charge of stealing three hats from Mr Evans’ shop during the riot”

Outcome of the Trial

The defendants were charged with causing a misdemeanour [riotous behaviour and damage to houses] instead of the higher charge of rioting as the judge believed that as it was an election the men should have the right to express their views and opinions. For this reason the defendants only received a 2 month prison sentence instead of a harsher sentence like 7 years hard labour.

1. Look at all the evidence (Police report, photograph and trial statements)
Do you agree with the outcome of the trial?
2. Do you think the working men were justified in expressing their views in this way because they did not have the vote?
3. Do you think the prisoners should have received a harsher punishment? If you do, how should they have been punished?
4. Do you think the working men of 1865 should have been able to vote in a general election?

Class Activity

Act out a trial of the prisoners based on the evidence