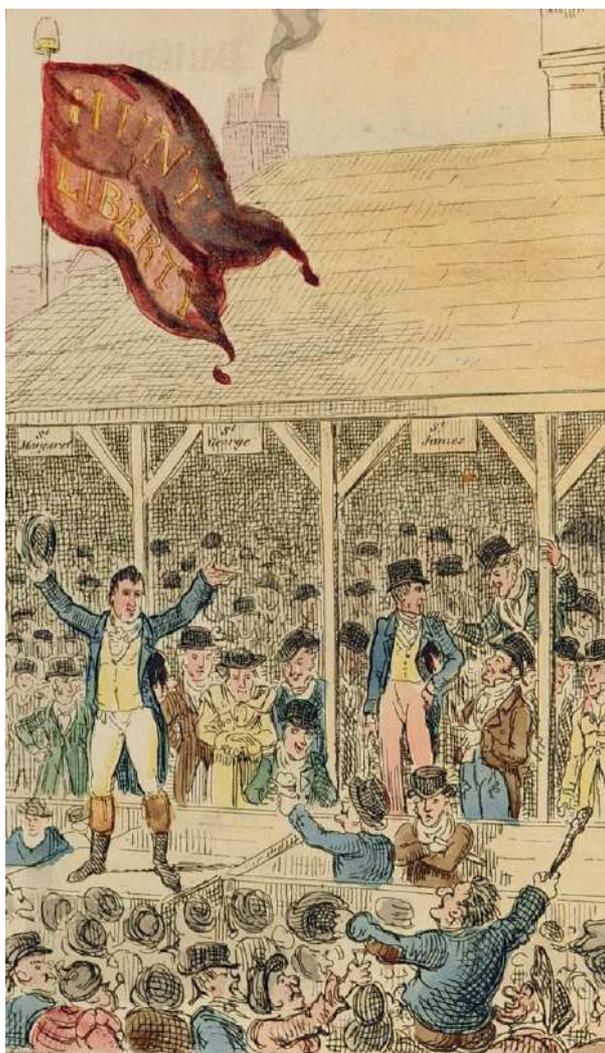


Poll books

Special Collections featured item for May 2010 by Carol Speirs, Rare Books Cataloguer.

Items held in Reserve and Pamphlet Books collections, University of Reading Special Collections Services.

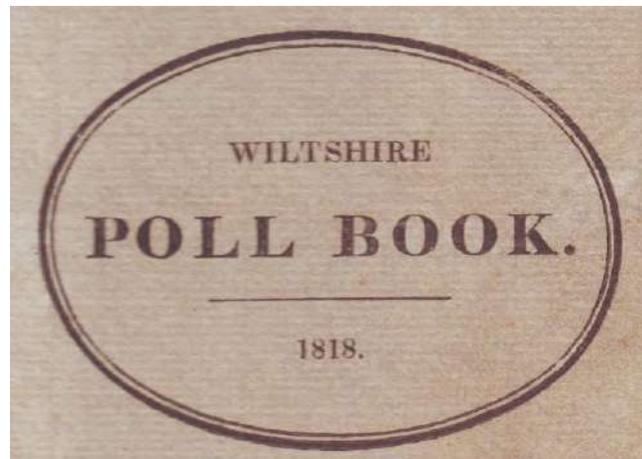


Detail from the frontispiece of the Westminster poll book of 1818.

It may be hard for us to imagine, but before 1872 anyone who was eligible to vote had their name, sometimes qualification to vote, address or occupation and who they voted for published for all to see in 'poll books' or 'voting registers'. This information on the voting preferences of individuals, which today would be considered too personal and sensitive to publish, became open to abuse from those with influence and money to bribe. This situation persisted for about two centuries until secret balloting was introduced by Parliament in 1872. Poll books were authorised by an Act of Parliament in 1696 to stop electoral fraud and were the responsibility of the Sheriffs.

Poll books were issued for the election of Members of Parliament, or “Knights of the Shire” as they were also known. The information was entered by the publishers, rather than the returning officer or hustings clerk, so many errors crept in, hence the presence of an errata leaf or a list of corrections; other mis-spellings were sometimes also recorded. The University of Reading rare book collections contain a number of examples of poll books in the Reserve and Pamphlet Books collections. One example is the Northampton poll book for 1806 which includes a note by the printers relating to printing errors it contains:

The printers ... are fearful many other inaccuracies will be discovered indeed in a work of this nature it is almost impossible it should be otherwise from Clerk's misspelling personal names to spelling of town's names which sound alike, as Rushton and Rushden.



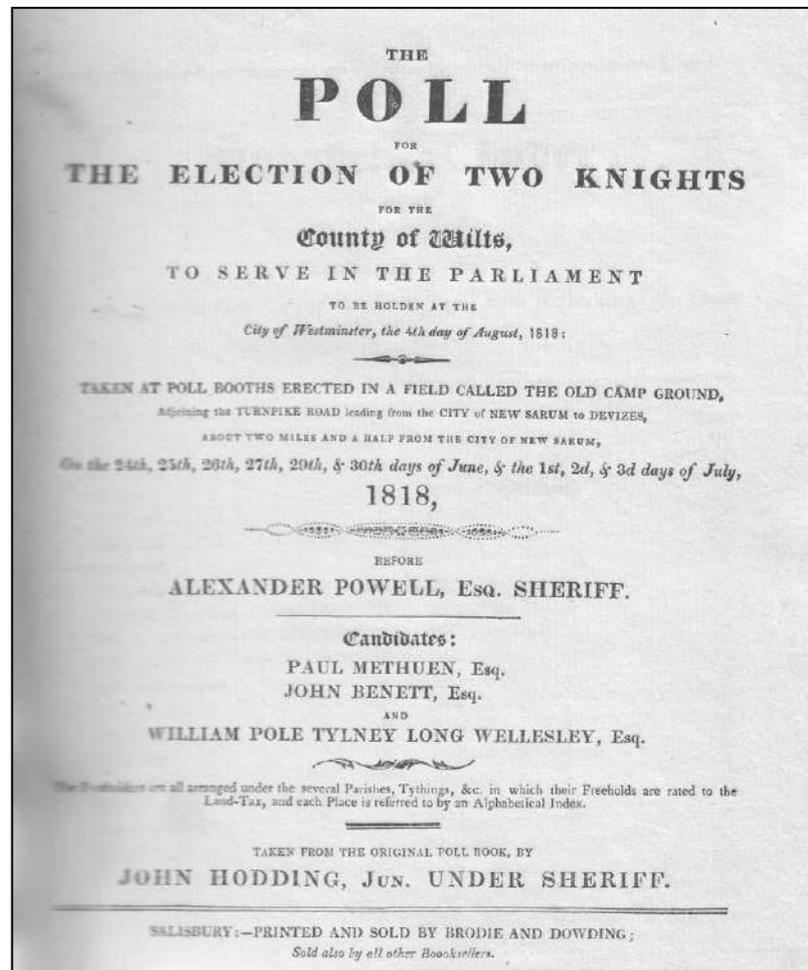
Printed label on front cover of the 1818 Wiltshire poll book.

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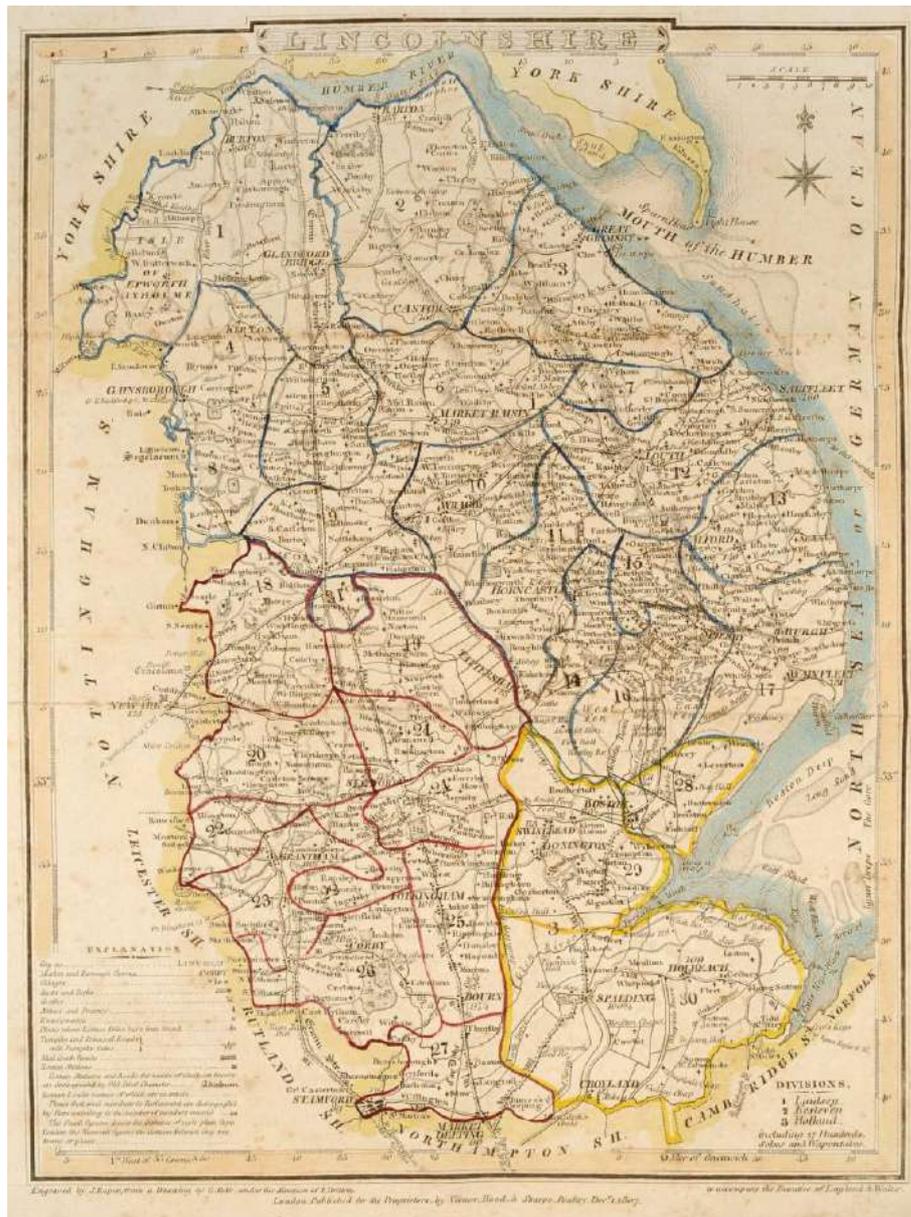
Freeholds.	Freeholders' Names.	Places of Abode.	Methuen	Benett	Wellester
<i>Purton</i>	John Large	Purton	-	1	-
	Joseph Cally	Ditto	-	1	-
	William Holliday	Bath	1	-	1
	William Bathe	Purton	1	-	1
<i>Rodbourne Cheyney</i>	Robert Caswell	Yatesbury	1	1	-
	James Barnes	Wootton Bassett	1	-	1
	William Allen	Rodbourne Chey- ney	1	1	-
	Thomas King	Stratton St. Mar- garet	1	1	-
<i>Sevenhampton</i>	Francis Warnesford	Sevenhampton	1	1	-
	William Barrett	Ditto	1	-	1
<i>Shorncut</i>	William Mill	Shorncut	1	1	-

Detail of the list of voters and who they voted for in the 1818 Wiltshire poll book.

The title-pages of poll books are often quite complicated typographically [see title-page of 1818 Wiltshire poll book shown below], and featured a number of different pieces of information associated with the election, including the election dates, sometimes locations of poll booths, the names of the local sheriffs and a list of the candidates.



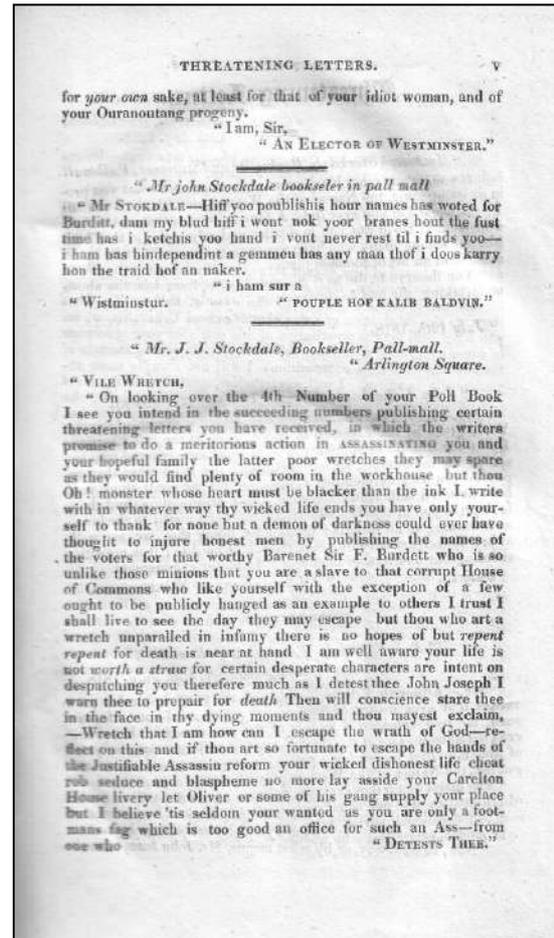
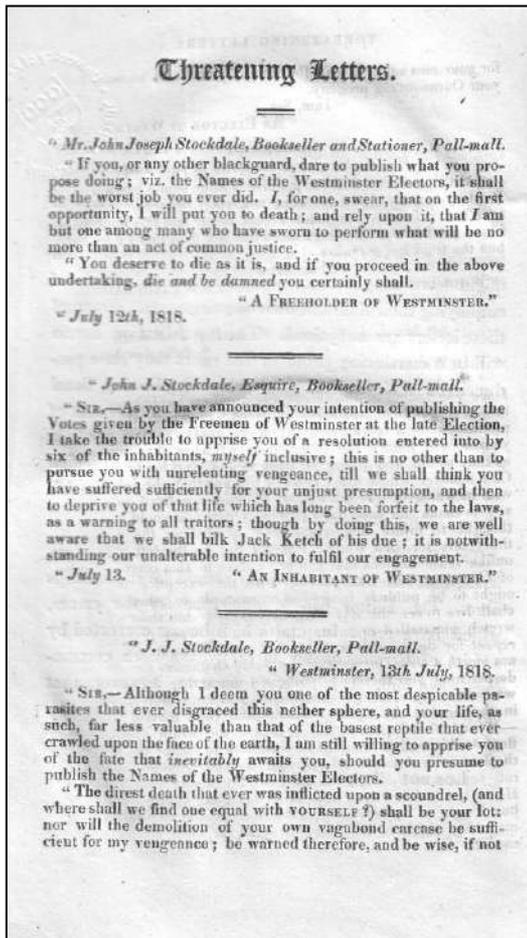
The publishers of poll books often included additional information, other than voters' names and their votes. There seemed to be some variety in this information but no constituency. In some poll books, dissenters and Catholics were identified, in addition to those who had not voted, were too ill to vote, or potential voters who were at sea. Indexes were often provided, and accounts of the proceedings, a voting history of the constituency and speeches by all the candidates were included. Occasionally poll books would use a map to illustrate the parliamentary division of the county, such as the frontispiece shown below from the Lincolnshire poll book of 1818.



The printer of the Northumberland poll book of 1826 included mainly anonymous letters and comments from the general public, as well as the candidates' speeches, including letters from "A bystander" or "Impartial" who states:

To the electors of the County of Northumberland – At a time when the country is on the eve of a contested election, it is with pain that I observe men losing sight of the great – the only proper object of their wishes, a person able to discharge the duties of a member of Parliament.

A twenty-first century voter would be able to relate to these words!



The Westminster poll book of 1818 has a section of reprints of 'threatening letters' [shown above] sent to the bookseller of the poll book, John J. Stockdale. It appears that the booksellers were perceived by the general public to be responsible for the production and content of poll books, and so they became the target of voters' frustration and dissatisfaction with the poll:

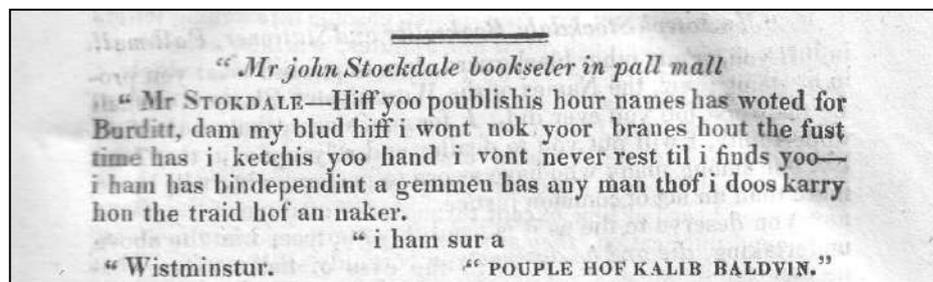
Sir, although I deem you one of the most despicable parasites that ever disgraced this nether sphere and your life as such far less valuable than that of the basest reptile ever-crawled upon the face of the Earth ... wrote "An elector of Westminster"

... and even worse ...

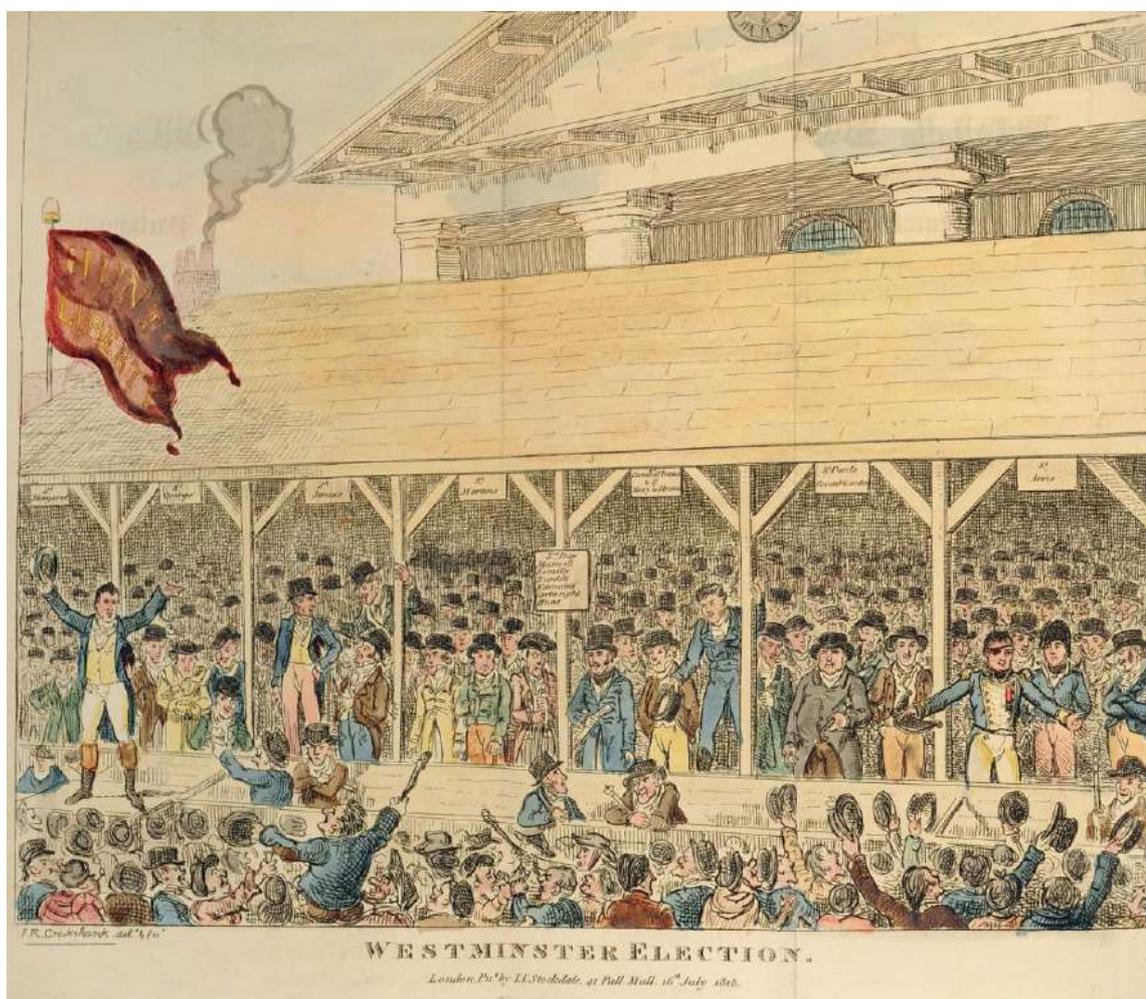
If you, or any other blackguard, dare to publish what you propose doing; viz. the names of the Westminster electors, it shall be the worst job you ever did. I, for one, swear, that on the first opportunity, I will put you to death... from "A freeholder of Westminster".

Another voter, struggling with his spelling, also threatens the bookseller [see image below]!

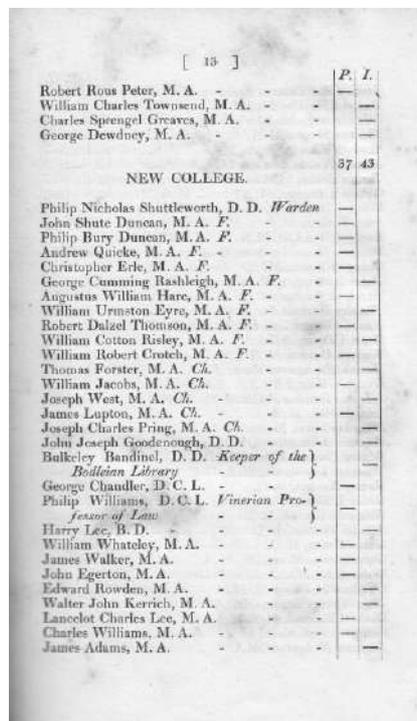
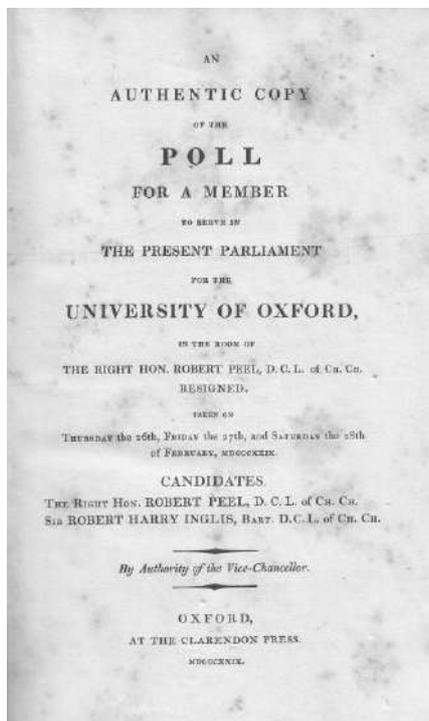
Mr Stokdale – Hiff yoo poublishis hour names has voted for Burditt, dam my blud hiff I won't nok yoor branes hout the fust time has I ketchis yoo hand I vont never rest til I finds yoo ...



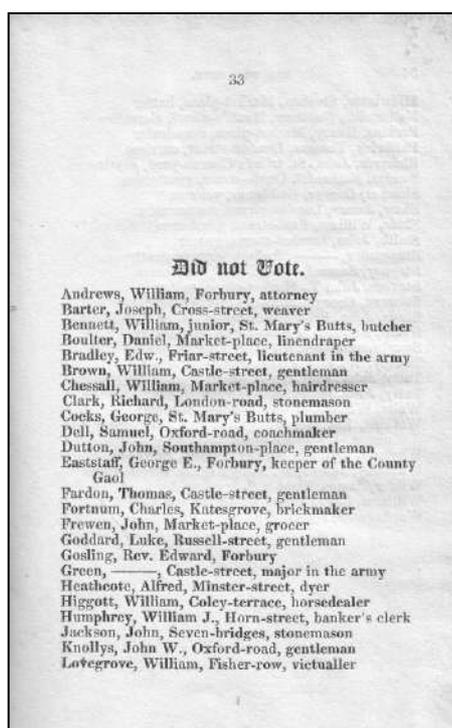
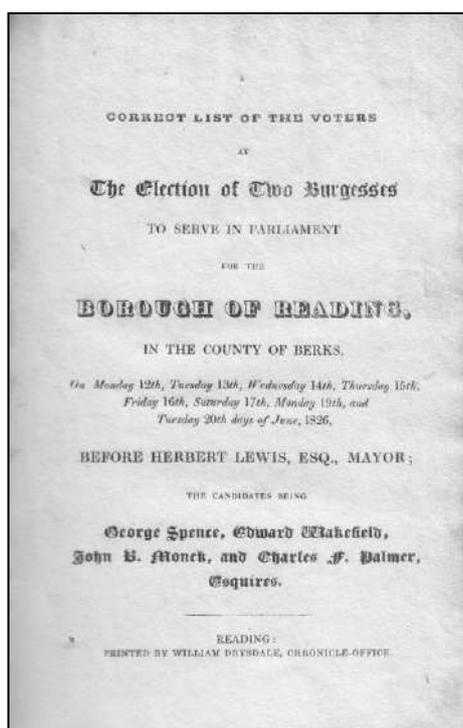
This poll book also contains a folded frontispiece: a caricature of a scene of the hustings held during the 1818 Westminster elections [shown below]. The caricature is signed by Roger Cruikshank (1789-1856), a noted book illustrator and caricaturist, younger brother of the more famous caricaturist and illustrator George Cruikshank. Unfortunately, Roger never matched his brother's success and died in poverty.



The Convocation of Oxford and the Senate of Cambridge had the right to elect their own Member of Parliament. The University of Reading Special Collections holds examples of poll books for both universities, including the University of Oxford poll book for 1829 shown below [title-page shown below left and page 13 from the voters' listing shown below right].



The University's rare book collections contain only one poll book for Reading, dated 1826 [see title-page below left]. A list of non-voters follows the list of voters [see below right].



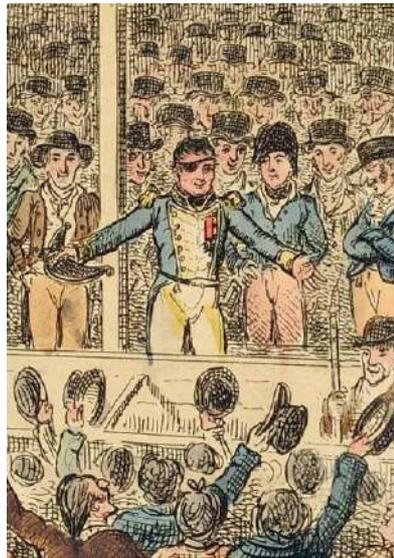
Poll books are an interesting genre for historians; as published books, they are a record of a unique event much in the same way as newspapers record events of the day. For genealogists, poll books are also a useful tool, despite their inaccuracies, because of the personal details they provide of ancestors. They also give an indication of wealth and the ownership of property, as only freeholders were eligible to vote.

List of poll books held in the Reserve and Pamphlet Books collections at the University of Reading Special Collections Services

1747-8	Northumberland
1774	Northumberland
1790	Kent
1802	Norfolk
1806	Northampton, Norfolk
1807	York
1812	Bristol
1817	Norfolk
1818	Wiltshire, Lincolnshire, Westminster, Norwich
1826	Maldon (Essex), Northumberland, Reading
1827	Northumberland
1829	University of Oxford, University of Cambridge
1830	Abingdon, Oxford
1831	University of Cambridge
1835	Scarborough
1837	Halifax
1847	University of Oxford, University of Cambridge
1857	Kent

References

- Gibson, Jeremy and Colin Rogers. *Poll books, c. 1696-1872 : a directory of holdings in Great Britain*. 4th ed. Bury : The Family History Partnership, 2008.
- Sims, John, ed. *A handlist of British parliamentary poll books*. Leicester : University of Leicester, History Department, 1984 in the series Occasional publication (University of Leicester, History Department) ; no. 4.



Detail from the frontispiece of the Westminster poll book of 1818.