

The Bristol Poll Book for 1852. John Stevens, ed. Bristol Record Society, 2020, ix + 243pp, one ill, endpaper maps. Hardback £25.00. [ISBN 978-0-901538-41-3].

Published by the Bristol Record Society in an attractive hardback, this volume reprints the poll book – running to 160 pages – from the 1852 general election at Bristol. As Stevens explains, in the era before the introduction of the secret ballot in 1872, voting was a public act. The poll books which survive from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were not official documents, but were produced by enterprising publishers hoping to profit from local interest in how fellow inhabitants voted. While some poll books only recorded the voter's name and address alongside how he voted, the 1852 Bristol poll book was among those which provided occupational or other descriptions (the latter including indications of status such as 'Esquire' or 'Gentleman'). With three candidates – two Liberal and one Conservative – standing for Bristol's two seats, its electors had the option to plump for one of the candidates (using only one of their two votes), to vote for the two Liberal candidates (for which Stevens uses the term 'double', although this is more usually referred to as a 'straight' vote), or to split their votes, giving one to the Conservative and the other to one of the Liberal candidates.

The original 1852 text is supplemented with a deftly written and highly informative thirty page introduction and forty-four pages of appendices. The introduction contains a wealth of material which sets the 1852 Bristol contest – the last for which a poll book survives – in its national and local context. It clearly explains the qualifications for the franchise, the procedure for registration, the background of the candidates, the main events of the election and the key political issues at stake. It also analyses the social and occupational composition of the electorate, identifying voting patterns among particular groups. The well-to-do, for example, tended to vote Conservative while, contrary to the later identification of the drink trade with the Conservative party, Bristol's publicans and beer house keepers leaned towards the Liberals. Stevens notes that we can 'never *know* why an individual voted as he did', offering instead a nuanced discussion of the range of possible influences, including party loyalties, economic interests, religious, family and ethnic ties, bribery and intimidation. His analysis of the poll book concludes that it was the support of 'the lower middle, or skilled artisan, classes who formed the great bulk of the electorate' which proved decisive in the victory of the two Liberals, (Francis) Henry Berkeley and (William) Henry Gore Langton.

Some nineteenth century poll books collated the election literature published in the constituency. Although the 1852 Bristol poll book did not contain such material, Stevens has compensated for this in Appendix 1. This reproduces the election addresses of the three candidates, in which they set out their political views and their claims to represent the constituency. It also includes two examples of more humorous electioneering material in the form of election verses, one of which encouraged the electors to 'Vote for Langton and Berkeley without any dread,/ They are friends of Free Trade and a large Loaf of Bread'. Free trade was the dominant election issue, and the large loaf features in the Liberal election cartoon which is one of the cover illustrations, while a Conservative election cartoon appears inside. These examples of visual election propaganda, together with the maps on the end papers, are pleasing additions to the volume.

The other appendices provide further information such as the locations of the polling booths and a list of voters likely to have been of Irish or Jewish origin. Appendix 3 outlines the voting patterns of the electors grouped by occupation, from accountants to a zinc merchant and the keeper of the zoological gardens. The list of occupations alone – the more obscure of which are explained in the introduction – offers a fascinating glimpse into life in Bristol in the 1850s. This is supplemented by Appendix 4, in which Stevens provides brief biographical profiles (mostly one or two lines, although others are more fleshed out) of well over 200 ‘notable voters’, including members of Bristol’s town council and other local office holders, religious ministers, prominent industrialists and financiers, and business and professional men, as well as the candidates themselves. Despite the understandably compressed nature of the biographies, there are many interesting snippets of local history in this appendix. This volume will appeal not only to those interested in electoral politics, but also those keen to discover more about Bristol’s social, economic, religious and political history in the mid-nineteenth century.

KATHRYN RIX

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