

Petticoat Politicians:

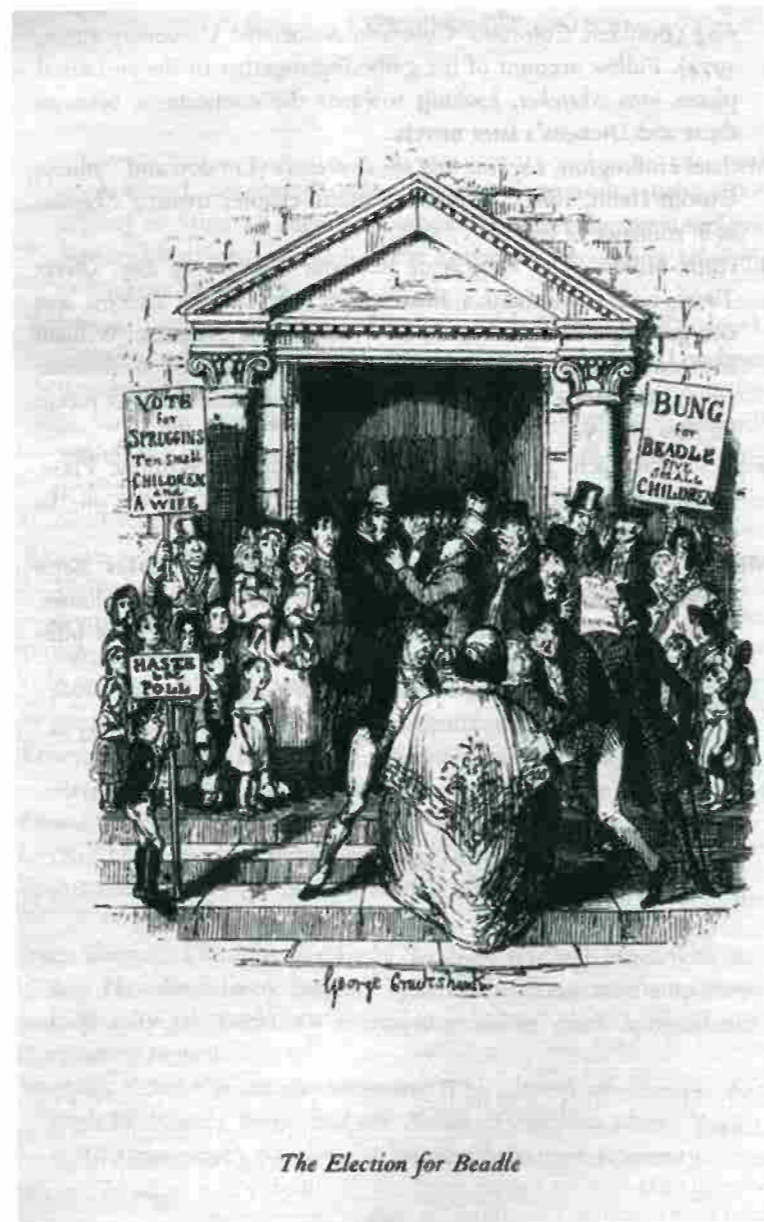
Women and the Politics of the Parish in England

Sarah Richardson

The history of women voting in Britain is familiar to many. 2013 marked the centenary of the zenith of the militant female suffrage movement, culminating in the tragic death of Emily Wilding Davison, crushed by the King's horse at the Epsom Derby in June 1913. A partial female franchise was eventually achieved at the end of World War I, with women being granted the vote on the same terms as men in 1928. Many histories of women's participation in formal politics begin in this period. However, this narrative obscures a hidden story: one where ordinary women were regularly able to exercise their right to vote and to hold local offices. It was in the realm of the parish, where female participation in politics was commonplace. At this level there was a community franchise to elect a range of local officers such as sextons, beadles, overseers of the poor, constables and highway surveyors. This franchise had evolved over time, reliant on custom, precedence and local bylaws leading Beatrice and Sidney Webb to describe it as 'an anarchy of local autonomy'. It allowed a high degree of public participation including from women and the poor.

Perhaps this aspect of the history of women voters has been overlooked because it was often unremarked upon by contemporaries. Perhaps, it is because the parish is considered less exciting or exalted than parliament. Or maybe it does not fit with the established narrative of a male dominated public realm and the racy tales of militant suffragette activities. Whatever the reason, it cannot be ascribed to a lack of source material. When the records of local and parish government are examined in detail, examples of female electors and office holders may be found. Table 1 gives some instances of the range of offices that women held in parishes all over the country from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries.

There are female overseers of the poor in Aldham, Colchester, Copford, Wivenhoe and Wormingford in the county of Essex alone in the eighteenth century. Other offices held by women



The Election for Beadle

included parish clerks, churchwardens, constables and headboroughs. Women were able to take advantage of the often confused patchwork of local jurisdictions and to play a role in community governance, thus receiving 'an education in citizenship through local government'.

One example of a successful female local office holder may be found in the parish of Stoke Poges in Buckinghamshire. In 1806 the Society for Bettering the Condition of the Poor reported on the exemplary work of Mrs Parker Sedding, overseer of the poor for the parish. Mrs Sedding had been elected with the consent of the justices and the encouragement of the local elite including the Earl of Rosslyn and the Vicar, George Bold. She undertook the duties of the office with great zeal: spending a month living in the workhouse to institute a new routine of cleanliness and industry; establishing a small worsted manufactory; ending the policy of farming out the poor; paying off the parish arrears and reducing the poor rates. Mrs Sedding was a substantial farmer and landowner earning in excess of four hundred pounds per year; she was also a widow, enabling her to be elected to the office of overseer. Mrs Sedding's approach to tackling the task of overseer chimed in well with the moral reform agenda of the Evangelicals who founded the Society as well as that of other middle-class female philanthropists. For example, she compelled the poor 'to observe cleanliness in their own persons' and employed a small boy in petticoats to work a spinning wheel at a rate of twopence a day in order that he may earn enough to provide himself with boy's clothes. Brooks, the author of the report on Mrs Sedding's work, recognised the sensitive position of a woman holding such a significant post but enquired 'whether this valuable female overseer, in her sphere, is not forwarding the views of the Society, and whether it would not help to promote their humane object if the example of such an overseer were so noted and recorded by the Society, that it might be generally held out to the imitation of other overseers... especially in some of the country parishes.' The Society duly acknowledged Mrs Sedding's work considering her contribution and adherence to the general moral reforming ideals were more important than her gender.

Although the general pattern was for parish government to become more exclusive in the early nineteenth century, women's eligibility to attend meetings, to vote and to hold office continued.

Table 1: Examples of female office holders

Date	Place	Office(s)
1643	Upton by Southwell, Notts	Constable, churchwarden
1671	Islington, Middx	Sextoness
1672	Creechurch, London	Parish clerk
1698-9	Creechurch, London	Parish clerk
1690	Hackney, Middx	Sextoness
1699	Copford, Essex	Widow deemed unfit for overseer post
1712	Woodland, Derbyshire	Headborough, overseer
1718	Creechurch, London	Parish clerk (with deputy)
1730	Hackney, Middx	Sextoness, midwife
1730-46	Kingston, Surrey	Sextoness
1741	Islington, Middx	Sextoness
1750	Wivenhoe, Essex	Overseer
1750	Sutton Bonington, Notts	Surveyor of highways
1754	Colchester, Essex	Overseer (with deputy)
1757	Aldham, Essex	Overseer (widow)
1757-62	Fowlmere, Cambs	Overseer
1766	Copford, Essex	Overseer (deputy acted)
1774	Thriplow, Cambs	Overseer
1776	Copford, Essex	Overseer
1780	Colchester, Essex	Overseer (with deputy)
1785	Wormingford, Essex	Parish offices including churchwarden, overseer, surveyor, constable
1786	Colchester, Essex	Overseer (with deputy)
1788	Creechurch, London	Sextoness
1788	St Giles in the Fields	Pew opener
1790	St Giles, Cripplegate London	Sextoness, grave digger
1800	Hampstead, Middx	Board of Guardians included Lady of Manor
1800	Paddington, Middx	Pew opener
1800	Stoke Newington, Middx	Sextoness
1807	Wormingford, Essex	Parish offices including churchwarden, overseer, surveyor, constable
1808	Copford, Essex	Overseer supervised workhouse supplies
1811	Stoke Newington, Middx	Sextoness
1814	Wormingford, Essex	Parish offices including churchwarden, overseer, surveyor, constable
1819	Stoke Newington, Middx	Sextoness (office considered a charity as the oldest of 4 candidates, all women, was chosen)
1828	Minshull Vernon, Cheshire	Constable, overseer, supervisor
1831	County Wexford, Ireland	Sextoness
1838-40	Norfolk	Parish Clerk
1854	Misson, Notts	Overseer
1866	Harrow, Middx	Sextoness (had to find an assistant, her duties mainly confined to pew opening)

The Sturges Bourne reforms of vestry government in 1818 and 1819 permitted a weighted franchise of ratepayers to establish select vestries. However, the legislation did not specifically exclude women from the electorate, allowing local custom to prevail. Some parishes, for example Chelsea, claimed that there was no precedent for female voting, and therefore excluded women by resolution asserting: 'the ladies and gentlewomen, widows and maidens, who pay and stand charged have not a right to vote in this election, there being no precedent in this parish for the same.' However, in other

places women voters were positively encouraged if it was thought they might be of use to a particular vested interest. This was particularly the case over the contested issue of setting church rates in largely nonconformist parishes in the early nineteenth century. In Leeds, a select vestry had been established under the Sturges Bourne Act which was dominated by nonconformist radicals who then refused to set a church rate. Local Tories insisted on a regular parish poll in an attempt to replace the dissenting churchwardens. In April 1835, the Tory *Leeds Intelligencer* outlined

the strategy: 'the only method now left to the friends of law and order is to appeal from such packed Vestries to the parish at large. Nor will the appeal be in vain... Rated females are entitled to vote as well as males. We do not wish for a gynocracy; but we are sufficiently gallant to perceive that too many of the wayward lords of creation are disposed to make a bad world of it; therefore the sooner the ladies interfere the better.' The attempt to remove the churchwardens by swamping the electorate with women voters was in vain, they were re-elected with a majority of more than three thousand and Leeds continued to resist levying the church rate. In Ipswich, the chair of a poll on church rates, defended his actions in allowing female electors to vote and then retire from the tumultuous environment of the parish vestry where they were 'pressed and elbowed by the crowd.'

The rough and tumble of local polls, as well as the presence of women voters, led many parishes to adopt the innovative method of voting by secret ballot. Some parishes had experimented with forms of secrecy in the eighteenth century. In Woolwich for example, an elaborate system for electing the church organist was devised. All candidates for the position entered the organ loft and the curtains were then sewn shut. They each played to the congregation below for fifteen minutes. The parishioners then cast their votes for their preferred candidate by secret ballot. Hobhouse's Vestry Act also allowed for a secret ballot if five or more parishioners requested it. In 1835 when the vestry clerk of the parish of St Marylebone testified before the Select Committee on Bribery in Elections, he argued that the secret ballot was essential to protect the female voters:

Do you think that if the election for vestrymen had been conducted *viva voce* like the Parliamentary elections, it could have taken place in so quiet and orderly a way as it does take place under the present mode?

[John Wardell, esq. vestry clerk] I am quite sure it could not; the excitement always occasioned by a proclamation of the names for which parties vote would certainly have raised disturbance and confusion.

Would there not have been considerable hooting and clamour, so as to embarrass timid or elderly persons coming up to the poll?

[John Wardell, esq. vestry clerk] Whenever an obnoxious name was mentioned, it certainly would have

excited hooting and shouting enough to terrify timid voters; and as in this election females are allowed to vote, they would have been kept entirely away, if the voting had not been by ballot.

Vestries constituted under the Hobhouse Act also allowed electors to cast their votes without attending the polling stations. Each year, a third of the vestry would be elected. A list of candidates was circulated to each rate-paying household in the parish and was collected the next day. Alternatively, voters could cast their vote by secret ballot in person at allotted polling stations. Their names were checked by the collectors of rates and they then cast their votes in a sealed ballot box. The procedures of voting at home and by secret ballot were viewed by officials and politicians as essential for protecting the sensitivities of female voters. Women were able to cast their vote in the protected private environment of their household rather than openly and publicly at the polling station: a method later favoured by the women's suffrage campaigner Lydia Becker. Other women's suffrage activists were less keen to have 'special' facilities for female voters. Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon in a pamphlet on female enfranchisement recognised that elections were often carried on in a 'turbulent and disorderly' manner and in such circumstances clearly women should not participate. But Bodichon used this evidence to call for state intervention to regulate polling stations rather than as a justification for excluding women from the franchise. In addition, she pointed out that, in many districts, a visit to a polling station was no more rowdy than attending the Botanical Gardens or Westminster Abbey.

It is unusual to find direct evidence of women voting as very few official poll books for vestry or other parish contests survive. Very occasionally, copies of parish polls survive in the records of solicitors engaged in managing elections or in other repositories of local material. Such sources help to validate the continuing vitality and vigour of vestry politics which had been given a new lease of life under the reforms of the early nineteenth century. A rare insight into the role played by the female electorate in these local contests may be found by the analysis of one of these surviving parish polls, that of the election of an assistant overseer for the parish of St. Chad in Lichfield in May, 1843.

The women in the poll book comprise just over six per cent of the total electorate (25 out of the total of 395 registered voters). All but two of them voted in the election for the overseer providing one indication of

Table 2: Occupations of female voters in St Chad's parish, Lichfield, 1843

Occupation	Total
Of independent means	4
Proprietor of house and land	1
Butcher	1
Publican	1
Dressmaker	1
Laundress	2
Washerwoman	1
Pauper	2
Female Servant	1
Not stated	5

Table 3: Occupations of female voters in Basingstoke, c.1869-70

Occupation	Total
No occupation given	14
Annuitant	9
Dressmaker/Seamstress	9
Laundress	9
Retailer	9
Servant/service	6
Innkeeper	6
Schoolmistress/assistant	5
Landowner/independent means	4
Other	3

their engagement with the process. Female participation in the election (92 per cent) was equivalent to the male turnout of 91 per cent. This high turnout is reflected in parliamentary contests in this period but is unusual for a local poll. The women voters split evenly between the two parties: twelve supported Gorton, the Liberal candidate and eleven backed Hitchin, the Conservative representative. However, the Liberal vote was boosted by the one plural voter among the women Grace Brown of Sandford who cast her four votes for Gorton. According to the 1841 census, Grace Brown was a butcher whose household comprised her son (also a butcher) and three others including a male and female servant. In all, twenty of the women are traceable in the 1841 census and their profile appears in Table 2.

A number of the women, like Grace Brown, are of wealthy status, being described in the census as of independent means or residing with one or more live-in servants. However, of equal interest are those further down the social scale who were able to vote and thus participate in local politics. These women include two paupers



(both elderly), two laundresses, a washerwoman and the intriguing Sarah Payne who in the 1841 census has the occupation of a live-in female servant. Sarah lived with Sarah Holland, aged 80 and George Payne who was 2 years old. The presumption is that by the time of the 1843 poll Sarah Holland had died and Sarah Payne qualified as the single head of household for the same property. Most of the female voters were of modest means living in homes with a low rateable value. Their average age was 47.9 years, reflecting the fact that many were older widows. This brief socio-economic profile of the women voters demonstrates that the opportunities female citizenship in parish politics could be quite extensive – the limiting factor being marital status rather than social or economic position.

This profile of female voters is supported by an analysis of one of the few municipal poll books that survive for the period between the Municipal Franchise Act of 1869, which formalised the extension of the vote to female ratepayers, and the introduction of the secret ballot in 1872. The female voters in the Basingstoke municipal poll book

for 1869-70 were overwhelmingly older, widowed heads of households. Their average age was 57.14 years. Sixty-seven of the seventy-four traced in the census were heads of households, two were described as daughters, two were mothers-in-law, one was a sister, and there was one visitor. The occupational profile of the women voters was centred on the textile and service industries (See Table 3). Many were in lowly employment, including one receiving parish relief, nine laundresses and one waitress at the railway station. However, there were women of higher status. For example, Isabella Apeltre, a widow and annuitant, lived with her two daughters who were themselves described as landowners, five female servants and one male servant. There were five women engaged in the teaching profession, including Maria Graysmark whose school had twenty-seven live-in pupils at the time of the census. The licensed victualler Eliza Daniels of London Street had eight servants as well as five members of her family residing with her on census night.

This glimpse of a lost world of women voters and officeholders

portrays a very different picture of female citizenship in the period before their right to vote was formalised by legislation. Women from all social backgrounds were able to participate in local politics, as long as they met the one crucial test of being unmarried or widowed. Women routinely held office and voted in local elections.

The history of the wide and inclusive politics of the parish needs to be written back into the electoral histories of women (and men). For it was at this very local level where women were able to gain experience of political participation, to gain experience as office holders and to engage in the practical activities of local politicians.

Sarah Richardson is an Associate Professor of History at the University of Warwick. Her latest book *The Political Worlds of Women: Gender and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Routledge, 2013) explores issues surrounding the place of women in Victorian politics.