

IX. *The English Reform Legislation, 1831-1832*

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Between 1831 and 1832 three different sets of bills aimed at reforming the English representative system were considered by Parliament.¹ Just over fifteen months after the introduction of the first measure a final settlement reached the statute book.² The original proposals, which Lord Grey asked a 'committee of four' to draw up on becoming prime minister, bore increasingly little resemblance to the subsequent bills, both in terms of detail and a number of leading principles.³ Drawing on the biographies and constituency entries in these volumes, this section traces the development of the Grey ministry's reform legislation as it made its tortuous passage through the Commons, assessing how the bill evolved, at whose instigation, and with what results.

The Borough Franchise

One of the most challenging problems facing the ministry was the issue of how to deal with the English borough franchises. Both at cabinet level and in the Commons, the question of what new voting rights should be introduced and which former qualifications should be kept (if any) was fiercely debated. The scheme eventually agreed upon by ministers, and announced by Lord John Russell on 1 Mar. 1831, proposed to enfranchise all £10 householders (occupiers of property with a yearly rental value of at least £10), provided they were resident ratepayers. All other franchises were to be abolished, in what amounted to a drastic simplification of borough qualifications, although existing electors who were resident would be allowed to retain their privileges for the rest of their lives, leading to 'grandfathered' electoral rights for an ageing group of voters.

It has sometimes been assumed, both by contemporary commentators and later generations of historians, that this neat solution was the eventual one

¹ For the first bill and the amended versions of it discussed in this analysis see *PP* 1830-31 (247), ii. 197-216; (o.37), ii. 219-253; (o.36), ii. 259. For the second (or reintroduced) bill and its amended versions see *ibid.* 1831 (22), iii. 9-45; (o.29), iii. 47-79; (232), iii. 55-131; (244), iii. 133-181. For the third (or revised) bill see *PP* 1831-2 (11), 1-54.

² 2 Gul. IV, c. 45 (7 June 1832).

³ The 'committee of four' comprised Lord Duncannon, John George Lambton (Lord Durham), Sir James Graham and Lord John Russell.

adopted.⁴ But this was not the case. As with the borough redistribution clauses, modifications were under way almost before the ink on the original bill had dried. The first alteration, announced on 18 April, involved allowing all existing freemen to pass on their hereditary voting rights to their sons in the time-honoured way, provided they had been born before the introduction of the bill. It also gave apprentices who had entered into indentures before this date the right to qualify as freeman voters on the completion of their 'servitude'.⁵ This significant concession, which is often mistakenly attributed to the revised bill of 12 Dec. 1831, arose from two main objections.⁶ The first, which was to be a recurrent theme of Tory discourse in the months ahead (most notably in the diatribes of Sir Robert Inglis and Sir Charles Wetherell), centred around the notion that a freeman's ancient privileges amounted to a form of property which could be inherited, and that any attempt to curtail or limit them represented an attack on an Englishman's 'chartered' rights. Variations on this theme featured prominently in the 1831 election campaigns of most anti-reformers, especially in the freeman constituencies. The second objection came from ideological reformers concerned at any franchise restrictions or elements of disfranchisement being included in a bill that was supposed to broaden popular electoral participation. Caught between these two powerful and persuasive forms of argument, ministers paid lip service to both by agreeing to extend the freeman franchise to the next generation of sons and apprentices (provided they were resident), a sop which was included in the second (or reintroduced) bill of 25 June 1831.⁷

With their hand strengthened by the outcome of the 1831 election, ministers were under no pressure to give any further ground on the freeman (or any other old voter) issue during the second bill's committee stages. Indeed, their resolve was only bolstered by the surprising number of 'suicide' petitions presented from various places, expressing a willingness to surrender old franchises or even sacrifice representation altogether for the greater good.⁸ Various attempts were made to rescue elements of the ancient right franchises, most notably by the Tory Thomas Bucknall Estcourt, whose amendment to maintain all existing qualifications failed by 89-17, 27 Aug., and by Sir Robert Peel's younger brother Edmund, whose campaign to continue in perpetuity the votes of resident freemen who qualified by birth, servitude or marriage attracted sympathy from both sides of the House. Notwithstanding the support of 18 Members who 'usually voted for reform', however, his amendment was

⁴ See, for example, the freeman borough descriptions in C. R. Dod, *Electoral Facts from 1832 to 1853* (1853), *passim*.; H. J. Hanham, *The Reformed Electoral System in Great Britain 1832-1914* (1968), 34; E. J. Evans, *The Great Reform Act of 1832* (1983), 45; M. Taylor, 'Interests, parties and the state: the urban electorate in England, c. 1820-72', in *Party, State and Society. Electoral Behaviour in Britain since 1820* ed. J. Lawrence and M. Taylor (1997), 55.

⁵ *PP* 1830-31 (0.37), ii. 227.

⁶ See, for instance, C. Seymour, *Electoral Reform in England and Wales* (1915), 33.

⁷ *PP* 1831 (22), iii. 15.

⁸ The most striking included those from Aldeburgh, Downton, East Looe, Heytesbury, Hindon, Lostwithiel, New Romney, St. Mawes and Whitchurch. Camelford's electors were also said to be 'unanimously determined to give up their privileges ... for the benefit of their country' and similar sentiments were reported in Milborne Port and Minehead, to name but a few.

defeated by 210-131, 30 Aug.⁹ That day's bid by the Tory Arthur Hill Trevor to preserve the rights of existing non-resident freemen was more decisively rejected by 151-38, and his subsequent attempts to extend the borough residency requirements from seven to 20 miles fared even worse.

It was the committee stages of the new £10 household qualification that proved most troublesome for the ministry. As well as the predictable objections of Tories opposed to any extension of the franchise, particularly one that appeared to privilege a liberal-minded 'shopocracy' (see John Wilson CROKER, Charles WALDO SIBTHORP and WETHERELL), they faced attacks of a more sophisticated kind. These highlighted the numerous anomalies and inconsistencies which the adoption of a blanket £10 qualification would produce given that the cost of rents and rates varied so widely from borough to borough. Coupled with the fact that the second bill contained additional provisions regarding the frequency of rent and rate payments (the original bill had been silent on both), ministers found themselves facing a barrage of criticism, both from Tories keen to highlight the bill's technical shortcomings and advanced reformers and radicals unhappy at the restrictive tendencies of many of the new provisions.

One of these, a clause relating to the payment of rent, offers a particularly revealing insight into the whole drafting process, much of which was clearly impromptu and heavily reliant on departmental officials. In the small print of the second bill of 25 June was a stipulation that £10 householders paying rent would be excluded from the franchise 'if such rent shall be payable more frequently than once in every half-year'.¹⁰ As *The Times* noted, this new clause 'occasioned very general surprise', since it threatened to disfranchise vast numbers who paid their rents weekly, monthly, or even quarterly, as was the norm. It soon emerged that this 'obnoxious' provision had been drafted 'inadvertently' by an under-secretary at the home office, and was in fact the 'result of some extraordinary blunder'.¹¹ Although Lord Althorp arranged for it to be 'rectified instantly', remarking that it 'will not do us credit', over the ensuing weeks both Joseph Hume and Bucknall Estcourt, among others, sought to make capital out of what they regarded as clear evidence of the ministry's unfitness to legislate. The incident was neatly satirized by John Doyle's depiction of a swarthy-looking Russell being caught stealing '10 pounders' fruit from an orchard, and being advised by Althorp to 'say you did it *inadvertently*' (figure 1).

This episode did little to reassure Members on both sides of the House that ministers knew what they were doing when it came to the technical details of the householder franchise. The difficulties, to be fair, were acute. How long should the householder have been resident? The original bill had stipulated six months, but during the second bill's committee stage this was extended to a year, to the irritation of many advanced reformers. How up to date should householders be with their rate payments? The second bill had proposed that on qualifying on 31 August all 'rents, rates and taxes then due shall have been paid'. But after hearing protests about the

⁹ *The Times*, 31 Aug. 1831.

¹⁰ *PP* 1831 (22), iii. 15.

¹¹ *The Times*, 29, 30 June 1831.



Fig. 1: Detail from 'It's No Go!' by 'HB' (John Doyle), published by Thos. McLean, Haymarket, 11 July 1831.

potential disfranchisement of thousands, mainly from radicals, this was amended in committee, so that only the rents and rates due by 1 July needed to have been paid by 20 August. A further relaxation at the report stage then moved the 1 July date back to 24 June for rents and to 6 April for rates. And what about those householders who were not assessed to the rates? This could arise when the rates were only collected from certain high value properties, as was common in prosperous parishes, or when the rates were included (or 'compounded') with the householder's rent and paid by a landlord. Although the second bill offered compound householders the opportunity to 'claim to pay such rates' personally, this did nothing to address the problem of the discounts most compounders enjoyed, an issue that was never adequately addressed.¹²

These and similar details plagued ministers in committee, but by showing themselves to be adaptable and willing to make alterations when necessary they never came close to defeat. Most hostile motions never really got off the ground and the few that made it to a division were easily defeated. The radical Henry Hunt's amendments to substitute a ratepayer household franchise, 24 Aug., and to abandon the necessity for actual proven payment of rent, 25 Aug., were dismissed with huge majorities of 122-1 and 353-10 respectively. And although the Whig lawyer John Campbell's attempt to withhold the household vote from those who paid their rents weekly, and were therefore susceptible to landlord intimidation, attracted considerable cross-party support, 25 Aug., it was decisively rejected by 210-142.

The borough franchises that emerged from the committee stage by the late summer of 1831 were clearly very different to those of the original reform bill, especially in terms of enfranchising another generation of resident freemen and stipulating residence and rate payment conditions for all household voters. It is the changes introduced by the revised bill of 12 Dec. 1831, however, which have received the lion's share of attention in most accounts of reform. Implemented to placate the so-called 'Waverers' and thereby improve the bill's chances of passing the Tory-dominated Lords, who had firmly rejected the bill in October, these better-known alterations to the borough franchises were not quite as seismic as has sometimes been supposed, although for tactical reasons they received far greater publicity.

The most striking modification involved a further relaxation of the rules regarding freeman creations. The franchises of those who qualified by birth or servitude were now preserved not only to the next generation but to all subsequent generations, with the proviso that all new birth qualifications must have been derived from someone who was a freeman before 1 Mar. 1831 or from someone who had qualified in respect of servitude since that time. There were no restrictions on future creations by servitude. Despite the private entreaties of many Tories and the leading 'Waverer' Lord Wharncliffe, however, all those who had acquired their freedom by

¹² For more details see Seymour, 149-55; P. Salmon, *Electoral Reform at Work: Local Politics and National Parties, 1832-1841* (2002), 185, 187-8, 220-1.

'gift' or through marriage with a freeman's daughter after 1 Mar. 1831 remained disqualified, along with all non-residents.¹³ The adjustments made to the £10 householder franchise were less conspicuous, but not without long-term consequences. The requirement that all rents due by 24 June should have been paid by 20 August, as well as the necessity for bona fide proof of rental value, was quietly dropped, to the approval of most advanced reformers. At the same time the deadline for the payment of rates was brought forward a month, from 20 August to 20 July, a concession which paid lip service to those 'Waverers' concerned about the 'respectability' of the new franchise, but which Althorp's private negotiations with leading radical activists like Joseph Parkes indicated would make little practical difference.¹⁴

One far-reaching alteration went almost unnoticed. Previous bills had stipulated that the householder must have occupied exactly the same property 'and not different premises' for a full twelve months. Under the terms of the revised bill, however, a personal residence requirement of six months was introduced, clarifying the eligibility of residents who owned or rented non-residential property such as offices, warehouses or shops. At the same time a new clause was inserted specifically allowing successive occupation of 'different premises'. Given the very high levels of urban mobility in this period, and the growing trend of living 'over the shop', this prevented many thousands from losing their votes on account of moving home or business premises in the decades ahead.

With the exception of some trivial details, the key elements of the borough suffrage were now in place. Tory and radical critics continued to press for amendments during the revised bill's committee stages, repeating most of their earlier performances, but the terms of the borough franchise which had emerged through a process of public debate and private negotiation by 12 Dec. 1831 were essentially those that passed into law six months later.

One obvious legacy of the final arrangements was that the freeman franchise, unlike all the other ancient right qualifications, continued to flourish and expand during the nineteenth century, providing an important working class element in many borough electorates and helping to sustain pre-reform cultures of electioneering and political campaigning into the reformed era.¹⁵ Many commentators have noted how rapidly the ancient right franchises died away after 1832, and it is certainly true that 30 years after the passage of reform the number of such electors as a whole had almost halved, from 71,178 to 38,624. Free from the ratepaying and registration fees of the household suffrage, however, the freeman vote became increasingly popular and in some places grew substantially in the later decades. In Leicester, for example, the number of freemen expanded almost four-fold, from 501 in 1832 to 1,877 in 1862. In Coventry their numbers rose by 50 per cent from 2,756 to 4,108 over the same period. Significant increases also occurred in Durham, Maldon,

¹³ See Hatherton diary, 21 Jan. 1832.

¹⁴ BL, Althorp mss, Parkes to Althorp, 13 Nov. 1831.

¹⁵ Freeholders in the five English 'county cities' with a freeholder franchise could also continue to qualify after 1832: see below.

Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Stafford and York, to name but a few.¹⁶ How exactly the electoral dynamics of these surviving freeman boroughs differed from the householder constituencies is something that future volumes will need to examine more closely. But if there was ever a brake on electoral modernization this was surely it.

A second and arguably more significant consequence of the final reform settlement concerns the ratepaying requirements appended to the household franchise. The minister John Cam Hobhouse told the House that these would probably disfranchise nearly a quarter of all £10 householders, a figure which George De Lacy Evans, drawing on the advice of the radical activist Francis Place, complained would be even higher and deprive at least two-thirds of those entitled to vote of their franchise.¹⁷ There can be little doubt that the size of the household vote was very substantially capped by these conditions, with corresponding implications for the growth of the borough electorate as a whole (see below). Perhaps more crucially, however, all those in charge of setting and collecting local taxes, from parish vestries and boards of guardians to local municipal authorities, now acquired a decisive role in the administration of the household franchise. Manchester's electors had an early taste of the potential influence possessed by their poor law officers in 1833, when 245 of them were disfranchised for failing to pay a rate which had been levied shortly before the 6 April deadline.¹⁸ A few years later in neighbouring Salford it emerged that an assistant overseer had actually back-dated the receipt of rates so as to prevent the disqualification of many Conservative voters, while ensuring Liberal electors in the same position were struck off, an abuse which led to his dismissal for 'fraud upon the franchise of the duly qualified ratepayers'.¹⁹ As a number of studies have sought to demonstrate, this administrative link between taxation and the household franchise was to have a profound impact on the practical operation of the reformed electoral system, encouraging the politicization of local institutions along nationally oriented party lines and the emergence of a far more uniform political culture across all levels of English society.²⁰

Both of these crucial legacies were not solely attributable to the last-minute alterations introduced into the revised bill of 12 Dec. 1831, as has often been supposed. Instead they grew out of modifications that were in train long before this date, but which were then extended or refined in principle. The changes implemented to the borough redistribution clauses in December 1831, by contrast, had no such antecedents and marked a decisive break with all the previous bills. These alterations are examined next.

¹⁶ *PP* 1866 (259), xvii. 580-4.

¹⁷ *Parl. Deb.* (ser. 3), xiv. 1231-3, 1329.

¹⁸ *Manchester Herald*, 2 Oct. 1833.

¹⁹ D. Fraser, *Urban Politics in Victorian England* (1976), 88; idem. 'The poor law as a political institution', in *The New Poor Law in the Nineteenth Century* ed. D. Fraser (1976), 125.

²⁰ See especially Fraser, 'The poor law as a political institution', 111-27 and P. Salmon, 'Electoral reform and the political modernization of England, 1832-1841', *Parliaments, Estates and Representation*, xxiii (2003), 49-67.

Of the 107 English boroughs earmarked for disfranchisement (full and partial) by the first reform bill of 1 Mar. 1831, almost a third (31) eventually secured some form of reprieve. The constituency articles and biographies reveal how Members and their constituents played a key role in renegotiating this central component of reform, by exposing anomalies in the methods used to determine the disfranchisement schedules and campaigning and petitioning in support of their community's case. Not surprisingly, it was the 60 places listed for complete disfranchisement (schedule A), which included most of the notorious 'rotten' boroughs, that were the least affected by the ministry's subsequent changes and concessions. Only eight of the original 60 condemned constituencies eventually survived beyond 1832, one of them, the corporation borough of Buckingham, with both seats intact, and the rest, Eye, Malmesbury, Midhurst, New Woodstock, Petersfield, Reigate and Wareham, with the loss of a single seat. Five of them obtained an early reprieve when their population figures were revised above 2,000, the minimum threshold for survival in the first and second bills, following the discovery that the parish returns of the 1821 census had been incorrectly applied to the borough boundaries. (Malmesbury's original figure, for example, had only included the population of one of its component parishes.) Midhurst, New Woodstock and Petersfield, however, owed their survival to the completely new criteria eventually adopted for determining all disfranchisements in the final reform bill.

It was the schedule B boroughs, therefore, with populations of between 2,000 and 4,000, which bore the brunt of the alterations. The first to be reprieved was Bewdley, a single Member constituency which, as Russell explained, 14 Mar. 1831, had been incorrectly inserted in the list of places that were to lose one of their two seats. This was a unique case, but the oversights that led to the next set of changes were to provide anti-reformers and local campaigners with a highly effective blueprint for challenging the fate of individual boroughs over the ensuing months. In the Commons on 25 Mar. Sir Robert Peel contrasted the bill's partial disfranchisement of his family's constituency of Tamworth, with a population of 3,500 in the borough but 7,500 in the whole parish, with the Whig minister Lord Lansdowne's complete retention of his 'pocket' borough of Calne, where officials had applied the whole parish figure of 5,600. 'There is no just principle upon which Calne should be protected and Tamworth disfranchised', he complained. A few days later, in what became a widespread form of local objection, a petition against the inclusion of Morpeth in schedule B was presented to the Commons, citing the complete omission of Buller's Green, an integral part of the borough, from the 1821 population figures. Meanwhile, Truro's inhabitants and corporation, in another type of popular protest, sent memorials to the home secretary Lord Melbourne complaining that the parish boundaries used in the 1821 census bore no relation to those of the borough.

On 18 Apr. 1831 Russell, having the previous week declared the ministry's willingness to make alterations, announced the removal of these boroughs from schedule B, along with Chipping Wycombe, Leominster, Northallerton and Westbury for similar reasons. They were duly omitted from schedule B of the second reform bill of 25

June, as were Penryn and Sandwich, where local campaigns to combine their representation with neighbouring towns were heeded by ministers. (Penryn was united with Falmouth, in accordance with a memorial sent to Melbourne, and Sandwich with Deal and Walmer, following a petition to the treasury.) Two of the remaining places originally earmarked for partial disfranchisement, the nomination boroughs of Downton and St. Germans, were also transferred to schedule A, the former at the insistence of its high-minded radical Whig patron, the 3rd earl of Radnor, who fretted that it would prove impossible for his family not to retain control. In a significant development the justification for both transfers, which could not be made on the usual basis of population, focused instead on the paltry number of £10 houses within each constituency, prompting complaints of inconsistency from the Tory opposition. These alterations left 35 of the original schedule B boroughs in situ, to which the five transfers from schedule A were added, bringing the total number of partial disfranchisements in the second bill to 40, seven fewer than before.

Three main types of objection to schedule B resurfaced continuously during the second bill's committee stages. None attracted sufficient support to defeat ministers, but cumulatively they served to sap confidence in the schedules and prepare the ground for a completely different approach. The first involved protesting at what Sir Robert Peel called 'the inconceivable absurdity' of continuing to use the 1821 census now that the 1831 population returns were becoming available. There were many on both sides of the House who felt that the latest census would provide a much fairer and more sophisticated criterion for redistribution. But as Russell repeatedly pointed out, most of the 1831 data had been collected after the unveiling of the reform bill on 1 Mar. 1831, making manipulation of the population figures a real possibility given that so much was at stake. Indeed the boundary commissioners later discovered 'some clear cases of fraud on the part of the returning officers of small boroughs trying to save both Members, or one, by swelling the numbers above 2,000 or 4,000'.²¹ Moreover, much of the 1831 data was not yet to hand, making further delays inevitable. On 19 July 1831 the Tory William Mackinnon moved an amendment for use of the 1831 census. Although it was rejected by 244-169, this ministerial majority of 75 was one of the smallest recorded on any of the reform bill's leading provisions.

The second form of objection involved challenging the population figures on a borough by borough basis, much along the lines rehearsed in the first bill, and highlighting inconsistencies in the way the 1821 returns had been compiled and correlated with boundaries. The sorts of issues raised by these almost 'setpiece' local protests were well illustrated by the case of Sudbury. Here a campaign led by the town clerk resulted in two petitions to the Commons disputing the omission of the suburb of Ballingdon and insisting that its population exceeded 4,000. On 30 July 1831 Sudbury's inclusion in schedule B had to be postponed after its Members provided clear evidence of Ballingdon's administrative links with the borough, taking

²¹ Hatherton diary, 11 Nov. 1831.

'ministers by surprise'. It was only the chance discovery of the suburb's exclusion from a local improvement Act that allowed them to proceed as planned, although in the ensuing division their majority was reduced to just 49, one of the smallest on the bill's details. Similar issues encountered during the processing of many other boroughs only served to illustrate further the rather arbitrary and tenuous nature of much that was being framed in committee.

It was the third form of objection, however, which was the most compelling. This was the constitutional case against creating more single Member seats. Until now, critics claimed, English electoral culture had been shaped and strengthened by an almost exclusively double Member system, which created numerous opportunities for compromise agreements between parties, candidates and local interests, as well as ensuring an essential element of minority representation. Erode this, they contended, and a large national electoral minority would be completely unrepresented, increasing political disaffection. At the same time the number of contests, with all their associated costs and disorder, would inevitably rise. Crucially it was not only leading Tories, among them Peel, who argued along these lines.²² The issue was also taken up by a number of influential reformers, most conspicuously the independently minded Whig Lord Milton. Preferring to make a stand against schedule D, the part of the bill which proposed to create fresh single Member boroughs, on 4 Aug. 1831 he moved an amendment to give all these places two Members. Although he was defeated by 230-102, many leading Whigs, including Lord Morpeth and Edward John Littleton, were privately sympathetic. His amendment was also backed by a broad range of Tories, from hard-liners such as Croker to lukewarm supporters of reform like Thomas Wood. Here was an issue, then, on which there was considerable cross-party feeling, and these concerns were only heightened by the alterations that had been made to the parts of the bill dealing with the enfranchisement of new towns and cities.

The original bill of 1 Mar. 1831 had proposed giving two seats to 11 of the largest unrepresented towns and metropolitan districts, all of which had populations above 40,000 (schedule C). This part of the ministerial plan, originally based on the 1821 census, encountered very little opposition throughout its various stages, although some Tories and radicals complained that it gave too much influence to the London boroughs.²³ In addition, ministers planned to give a single seat to 20 towns with more than 10,000 inhabitants, an arrangement which within a fortnight was scaled down to 18 boroughs (schedule D).²⁴ In response to numerous petitions, memorials

²² Peel cited the 'immense advantage ... in having the means of effecting an amicable compromise, and of warding off the necessity of absolute triumph and unqualified defeat' in elections (*Parl. Deb.* (ser. 3), v. 408-9).

²³ The proposed two Member constituencies (with their 1821 populations) were Birmingham (101,722), Finsbury (162,000), Greenwich (55,000), Holborn (218,000), Lambeth (104,658), Leeds (83,796), Manchester (129,035), Sheffield (65,273), Sunderland (31,891), Tower Hamlets (293,817) and Wolverhampton (53,011). Parts of Holborn were later incorporated into Finsbury (202,914) and Marylebone (174,354).

²⁴ Brighton (24,741), Bolton (32,045), Blackburn (21,940), Bradford (26,307), Cheltenham (13,396), Dudley (18,211), Frome (10,515), Gateshead (12,081), Huddersfield (13,284), Kidderminster (11,438), Kendal (10,438), Macclesfield (21,034), Stockport (38,639), South Shields (16,503), Tynemouth (23,173), Warrington (14,822), Whitehaven (16,694) and Walsall (11,440).

and the arguments of Members, however, on 18 April Russell added eight more places to schedule D, bringing the total number of single Member creations to 26.²⁵ Schedule C, by contrast, only acquired one extra borough.²⁶ During the second bill's committee stages ministers faced a far more concerted campaign for representation by individual towns, many of which submitted detailed memorials in support of their case, and whilst they easily parried most claims, by 15 September both Ashton-under-Lyne and Stroud had been granted a Member.²⁷ A few days later Chatham secured one as well. Instead of 18 single Member creations there were now 29. Although ministers agreed to make future adjustments, including elevating the new constituencies of Brighton and Stockport to double Member status, the single Member issue was now far more prominent than it had been before.

Significantly, one of the first changes considered by the cabinet following the reform bill's rejection by the Lords in October 1831 was a total abolition of the single Member schedules (B and D). On 15 Nov. 1831 Littleton recorded how Grey, Althorp and Russell had visited the boundary commissioners' offices and

informed us their object, or at least their wish, was to do away with schedule B which left only one Member to towns the population of which ranged between 2,000 and 4,000, and also to do away as far as possible with schedule D, containing some very large places to which it had been proposed to give only one Member ... It is therefore proposed to marry the boroughs in schedule B to each other as far as possible, perhaps to disfranchise a few of them, to marry also some of the places in schedule D, thus giving them two Members, and to give two Members to those that cannot be married by filling up the numbers of the House.²⁸

Despite Althorp and Russell's enthusiasm, for practical reasons this complete cull of the single Member boroughs was eventually scaled down to a substantial pruning. Under the terms of the revised bill of 12 Dec. 1831, the number of boroughs in schedule B was lowered from 41 (including Saltash) to 30 and in D from 29 (including Chatham) to 19, a net reduction of 21 or nearly a third. The 'Waverers', however, were satisfied and according to Littleton, their leader Wharncliffe considered ministers' willingness to have this 'objectionable' aspect of the bill 'partly done away with' one of their 'great concessions'. As he noted privately though, 'the reduction in the number of single Membered boroughs was decided upon long before Lord Wharncliffe's interview with Lord Grey'.²⁹

A second and even more fundamental response to the problems noted above, which has sometimes been overlooked by historians, was the government's decision

²⁵ Bury (13,480), Halifax (17,056), Oldham (38,201), Rochdale (14,017), Salford (32,600), Stoke-on-Trent (40,237), Wakefield (14,164) and Whitby (11,249).

²⁶ Devonport (39,621).

²⁷ Details of 27 memorials can be found in *PP* 1831 (64, 112), xvi. 1-79.

²⁸ Hatherton mss D260/M/7/5/26/7; Hatherton diary, 15 Nov. 1831.

²⁹ Hatherton diary, 21 Jan. 1832.

to ditch the 1821 census and completely abandon population as the criteria for borough disfranchisement.³⁰ As Littleton explained:

Their desire was now to disfranchise decayed boroughs on positive information as to their condition ... It was thought that the number of houses, and the amount of assessed taxes taken together, would furnish a better test of the respectability of each place than the arbitrary line of population proposed in the late bill. We were accordingly instructed to prepare tables showing which were the 114 boroughs that would stand lowest in the scale on this principle.³¹

Using the latest data for houses and taxation, both of which could be independently verified, neatly bypassed both the inconsistencies of the 1821 returns and the potentially fraudulent nature of the 1831 population figures. But how to rank the boroughs? Writing formally to Thomas Drummond, the head of the boundary commission, on 24 Nov. 1831, Melbourne simply asked him to 'make a scale' showing their 'relative importance' and provide 'an account of the manner in which the calculation has been made'. This was no easy undertaking and the formula he came up with, which divided the number of houses within each borough by the average number of houses for all the boroughs in question, did the same for the amount of assessed taxes, and then added the two figures together to produce a result by which they were graded, sparked an extraordinary public debate, both within the House (see Croker) and between various leading professors of mathematics.³² The statistical niceties of the 'Drummond list', as it became known, meant that when Russell came to announce the new details of the revised reform bill to the Commons less than three weeks later, the last minute arrival of some outstanding data had a major impact. As Littleton recorded, 12 Dec. 1831:

He was to have begun at 5 o' clock and the House waited for him from that hour until quarter before six. Some of the opposition began to laugh, and to cry 'Adjourn'. They little suspected the real cause of Lord John's absence, which was that he had not been able to settle which of the boroughs should be placed in the schedules. Nine reports respecting as many different places came to town only this morning, and their contents altered the relative position of so many places on the list or scale that was made, in which each place was marked by a figure representing its exact importance, that it was all but impossible to complete the calculation in time for the debate. The result was an extensive change in the schedules.³³

The final scheme of English borough redistribution, based on Drummond's list, is summarized in the following table.³⁴

³⁰ See, for example, V. Cromwell, *The Great Reform Bill 1832* (1973), 22 and 'The Victorian Commons, 1832-1884', in *The House of Commons* ed. R. Smith and J. S. Moore (1996), 120; A. Lawrence Lowell, *The Government of England* (1908), i. 197-8; *The Reform Bill of 1832* ed. W. Maehl (1967), 19.

³¹ Hatherton diary, 15 Nov. 1831.

³² On this curiously neglected episode see the chapter entitled 'The mathematics of representation' in J. F. MacLennan, *Memoir of Thomas Drummond* (1867), 138-61. See also John Wilson CROKER.

³³ Hatherton diary, 12 Dec. 1831.

³⁴ The receipt of some more 'definitive' data the following month necessitated yet another rearrangement of the list, but other than throwing doubt on the position of Totnes and Wallingford, respectively 87th and 86th, made no practical difference (*PP* 1831-2 (44), viii. 185-8).

English borough redistribution in 1832

Schedule A
(total disfranchisement)

Aldborough	Fowey	Old Sarum
Aldeburgh	Gatton	Orford
Amersham	Great Bedwyn	Plympton Erle
Appleby	Haslemere	Queenborough
Bere Alston	Hedon	St. Germans
Bishop's Castle	Heytesbury	St. Mawes
Boroughbridge	Higham Ferrers (single Member)	Saltash
Bossiney	Hindon	Seaford
Bletchingley	Ilchester	Steyning
Brackley	Lostwithiel	Stockbridge
Bramber	Ludgershall	Tregony
Callington	Milborne Port	Wendover
Camelford	Minehead	Weobley
Castle Rising	Mitchell	West Looe
Corfe Castle	Newport	Whitchurch
Downton	New Romney	Winchelsea
Dunwich	Newton	Wootton Bassett
East Grinstead	Newtown (Isle of Wight)	Yarmouth (Isle of Wight)
East Looe	Okehampton	

Schedule B
(partial disfranchisement)

Arundel	Horsham	Reigate
Ashburton	Hythe	Rye
Calne	Launceston	St. Ives
Christchurch	Liskeard	Shaftesbury
Clitheroe	Lyme Regis	Thirsk
Dartmouth	Malmesbury	Wallingford
Droitwich	Midhurst	Wareham
Eye	Morpeth	Westbury
Great Grimsby	Northallerton	Wilton
Helston	Petersfield	Woodstock

Schedule C

(double Member enfranchisements)

Birmingham	Halifax	Stockport
Blackburn	Lambeth	Stoke-upon-Trent
Bolton	Leeds	Stroud
Bradford	Macclesfield	Sunderland
Brighton	Manchester	Tower Hamlets
Devonport	Marylebone	Wolverhampton
Finsbury	Oldham	
Greenwich	Sheffield	

Schedule D

(single Member enfranchisements)

Ashton-under-Lyne	Huddersfield	Wakefield
Bury	Kidderminster	Walsall
Chatham	Kendal	Warrington
Cheltenham	Rochdale	Whitby
Dudley	Salford	Whitehaven
Frome	South Shields	
Gateshead	Tynemouth	

The differences between the revised bill's schedules and those of the first bill of 1 Mar. 1831 are highly revealing. Of the 60 boroughs originally earmarked for complete abolition (schedule A), 52 (87 per cent) were unaffected by the new disfranchisement criteria and remained in situ. However, four additional boroughs, Amersham, Downton, East Grinstead and St. Germans, were transferred from schedule B, bringing the total number in schedule A to 56. Almost half (27) of these places were located in the geographically over-represented south-western counties of Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Somerset and Wiltshire, a marginally higher proportion than in previous bills.

Schedule B, of course, was now limited to 30 boroughs, but the new criteria used for disfranchisement ensured that the changes made went far beyond this alteration alone. Of the 46 boroughs originally assigned to lose one seat by the first bill, only two-fifths (19) ended up doing so under Drummond's scheme. Half (23) escaped unscathed while another four were moved to A (see above). The remaining places were filled by seven boroughs reprieved from the original schedule A and the fresh additions of Calne, Christchurch, Dartmouth and Horsham. As with schedule A, almost half (14) the schedule B boroughs were located in the south-western counties.

It was the reorganization of schedules C and D, however, that was the most

striking. By limiting the number of single Member creations to 19, a very similar figure to that in the first bill, the status of the ten additional boroughs that had been awarded a Member since April 1831 was called into question. But rather than deny the hard-won claims of these places, ministers simply gave the ten most significant towns (loosely but not entirely based on the 1831 census) a second seat, thereby increasing the number of two Member seats in schedule C to 22, double the original figure of 1 Mar. 1831. One noteworthy side effect of this was a disproportionate rise in the number of new borough seats in the industrial north-west, comprising the counties of Cheshire, Lancashire, Staffordshire and the West Riding of Yorkshire. Over half (12) the final schedule C creations were now located in this economically strategic region, compared with a third (four) under the terms of the previous bill. Instead of securing 24 new borough representatives, as had been planned in mid-September, this area now gained 32.

Two points, in particular, stand out about the revised bill's modifications to the English borough redistribution schedules, all of which were enshrined in the final Reform Act. The first is that they significantly reduced the number of new single Member constituencies and either retained or created many more double Member seats than had originally been proposed. Together with the four surviving unreformed single Member boroughs (the fifth, Higham Ferrers, was disfranchised), there were 53 single Member boroughs out of a total of 187 (28 per cent) in England after 1832.³⁵ The gradual move towards single Member constituencies, which was to have such a profound impact on the operation of England's representative system later in the century, had clearly commenced, but not to the same extent as initially planned.³⁶ The second point is that by filling many more of the seats made available from disfranchisement than at first intended, the ministry's plans to do something about the 'inconveniently large' size of the Commons had to be dropped.³⁷ The original bill had proposed reducing the number of Members from 658 to a more manageable 596, a figure which was later revised to 627. The abandonment of this much-needed organisational reform in order to accommodate more double Member seats delighted many, not least the Protestant Members and those 'Waverers' who had campaigned for 'the numbers of the House to be filled up' in order that 'Ireland could not then have grounds of future claim'.³⁸ All of these altered elements – the retention of a higher proportion of double Member communities, maintaining an 'inconveniently large' membership, the continuing under-representation of Ireland, and the improved representation of the industrial north – were to have far-reaching constitutional and political implications in the years ahead.

³⁵ In a rare error Brock, 310, gives 54, a figure followed by *The Boundary Commissions: Redrawing the UK's Map of Parliamentary Constituencies* ed. D. Rossiter, R. Johnston and C. Pattie (1999), 20.

³⁶ For a broad discussion of the move to single Member seats see P. Salmon, 'The House of Commons, 1801-1911', in *A Short History of Parliament* ed. C. Jones (2009), 262-8.

³⁷ W. Molesworth, *History of the Reform Bill of 1832* (1865), 108.

³⁸ Hatherton diary, 21 Jan. 1832.

The constituency accounts in these volumes indicate that the overall impact of the Reform Act was to increase the English borough electorate (excluding the two universities) from 168,298 in 1831 to 270,639 in 1832, a rise of 102,341 (61 per cent).⁴⁰ This net growth, however, obscures some extremely divergent experiences, many of which sit uncomfortably with popular expectations about the extension of the franchise and appear almost counter-intuitive. Particularly striking in this respect were those places in which the number of qualified electors actually declined. Of the 146 English boroughs that survived reform, nearly a third (42) had an electorate that was actually smaller after 1832.⁴¹ Another two (Abingdon and Richmond) remained the same size, while a further 11 experienced marginal increases of less than ten per cent.⁴² Thus in almost two-fifths of the English boroughs the number of electors either fell or stayed roughly the same, despite the celebrated enfranchisement of the £10 borough householder. Why was this the case?

The most obvious explanation, the disfranchisement of non-resident electors, undoubtedly lay behind some of the more dramatic instances of electoral shrinkage. In the large freeman boroughs lacking residence requirements, in particular, the removal of out-voters often had a spectacular impact. Top of the scale was Maldon, where just eight per cent of the 3,119 freemen who polled at the 1826 general election were local residents. By removing all non-resident freemen (as well as all those who had qualified after 1 Mar. 1831 through 'gift' or 'marriage'), the Reform Act cut Maldon's electorate by almost 79 per cent, from 3,400 to 716. Next in line was Lancaster, where the electorate was reduced by 72 per cent, followed by Ludlow (64 per cent), Bridgnorth (50 per cent) and Sudbury (49 per cent). In all these places the recruitment and threat of bringing up non-resident freemen had played a key role in pre-reform campaigns, even if the election itself had never gone to a poll. Their exclusion in 1832 dramatically altered the political dynamics of these constituencies, giving local interests far more sway and making voters much easier to manage, both by legal and illegal means. Tellingly, the handful of boroughs disfranchised for corruption before 1867 included both Sudbury (1844) and Lancaster (1865).

The next five largest electoral reductions occurred at Weymouth (41 per cent), Leicester (39 per cent), Berwick-upon-Tweed (38 per cent), Dorchester (36 per cent), and Canterbury (34 per cent). Two of these places were again large freeman boroughs, with a hefty non-resident vote, but Weymouth was a freeholder borough,

³⁹ The data set on which the following section is based has been extracted from the constituency accounts in these volumes and *HP Commons, 1790-1820*, ii. 1-480. A digital copy is available on request.

⁴⁰ This 1831 figure for England (excluding Wales) is approximately 10,000 (six per cent) lower than the estimate used in many previous accounts, including Seymour, 533; Brock, 312; Salmon, *Electoral Reform*, 23 and P. Jupp, *The Governing of Britain, 1688-1848* (2006), 235.

⁴¹ Arundel, Barnstaple, Berwick-upon-Tweed, Beverley, Bridgnorth, Canterbury, Chichester, Cirencester, Colchester, Coventry, Dorchester, Dover, Durham, Evesham, Gloucester, Grantham, Great Yarmouth, Hereford, Hertford, Lancaster, Leicester, Leominster, Lichfield, Lincoln, Ludlow, Maldon, Newark, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, New Windsor, Preston, Reading, Rochester, Sandwich, Southampton, St. Albans, Sudbury, Tewkesbury, Warwick, Westminster, Weymouth and Melcombe Regis, Worcester and York.

⁴² Bridgwater, Carlisle, Honiton, Hythe, Ipswich, Northampton, Norwich, Nottingham, Oxford, Peterborough and Wells.

Leicester had an additional household ratepayer qualification, while Dorchester's franchise was vested in all persons paying church and poor rates. In all three the incidence of out-voters was nevertheless high. It was not just the traditional free-man boroughs that were emasculated by the Reform Act's residency requirements. In practice many freeholders, burgage owners and ratepayers often lived outside the boroughs in which they held property or incurred tax obligations, and were also affected.

Other factors, however, must have also contributed to voter disfranchisement. One of the most surprising features of the reductions was that they even occurred in places where non-residents were already excluded from the franchise. In Arundel, where the number of electors fell by 24 per cent, the suffrage was vested in the inhabitants paying scot and lot. A similar type of franchise operated at New Windsor, where the decline was 22 per cent, Reading (20 per cent), Westminster (11 per cent), and Newark (seven per cent). In Cirencester, where voters qualified as inhabitant householders, the electorate dropped by 14 per cent. The reasons for these falls are less easy to explain. It is possible, of course, that some of the contemporary estimates of the numbers qualified to vote in 1831 were exaggerated and based on outdated information, particularly in places that had experienced few or no contests. Claims to the franchise, it must be remembered, were only adjudicated in the event of a poll in the unreformed system. The yearly voter registration system introduced by the Reform Act scrutinised and updated franchise entitlements in a way that had not been possible before, inevitably leading to the removal of much 'dead wood'. This explanation – the move to more accurate electoral data – may well account for the reductions noted above in Cirencester, Dorchester and New Windsor, where there had been no polls for over a decade.

In all the remaining 39 boroughs that experienced a reduction of electors, however, there had been contests and opportunities to update electoral information before 1832. And even if the resulting figures were still liable to exaggeration, it is important to recognise that this problem did not vanish after reform. The new registers, especially in the first few years, also inflated the size of electorates by listing qualifications rather than individuals. This was not an issue in the new boroughs, where the only qualification was that of the £10 householder. But in all the boroughs that survived reform, ancient right entitlements co-existed alongside new ones, creating the possibility of individuals qualifying both as old franchise holders and as £10 householders and being listed more than once. (The fact that freemen rolls were compiled by town clerks and householder registers by overseers only exacerbated this problem.) These multiple entries, it has been suggested, probably inflated the size of many post-1832 registers by 10-20 per cent, a figure which allows for the possibility of even greater reductions having occurred in some places in 1832.⁴³

Looking at the numbers who actually polled – the so-called 'voterate' – provides a useful alternative perspective on these developments. In recent years voterates have acquired considerable vogue among historians as a more revealing indicator of elec-

⁴³ Salmon, *Electoral Reform*, 22.

toral participation, but they are not without their pitfalls.⁴⁴ Many polls failed to run their full course, usually owing to the early withdrawal of candidates. The practice of holding back votes for personal or political gain was also systemic. Some polls were simply token affairs, designed to aggravate entrenched interests or prepare the ground for future candidatures. Others merely provided the pretext for an election petition and included disputed or 'tendered' votes. Comparing the numbers who actually voted in contests before and after 1832, therefore, provides a rather crude measure of electoral change, but it is nonetheless telling.

Of the 86 boroughs that were contested in this period and also went to the polls in 1832, over a third (31) witnessed a fall in the number of men voting.⁴⁵ Another two, the inhabitant householder constituencies of Honiton and Northampton, remained static, while a further eight failed to poll more than an additional ten per cent. Taken together, in almost half the boroughs that experienced contests either side of 1832, the number of people voting either declined or remained relatively unaffected by the passage of reform. Maldon again registered the greatest reduction, with 3,119 polling at its last contested general election of 1826 compared with just 671 in 1832, a drop of 78 per cent. Next in line was Westminster, where 9,280 had turned out at the previous poll of 1820 but only 4,453 did so in 1832, a fall of 52 per cent. This was followed by Leicester, whose voter rate shrank by 42 per cent, Canterbury (39 per cent), Sudbury (35 per cent) and Beverley (32 per cent). Once again, these reductions were not just confined to the freeman boroughs. More was clearly at work here than the disfranchisement of non-residents alone. Westminster, with an inhabitant scot and lot franchise, has already been mentioned, but reduced numbers also polled in other constituencies with an exclusively resident electorate, such as Abingdon and Southwark.

The case of Preston, an industrial town with an inhabitants-at-large qualification verging on manhood suffrage, provides a significant example of how even resident voters could fall foul of the Reform Act. With a potentially vast pre-reform electorate (deemed far too large to ascertain by the town clerk) and a voter rate of 7,122 in 1830, the registered electorate of 6,352 in 1832 (of whom 5,528 polled) was much lower than anticipated. Commenting on this surprising shortfall, the local press explained that under the new system all resident ratepayers should have been automatically registered by the overseers, but that as ratepayers they would now be liable for the new 1s. registration fee, charged annually alongside the poor rate. In addition, they must have cleared all arrears by 20 July, a stipulation which in practice, as the radical De Lacy Evans presciently warned the Commons, 7 Aug. 1832, was to have a profound impact on levels of enfranchisement. All non-ratepaying inhabitants, meanwhile, would be forced to make a separate claim every year and have their entitlement decided in the annual registration courts, a potentially even more costly

⁴⁴ See, in particular, the exchange between D. Beales, 'The electorate before and after 1832: the right to vote and the opportunity', *PH*, xi (1992), 139-50 and F. O'Gorman, 'The electorate before and after 1832: a reply', *ibid.* xii (1993), 171-83.

⁴⁵ Hastings and Knaresborough have been excluded from this analysis owing to the disputed status of their pre-1832 polls.

process.⁴⁶ Many of Preston's potentially qualified inhabitants, under these circumstances, simply declined to pay their fee or make a claim. As the *Preston Chronicle* remarked, 'to the poor man who reckons his earnings by *pence* ... a shilling is a very serious and important amount'. 'Few persons', noted another local paper, 'thought it worthwhile to pay the courts a visit'.⁴⁷

In a significant proportion of the English boroughs that survived reform, it would seem, the number of people who could participate in elections was substantially reduced by the details of the Reform Act. This alone represents an important qualification to the widely held perception of 1832 as some form of democratic advance. (It also serves as a reminder that straightforward comparisons between the unreformed and reformed electorate are ultimately misleading and unhelpful. Borough electorates were very differently constructed either side of 1832, not just in terms of where electors lived in relation to constituencies, but also in terms of how they claimed and qualified for the different types of franchise on offer.) But what about electoral expansion? Given the incidence of disfranchisement noted above, it stands to reason that some of the remaining boroughs must have grown very substantially indeed.

The most spectacular instances of electoral expansion after 1832, not surprisingly, occurred in the corporation boroughs and tightly controlled freeman boroughs, where admissions to the ancient franchises had been artificially restricted. Top of the scale was Bath, where the electorate expanded almost a hundredfold, from 30 in 1831 to 2,853 in 1832. This was followed by Portsmouth, whose electorate grew by a factor of 26, Buckingham (23), Hastings (23), Malmesbury (22) and Rye (21). Rises of between ten and twentyfold occurred at Launceston, whose theoretically 'indefinite' number of freemen had withered to just eight by 1831, and the corporation boroughs of Banbury, Bury St. Edmunds, Marlborough, Newport, Salisbury, Scarborough, Tiverton and Truro. In total, 102 boroughs (70 per cent of those that survived) witnessed some form of electoral expansion in 1832, suggesting that the majority experience of reform was one of enfranchisement.

For many, however, the scale of growth was far less spectacular and fell well short of that forecast in the various boundary reports prepared for ministers on individual constituencies. In 11 boroughs, as already noted, there was a marginal increase of less than ten per cent, while in a further 13 the rate did not exceed 20 per cent. Indeed, almost half (47) of those that expanded failed to double in size, which, given the severely restricted nature of many pre-reform electorates and the huge expectations surrounding the enfranchisement of the £10 householder, was clearly surprising. In the 'pocket' burgh of Ashburton, for instance, where there were 101 'broomstick voters' in 1831, the boundary commissioners had confidently predicted that 342 £10 householders would be enrolled in 1832, increasing its electorate nearly three-and-a-half times.⁴⁸ In the event, however, just 146 householders and 52 old voters came on to the registers, barely doubling the electorate.

⁴⁶ See Salmon, *Electoral Reform*, 20-42.

⁴⁷ J. Aldridge, 'The parliamentary franchise at Preston and the Reform Act of 1832' (Manchester Univ. B.A. dissertation, 1948), 68-71; *Preston Chron.* 19 Oct. 1833.

⁴⁸ *PP* 1831-2 (141), xxxviii. 113-14.

This broad picture of spectacular electoral growth in some of the smallest boroughs coupled with a failure for reform to meet expectations in many others appears to tally with the available evidence for voterates. Of the 86 boroughs that went to the polls either side of reform, 53 (62 per cent) experienced an increase of voters at the 1832 election. Bath again came top, with the number who polled multiplying 78 times from 30 in 1830 to 2,329 in 1832. This was followed by Marlborough, whose voterate grew by a factor of 25, Cambridge (24), Ludlow (21), Rye (17), Portsmouth (17), Truro (16), Bury St. Edmunds (14), Salisbury (13) and Devizes (11). In only another 11 boroughs, however, did the number of voters more than double. Of the remaining 32 (60 per cent), 11 experienced an increase of between 50 and 95 per cent, eight between 20 and 49 per cent, and 13 of less than 17 per cent.

Whether viewed from the perspective of electorates or voterates, the expansions that occurred in 1832 were clearly far from evenly distributed and did not amount to a broad-based opening of the boroughs. Indeed, looking at the actual number of electors involved (rather than multipliers) demonstrates just how unequally dispersed these electoral expansions were. Taken together, in the 102 expanding boroughs the total electorate grew from 76,439 in 1831 to 123,735 in 1832, a rise of 47,296. In what resembles a classic pyramid distribution, however, over a third (16,441) of this increase occurred in Bristol, London and Liverpool alone, where the expansions were 3,924, 6,584 and 5,933 respectively. Almost another third (14,561) came from the 22 other large boroughs with electorates of above 1,000, leaving the last third (16,294) to be supplied by the remaining 77 boroughs, 55 of which were small boroughs with electorates of less than 500. The majority experience of reform in the boroughs may well have been one of electoral growth, but for most of them that growth involved relatively modest numbers of electors.

Ultimately, the most revealing indicator of the Reform Act's impact on the borough electorate is how the changes of 1832 measure up against the natural trends of the previous decade. Although this is something that has been touched on before, using estimates of the number of voters, the constituency studies in these volumes now make it possible to study this phenomenon far more comprehensively.⁴⁹ Between 1820 and 1831 almost three-fifths (120) of the 202 English borough constituencies (excluding Grampound) experienced some form of electoral expansion. Top of the scale was East Retford, whose electorate increased tenfold following the reform of its notoriously venal franchise in 1830. Next in line was the 'pocket' freehold borough of Callington, where local challenges to the patron (and the right of election) prompted a wave of 'faggot' vote creations that increased its electorate 3.75 times. This was followed by Bewdley, where the corporation's consolidation of their control through freeman admissions tripled its tiny electorate to 42, providing an important reminder that electoral expansion was not always synonymous with the 'opening' of boroughs. Increases of between 100 and 200 per cent occurred in the freeman constituencies of Bossiney, Bridgnorth, Chipping Wycombe, Lancaster, Leicester, Maldon and Newcastle-upon-Tyne, the scot and

⁴⁹ See, for example, F. O'Gorman, *Voters, Patrons, and Parties: The Unreformed Electorate of Hanoverian England, 1734-1832* (Oxford, 1989), 178-99.

lot boroughs of Dorchester, Fowey and Warwick, the inhabitant householder constituencies of Ilchester and Preston, and the freeholder borough of Haslemere. A further 28 constituencies experienced rises of between 50 and 99 per cent, while in 42 the number of electors grew by between 20 and 49 per cent. Of the remaining 34, the rate of growth was between ten and 19 per cent in nineteen and less than ten per cent in only 15. Not only was the pre-reform expansion of the borough electorate far more evenly distributed than that associated with reform, it also involved a remarkably similar number of electors. As noted above, in the boroughs that expanded after 1832 there was a net increase of 47,296 electors. In the constituencies that grew before reform, by contrast, the electorate rose from 106,856 in 1820 to 153,148 in 1831, an increase of 46,292. Viewed from the perspective of these expanding boroughs, the natural growth of the pre-reform decade appears to have been just as significant as that associated with the Reform Act.

Not all borough electorates, of course, increased in size. Fifty-seven, mostly tiny burgh and corporation boroughs, remained static throughout the 1820-31 period.⁵⁰ (Twenty-four were completely disfranchised by the Reform Act and ten partially). But in another telling comparison, the number that declined in size following reform, 42, was much higher than the number that had contracted during the previous decade. Only 25 constituencies experienced a fall in their electorates between 1820 and 1831, all but four of them, Bedford, Chester, Evesham and Gloucester, already extremely small boroughs with less than 300 electors. (Eleven were completely disfranchised by reform and four partially.) The combined electorate of these shrinking boroughs was 8,070 in 1820 and 6,775 in 1831, a reduction of just 1,295 electors (16 per cent). In the boroughs where the number of electors dropped as a result of reform, by contrast, the total electorate was 85,707 in 1831 and 64,303 in 1832, a fall of 21,404 (25 per cent).

The overwhelming trend in the size of electorates, therefore, was one of growth rather than contraction in the years leading up to 1832, with many boroughs 'opening' up and broadening their electoral base in what amounted to a process of reform ante reform.⁵¹ Taken as a whole, the unreformed English borough electorate expanded from 123,370 in 1820 to 168,298 in 1831, a rise of 44,928 (36 per cent). The Reform Act then propelled the number of borough electors to 270,639, but as we have seen it did so in a manner that encompassed extremely divergent experiences. One symptom of this was that while the combined electorate of the 146 surviving boroughs increased from 118,528 in 1820 to 162,719 in 1831, the following year it only crept up to 188,612. Looked at from the perspective of these 146 boroughs – which of course are the only ones where a comparison can be made either side of 1832 – the rate of natural growth in the pre-reform decade was 37 per cent. That associated with the Reform Act, by contrast, was 16 per cent.

⁵⁰ They included 20 burgh and 20 corporation boroughs.

⁵¹ This theme is explored more fully in P. Salmon, "Reform should begin at home": English municipal and parliamentary reform, 1818-32', in *Partisan Politics, Principle and Reform in Parliament and the Constituencies, 1689-1880* ed. C. Jones, P. Salmon and R. W. Davis (2005), 93-113.

Fifty-six 'rotten' or 'pocket' boroughs, of course, did not survive reform and as a result of their abolition 5,579 electors were disfranchised (roughly the same number as in Liverpool alone), reducing the 1831 English borough electorate from 168,298 to 162,719. The 1832 registers thus showed a net increase of 107,920 electors, of which 25,893 (24 per cent) was recorded in the surviving boroughs and 82,027 (76 per cent) in the 41 newly created constituencies. Three-quarters of the electoral expansion that occurred in 1832, therefore, can be located within the enfranchised boroughs. How the politics and electoral dynamics of these new constituencies differed from the surviving boroughs must await the work of future volumes. But what is clear for now is that the impact of reform on the 'old' constituencies – which continued to make up the majority of English boroughs (78 per cent) after 1832 – was far less impressive than the overall figures for electoral expansion suggest.⁵² With most electors (70 per cent) living in the 'old' boroughs after 1832, the 'majority' experience of reform was far more muted and in almost a third of cases the exact opposite of what has commonly been assumed. One last detail, which has not received sufficient attention, is worth underlining here about the impact of reform. The increases that did occur in 1832 were not simply the result of the electorate growing internally within each borough. Unlike the 'natural' expansions of the previous decade, they also benefited from boundary changes which actually extended the geographical limits of the boroughs into surrounding districts. Without these physical enlargements, some of which were extremely dramatic, the increase of the borough electorate in 1832 would have been even more modest. It is this final component of reform which is examined next.

*Borough Boundaries*⁵³

The boundary changes of 1832 remain one of the least studied components of the English reform legislation. Embodied in a separate Act (2 & 3 Gul. IV, c. 64), which received royal assent five weeks after reform on 11 July 1832, only a few historians have given them much attention.⁵⁴ The constituency accounts in these volumes suggest that they were of far greater significance than has hitherto been realised. Of the 146 English boroughs (excluding the two universities) that survived reform, only 34 (23 per cent) seem to have retained the same boundaries after 1832. In ten more the impact of reform is uncertain owing to insufficient data. In all the remaining 102 boroughs, however, the boundaries were redrawn in such a way as to enlarge the constituency. In other words almost 70 per cent of the English boroughs that survived reform increased their geographical area after 1832. They may have been known by the same name, but as constituencies many of them bore little or no relation to their pre-reform predecessors. This again indicates how simple comparisons of elections either side of 1832 risk conflating differently constructed systems.

⁵² There were 187 English boroughs after 1832.

⁵³ The data set on which the following analysis is based has been compiled from the constituency accounts in these volumes and the figures in *PP* 1859 (166), xxiii. 121-9; 1866 (259), xvii. 585-7. A digital copy is available on request.

⁵⁴ Most notably N. Gash, *Politics in the Age of Peel* (1953), 67-72, 432-33.

The scale of these boundary alterations varied enormously. The least significant enlargement occurred at Boston, where the east and southern boundaries were realigned with some local sewers, taking the total area of the borough from 6.9 to 7 square miles, an enlargement of less than 1.5 per cent. At the other end of the scale was Westbury, a burgage borough that before 1832 comprised three tiny isolated pockets of land. By adopting the boundaries of the vast surrounding rural parish the size of this constituency grew almost 500 times, from 0.04 to 19.3 square miles. Similarly impressive increases occurred at New Woodstock, where the addition of ten parishes, three hamlets and part of Blenheim Park boosted its area 337 times, from 0.1 to 33.7 square miles, and at Wilton, where the inclusion of neighbouring parishes resulted in a 247-fold expansion, from a mere 0.2 to almost 49.4 square miles. This made Wilton the second most geographically extensive borough after Wenlock, and, as critics like Croker repeatedly pointed out, more of a miniature county than a borough constituency. Other very substantial increases of between 100 and 200 times occurred at Chippenham, Malton, Malmesbury and Shaftesbury, and of between 50 and 99 times at Christchurch, Cirencester, Great Marlow, Horsham, Kingston-upon-Hull, Morpeth, Petersfield, Reigate, Tamworth and Wareham. In a further 16 boroughs the rate of expansion was above tenfold, while another forty more than doubled their size. Indeed, only nine boroughs registered an increase of less than 20 per cent.⁵⁵ Combined together, the 136 English boroughs for which there is available data covered a total area of 451 square miles on the eve of reform. The following year this more than tripled to 1,379 square miles, extending the politics of the boroughs (and subsequent forms of urban government) into areas that had hitherto been part of surrounding county constituencies.

This transfer of land – some of it rural, some suburban, much of it mixed – from the English counties to the boroughs undoubtedly helped to reshape the Victorian landscape in ways that went beyond the merely electoral and which have yet to be fully explored. The shape of the enlargements was extremely significant. When the boundary commission was first established its head Thomas Drummond, a 33-year-old pioneering surveyor recommended by Lord Brougham, was instructed to add ‘neighbouring districts’ sufficient to give each borough at least 300 £10 householders, 8 Aug. 1831. If any districts extended ‘considerably beyond the portion covered or nearly covered with houses’, however, the boundaries were to be ‘assigned as nearly as possible, comprising the city or borough, and little or no portion of the country’.⁵⁶ Relaying these instructions to the commissioners,⁵⁷ 23 Aug., Drummond stipulated that ‘attention should be paid to the direction in which a town is increasing’.⁵⁸ One

⁵⁵ Andover (9 per cent), Boston (1 per cent), Chester (4 per cent), Monmouth (15 per cent), Nottingham (15 per cent), Oxford (15 per cent), Plymouth (5 per cent), Preston (16 per cent) and New Windsor (5 per cent).

⁵⁶ Maclennan, 140-1; *PP* 1831-2 (141), xxxviii. 5.

⁵⁷ The unpaid commission, a curious mixture of surveyors from the royal engineers, hydrographers, relatives of Members and a sitting Member, eventually numbered 24: Launcelot Allen, Benjamin Ansley, Thomas Birch, Henry Brandreth, Francis Beaufort, John Chapman, R. D. Craig, Robert K. Dawson, John Drinkwater, Thomas Drummond, Thomas Ellis, Henry Gawler, H. Bellenden Ker, George Lennard, Edward Littleton M.P., William Ord, John Romilly, Robert Saunders, Richard Scott, Rev. R. Sheepshanks, William Tallents, Henry Tancred, John Wrottesley, and William Wylde. (See Maclennan, 161; *PP* 1831-2 (141) xxxviii. 24.) The status of the Tory Member Davies Gilbert, who was named as a commissioner in the bills of September 1831 as a partisan counterweight to Littleton, is unclear. See *The Times*, 14 Sept. 1831.

⁵⁸ *PP* 1831-2 (141), xxxviii. 7.

week after the introduction of the revised reform bill, however, this criterion was very significantly altered.⁵⁹ As a vexed Littleton explained, 19 Dec. 1831:

Russell today produced to us a fresh set of instructions respecting the boundaries to be given to boroughs containing less than 300 qualifying tenants, which were now in all cases to be thrown into the parish if its limits did not exceed four miles in distance from the town. Here was a complete *bouleversement* of all our proceedings with respect to such boroughs. We had taken in the most convenient and fittest neighbourhoods by arbitrary lines, or had in some cases associated neighbouring towns by separate circles in pursuance of previous instructions ... Poor Drummond [is] at work trying to coax the commissioners into good humour ... Many of their reports must be torn [up] and reconstructed and many of them must revisit their boroughs in the frost and snow.

This new scheme, which resulted in larger tracts of surrounding countryside being added to many boroughs, was clearly designed to secure the support of the 'Waverers'. When Littleton later asked Althorp if the object of 'making boroughs more rural' had been to 'please the peers and country gentlemen', as some form of compensation for the abolition of the 'pocket' boroughs, he was given the nod and told 'it is our duty to shape the measure so as to ensure its success'.⁶⁰

These 'ruralised' boroughs undoubtedly helped to mitigate political divisions between town and country in the years ahead, in much the same way that urban freehold electors continued to dilute county interests (see below). Their greatest impact, however, was the way in which their physical shape – as determined by the new criteria – inevitably helped to fashion future patterns of urban development on the ground. Rural districts that might have been omitted from the first scheme were now included, creating areas for obvious urban in-fill, and in some cases the 'direction in which a town is increasing' was reorientated as a result. Littleton believed that the new rules had resulted in 'more uniformity certainly, but far worse limits and worse boroughs'.⁶¹ More work obviously needs to be done on this neglected impact of the Boundary Act, especially by landscape historians. What is abundantly clear, however, is that the boundary alterations implemented in 1832 were much more than an electoral nicety. In some places they amounted to town planning.

Given the scale of these territorial expansions to the English boroughs it would be reasonable to expect some major upheavals to have occurred in the established dynamics of local politics. As with so much associated with reform, however, the results were anything but straightforward. The Lopes family easily retained their substantial interest at Westbury, New Woodstock continued to be dominated by the duke of Marlborough, and Wilton carried on returning the nominees of the 12th earl of Pembroke. The electoral politics of Chippenham, Cirencester, Malton and Kingston-upon-Hull, the latter notoriously open and venal, also remained very

⁵⁹ Interestingly, this important change was backdated in the official papers to 24 Nov. 1831, reflecting Littleton's comment to Melbourne that 'it will be awkward for the public hereafter to see an instruction with so late a date' (*PP* 1831-2 (141), xxxviii. 14; Hatherton diary, 21, 27 Dec. 1831).

⁶⁰ Hatherton diary, 19-21 Dec. 1831.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

much as they had been before. In a striking speech that broke almost 30 years of silence in the Commons, Petersfield's eccentric Tory patron 'Hat' Jolliffe confidently predicted that his influence would be completely annihilated by the proposed enlargement of his 'pocket' borough from 0.4 to 35.5 square miles, 22 July 1831. But within a few years the family's political hegemony had been successfully re-established by his nephew Sir William Jolliffe.

In other boroughs, however, there were substantial shifts of power and patronage. Some even experienced an increase of proprietorial influence. Malmesbury's expansion from 0.2 to 32.3 square miles, for example, destroyed the interest of its former patron Joseph Pitt, the Tory Member for Cricklade, only to confer greater authority on the Whig earls of Suffolk, the new constituency's dominant landowners. At Morpeth the representation had for many years been shared between the Howards (earls of Carlisle) and their fellow Whig William Ord, owner of the nearby estate of Newminster Abbey. The borough's expansion from 0.4 to 23.3 square miles, which Ord tried unsuccessfully to prevent with advice from his son, a boundary commissioner, enabled the Howards to assume complete control after 1832. Rye's impressive enlargement, from 1.6 to 32.3 square miles, was also accompanied by an intensification of landed influence, with leadership being transferred from the already weakened Lamb family to Edward Curteis, the former county Member and the new area's largest proprietor. Other examples include Reigate, where the Cocks family, who had formerly shared the nomination, emerged supreme following the borough's 96-fold expansion, and Horsham, where the duke of Norfolk's ascendancy was eclipsed by the owners of Horsham Park after the constituency was enlarged 59 times.

Of course not all borough enlargements played into the hands of local proprietors. There were plenty of places, like Poole for instance, where extending the boundaries 'very considerably increased the constituency of the borough and no longer left the representation in the hands of a few individuals', as the publisher of its 1835 pollbook approvingly noted.⁶² On the whole larger constituencies (and larger electorates) were less easily managed, whether by legitimate or illegitimate means, and the same type of factors that conditioned the exercise of influence in most counties after 1832 would have also applied in all but the smallest boroughs.⁶³ There is also not much evidence to support Tory accusations, especially as articulated by Croker, Wetherell and Sir George Clerk, that the boundary alterations were designed to shore up Whig interests and amounted to blatant gerrymandering. A more complete overview of the political consequences of these boundary changes must inevitably await a more detailed analysis of each constituency in the period after 1832. But given the undoubted significance of the changes, two questions arise. First, why have they been so neglected in most studies of reform? Second, how was such an important measure implemented with apparently such little opposition and debate in Parliament?

⁶² *Poole Borough Pollbook* (1835), p. 6.

⁶³ See A. Heesom, "Legitimate" versus "illegitimate" influence: aristocratic electioneering in mid-Victorian Britain', *PH*, vii (1988), 282-305; Salmon, *Electoral Reform*, 119-45; Jupp, 237-9.

The answer to both questions lies in the extraordinary way in which the work of redrawing the boundaries became detached from parliamentary scrutiny. On 16 Nov. 1831 Littleton privately recorded how at dinner the commissioners had

considered the very difficult point of avoiding a discussion on the description of the boundaries of the boroughs in the schedules of the reform bill ... A discussion of such matter would be endless, and yet how to avoid it we knew not, for it being known the requisite information was all procured, the House would insist, we feared, on such essential matter appearing in the body of the bill. After much deliberation, we all agreed the best thing to be done was to adhere to the principle of ... last session ... and let the king issue a commission to five persons to inquire into and recommend the proper boundaries, etc. ... Then to lay that report before both Houses and to advert to it in the bill as the document containing the limits to be adopted. There is no precedent for this. But the rule of proceeding in private bills with reference to plans of roads and canals is somewhat analogous. In this way we shall avoid a discussion of each boundary, and every part of each boundary, and shall probably have one great debate only on a motion for referring the report to a select committee, which must be opposed. This plan was unanimously approved and adopted.⁶⁴

Although the cabinet eventually abandoned the idea of a king's commission in favour of introducing a separate boundary bill, based on the existing commissioners' reports, the intention and effect remained remarkably similar, especially in terms of limiting the amount of debate in the Commons.⁶⁵ This strategy did not go unnoticed though, and a campaign by leading opposition Members, most notably Croker, Henry Goulburn and Sir Richard Vyvyan, for the boundaries of each borough to be examined when their place in the schedules was discussed attracted considerable sympathy. An attempt to prevent the House going into committee on the revised reform bill until the boundary reports and maps were available, however, was rejected by 152-99, 20 Jan. 1832. Many of the final reform bill's proposals for individual boroughs were thus considered independently of the boundary details, a state of affairs which many, like Goulburn, deemed farcical. Written descriptions of the proposed boundaries did appear in the first draft of the boundary bill, which was brought in by Russell on 16 Feb., to 'no remark'.⁶⁶ But it was not until 10 Feb. that the boundary commissioners' maps and reports were made available for publication, and not until 23 Feb. that the Liberal Charles Tennyson, keen to discover the new boundaries of his Stamford constituency, reported being able to obtain a copy.⁶⁷ By this time most of the leading borough schedules in the reform bill had been disposed of.

This is not to say that no alterations were made to the proposed boundaries, but rather that they tended to be settled away from the floor of the House, by private negotiation and in isolation from the broader theatre of reform. Local petitions, of course, continued to initiate and inform much of this process and to trigger impromptu parliamentary debates. The scope of these, however, was always limited

⁶⁴ Hatherton diary, 16 Nov. 1831.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 20 Nov. 1831.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 16 Feb. 1832; *PP* 1831-2 (174), iii. 193-265.

⁶⁷ Lincs. AO, Tennyson D'Eyncourt mss Td'E H111/11.

by a lack of access to the commissioners' working papers, including the accounts of their interviews with local witnesses. All hope of examining these potentially highly revealing documents was dispelled on 10 May, at the height of the 'days of May' crisis, when Russell instructed Drummond to remove 'every paper except the commissioners reports and copies of the instructions, in short everything that could not be considered public documents' from the boundary office. This was considered 'perfectly justifiable, for the services of the commissioners have been voluntary'.⁶⁸ The upshot of all this, as Littleton recorded, was that on 8 June 1832

[the] boundary bill went through committee, not occupying altogether more than ten hours. It had been universally supposed early in the session that a month at least would have been occupied at this stage, every line being debateable matter. But by much previous labour in satisfying objections, and by having observed throughout most scrupulously the fairest and most impartial conduct much opposition was got over before we entered the House.⁶⁹

The way in which the detailed negotiations over the boundary bill were hidden from view undoubtedly helps to explain why historians have generally paid this measure so little attention. Judged from the perspective of parliamentary time, boundaries barely seem to warrant a footnote in the broader struggle for reform, with the bill itself occupying just 'three nights' discussion' on 7, 8, 22 June.⁷⁰ One episode relating to the last-minute preparations at the report stage is particularly suggestive of the way in which things were done. On 14 June Littleton recounted how

Drummond and I were hunting all over the town for Lord John Russell this morning, to settle with him various alterations in boundaries, previous to the report on the boundary bill. We at last found him in a stable in a backyard in King Street, Westminster. Here with the groom's ink bottle and pen, and lying down on straw in one of the stalls, we settled that all the adjoining parishes should be laid to Rye ... that the connection of Hythe and Folkestone should be maintained, that we would maintain the addition of St. Martins to Newark and that, if I pleased, I should be at liberty to substitute Lichfield for Walsall as the chief town of South Staffordshire. We also made a great variety of amendments in polling places.⁷¹

It would be misleading to assume from this, though, that ministers simply dictated their own terms and disregarded their critics. Even their sweeping Commons victory of 22 June 1832, when they charged through the third reading of the boundary bill in a mere seven hours, was not all that it initially appeared. Some of the more notable challenges in this debate included William Blamire's attempt to restrict Whitehaven's proposed boundaries in order to neutralize Lord Lonsdale's influence, which was rejected by 82-23, and a bid by Tennyson to exclude the parish of St. Martins from Stamford and prevent Lord Exeter's domination, which failed by

⁶⁸ Hatherton diary, 10 May 1832.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 16 Feb., 7-8 June 1832.

⁷⁰ Hatherton mss D260/M/7/27/53, f. 165.

⁷¹ Hatherton diary, 14 June 1832.

172-19. The liberal Tory George Richard Robinson's amendment to add Corfe Castle to Wareham, which would have given the nomination to the Tory Bankes family, was also dismissed by 122-55. Notwithstanding these impressive majorities, however, ministers allowed compromise versions of many defeated amendments to be incorporated into the bill as it went through the Lords, including the removal of half of St. Martins from Stamford and the addition of Corfe Castle and Bere Regis to Wareham. Here then was a measure which for all its apparent subterfuge and formulation outside the House appears to have been just as 'negotiated' as any other aspect of reform. There can be little doubt, as Lord Lyndhurst later suggested to Littleton during an encounter in Bird Cage Walk, that the 1832 Reform Act was 'materially modified by the boundary bill'.⁷² Perhaps more significantly, however, the bill was one of the first occasions that a commission of this type was used to sidestep Parliament and streamline the legislative process on such a major issue. It would, of course, not be the last.⁷³

The County Franchise

The first reform bill proposed extending the existing 40s. county franchise to £10 copyholders and £50 leaseholders on leases of more than 21 years. Both propositions attracted criticism for introducing a class of voter likely to be dependent on local landlords, in what was widely regarded as a measure designed to compensate the landed interest for their loss of influence in the disfranchised boroughs. (The more sophisticated attacks included those of Lord Milton, 17-18 Aug. 1831.) It was the ministry's plans respecting the county voting rights of various categories of borough freeholder, however, which caused the most difficulty and disagreement, and ultimately helped prepare the ground for the ministry's only serious defeat in committee on a Tory amendment to enfranchise £50 tenant farmers.

It has been widely assumed that the first bill included 'a clause prohibiting urban freeholders from voting in the counties'.⁷⁴ This, however, only applied in a certain set of circumstances. The original bill not only gave freeholders in cities with their own 'county' status a vote in the surrounding county (schedule G), but also upheld the county voting rights of freeholders who qualified in respect of property within borough constituencies, as long as that property did not either entitle them 'or any other person' to a borough vote.⁷⁵ During the reintroduced bill's committee stages prominent Tories such as Peel, Winthrop Mackworth Praed and Sir Edward Sugden, among others, argued that it would be far better (and simpler) for all borough freeholders to vote in the boroughs where their property lay. More

⁷² Ibid. 25 June 1832.

⁷³ On the increasing use of commissions of various types see H. Clokie and J. Robinson, *Royal Commissions of Inquiry. The significance of investigations in British Politics* (1969), 54-79.

⁷⁴ J. Cannon, *Parliamentary Reform, 1640-1832* (Cambridge, 1973), 247. The extent to which borough freeholders were in practice able to qualify for both a county vote and the local borough franchise prior to 1832 has probably been exaggerated, though it was clearly possible. (See Beales, 'The electorate before and after 1832', 144-45.) Many pre-1832 borough franchises, it must be remembered, were not based on the ownership of property and were artificially restricted.

⁷⁵ *PP* 1830-31 (247), ii. 199, 216.

fundamentally, they protested at the 'dilution of the landed interest' that would result from borough freeholders having too much influence in county elections.

Much has been made of the Reform Act's supposed intention to separate urban and rural constituencies.⁷⁶ The alterations which were made to these urban freeholder clauses are therefore worth considering in some detail, especially given the prominence that this group of electors increasingly assumed in the reformed electoral system.⁷⁷ Under pressure from dissident reformers, most notably Hughes Hughes, in mid-July ministers privately agreed to delete 'or any other person' from the original clause respecting the county voting rights of borough freeholders. Owners of borough freeholds who did not themselves qualify for a borough vote would, as a result, be able to vote in the adjacent county, even if their property conferred the borough franchise on another person, such as a tenant. A single property would, in effect, be able to confer the vote on more than one individual. However, ministers hoped to delay announcing this amendment, which would significantly extend urban influence in the counties, after dealing with an opposition motion for giving the county franchise to £50 tenants-at-will. In the event, however, the issue was forced into the open by Sugden, who, in an attempt to ridicule the bill's proposals regarding urban freeholders, pointed out that they would disfranchise all substantial landlords whose property conferred a £10 borough vote on their tenants, 12 Aug. 1831.

With support growing for the idea of removing all borough freeholders from the counties, and an amendment to that effect being tabled by another disgruntled reformer, Thomas Davies, Hughes Hughes let it be known that his proposal, for removing 'or any other person' had received ministerial backing, 13 Aug. Four days later this was confirmed by Althorp, prompting a furious outburst from Sugden, who declared that the resulting influx of urban freeholders would completely destroy 'the influence of land on the return of county Members'. That day's unfortunately timed debate on the status of freeholders in cities with their own county status (five of which already successfully operated their own freeholder franchise) only served to highlight the feasibility of keeping urban freeholders out of county elections, and in the ensuing division the ministerial majority was reduced to just 40.⁷⁸ Next day, in what had clearly by now become a related counter-offensive by the landed interest, Charles Waldo Sibthorp's amendment to extend the county franchise to £50 tenants-at-will, after being hijacked by Lord Chandos, was carried against the ministry by 232-148 with the support of many Whig squires and some radical reformers. In total, 87 Members who 'usually voted for the bill' rebelled.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Most notably in the amazingly resilient work of the American sociologist D. C. Moore. See especially his 'Concession or cure: the sociological premises of the first Reform Act', *HJ*, ix (1966), 39-59 and 'Political morality in mid nineteenth-century England: concepts, norms and violations', *Victorian Stud.* xiii (1969-70), 5-36. For a rebuttal of Moore's thesis see Cannon, 246-50; D. Eastwood, 'Contesting the politics of deference: the rural electorate, 1820-60', in *Party, State and Society* ed. Lawrence and Taylor, 27-49, and Salmon, *Electoral Reform*, 119-45.

⁷⁷ See J. Prest, *Politics in the Age of Cobden* (1977), 31-4, 80, 132; J. Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain* (1993), 80, 335 and Taylor, 'Interests, parties and the state', 55-56.

⁷⁸ Bristol, Exeter, Lichfield, Norwich and Nottingham. In these 'county cities' with a freehold franchise electors continued to be able to qualify as 40s. freeholders after 1832.

⁷⁹ *The Times*, 19 Aug. 1831.

Having decided to accept defeat on this issue if they were beaten, ministers were now able to use the 'Chandos clause', as it became known, as the justification for pushing through their existing urban voter amendments and inserting some new ones. On 19 Aug. 1831 they proposed that in addition to freeholders, borough copyholders and leaseholders should have the right to vote in counties, as long as their qualifying property did not give them 'or any other person' a borough vote. Hughes Hughes' attempt to prevent this was easily defeated by 187-1. Five days later Davies, somewhat incongruously citing the 1,800 'small freeholders' of Leeds who would 'deluge' the county (for which of course they currently voted), moved to restrict the votes of all urban freeholders to boroughs and thereby prevent 'large bodies of votes in the manufacturing districts from controlling the county elections'. This was rejected by 225-136 and a similar amendment by Mackworth Praed suffered the same fate the following year.

Not surprisingly, the issue of urban freeholders, or more specifically urban penetration of the counties, resurfaced during the ministry's negotiations with the 'Waverers' in November 1831. Wharnccliffe expressed his 'earnest desire' to prevent borough freeholders from voting in counties, but although this was 'considered' by Grey, it was 'thought unjust and impolitic' and 'refused'.⁸⁰ Littleton, in particular, campaigned hard against it, warning Russell that it 'would infallibly lead to a division of the country and M.P.s into two parties, a Town party and a Country party, and jealousy and hatred would thus be engendered and would endure till one party destroyed the other'.⁸¹ Opponents continued to press for changes at the revised bill's committee stages, when Littleton and the leading Whig Lord Ebrington 'pledged ourselves to each other to die on the benches of the House of Commons sooner than allow town influence to be shut out of county elections', but no further modifications of any significance were made to the county freeholder clauses before the final passage of the bill.⁸² Along with some technical adjustments to the leasehold qualification, including the enfranchisement of £10 leaseholders on leases of at least 60 years and clarification of the status of freeholders in county cities with their own freehold franchise, the terms of the county suffrage were by now settled.

The resulting Act's main impact on the counties has traditionally been viewed in terms of the enfranchisement of the £50 tenants-at-will and its bolstering of landlord influence and control. Recent studies, however, have suggested that this much-maligned group of voters were no less independent in the exercise of their franchise than any other type of county elector.⁸³ This is something that future volumes will need to look at more closely. But it is perhaps telling that the duke of Wellington, when asked in 1833 to comment on the outcome of reform in the counties, offered this analysis:

⁸⁰ *William IV-Grey Corresp.* i. 467, 474; Hatherton diary, 23 Dec. 1831.

⁸¹ Hatherton diary, 7-8 Dec. 1831.

⁸² *Ibid.* 29 Feb. 1832.

⁸³ P. Radice, 'Identification, interests and influence: voting behaviour in four English constituencies in the decade after the Great Reform Act' (Durham Univ. Ph.D. thesis, 1992), 510; Salmon, *Electoral Reform*, 132-45; Jupp, 237-40.

The gentry have as many followers and influence as many voters at elections as ever they did. But a new democratical influence has been introduced into elections [by] the copyholders and freeholders and leaseholders residing in towns ... These are ... a formidably active party against the aristocratic influence of the landed gentry.⁸⁴

*The County Electorate*⁸⁵

The impact of reform on the English county electorate was far more straightforward than in the boroughs. The overall result was to expand the number of electors from an estimated 266,232 in 1831 to a registered 344,015 in 1832 (including the new Isle of Wight county constituency), an increase of 77,783 (29 per cent). This 1831 figure, it should be noted, is substantially higher than the traditional estimate of 247,000 for both England and Wales (approximately 227,000 from England alone) employed by literally generations of historians, which can be traced back to an article published in the late nineteenth century.⁸⁶ The most impressive rise occurred in Derbyshire, where the electorate expanded over three times, from a nominal 3,000 to a total of 9,911 registered in the newly created North and South Derbyshire divisions. Next in line was Lincolnshire, where the number of electors grew almost 2.5 times, followed by Staffordshire (2.4 times) and Cheshire (2 times).⁸⁷ Rises of between 50 and 100 per cent occurred in 14 counties,⁸⁸ and between 20 and 49 per cent in another ten.⁸⁹ Of the remaining dozen, seven experienced minimal growth of between one and 14 per cent,⁹⁰ Herefordshire remained static, while four decreased in size. The largest fall took place in Yorkshire, where a probable electorate of 50,000 in 1831 declined to a registered total of 33,154 in its new East, North and West Ridings, a loss of 16,846 electors (34 per cent). This was followed by Suffolk, where the estimated number of electors contracted by 24 per cent, Middlesex (13 per cent), and Sussex (4 per cent).

The new voter registration system undoubtedly played a role in some of these reductions. It was reported by the *Edinburgh Review*, for example, that many of the yeomanry 'doggedly refused to register ... saying "they had always voted with-

⁸⁴ *Croker Pprs.* ii. 206.

⁸⁵ The data set on which the following analysis is based has been compiled from the constituency entries in these volumes and *HP Commons 1790-1820*, ii. 1-480. A digital copy is available on request.

⁸⁶ Sir J. Lambert, 'Parliamentary franchises, past and present', *Nineteenth Cent.* xxvi (1889), 942-62. The genealogy of this estimate can be traced through Seymour (1915), 533; Brock (1973), 322; Salmon (2002), and Jupp (2006), 235, to name but a few. John Cannon was the first to question it and to substitute an alternative but subsequently discredited figure (Cannon, 259, 290-92; O'Gorman, *Voters, Patrons, and Parties*, 178-80).

⁸⁷ Since the estimated electorate in all these places had remained static in the pre-reform decade, these increases probably included an element of updating as well as fresh enfranchisement.

⁸⁸ Cornwall (95 per cent), Northumberland (88 per cent), Somerset (88 per cent), Monmouthshire (87 per cent), Berkshire (86 per cent), Gloucestershire (85 per cent), Northamptonshire (85 per cent), Worcestershire (69 per cent), Norfolk (63 per cent), Rutland (62 per cent), Cambridgeshire (61 per cent), Essex (61 per cent), Cumberland (58 per cent), Warwickshire (57 per cent).

⁸⁹ Co. Durham (43 per cent), Bedfordshire (42 per cent), Dorset (41 per cent), Huntingdonshire (39 per cent), Oxfordshire (35 per cent), Buckinghamshire (33 per cent), Leicestershire (30 per cent), Devon (28 per cent), Westmorland (25 per cent), Wiltshire (23 per cent).

⁹⁰ Kent (14 per cent), Shropshire (13 per cent), Hampshire, including the Isle of Wight (12 per cent), Lancashire (11 per cent), Hertfordshire (6 per cent), Nottinghamshire (1 per cent), Surrey (1 per cent).

out being registered, and did not see why they should have any thing of the kind done now".⁹¹ But the type of wholesale disfranchisement witnessed in the boroughs after reform, on account of the new residency and ratepaying requirements, did not apply in the counties where there were no such conditions.⁹² Instead, most falls were related to the creation of boroughs and the transfer of county electors to new constituencies. In Yorkshire, for instance, 11,106 electors were registered in the newly enfranchised boroughs of Bradford, Halifax, Huddersfield, Leeds, Sheffield, Wakefield and Whitby, many of whom would have previously qualified as 40s. county freeholders. In a similar fashion the metropolitan boroughs of Finsbury, Marylebone and Tower Hamlets removed many town freeholders from Middlesex.

The information available for county voterates shows a similar pattern. Over a quarter (12) of England's 40 counties experienced contests in the pre-reform decade and at the 1832 general election in all of their respective divisions. The largest growth of voters occurred in Somerset, where 2,231 polled in 1826 and 13,506 in the combined East and West divisions in 1832, a six-fold increase. Next came Suffolk, where the voterate almost quadrupled from 1,725 in 1830 to 6,746 in 1832, in a trend clearly at odds with the contraction of its estimated 1831 electorate noted above. This was followed by county Durham, where the number of voters rose 2.9 times, Berkshire (2.2 times), and Shropshire (2 times). Five counties experienced increases of between 36 and 80 per cent and Westmorland one of seven per cent. Middlesex was the only county in which the voterate decreased, from 'over 7,000' voters at its last contest of 1820 to 5,132 in 1832, a drop of 1,868 (27 per cent). The overall pattern of growth in the English counties, therefore, was markedly different from the boroughs, with a more evenly distributed expansion of the electorate (and voterate) and a far less pronounced level of disfranchisement occurring in most places after reform. In one respect, however, there was an important similarity.

As with the boroughs, many counties had already experienced a significant expansion of their electorate prior to 1832. Taken together, the estimated number of county electors increased from 191,600 in 1820 to 266,232 in 1831, a rise of 74,632 (39 per cent). Not only was this rate of growth ten per cent higher than that associated with the Reform Act, it also involved roughly the same number of electors. Top of the scale was Yorkshire, whose electorate multiplied two-and-a-half times, from roughly 20,000 in 1820 to 50,000 by 1831. Next in line were Northumberland, Nottinghamshire and Suffolk, whose electorates appear to have doubled, followed by Lancashire, Shropshire and Surrey, where the rates of growth were 88, 66 and 50 per cent respectively. Seven counties expanded by between 40 and 49 per cent, five by roughly a third, and six by between 12 and 25 per cent. Only one county, Oxfordshire, declined in size, from roughly 4,000 to 3,500 electors, leaving 14 counties in which the estimated electorate remained unchanged prior to 1832. Given that these static figures probably arose from a lack of opportunities to update electorate information, some of the increases attributed to 1832 may well have included an element of

⁹¹ *Edinburgh Rev.* (1833), lvi. 545.

⁹² See Salmon, *Electoral Reform*, 20-27, 253.

catching-up on previous unrecorded growth. Moreover, the new county registers, like those in the boroughs, tended artificially to inflate the number of electors by listing qualifications rather than individuals, a factor which it has been estimated exaggerated initial electorates by between ten and 20 per cent.⁹³ If the 1832 figures are accordingly scaled down by ten per cent, the overall increase in the county electorate becomes even less impressive, with a rise of just 43,382 (16 per cent) occurring after reform.

The overwhelming trend in the size of the county electorates, therefore, appears to have been one of substantial growth in the years leading up to 1832. The expansion that occurred after reform may have been far more uniform than that recorded in the boroughs, but in percentage terms it was far less significant than the 'natural' growth of the previous decade, despite the Reform Act's extension of the franchise to new categories of county voter. Indeed, without the Tory proposal to enfranchise £50 tenants-at-will, on which ministers had conceded defeat, it is clear that some counties would have experienced minimal or perhaps even negative growth. £50 tenants, on average, made up about 22 per cent of the county electorate after reform, but of course in some places this was considerably higher.⁹⁴ In South Shropshire, for example, they constituted 36 per cent of the electorate in 1833.⁹⁵ Clearly if this additional class of voter had not been introduced in 1832, this county might have shrunk electorally.

One obvious reason for the comparatively modest expansion of the county electorate in 1832, which has already been touched on, was the fact that many urban freeholders were able to qualify as £10 householders in the newly enfranchised boroughs. (If not they retained their county qualification.) Indeed, because of the way in which these two franchises were constructed, all £10 householders who qualified as owners (rather than occupiers) in the newly enfranchised boroughs ought to have been entitled to a county freehold vote before reform. Perhaps more importantly, however, the county constituencies did not undergo any territorial expansion in 1832. On the contrary, all were reduced in size by the removal of areas not only to the newly created boroughs, but also to the surviving borough constituencies. As we saw earlier, parishes and suburbs that had previously been part of a county seat were annexed to boroughs, in what amounted to a substantial transfer of land and, of course, all those electors who met the new borough franchise requirements. In total, almost 1,400 square miles were reassigned from the counties to the boroughs under the terms of the 1832 Boundary Act, reducing the total area covered by the English counties by almost three per cent.⁹⁶ This important shift in the geography of representation has received surprisingly little attention in the historiography of reform. But it clearly goes a long way towards explaining the developments outlined above.

⁹³ Ibid. 22.

⁹⁴ The proportion was 23 per cent in 1835 and 21 per cent in 1851 (*PP* 1837-8 (329) xliv. 553-79; 1852 (8) xlii. 309-313).

⁹⁵ Salop RO, electoral registers QE/6/2/2-3.

⁹⁶ Based on the data in *PP* 1830-1 (52), xl. 211; 1866 (259), xvii. 585-9.

The impact of the Reform Act on the number of Members returned by the English counties was in many ways far more striking than the scale of their electoral expansion. Whereas the county electorate grew by 29 per cent, the number of English county Members rose by 76 per cent, from a total of 82 in 1831 to 144 in 1832. This addition of 62 seats was only one less than the number allocated to the newly enfranchised English boroughs, where most discussions of redistribution have traditionally focused, and, combined with the seats given to the Welsh counties, represents one of the largest single transfers of representation in British electoral history. Of course unlike the boroughs, there were no unenfranchised counties that could simply be turned into new parliamentary constituencies. The difficulty therefore was how to assign extra Members to places that already had two knights of the shire. Yorkshire's acquisition of two additional representatives in 1821 had prompted lengthy discussions about whether the county should be divided for parliamentary purposes.⁹⁷ This, however, was eventually rejected, leaving Yorkshire as a four Member constituency in which each elector possessed four votes. In this respect the redistribution clauses of the reform bill were to mark a clear break with the past and establish an important precedent for future redistributive practices.

The original bill of 1 Mar. 1831 had proposed giving two additional Members to 27 counties with more than 150,000 inhabitants, in what was clearly a move designed to counterbalance the enfranchisement of the new towns and compensate the landed interest for their loss of nomination boroughs. Along with the bill's plan to turn the Isle of Wight into a single Member county, this would have increased the number of English county Members from 82 to 137. The subsequent addition of eight more towns to schedule D, which took the number of new single Member boroughs to 26, threatened to upset this balance, and in order to attract as much support as possible for the first bill, on 18 April Russell announced that as a result a third Member would be allocated to seven agricultural counties with populations of between 100-150,000. Although there was some argument about which counties fell into which category – not least because of discrepancies in the 1821 population figures similar to those encountered with the boroughs – the provision of additional Members for the English counties proved one of the least troublesome parts of the reform legislation. How exactly the county seats were to be redistributed, however, provoked considerable debate.

The bill's proposal to divide 26 counties into two divisions and Yorkshire into its three ridings, each of which would then return two Members, upset a broad cross-section of the House, but most notably the Tories and radicals. The former feared that breaking up counties into artificial electoral districts would destroy long-established traditions of representation and damage local political identities. 'Their common feeling would be ruined', Peel complained. It would also diminish the prestige of the county Member, hitherto a far more influential figure in the House than the

⁹⁷ See 1 & 2 Geo. IV, c. 47. Its additional Members were not elected until the 1826 general election.

borough lackey, and as result county interests would not receive the attention they deserved. Meanwhile the radicals and some independents, like the veteran Somerset Member William Dickinson, argued that dividing counties into ‘petty districts’ risked turned them into ‘rotten boroughs’.

On 11 Aug. 1831 the maverick reformer Hughes Hughes moved an amendment against the proposal, which he believed would ‘convert the county districts into divisions as completely within the influence of the rich landholder’ as the ‘nomination system in close boroughs’. In reply ministers stressed the constitutional advantages of double Member seats, with their capacity to encourage compromise arrangements and provide an important element of minority representation. Abandoning this historic unit of community representation, they warned, would lead to more contests and more expense, whilst at the same time encouraging the growth of ‘popular’ party politics along the lines recently experienced in the four Member county of Yorkshire. As Althorp suggested, much to the fury of *The Times*, dividing the counties would make it far less likely that ‘mere popularity should be the means of returning Members for counties, oftentimes strangers, to the exclusion of gentlemen of retiring habits, holding large property in the county’.⁹⁸

Hughes’s amendment was defeated by 241-122, but it is worth noting that 49 Members ‘usually friendly’ to the bill rebelled against the ministry on this issue, including Amcotts Ingilby, Thomas Davies, De Lacy Evans, Barrett Lennard, Lord Stanley (father of the cabinet minister Smith Stanley) and the Irish Members Blackney, Daniel O’Connell, Sheil and Wyse. On the other hand, at least 15 Tories hitherto opposed to reform lent the measure their support, among them Charles George Arbuthnot, John Henry Lowther and Mackworth Praed.⁹⁹ Peel’s attitude was equivocal.¹⁰⁰ As Littleton recorded:

Fought the battle of division of counties in the committee. This was a question of infinite delicacy and difficulty. Its tendency and object was aristocratic and was designed to please the Tories and the Lords. The opposition wished Sir Robert Peel to oppose it ... The Mountain (Hume, Warburton and others) were refractory and were disposed to oppose the government. I frightened this latter party into support, by telling them the county Members would not compromise their principles about the *due amount* for the franchise, if they in return did not give way on this point. So they voted with us. Peel spoke as firmly as his party would let him for a division, only objecting to the arbitrary power to be given to the commissioners ... After this he walked away without voting!! to his infinite discredit. To our great joy and surprise we got a capital division, though all the objecting county Members spoke against us.¹⁰¹

The only other part of the county redistribution scheme to be seriously challenged, although far less effectively, was the creation of three Member counties. The most vocal critics included the lukewarm reformer Thomas Wood and Mackworth Praed,

⁹⁸ *The Times*, 15 Aug. 1831; Parry, 80-1.

⁹⁹ *The Times*, 12 Aug. 1831.

¹⁰⁰ See Brock, 223.

¹⁰¹ Hatherton diary, 11 Aug. 1831.

who on 13 Aug. moved an amendment to restrict electors in the new three Member counties to two votes each and thereby assist minority representation. His erudite attack on the 'block-vote', hitherto the bulwark of the representative system, seems to have bemused most observers, however, and he did not press his amendment either on this occasion or on raising it again, 27 Jan. 1832. His proposal would later be implemented by the 1867 Reform Act.¹⁰²

The division of the counties inevitably resurfaced during the ministry's negotiations with the 'Waverers' in November 1831, by when it had become clear that its effects might not be as 'aristocratic' as had originally been supposed. But although Grey was prepared if necessary to give it up, 'thinking it a doubtful question', Wharncliffe, like him, remained 'upon the whole in favour of the division'.¹⁰³ Other than adding a third Member to Monmouthshire, which was later revoked in order to accommodate the Welsh borough of Merthyr Tydfil, the revised reform bill of 12 Dec. 1831 therefore made no alterations to the proposed redistribution scheme for English counties. When the division of counties came again before the Commons, 28 Jan. 1832, it was 'carried by large majority', much to the delight of Littleton, who recounted how on this occasion, 'Sir Robert Peel had spoken in our favour and was walking away to dinner, on which Edward Ellice, the secretary to the treasury, "whipped him in" as a treasury Member, saying "Pray stop and give us a vote", which he good naturedly did'.¹⁰⁴

Like Peel and many others, Wharncliffe's main concern about the division of the counties was not so much the principle, which was all that appeared in the reform bill itself, as the practical details of how these new divisions were to be drawn up, with all their potential scope for gerrymandering.¹⁰⁵ The first two reform bills had proposed delegating this important task to a dedicated commission, separate from that examining the borough boundaries, but by the time of the amended bills of September 1831 it was clear that the borough commissioners would be required to settle the new county divisions as well. This they duly did, under the supervision of the rising mandarin John George Shaw Lefevre, brother of the Whig Charles Shaw Lefevre, the future Speaker, and possibly with the assistance of the Tory Member Gilbert, whose appointment was originally proposed as a partisan counterweight to Littleton's.¹⁰⁶ Crucially, the same limits to parliamentary discussion that were experienced with the borough boundaries also affected the counties. Both were dealt with by the same separate boundary bill introduced on 16 Feb. 1832, with the detailed maps and reports of the commissioners appearing the following week, and both were mainly settled (and amended) by private negotiation and passed through the Commons with remarkably little trouble. The advantages of using a commission were clearly fundamental to this process, but Shaw Lefevre's report also

¹⁰² See J. Hart, *Proportional Representation: Critics of the British Electoral System, 1820-1945* (1992), 9-11, 75-77, 119-21.

¹⁰³ *William IV-Grey Corresp.* i. 468.

¹⁰⁴ Hatherton diary, 28 Jan. 1832.

¹⁰⁵ See *William IV-Grey Corresp.* i. 474.

¹⁰⁶ On 1 Sept. 1831 Littleton recorded that he and Gilbert were proposed as commissioners for dividing counties and their names were duly included in the amended bills of September 1831 (Hatherton diary, 1 Sept. 1831). Gilbert's name, however, does not appear in any of the commissioners' official papers.

suggests that genuine care was taken to ensure that the ‘common feeling’ of county communities would not ‘be ruined’, as Peel had feared:

I wished to divide each county into two parts, equal in extent, equal in population, and equal in the number of voters contained in them. I soon found that I could not do this without altogether breaking through the established division of counties into parishes and hundreds, and without separating districts and places which, from their community of interest and feeling, manifestly ought to be placed in the same division of their county. As far, however, as I have found it compatible with a due regard to these considerations, I have endeavoured to approach towards each of these equalities.¹⁰⁷

How exactly the division of the counties affected the established traditions and electoral dynamics of individual constituencies is something that will be examined more closely in future volumes. On balance, however, it is clear that the worst forebodings of the Tories or the radicals were not realised. Counties retained their distinctive political cultures for years to come and for every division which seems to have experienced an increase in landed influence there appears to have been another in which the leading interest became more urban or industrial owing to the greater prominence of a town, whether enfranchised or not. Smaller units of representation could obviously work both ways. And although county elections might have become more manageable, especially in terms of the trouble and expense associated with transporting or ‘conveying’ voters to the poll from distant parts of a county, this improvement was not as major as Russell and Althorp, among others, had hoped for. County contests remained extremely costly, not least because so many electors were actually non-residents who lived outside the constituency. Their exact proportion varied widely, but in most counties out-voters comprised somewhere between 12 and 25 per cent of the reformed electorate. The growing importance of this group of electors after 1832, and the increasing ease with which they were able to get to the poll as a result of railway development, helped to ensure that the divided counties never became the new ‘rotten boroughs’ that many had feared.¹⁰⁸

Summary

One of the more revealing themes to emerge from this survey has been the extent to which the English reform legislation was a highly negotiated settlement involving both Parliament and the localities. The differences between the first reform bill, drafted in secret by the ‘committee of four’, and the final Act were profound, especially in terms of the alterations made to the redistribution schedules and the continuation of old franchises and creation of new ones. While some of these modifications undoubtedly arose from closed ‘high political’ negotiations between leading politicians, as perhaps best exemplified by Grey’s private discussions with the ‘Waverers’ in November 1831, much that has traditionally been associated with this episode, along with a host of other significant alterations, was clearly developed ear-

¹⁰⁷ *PP* 1831-32 (357), xli. 339.

¹⁰⁸ See Salmon, *Electoral Reform*, 110-15, 136-40.

lier, as a result of public lobbying and amendments that cut across formal party lines and attracted crossbench support.

Bolstered by a system in which petitions took precedence over other business and frequently sparked lengthy discussions in the Commons (it was only from 1835 that debates on petitions were barred) and by a marked degree of independence among Members in both the pro- and anti-reform camps, the localities and their representatives were able to play a genuine role in helping to shape the terms of the English reform legislation.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, the contrast with the subsequent electoral reforms of 1867 and 1884, which were fashioned almost exclusively by party manoeuvres in Parliament and leadership deals in Downing Street, could not be greater. Here then was a measure that produced a lively but constructive dialogue between centre and locality, which might be better conceptualized not so much as a 'concession' or a 'cure', as a consultation.¹¹⁰

Perhaps the most striking feature to emerge from this analysis, however, has been the extent to which the impact of reform on the English constituencies varied enormously and was anything but the straightforward story of electoral expansion implied by the overall figures. In a third of the borough constituencies that survived reform the number of electors (and voters going to the polls) actually declined after 1832. This occurred despite the celebrated enfranchisement of the £10 householder and a tripling of the geographical area covered by these boroughs as a result of boundary changes. Indeed, without the very substantial constituency enlargements implemented by the Boundary Act, the number of boroughs with smaller electorates would clearly have been far higher after 1832.

Electoral expansion in the counties was more evenly distributed, with only ten per cent of the shires having fewer electors after reform. But in a telling comparison now made possible by these volumes, it is clear that the county expansions of 1832, impressively uniform though they were, were not as significant as those of the previous decade. And although less conspicuously, the boroughs also experienced substantial growth during the 1820-31 period, despite the tightly controlled nature of many unreformed franchises. The remarkable upshot of all this is that taken as a whole the English electorate grew from 314,970 in 1820 to 434,530 in 1831, a rise of 38 per cent. The following year the electorate increased to 614,654, a rise of 41 per cent. Such strikingly similar figures – just three percentile points apart – leave the Reform Act's impact on the number of electors looking far less impressive when viewed in this broader context. A steadier but more uniform expansion of the numbers enfranchised was under way long before 1832, and in this respect reform might be said to have only accelerated and intensified an established trend.

Viewing the Reform Act as primarily an enfranchising measure, as most twentieth-century historians have done, seems inappropriate in these circumstances.¹¹¹ But

¹⁰⁹ For a brief discussion of this alteration to petitioning see Salmon, 'The House of Commons, 1801-1911', 257-8.

¹¹⁰ Moore, 'Concession or cure', 39-59. It is interesting that for all the justified criticism levelled at Moore's central thesis, his terminology continues so neatly to epitomize the historiography of reform.

¹¹¹ A notable exception is Parry, who has emphasized the role of redistribution (72, 78, 84).

this of course raises the question of how exactly the Reform Act should be understood. Two other fundamental changes highlighted in this analysis appear especially relevant here. The first relates to the disfranchisement of all non-resident borough voters, which accounted for so much of the electoral shrinkage experienced in 1832. The second was the division of the counties. Both alterations went a long way towards reversing the trends of recent years, by restoring the role of resident borough electors after a period of intense out-voter activity and by re-establishing the ratio of Members to electors in the counties. (It is significant that in 1820 there were on average 2,395 electors per English county Member. By 1831, however, this number had climbed to 3,247. The Reform Act, with its addition of 62 extra county seats, returned the ratio to 2,389 per Member, a figure almost identical to that of 1820.) These restorative components of reform appear to have been just as significant as the redistribution of seats to non-parliamentary boroughs in re-establishing the connection between representatives on the one hand and constituencies on the other. Coupled with the spur to local party organization arising from the new ratepaying and registration clauses, a new constitutional arrangement was forged between the centre and the localities after 1832.¹¹² It would be on the basis of this revitalized relationship that England's modern representative system would start to be established.

¹¹² These themes are explored more fully in Salmon, 'Electoral reform and the political modernization of England', 49-67. See also M. Cragoe, 'The Great Reform Act and the modernization of British politics: the impact of Conservative Associations, 1835-1841', *JBS*, xlvii (2008), 581-603.