



Articles – Lesson 5: Later Reforms (1880s)

(Terms in ***bold italics*** are explained further in the Glossary, terms underlined have their own articles)

1880-1885 Parliament

Liberal government, Prime Minister ***William Gladstone***



William Gladstone

William Gladstone and the ***Liberal*** party won the 1880 election after 6 years of ***Conservative*** government. This Parliament passed three major pieces of reform legislation. Although ***MPs*** were still not prepared to give a vote to every man – and certainly not to women – these measures taken together gave more men the vote and helped change Britain's politics.

The ***1883 Corrupt Practices Act*** was guided through Parliament by the ***Attorney General***, Henry James. It placed limits on the amount of money each candidate could spend on elections and defined what was corrupt.

The ***1884 (Third) Reform Act*** (also drafted by James) and the ***1885 Redistribution of Seats Act*** between them increased the number of voters from 3.15 million to 5.7 million. The rules over who could vote were made the same in the towns and the countryside (although who could vote still depended on whether you owned property or how much rent you paid). The redistribution act once again changed which communities had ***MPs***, and for the first time ***constituencies*** were based on a roughly equal number of voters. Most now only had one MP, rather than two.

After these changes parties had to become much more organised, and their central organisations grew. The politicians also had to appeal to a 'mass' audience, rather than a small number of people with special interests. The growing number of newspapers were important to this.

Although the number of voters grew again, you still had to be the 'head of your household', and fairly well-paid, to vote. Of course, it didn't matter how rich you were, if you were a woman, you still could not vote in parliamentary elections.

? *Did you know?*

The ***Corrupt Practices Act*** had a large impact on election spending. In 1885 ***candidates*** spent just over £1 million campaigning, in 1880 some have estimated over £3 million was spent!

Henry James (MP Biography)

1828-1911, Hereford

James was born in Hereford in 1828, a younger son of a surgeon. After school, he convinced his father to let him train as a lawyer. He was very successful at this – and made a large amount of money from it! A charming, attractive man, he had a wide circle of rich and important friends from the political, sporting and artistic worlds.

In 1868 he became a **Liberal MP** for Taunton. Although he originally lost the election, his rival **candidate** was accused of **bribery**, and James was declared the winner. There was a long tradition of bribery in British elections, from the early 18th century onwards. Voters at election times expected to be ‘treated’ to drinks or food by the candidates in order to gain their vote. Large amounts of money could be spent entertaining candidates, and in other cases rich men could simply buy the votes of others. Although much of this changed by the introduction of the **secret ballot** (first held in Pontefract), there was no limit on how much candidates, or party officials, could spend at election time.



Henry James
Caricature in 'Vanity Fair',
1874

James briefly entered the **cabinet** in 1874 as **Attorney General**, the main legal advisor to the government. However, the **Liberals** lost the election so James had to wait until 1880 before he could take on the role.

This position meant that James played a key role in reform. He drafted the **1884 Reform Bill** and helped take the **1883 Corrupt Practices Act** through Parliament. The Corrupt Practices Act put a limit on how much money could be spent at election time and these expenses had to be published. The act also laid down clear rules about what was not acceptable during election campaigns. Now it was much harder for rich men to buy votes, although it did not completely get rid of **corruption**. James was criticised for his ‘over-elaborate’ speaking in Parliament, but his legal skills were very important in these reforms.

After the 1885 government James left the **Liberal** party due to a split over the future of Ireland. In 1895 he was made a lord – Baron James of Hereford – and left the House of Commons. He died in 1911, and is remembered for his loyal support of several party leaders.

? *Did you know?*

James was a keen sportsman. He was President of the Marylebone Cricket Club in 1889.

Additional Materials

Old Sarum (Constituency)

Borough in Wiltshire, Parliamentary constituency since 1295, 2 MPs

Old Sarum was one of the most infamous **rotten boroughs** before 1832. A rotten borough was a place that had the right to send **MPs** to Parliament because it had been an important town in the past, but very few people still lived there. Often the land (and the rights to vote that went with this land) was bought by rich landowners who then chose their own MP.

Today, Parliament tries to keep the number of voters in each **constituency** roughly equal, and every so often revises the boundaries of constituencies to reflect changes in population. Yet in the early nineteenth century, this did not happen. With the growth of new towns thanks to the **Industrial Revolution**, the places that had **MPs** and the places where people lived were now very different. The new towns of Manchester and Birmingham did not elect their own MPs, but there were many **rotten boroughs** that did. There was lots of opportunity for rich landowners to have more influence over who was in Parliament.



Old Sarum by John Constable
© Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

Old Sarum is on a hill close to Salisbury, Wiltshire. It was the site of a Norman Castle and Salisbury Cathedral was supposed to have been built there. It was because of the Cathedral that the settlement was given the right to send two **MPs** to Parliament. However, in 1219 the Cathedral was moved to 'New Sarum' – Salisbury – closer to the River Avon. From then on Old Sarum went in to decline.

By the nineteenth century all that was left was ruins and trees. Although there were two **MPs**, no-one actually lived there! The people who owned the land also owned the right to vote for the MPs. In 1820 the land was bought by brothers Josiah du Pré and James Alexander, who made their money in India. They both immediately elected themselves to Parliament! Both consistently voted against reform.

Old Sarum was often mentioned in debates over the Reform Act as 'mounds', 'ditches' or 'ruins'. In 1831, the two brothers held their 'election' at 9am to avoid any trouble from protesters.

The constituency was abolished by the **1832 'Great' Reform Act**, and the Alexander brothers never sat in Parliament again.

? Did you know?

After the Old Sarum constituency was abolished, many reformers celebrated with funerals. The *Times* published a 'Lament to Old Sarum'.

* Pontefract (Constituency)

Borough in Yorkshire, since 1621, 2 MPs

The town of Pontefract sent **MPs** to Parliament in 1621. In 1832 the boundaries of the **constituency** were extended to include smaller local towns. Throughout the mid-nineteenth century the MPs were from both the **Liberals** and **Conservatives**.

Pontefract became the first place in Britain that a parliamentary election took place by **secret ballot** in 1872. Before then voters turned up at a booth and were asked – in public – who they were voting for. The



A 'poll book' from 1708

answer was written down and the lists – ‘poll books’ – could be bought from local

newspapers. They are now great sources for historians! For many Victorians, even reformers like Lord Russell, the idea of voting in private was cowardly or ‘un-English’. They believed that people should admit who they voted for.

But this system also meant there was plenty of opportunity for intimidation or bribery. From the eighteenth century onwards sometimes mobs were brought to polls to intimidate the voters. Elections could be like a party – many **candidates** ‘treated’ their voters to large amounts of alcohol!

After the **1867 Reform Act** more working class people could vote. This meant that more people were concerned about voting in public. John Bright argued that those who were poorer could face greater intimidation – or be easier to **bribe** – by those with more money or power.

The Pontefract 1872 election was watched with ‘considerable curiosity’ by party officials from all over the country. The town only had a few weeks to prepare, so there were some teething problems. Voters now placed a cross on a ballot paper next to the names of the chosen candidates – very similar to how we do now. They did so in private booths, although in some of the booths the partitions were loose so people could see inside! There were other things to get used to. If a voter could not read or write the whole room had to be cleared before they could tell the official their choice. Despite these issues, the election went smoothly. It only took four hours to count the votes, and many people commented the town was much more quiet than a normal election.

Despite the positive reports, party officials felt that **bribery** could still be possible. This was not dealt with until the 1880-1885 Parliament.

? *Did you know?*

One of the first ballot boxes is still in Pontefract museum. It was sealed with the stamp used to make liquorice Pontefract cakes!