

Martin Spychal describes how the 1832 Boundary Act and the work of the 1831–32 Boundary Commission implemented the electoral reforms of 1832.

Boundaries, Science and the Redrawing of England's Electoral Map in 1832

THE YEAR 1832 was a foundational moment for British Liberal politics. After five decades of nearly unbroken Tory rule, the reform crisis of 1830–32 preceded a four-decade period of Whig-Liberal dominance in government. The reform legislation of 1832, a collection of five Acts of Parliament introduced by the Whig ministry of the 2nd Earl Grey, established an electoral system that saw the 'Liberals' eventually emerge as a coherent party.¹ And the actions of successive Whig and Liberal governments over the subsequent decades cemented social and economic liberalism as the dominant governing idea of the British state (with a little help, it should be noted, from the repeal of the corn laws by a Conservative government in 1846).

The reform of England's electoral system in 1832 was achieved via two of those five pieces of legislation – the 1832 Reform Act and the 1832 Boundary Act. Despite completely overhauling England's constituency system, the latter has generally been ignored by historians.² This is somewhat surprising, as the 1832 Boundary Act changed the boundaries of over 80 per cent of reformed English constituencies, created fifty-six newly divided counties and more than doubled the combined area of England's borough system from 1,300 to 2,800 square miles. It split counties

like Northamptonshire into two separate double-member constituencies. It turned some tiny boroughs into huge rural constituencies, geographically defined new boroughs such as Manchester and updated the boundaries of others that had been in place since their medieval or early modern charters.

The boundary commission that completed this process – which has also been overlooked by historians – is equally noteworthy.³ Between August 1831 and September 1832, a staff of over 100 commissioners, clerks, lithographers and cartographers worked at Whitehall and in the constituencies to complete the first ever official state survey of England's electoral system. They utilised the 'scientific' techniques of statistics and cartography to collect reams of previously unknown electoral data from the localities and draw England's electoral map – including official plans for at least sixty of England's northern towns and cities – for the first time.

This striking exercise in early Hanoverian legislative inquiry represented an early experiment in, what we would today consider, the disciplines of psephology and electoral sociology. The commission's remarkable multi-volume report also represented a startling feat of political publishing, including the production of over 900,000 constituency maps which

English Miles



Counties (including one division of a county - the I. of Wight)
returning 1 member each coloured

Counties returning 2 members each	"	
" " 3 " "	"	

Counties subdivided into 2 constituencies and returning 4 members each

County of Yorkshire subdivided into 3 constituencies and returning 6 members

Boroughs returning 1 member each show this Morpet
 " " 2 members do " " Durham

The city of London returned 4 members and the Universities of Oxford & Cambridge 2 members each.

In Wales the boroughs marked, with the exception of Brecon and Merthyr Tydfil, returned their 1 member

in conjunction with other smaller boroughs of the same county.

*The boroughs of New Shoreham, East Retford, Crick-
lade, and Aylesbury included the surrounding district.*

which are shown thus:

are still readily available from map sellers and popular auction websites today. Of more material consequence to the evolution of the British state, the work of the commission predated, and set significant precedents for, the more famous investigatory royal commissions that defined nineteenth-century British bureaucracy – such as those concerned with the poor laws, factories, local government and public health.

Taken together, the 1832 Boundary Act and the work of the 1831–32 boundary commission transformed the electoral reforms of 1832 into an accomplished set of technical measures grounded in innovative bureaucratic techniques. The boundary reforms of 1832 are also crucial in terms of explaining the subsequent evolution of British Liberal politics. Following 1832, England's reformed electoral map reaffirmed the centrality of community and pre-democratic concepts of representation to electoral politics, shaped the political identities and electoral strongholds of the emerging Conservative and Liberal parties, and established major precedents for electoral reform that are still in use today.

Envisaging a reformed electoral map

England's electoral map was redrawn in 1832 in order to rebalance the representation of the nation's interests in the Commons. Unlike today, where constituencies are of broadly equal population, the electoral system, both before and after 1832, was hugely varied. Voting rights and electorate sizes differed from constituency to constituency, electors could vote in multiple constituencies, some constituencies returned one MP, some returned four MPs, some covered vast geographic spaces, others only very small areas, and some, such

as the university seats didn't even have a geographic definition.

The vast majority of parliamentarians rationalised this uneven and, perhaps, to modern eyes, irrational electoral system on the basis that constituencies represented 'interests' rather than individuals. These interests were often related to economic sectors – such as the landed, agricultural, commercial, shipping, manufacturing, monied, West India or East India interest. Constituencies were also thought to represent constitutional

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and class interests – such as those connected to the crown, the aristocracy and the democracy. This was all in addition to the specific geographic interests of the towns and counties that bore a constituency's name. MPs were thought to represent interests via their connections to their constituency, but also via 'virtual representation' through their varied property holdings, and economic and occupational backgrounds.

Until around 1820, most moderate and even some quite radical Whig and Tory parliamentarians thought parliament did a pretty good job at representing the nation's interests. However, by 1830 this consensus had been destroyed – leaving a majority of support (even in the unreformed Commons) for the idea that the electoral system was not fit for purpose. This shift in opinion was caused in part by the UK's increasingly complex and fractured, post-Napoleonic economy and the issue of free trade and tariffs. It was also caused by a decade of debate over what to do with the boundaries of parliamentary boroughs found to be corrupt at the 1818, 1820 and 1826 general elections. By the end of

the decade, key moderate Whigs and Tories had warmed to the idea that the manufacturing interests of unrepresented towns like Manchester, Birmingham and Leeds might gradually be given the seats of corrupt constituencies like East Retford, Barnstaple and Penryn. The unwillingness of key Tories to agree to these ideas, particularly the Duke of Wellington, who was prime minister between 1828 and 1830, forced a new coalition of liberal Tories and Whigs into being.

This prototypical 'liberal' coalition formed a government under the premiership of the 2nd Earl Grey in November 1830, after a public declaration against electoral reform by the Duke of Wellington made his ministry untenable. The new government agreed to the general principle that England's rotten, or corrupt, boroughs needed to be disfranchised, and that the 100 or so seats that were freed up should be distributed primarily between the agricultural and landed interests on the one hand (via new county seats), and the commercial and manufacturing interests on the other (via new borough seats). Ensuring the even representation of these interests served as a key political strategy for the government between 1830 and 1832, as they sought to 'conciliate' competing political factions associated with urban and landed electoral interests by maintaining a 'balance of town and country' in their reform legislation.⁴

At a very broad conceptual level, then, the reforming Grey ministry of 1830 knew how it wanted to redesign the United Kingdom's (in particular England's) electoral map. At the level of fine detail, however, ministers were woefully unprepared. As they drafted and debated their plans for reform in private and public during the first half of 1831, it quickly became evident that electoral reform required that a major investigation into England's constituency system be implemented.

Significantly, the government's proposals for disfranchising rotten boroughs, creating

new constituencies and establishing new voting rights required existing and future constituency boundaries to be legally defined by parliament. However, there was no central repository of boundary or constituency data at Westminster to do this with (it was all held locally in parish and council halls). The cabinet briefly tried to adapt census and tax return data to model its reformed constituency system, but quickly found this data unfit for purpose. Most constituencies, they discovered, had vastly outgrown their old boundaries. Further basic investigation also revealed many local officials didn't know, or couldn't agree internally on their existing boundaries. These revelations all took place in full public view during the spring and summer of 1831, as parliamentarians were looking for every opportunity to scrutinise and embarrass the government over their plans for reform.

To make things worse, the Grey ministry didn't know what constitutional mechanism to use to establish a nationwide boundary inquiry. The cabinet feared that convening a formal royal commission would require them to halt all debate on the reform bill, and that squabbles between the localities and Westminster over boundaries, and delaying tactics by anti-reformers, would stop any reform measure ever passing. The government received a lot of public criticism for initially suggesting that their inquiry might be completed and enacted using privy council powers. They then toyed with the vague notion of a cross-party 'parliamentary committee', before settling on a strange loophole of using the home secretary's powers to request returns from local officials to institute a quasi-official boundary commission, which remarkably completed all of its operations without any form of parliamentary approval. Legally and bureaucratically, the boundary issue revealed the Grey ministry's initial attempts at instituting parliamentary reform to be, well, a bit of a shambles.

A 'scientific' boundary commission?

This bureaucratic chaos was seized on by the divisive Whig lord chancellor and polymath, Henry Brougham. Brougham had long been an advocate of commissions of inquiry as a means of influencing a more active domestic policy agenda. He was also a key advocate of science, particularly the introduction of scientific methods into the policy-making process. Science in this sense meant statistics, surveying and inquiry (rather than natural sciences) – and was a forerunner to what we might consider today as the social sciences. For many Whigs, such methods led (to modern eyes at least) to a somewhat naïve hope of a future cross-party 'science of government' based on 'the accumulation of simple, irrefutable facts'.⁵ Brougham established and ran a number of institutions and societies that promoted a broader Whiggish scientific ideology, all of them centred around 'Godless' Bloomsbury – as it became known.⁶ These included the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge – set up to teach science to the masses – and the London University (now UCL).

One key figure from Brougham's scientific coterie was the royal engineer, chemist and mathematician, Thomas Drummond. Drummond had spent most of the past decade on the ordnance survey in Ireland. He had been in London since 1829, putting his training as a chemist to use in the development of lighthouse lights for Trinity House (where he pioneered the technology of limelight) and lecturing at the Royal Society. During 1831, he was introduced to Brougham, who put him to work on the SDUK map committee, which hoped to publish a cheap world atlas for the masses. With the issue of the government's boundary scheme pressing on his mind, in July 1831 Brougham asked Drummond to devise a scheme for redrawing the United Kingdom's electoral map – which he then secured cabinet approval for.

Drummond's ambitious plan for a boundary commission was infused with science at every step. First, Brougham and Drummond recruited commissioners, almost exclusively, from the ranks of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge or the ordnance survey. This left them with commissioners of either gentlemanly scientific 'expertise', or technical training in surveying and cartography. Using these men, Drummond proposed an extensive cartographic, statistical and socio-economic investigation of every parliamentary borough, which he contended would provide a neutral, disinterested analysis of each constituency's geography and demography. The commissioners were instructed to apply the results of this investigation to a strict set of criteria for identifying an electoral community. This, Drummond and Brougham contended, was an innovative, inductive method for defining parliamentary boundaries, which would allow for every borough constituency to be defined consistently and impartially across the four nations.

At its core, the boundary commission was a massive data gathering exercise. Before they could propose new parliamentary boundaries, Drummond required his commissioners to gather ancient charters, locally held maps, new population and house valuations, and to complete an investigation into the social and economic interests of each constituency. In England, he established seven regional teams of commissioners and surveyors who had to travel the country – attending around twenty or so constituencies during a three-month period. In London, a team led by Drummond, including numerous clerks, cartographers and lithographers, drew maps, collated and printed data and oversaw operations to ensure boundaries were drawn consistently across the country.

To the cabinet, and Drummond's surprise, the commission found it relatively easy to gather all this data at speed. As a result, the

cabinet assigned the commission with three further tasks. First, they were asked to start investigating regional variations in the £10 householder qualification to tidy up clauses in the reform bill. This investigation confirmed many of the issues with the £10 borough franchise that reformers such as Joseph Parkes had been urging the government to address for several months.⁷ However, key figures in the Grey cabinet refused to act on the commission's reports, instead using the commission's data to celebrate the restrictive nature of their proposed £10 franchise.⁸

Second, the commission was asked to completely remodel the famous, and highly controversial 'disfranchisement' schedules using new data to scale England's 120 most rotten boroughs. This substantial new inquiry – which led to the publication of the controversial 'Drummond's List' – placed the boundary commission and its scientific approach at the centre of national discussion about parliamentary reform in early 1832. And third, the government established a subsidiary boundary commission that divided the counties. This commission, which was overseen by the rising civil servant John George Shaw Lefevre, embraced Drummond's scientific methods and professed to have effected boundary change in the counties via several disinterested principles.

The commission's work was completed in the space of five months, between September 1831 and January 1832, with the first of their reports and boundary recommendations printed for parliamentarians by February 1832. Unsurprisingly the commission had its critics. Chief among them were most Tories and anti-reformers in the Commons, who tried, and failed, to halt the commission on constitutional grounds.

Tory critics also took great umbrage that Whiggish and Liberal notions of 'science' were establishing roots in the heart of Whitehall. In September 1831, the *Tory Morning Post* asked:

What in the world has science to do here?

Is the division [of counties] to be geological according to minerals and strata? Or is it to be astronomical, by latitudes and transits?⁹

Nevertheless, the speed at which the commission completed its work, as well as its ability to fly under the radar as the Lords and Commons embarked on a massive constitutional struggle over the reform bill and some towns started rioting in the winter of 1831, meant the commission's report and proposals, once completed, took most opponents by surprise.

Local parish and town officials, too, were remarkably cooperative with the boundary commission. Although no public boundary hearings were held, Drummond's rigorous oversight and commitment to his 'scientific framework' required all local officials to be interviewed by the commissioners. This ensured that local factions, on the whole, were all given a chance to present data to the commission, and complaints and disputes proved few and far between. More importantly, the expertise of parish officers, tax collectors and municipal officials, and the quality of data they were able to provide to the commissioners, defied expectations at Westminster. As well as revealing reform in 1832 to be a genuine 'consultation' between the localities and the centre, the commission's work confirmed the existence of a remarkably proficient late-Hanoverian state.¹⁰

Importantly, the speed with which the commission gathered and proposed boundaries allowed for the government to subject Drummond's boundary recommendations to full parliamentary scrutiny between February and July 1832. This gave local factions unhappy with their proposed boundaries the chance to petition parliament or raise issues through their MP. That said, complaints proved minimal. Drummond's rigid application of his scientific framework led to a remarkably consistent set of boundary

proposals, that appeared to favour as many Whig factions as they did Tories. And when disputes did arise, further investigations took place. Aside from a handful of cases where ministers had over-ridden Drummond and tried to gerrymander individual boundaries, the government proved conciliatory in negotiations with MPs from across the spectrum, ensuring the passage of the 1832 Boundary Act with remarkably little parliamentary conflict.

A Liberal success?

As an episode in legislative practice, the experience of the 1831–32 boundary commission was revelatory for the Whig government – and had far reaching consequences for the British state. It initiated a major rhetorical and practical shift in the ambition of Whig and Liberal legislators and their expanding arsenal of administrators in the decades that followed. The cabinet had moved from the chaos of early 1831, where they were woefully unprepared for the fine details of parliamentary

legislative investigation – much to the disgust of those who railed against a new era of ‘government by commissions’.¹²

What of the political and electoral impact of the commission's reformed electoral map? For those wanting very fine detail, my book, *Mapping the State: English Boundaries and the 1832 Reform Act*, explores how the commission created several different types of borough and county constituency, which all had varied political outcomes. The big takeaway, though, is that reform did not ‘balance’ the nation's interests in a reformed Commons as the Whigs had hoped it would do. Rather, the 1832 reform legislation (particularly the 1832 Boundary Act), accentuated the urban–rural divide in the electoral system and entrenched political division over the corn laws and religion in the decades that followed.

England's reformed constituency structure (particularly the division of counties and the creation of a set of fifty or so ‘rural boroughs’) provided a significant foothold for the forces of protectionism prior to 1846 (that is

those who supported the corn laws), and for the emerging Conservative Party under the subsequent direction of Derby and Disraeli. One might

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reform, to having so much data by early 1832 that they were able to bemuse and confuse, and sometimes actually convince, MPs and the public about their proposals for reform with a plethora of data, maps and reports. The Whigs in cabinet were also convinced by the rhetorical and practical opportunities provided by a ‘scientific’ approach to legislation. Within three decades, ‘system, method [and] science’, via investigatory commissions, had been applied to nearly every facet of the domestic and colonial state.¹¹ Over 220 commissions of inquiry alone were established between 1833 and 1868, leaving few areas of domestic or colonial policy untouched by

go so far as to say, the 1832 Boundary Act was crucial to the formation and future survival of the Conservative Party. By the late 1850s, Disraeli was even seeking to gerrymander the electoral system by emulating the principles of the 1832 Boundary Act in his own reform proposals.

The boundary settlement elsewhere, which defined the vast majority of England's reformed boroughs around their associated town populations and reasserted the centrality of community to borough politics, proved remarkably beneficial to an emerging Liberal Party that coalesced around free trade, Dissent and industry – particularly in the new

boroughs and as the £10 householder started to completely dominate ancient franchise holders in the old boroughs by the 1860s. By the 1850s, however, it was the Whigs who had been in the Grey cabinet that looked at 1832 with regret, particularly Lord John Russell, whose own reform proposals sought to cement future Liberal electoral hegemony, by rejecting any emulation of the principles of 1832 Boundary Act.

Perhaps more significantly, the 1832 Boundary Act established long-running precedents for electoral reform. The 1867, 1884 and 1918 Reform Acts were all accompanied by boundary commissions whose recommendations were enacted by separate acts of parliament. While this precedent was broken in 1944, when a permanent independent boundary commission was established, parliamentary boundaries have continued to provide the primary means by which the electoral system has been, and continues to be, reformed. The efficiency of the 1831–32 commission's work, and the speed of its enactment, is best demonstrated by contrasting it with the most recently completed review of English boundaries, which commenced in 2011 and following three separate reviews was not approved by parliament until 2023. The failure of the 2013 and 2018 reviews revealed the continued relevance of Drummond's insistence that the boundary-setting process be based on the most up-to-date electoral data, and anchored by a set of uniform rules for the consistent definition of electoral communities. That twenty-first-century Westminster continues to reform itself in the shadow of, and according to the methods established by Drummond, his commissioners and the Grey ministry in 1832, is one of the most enduring legacies of the 1831–32 boundary commission. ■

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Boundaries and the 1832 Reform Act (University of London Press, 2024).

- 1 The five statutes that reformed the United Kingdom's electoral system in 1832 were: the 1832 Reform Act (England and Wales) (2 & 3 Wm. IV, c. 45); 1832 Reform Act (Scotland) (2 & 3 Wm. IV, c. 65); 1832 Reform Act (Ireland) (2 & 3 Wm. IV, c. 88); 1832 Boundary Act (England and Wales) (2 & 3 Wm. IV, c. 64); 1832 Boundary Act (Ireland) (2 & 3 Wm. IV, c. 89).
- 2 The exceptions are: N. Gash, *Politics in the Age of Peel: A Study in the Technique of Parliamentary Representation* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1971), pp. 432–3; P. Salmon, 'The English Reform Legislation, 1831–32', in D. Fisher (ed.), *House of Commons 1820–32*, vol. i (Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 395–401. For a controversial misinterpretation of the commission see: D. C. Moore, *The Politics of Deference: A Study of the Mid-Nineteenth Century Political System* (Barnes & Noble, 1976), pp. 173–83; D. C. Moore, 'Concession or Cure: The Sociological Premises of the First Reform Act', *Historical Journal*, ix/1 (1966), pp. 39–59.
- 3 The exceptions are, B. Hilton, *A Mad, Bad, & Dangerous People?: England 1783–1846* (Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 589; Salmon, 'English Reform Legislation'.
- 4 Lord John Russell to Earl Grey, 20 July 1831 (Durham University Special Collections, Grey Papers, B50A/6/19, fo. 1–2); M. Spychal, *Mapping the State: English Boundaries and the 1832 Reform Act* (London University Press, 2024), pp. 21–82, 173–294, 307–8.
- 5 T. Porter, *The Rise of Statistical Thinking, 1820–1900* (Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 36.
- 6 R. Ashton, *Victorian Bloomsbury* (Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 1–81.
- 7 N. Lopatin-Lummis, 'The 1832 Reform Act Debate: Should the Suffrage be Based on Property or Taxpaying?', *Journal of British Studies*, xlv (2007), pp. 320–45.
- 8 Hansard, Parl. Debs. (series 3), vol. 12, cols. 17–22 (9 Apr. 1832); Spychal, *Mapping the State*, pp. 125–8.
- 9 *Morning Post*, 5 Sep. 1831.
- 10 Salmon, 'English Reform Legislation', p. 411; J. Innes, 'Forms of "Government Growth", 1780–1830', in D. Feldman and J. Lawrence (eds.), *Structures and Transformations in Modern British History* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 90–2.
- 11 Hilton, *Mad, Bad & Dangerous People?*, p. 589; P. Mandler, *Aristocratic Government in the Age of Reform: Whigs and Liberals, 1830–1852* (Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 123–282.
- 12 J. Toulmin Smith, *Government by Commissions: Illegal and Pernicious* (Sweet & Maxwell, 1849).