

Census - introduction

Census records are an invaluable resource for anyone tracing their family tree as they provide us with a snapshot of history at a particular point in time.

If you have so far traced your ancestors using birth, marriage and death records and you have drawn up a family chart of key dates and individuals, your next step should be searching the census returns, as this is the information that will help bring your ancestors to life.

Census returns can not only help us determine who our ancestors were, but they can also tell us.

Where our ancestors were living
Who they were living with
What their occupations were
If they had any servants
Who their neighbours were
If they had any brothers and sisters
What their ages were at the time of the census
If they had any disabilities.

A census return can also provide us with small details such as streets that existed that perhaps no longer exist, to large chunks of information such as the number of men, women and children in England and Wales at that particular point in time.

As well as giving us the above useful information, the fact that census returns are taken every ten years also allows us to track the movements of our ancestors as they perhaps move house, get married, have children or even change occupations.

Census - the origins

The 1800 Population Act initiated the holding of decennial (ten year) censuses which increased in sophistication and amount of information obtained as they developed throughout the 19th century.

However, censuses were being taken long before this, and Enumerations were even more common. Governments have long been interested in surveying their resources in land goods or people.

One of the earliest censuses must be that of the Children of Israel in 1200BC. There is also evidence of the Romans conducting censuses every 5 /14 years; sadly, however, these rarely contained lists of names.

The Domesday Book and beyond

The earliest of the surviving British population listings must be the Domesday Book, compiled between 1086 and about 1088. The exact purpose of the survey is unclear, but it was probably intended to be the basis for taxation.

The Book compares landholding and possessions under Edward the Confessor (died 1065), with the situation in 1086 under William the Conqueror.

Parts of the country were not surveyed, especially in the far north, where William the Conqueror's authority was weak, and the returns for some large towns, including London and Winchester, were not written up into the final version.

Following the Domesday Book, many lists were made throughout the British Isles. Both the Church and the State – which at certain times were inseparable – conducted surveys of the people, mainly for raising revenue particularly in time of war or unrest.

These were mostly organised locally, covering a specific area and, where surviving, will mostly be found amongst the Quarter Sessions records in local archives and record offices.

Population problem

However, by the 1790s things began to change. Britain was still in the throes of the Industrial Revolution, which had begun in the 1740s - the numerous inventions and techniques permanently transforming the

British Isles. Britain had been at war with France for most of the 1790s, creating a real need to know exactly how many eligible fighting men there were.

It was also a time of bad harvests and food shortages. In 1798 things came to a head when Thomas Malthus published his essay on the "Principle of Population". It caused great concern by suggesting that population growth would soon outstrip supplies of food and other resources, 'causing Britain to be hit by disease, famine and other disasters'.

Frightened by this alarmist view of the future, Parliament passed the Census Act in 1800 and the first full official census in England and Wales was taken on 10 March 1801.

Information was collected from every household by the Overseers of the Poor; they were aided by constables, tithingmen, headboroughs and other officers of the peace. This first official head count revealed Britain's population to be nine million.

An army of clerks using only pens and paper processed information about every person in the land. Technology did not reach the census until 1911 when punch cards and mechanical sorting were introduced. Computers were first used in 1961 and now play an essential role.

The census as we know it

The 1841 census is regarded as the first modern census, when the first Registrar General of England and Wales was made responsible for organising the count.

The task of counting was passed to local officers of the newly created registration service. This is the earliest census that has survived in its entirety: few of the 1801, 1811, 1821 and 1831 censuses have survived the ravages of time.

1841 was the first time that the head of each household was given a form to fill in on behalf of everyone in the dwelling on a set day. This system still forms the basis of the method used today.

Since 1801 there has been a census every 10 years except for 1941, during the Second World War. Although the basic principle remains unchanged, new questions have been added whilst some have been removed. Until 1911 the Government needed to introduce a new Census Act for every census held.

Since the passage of the 1920 Census Act the law has supported census taking in Great Britain, making it possible for the Government to hold a census at any time.

Every household must now return a completed form by law. Failure to make a completed return or giving false information is now an offence, and attracted a fine of up to £1,000 by the time of the 2001 census.

The law protects the confidentiality of the census. The 1920 Census Act prohibited the unlawful disclosure of any information given in the census, determining that the information collected would only be used to produce statistics, and no information would be released which allowed the identification of any individual or household.

The census information is not available to be viewed by the public for 100 years, however, the 1911 census has been released online three years early, except for some sensitive information that has been redacted until 2012.

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Past census returns - years and dates

A census of the population of England and Wales, the Isle of Man and the Channel Isles has been taken every ten years since 1801, except in 1941 during the Second World War.

As census returns are subject to public closure for 100 years because of the potentially sensitive personal information they contain, the English and Welsh census returns that are currently available to the public are

as follows:

1841 - taken on 6 June
1851 - taken on 30 March
1861 - taken on 7 April
1871 - taken on 2 April
1881 - taken on 3 April
1891 - taken on 5 April
1901 - taken on 31 March
1911 - taken on 2 April

Whilst the census returns for 1801, 1811, 1821 and 1831 were not preserved in their complete form, there are some areas where returns for these years have been found and some survive in local authority libraries and archives.

1801 - taken on 10 March
1811 - taken on 27 May
1821 - taken on 28 May
1831 - taken on 30 May