Census - what the records contain

The census returns from 1801 to 1831 were taken by the government for purely statistical/headcount purposes and the details collected about individuals were mostly destroyed after they had been used.

However, this changed with the census in 1841, where set information was recorded about every person staying at an address on the night of the census.

From 1851 to 1901 details about every individual at an address were still recorded; however, further information was also collected by the enumerator, such as condition of marriage and disability. The format of the census remained largely the same throughout this time.

Data included in the 1841 census:

Address
Names - only the surname and first name
Age - rounded to nearest five years
Occupation
Born (county) - question only answered by a yes or a no if the person was born in the county where he/she was, on the night of the census
Born (country) - question only answered by a yes or a no if the person was born in the country where he/she was, on the night of the census

1851, 1861, 1871, 1881, 1891 and 1901 census – data included:

Address
Names - the surname and first name, and sometimes the middle name or initial
Age
Occupation
Born (county) - name of county given
Born (country) - name of country given
Relationship to head of household
Condition of marriage
Disability - "blind, deaf-and-dumb, imbecile or lunatic"
Additionally, where the 1891 and 1901 census was taken in Wales, the census included a question on the language spoken.

Census - Don't believe everything you read

As with any family history records, original census returns are not free from mistakes; you should therefore keep an open mind when using the data and not believe everything you read.

Some common errors that can be found in census returns are as follows:

Errors in recording census data

As illiteracy was quite high in the 19th century, many people may have asked their friends, neighbours or even the enumerators to help fill out the forms.

In institutions or on vessels it was the person in charge of the prison or ship who completed the details on behalf of everyone in the institution or on the ship. This led to many errors in note taking and in recording the final information.

Typical mistakes were made when spelling peoples' names, or noting their occupations, or even when recording their ages.

Census age discrepancies

Whilst enumerators and the officials at institutions made mistakes when recording information, individuals who completed the forms themselves also made some errors.

This is certainly true of some people who were quite inventive about their age, or simply had only a vague

notion of when they were born.

Census - name changing

Ten years is a long time, and a lot of things happened in our ancestors' lives between one census and another.

During this time they may have got married and re-married perhaps, resulting in a number of name changes. Alternatively, there may have been cases where they wanted to change their identity, perhaps for personal or political reasons.

You may, for example, have a bigamist in the family who changed his name to flee from a former partner. You may also have ancestors who anglicised their names over a period of time to suit the political environment.

Census occupations

Many people also lied about their occupations when completing census returns.

For example, in the 19th century thousands of women were prostitutes, yet this is certainly not what they recorded on their forms.

Also, whilst most children were noted as 'scholars' by their parents, this may have been to disguise the fact that they were breaking the law by sending their underage children out to work.

Census – nicknames

If you can't track down James, he may be a Jim. Eminent family historian, Jeanne Bunting, points out that Aunt Patty might be listed as Martha and your Grandma, who was always called Polly, was probably Mary. Uncle Wag could be listed as Charles or Chas and Aunt Fanny as Frances.

Nicknames and diminutives can derail your family history search – a man can be William to acquaintances, Will to his friends and Billie to his mother – but what is he called in the records?

Wildcards, denoted by a *, can be used to enhance your search. If you have searched unsuccessfully for William Lancaster, you could type in Wil* Lancaster; the search will return a list of names such as Wilfred Lancaster, Willie Lancaster and Will Lancaster.

You can use two wildcards to search for a string of letters such as *ill* which will give you all the Bills, Wills, Williams and others. This is a particularly useful search tool as the initial letter is often misrepresented in the transcript.

When searching for your ancestors in the census records, keep an open mind as to where they may have been on the night the particular census was taken.

If you have an idea about where they lived, you should start your search with that address. If they are not recorded at that address, you should broaden your search.

Tips for searching the census

A census is taken at an address, not specifically of a family or household.

When searching for your relatives, you should remember that even though your ancestor may have lived at one address, if he or she were not at home on the night of the census then they will not be included in the enumerator's records for that address.

If they were visiting friends or relatives that evening, they may, however, be included in the census at that particular address.

Many people, particularly young, unmarried women, were in service and may be found at the residence of their employers.

You should also think about your ancestors occupations too.

If for example you know that your great-great-grandfather was a sailor, he may have actually been at sea that evening - in which case he wouldn't be recorded on the census. However, if he was on a ship that was docked in an English port, then he should be recorded at the ship's address - as he was there that evening - rather than at his home address.

The same situation may apply to any relatives who worked as medical staff in hospitals, or wardens in prisons, or night-workers in a factory. If they were at the institutions on the night of the census, they would be recorded at that address rather than their home address.

Residential place census search field

"Residential place" is a key-word field. It draws matching results from the following header fields:

City/Municipal Borough
Ecclesiastical District
Parish
Registration District
Municipal ward
Town
Hamlet
A key word search in residential place should pick up anything (including parish or registration district) from any of these seven fields.

Census - cross-checking with births, marriages and deaths

Census returns enable us to track ancestors we know about and discover ancestors we never knew existed. By linking these finds to the birth, marriage and death records, we can discover more about these long lost relatives.

Some examples of how this can be done are below:

You may discover in the census return for 1881 that your great grandmother had another daughter that you've never heard about.

If the return recorded the child as being six years old and states where she was born, you now have the relevant information to calculate the child's year of birth, search for her entry in the GRO birth index (available on findmypast.co.uk), and order her certificate.

When you obtain the certificate, you will be able to fill in the missing details such as her actual birth date, the name of her father and who registered her birth.

Alternatively, your great-great-grandfather may appear in the 1841, 1851 and 1861 census, but doesn't appear in any later census returns.

Whilst there may be many reasons for this - he may have moved abroad or changed his name - you could also assume that he died between the recording of the 1861 and 1871 census.

To check your assumption, you could try to find him in the GRO death index, by searching the records for this ten year period. If you discovered that he died in 1863, you could order a copy of the death certificate to fill in the missing details such as the exact date of death, the cause of death and where he died.

You could also start with the birth, marriage and death indexes to help locate your ancestors in the various census returns.

Once you've found details of a birth in the indexes of findmypast.co.uk and you have ordered a copy of the birth certificate, you'll have details such as the names of the parents (including the mother's maiden name), the father's occupation, and the address and area where the family was living at that particular date.
This is the valuable information that will help you find this family in the next census return for that period.

Marriage certificates also name the fathers of bride and groom, give their occupations, the bride's maiden name, and very importantly, the addresses at which they were living at the time of the marriage. These too

can be followed up in the census returns.

Census – search by address

When you use census returns to trace your ancestors, you may also want to think about using them to trace the history of your home and the road you live on.

If you have a property that was built before 1901 you could find out about the lives of the people who lived there before you, or indeed the lives of the people who lived along the same street.

You may discover for example that a family of four lived at the same address, that the head of the household was a doctor and that the family employed domestic servants. Or that there were several families and assorted lodgers crammed into a few rooms.

Alternatively, you may find out that a famous politician or author once lived at the same address or along the same street.

Equally as interesting, you might want to look at how your home has changed throughout history or how the road has changed. For example, your building may now be converted into four apartments, with a total of 15 people living in the building. In 1861, the building may have simply been one very large house - home to just one family!

The road you live on could have drastically changed too. What is now a row of shops at the end of your street, may once have been a hospital, a factory or a prison.

Census trivia

The way census returns have been compiled since 1801 varies from decade to decade, leading to errors, mistakes and interesting anomalies. Before using census records, spare a few moments to read the quirky facts below:

Whilst the very early census returns were used for purely statistical purposes by the government, many of the enumerators - such as clergy - may have also recorded data about their individual parishioners for their own use. Some of the data that they recorded was so detailed that some even recorded how many dogs or hens certain parishioners had.

Generally it was clergy, teachers or businessmen who volunteered as enumerators as they had the required level of literacy to complete the forms.

It was not until the census of 1891 that women were allowed to volunteer as enumerators.

Whilst we live in an age of political correctness now, it didn't seem to concern the enumerators of the 19th century. If you look at the disabilities column on the later census returns you may spot some instances where people were described as "lunatics", "idiots" or even "feeble minded"!

According to the 1801 census, approximately nine million people lived on the British Isles of England, Wales, the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands. By 1861 the figure rose to 20 million. By 1891 there were just under 29 million and today the populations stands at over 60 million.

Once the 1881 census was fully compiled, officials noted that there was an alarming rise in the number of individuals being reported as "deaf and dumb", when compared to previous census returns. After enquiries were made, it transpired that many enumerators had recorded babies as being deaf and dumb simply because they could not speak!

Due to a number of factors, such as people not being at home on the night census returns were collected, or people being homeless, generally 5% of the population are always missing from each return.

Some enumeration books are missing and some have damaged or unreadable pages; if you are unlucky your ancestors may have been recorded on one of these pages.

Whilst you would expect to see occupations such as butcher, or florist, or teacher in past census returns, you may be surprised to discover that occupations such as "bone collector", "temptress" and "professional

wizard" were also recorded.

People have tried to sabotage the accuracy of census returns throughout history for a number of reasons, such as invasion of privacy or to mastermind a prank. In 1911 many women boycotted the census to protest against the lack of women's right to vote. The census for 2001 did not escape this, when thousands of people decided to record their religion as "Jedi Knight"!