

A short guide to the census

- ◇ The census is a count of the population. The UK census is taken every ten years.
- ◇ The earliest census was 1801, but the first few censuses give only statistical information. From **1841** onwards, the census includes **names of individuals**.
- ◇ Because of the personal information in census returns, they generally remain **closed to the public for 100 years**.
- ◇ You can, however, get statistics from the more recent censuses. As staff for printed statistics ref qC31.2 or try:

<https://shropshire.gov.uk/information-intelligence-and-insight/facts-and-figures/>
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/census>
<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics>
<http://datashine.org.uk>

- ◇ The 1841 census contains less information than later ones and is harder to read.
- ◇ From 1851 **all census returns contain** the following information:
 - * *Enumerators number*
 - * *Address*
 - * *Who was present in the house on the census night*
 - * *Relationship to head of household, marital status, age and sex*
 - * *Occupation*
 - * *Place of birth*
- ◇ In 1911 all returns were completed by the householders themselves. Extra details include length of present marriage and children born to that marriage, living or deceased, detailed occupational data, infirmity.
- ◇ The people collecting the information for the census are known as **enumerators**. Each was responsible for an enumeration district and the arrangement of the census follows the route that they took.
- ◇ At the start of each new enumeration district, there is usually a **description of the enumeration district** e.g. "*all that part of the parish which comprises the townships of Hardwick, Lee and Northwood*" or "*the south side of Abbey Foregate starting at Brook Road ... ending at Mill road*".
- ◇ This is followed by a summary of the number of houses, occupiers and persons; summary of numbers of itinerants and temporary changes in population; directions and examples for filling up the book.
- ◇ After this, the entries for households are recorded. **House numbers are not** always noted and the enumerator did not always take the same route. Therefore, it is sometimes difficult to compare one census year with another. Numbers of houses can also change through the years.

◇ **Remember**, the census only records who was present in the house on census night. 'Missing' people might be visiting family or even hiding! The census was taken on the nights of 7 June 1841, 30 March 1851, 7 April 1861, 2 April 1871, 3 April 1881, 5 April 1891, 31 March 1901 and 2 April 1911.

◆ **Finding census returns**

◆ Census returns for England and Wales from 1841-1911 are searchable at www.ancestry.co.uk and www.findmypast.co.uk You can also browse the indexes by place. These sites normally charge a fee but Shropshire Archives has a subscription the library edition of these sites which allows you to search this free of charge on the PCs at Shropshire Archives and at most Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin libraries.

◇ Shropshire Archives also has census returns for Shropshire, 1841-1901 on **microfiche**.

◇ There are **place indexes** for each census. Instructions for finding the fiche are on the back of these indexes. There are detailed street indexes for only a few places.

◇ The Shropshire Family History Society has produced **name indexes**, mainly for the **1851 census**. These are in ring binders with yellow spines on the Reading Room shelves. For Shropshire, Staffordshire and the surrounding Welsh counties, a name index to the 1881 is also available on microfiche.

◆ **Notes for family historians**

◇ One of the most important sections of the census is the **place of birth**. This allows you to move back to earlier census returns or parish registers. Looking at the children's places of birth may help you track the movements of a family. **NB** The 1841 census does not give such details, it only states whether a person was born inside or outside the county.

◇ The **recording of ages** sometimes presents problems. In **1841** the age was often **rounded down to the nearest 5 years** (e.g. someone aged between 20 and 25 would be given the age of 20). For those over 60, the ages could be rounded down to the nearest 10 years. From **1851** the age is usually given as **exact** (except where it was not known and therefore rounded up or down).

◇ There are many instances of inaccuracies and miscalculations so treat ages and places of birth with caution!

◆ **Further reading**

Higgs, Edward *A Clearer Sense of the Census*; HMSO, 1996 (ref: 312)

The 1939 register compiled for rationing purposes and listing household members is searchable at www.findmypast.co.uk Details relating to people who may still be alive will be blanked out.

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