

The Census is an invaluable source of information for anyone remotely interested in family and local history, these census documents provide a wealth of detail and are a national treasure. Here are a few fascinating facts that have emerged.

Perhaps the first attempt at a tally of our population was made by William the Conqueror, with his Domesday Book of 1086, a masterpiece of its time, still revered today.

A more modern approach to the question of population was envisaged in 1801, during the reign of King George III. However, this was a hap-hazard affair that has never been looked upon as an accurate reflection of our country and its population. None the less, it came up with some interesting details which tells us that the population of England and Wales was 8.9 million, Scotland 1.6 million, but Ireland was not included.

There were further attempts made at ten-year intervals in 1811, 1821 and 1831, but these were essentially no more than head-counts. Only heads of the household are named, other members grouped into age bands. Few records from these times exist, some for our area are Bewdley, Kidderminster, Bromsgrove and Wednesbury, Stafford (part), Walsall, Warwick (part).

1841

Quickly after Queen Victoria came to the throne in 1837, things had moved on and from 1841 onwards, it was written that a census would be taken every ten years. The initial event, considered to be the first modern census of the UK, took place on Sunday 6th June 1841. This required each householder to complete form giving his address, names of all the occupants, their age, sex and place of birth. Back then there were many who could not write, so the enumerators assisted. In turn these household documents were transcribed into books and the original documents, unfortunately, were destroyed. The fact that details were transcribed, sometimes twice, led to mistakes, but overall it achieved most of what it was designed to do.

1851

This took place on Sunday 30th March, when much the same information was required, but asked for in more precise terms. Now each person would be recorded as “married or unmarried” and required to provide specific occupation and place of birth. Furthermore, if they had a disability, that must be stated. The final outcome produced a far clearer representation of our country and formed the basis for future census.

1861

On Sunday 7th April 1861, the next census was made using the format as in 1851, hence the required information remained the same. At the time there had been pressure to include “religious affiliation” but this was excluded and has been so ever since. It is interesting to see some statistics that were produced -

Total population = 20,066,224
Of which
12,032,157 were unmarried
6,917,395 were married
1,116,672 were widowed

1871

We now come to the evening of 2nd April 1871, when once more, the same information was asked but this time, together with disabilities, “lunatic, idiot or imbecile” was to be noted – what would today’s politically correct society think of that? Indeed, the Registrar General at that time remarked that “it is against human nature for any mother to admit her child to be an idiot, however much it may be true. To acknowledge the fact is to abandon all hope”.

1881

Taken on Sunday 3rd April 1881, this was the first census to be made available online, initially transcribed by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. The required information was as previous, but in Scotland they were asked to state what language they spoke. This is the only census that is available for the entire country free of charge, it can be so accessed via familysearch.org

1891

Sunday 5th April 1891. Now the Welsh were asked to say what language they spoke. As regard to occupation, each should say if they were employer, employee or neither. For each household it should be stated the number of rooms occupied, if less than five.

1901

Sunday 31st March 1901 – no changes to the format, same requirement as ten years previous.

1911

Sunday 2nd April 1911 – the first census where the return for each household or institution was written by the head person and thereafter used as the primary census information. The format was slightly different with a more expansive detail. Now persons were asked to say how long they had been married, how many children born alive and how many still living. If someone was born in a foreign country, what was their nationality? Finally to the question of disability, this was now asked to say, “Totally deaf or dumb, blind, lunatic, imbecile or feeble-minded”. The head was required to sign the document as true and correct.

1921

Appeared on Findmypast in January 2022 with 38 million entries. So what is different from previous census? The original date for the 1921 census was due to be 24th April of that year, but was delayed due to political strife and agitation from the suffragette’s movement, all of which delayed matters until Sunday 19th June 1921, with some of the documentation still having the original April date. However, the finished article was well worth our wait, as we are treated to much more detailed information including precise ages, down to the month, plus names and addresses of employers, allowing a much fuller picture of our forebears.

1931 and 1941

Records of the England & Wales 1931 census were completely destroyed by fire in the storerooms of the Office of Works in Hayes Middlesex in December 1942, Scotland and N. Ireland still exist. No census was taken in 1941 due to the 2nd World War

1939 Register

Wartime has given us a very valuable account known as the National Registration Act, a survey carried out on 29th September 1939. Similar to a census, it gives for each household, the full address, complete name of each civilian, their date of birth and occupation.

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Census years ID Numbers			
6 June	1841	HO107	Portrait form
30 March	1851	HO107	Landscape form
7 April	1861	RG9	
2 April	1871	RG10	
3 April	1881	RG11	
5 April	1891	RG12	
31 March	1901	RG13	
2 April	1911	RG14	
19 Jun	1921	RG 15	Should have been 24 April
29 Sept	1939		Not really a Census but a Register

All are Sundays

Some notes –

In 1841, the ages for children under 15 were recorded as is. For adults, that is those over the age of 15, the age was rounded down into bands of 5 years thus –

Those shown as age 20, would be actually between 20 and 24, so born between 1817 and 1821

Those shown as age 25, would be actually between 25 and 29, so born between 1812 and 1816

U.K Census records are available from FamilySearch FindMyPast, Ancestry, S & N Genealogy, The Genealogist. Some transcriptions can sometimes be had from local history societies where they had undertaken such projects.

This and other useful record sheets, guidance notes and charts can be downloaded from the members section of the Midland Ancestors website www.midland-ancestors.uk