the national archives

Census Returns

Domestic Records Information 99

1. Which censuses are available?

A census of the population of England and Wales has been taken every ten years since 1801 with the exception of 1941. The 1841 census was the first to list the names of every individual.

From January 2009, a phased online release of most of the information from the 1911 census is taking place, but the most sensitive data will be unavailable until 2012. See www.1911census.co.uk for the latest information about the release.

2. Where can I see the census returns?

The census returns from 1841 to 1911 for England, Wales, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man can be accessed online at www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/census. The National Archives provides free access to this service in its reading rooms, but please note that standard onsite charges for printing still apply. The returns for 1841 to 1891 are operated in partnership with MyFamily Inc. at www.ancestry.co.uk, the 1901 census with Genes Reunited and the 1911 census with FindMyPast.

The National Archives also holds microfilm copies of the census returns for 1841 to 1891 and copies of the returns for 1901 on microfiche, for which there are place-name and street indexes. The 1911 census is only available online.

Most local and county record offices hold microfilm or microfiche copies of the census returns for their own areas, excluding 1911. You can find out more on ARCHON. Census returns can also usually be viewed at Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints' Family History Centres.

3. When were the censuses taken?

The dates of the censuses were as follows:

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

Censuses were also taken on 10 March 1801, 27 May 1811, 28 May 1821 and 29 May 1831 but these were only headcounts so The National Archives does not hold details of individuals. In a few cases, nominal lists created by local overseers for the purposes of calculating the headcounts survive locally. See Colin Chapman, *Pre-1841 Censuses & Population Listings in the British Isles* (Genealogical Publishing Co, 1996) or Jeremy Gibson, *Local census listings, 1522-1930: holdings in the British Isles* (Birmingham, 1997) for details of what has survived.

4. What information can I find in the census returns?

The census returns record details of people present in England and Wales on the date of each census. From 1841, the census returns for England and Wales were compiled using the same system of registration districts and sub-districts that was used for the registration of births, marriages and deaths. This means that there is a direct link between the two most important 19th-century sources for family historians.

Each registrar's sub-district was divided into a number of enumeration districts, each of which was the responsibility of an enumerator. The enumerator delivered a form known as a schedule to each household a few days before census night, and collected the completed schedules the day after. The schedules were then sorted, and the details copied into the census enumerators' books. It is these books which have survived for 1841 to 1901 and which can be seen today online or on microform. The original

householders' schedules were later destroyed with the exception of 1911. Special schedules were provided for vessels and institutions.

1841

The 1841 census was the first to ask detailed questions about individuals. The following information was recorded about each person:

- forename and surname
- age (rounded down to the nearest five for those aged 15 or over)
- sex
- occupation
- whether they were born in the county in which they were enumerated (Y or N)
- whether they were born in Scotland (S), Ireland (I) or Foreign Parts (F)

An address was also shown for each household but house numbers were rarely given, and in rural areas you will often find only the name of the village or hamlet.

1851-1901

From 1851 to 1901 the format of the census returns and the range of questions asked remained largely the same. The following details can be found for each individual:

- forename, middle names (often just initials) and surname
- relationship to the head of the household (usually the oldest male)
- marital status
- age (at last birthday)
- sex
- occupation (i.e. their source of income)
- county and parish of birth (if born in England or Wales)
- country of birth (if born outside England and Wales)
- whether they suffered from certain medical disabilities
- language spoken (in Wales, from 1891; on the Isle of Man, from 1901)

The full address is given and, progressively with each census, more information about the dwelling itself.

1911

As well as information provided in the previous censuses, 1911 is notable for the extra information supplied and because all returns were completed by the householders themselves. This allows researchers to see the subject's handwriting as well as some unsolicited supplementary information. Other details include:

- a married woman's 'fertility in marriage' - length of present marriage and children born to that marriage, living or deceased
- detailed occupational data
- infirmity (this and some other sensitive information remains closed until 2012)

5. Are there indexes to the census returns?

The Catalogue provides descriptions for the 1841-1911 census enumeration books in HO 107, RG 9 - RG 14 and RG 78 , but these only show which places are covered by a specific document reference.

Name indexes, with links to digitised images, are available for all census years via www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/census. An index to the 1881 returns is also available online at www.familysearch.org. Many family history societies have also produced indexes to the census returns for their own areas. The 1851 census has been well covered but there are relatively few indexes for other census years. The National Archives has a good collection of census indexes on CD ROM

(accessible through public terminals), on microfiche and in booklet form.

6. What about census returns for Scotland and Ireland?

Scottish census returns for 1841 to 1901 are held by the General Register Office (Scotland) and can be seen at New Register House, Edinburgh EH1 3YT. The returns can also be accessed online at: www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk. The site offers links to digitised images for all census years except 1881.

The 1881 census index for Scotland on CD ROM can be accessed through public terminals at The National Archives. Indexes to the Scottish censuses are also available online at www.ancestry.co.uk. None of these indexes has links to digitised images.

Unfortunately, few 19th century Irish census returns have survived, but the returns for the whole of Ireland for 1901 and 1911 are fairly complete, and can be viewed at the National Archives of Ireland. Those for the 1901 census of Northern Ireland only can be viewed at the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland. The National Archives of Ireland is in the process of digitising the 1901 and 1911 census returns for Ireland and making them available online. Information on this project can be found at www.census.nationalarchives.ie.

7. What can I read to find out more about the census?

- The Census, 1801-1901: Statistical Reports (The National Archives, Domestic Records Information Research Guide 53)
- Peter Christian & David Annal, *Census: The Expert Guide* (The National Archives, 2008)
- David Annal, *Using census returns: pocket guides to family history* (The National Archives, 2002)
- Edward Higgs, *Making sense of the census revisited: census records for England and Wales, 1801-1901 - a handbook for historical researchers* (London, 2005)
- Susan Lumas, *Making use of the census* (4th edn, The National Archives, 2002)
- Your Archives article on 1931 Census

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