

Census Returns Pre 1841

1801 was the year for the first official government census and these have taken place at ten year intervals since that date. Various parish and ecclesiastical enumerations had taken place before this date, mainly in connection with the payment of tithes.

GOVERNMENT CENSUS DATES

1801 March 10/11

1811 May 27/28

1821 May 28/29

1831 May 29/30

In general, the above do not contain information of use to genealogists

Midnight Sun/Mon 6/7 June 1841 (available)

Midnight Sun/Mon 30/31 March 1851 (available)

Midnight Sun/Mon 7/8 April 1861 (available)

Midnight Sun/Mon 2/3 April 1871 (available)

Midnight Sun/Mon 3/4 April 1881 (available)

Midnight Sun/Mon 5/6 April 1891 (available)

Midnight Sun/Mon 31/1 March/April 1901 (available)

1911 Sun/Mon April 2/3 (available with some exceptions)

1915 Parochial Census re Aliens Act

1921 Sun/Mon June 19/20

1931 Sun/Mon April 26/27 (records lost to fire)

1939 29/30 Sept (except service personnel for ID cards)

1941 (No census taken due to war)

1951 9 April (Mon)

1961 24 April (Mon)

1971 26 April (Mon)

1981 06 April (Mon)

1991 22 April (Mon)

2001 29/30 April (Sun/Mon)

1801 - 1831 Census Returns

The first four censuses were merely headcounts and in general provide nothing of any use to genealogists. Questionnaires were sent to overseers of the poor and clergy to provide the Government with a set of simple raw statistics:

- Number of houses
- Number of occupants in each house
- Number of houses unoccupied
- Categories of employment

After the figures had been extracted the original returns were usually destroyed. There is an example of a rare portion of the **1811 Census** for Ashton-under-Lyne which has survived, transcribed on my website: tamesidefamilyhistory.co.uk/contents.htm For a full list see, 'Pre 1841 Censuses and Population Listings', Colin Chapman. These seem to be the ones surviving for Cheshire: 1801 Marbury, 1811, Alderley, 1821 Alderley and Rostherne, 1831 Alderley, Stockport, Tattenhall and Warbyton.

The 1841 Census is first of any real use to family historians, but unfortunately does not show family relationships or place of birth. Households were only obliged to state whether they were born in or out of the county. This is particularly annoying where ancestors straddled county boundaries. Enumerators were also allowed to round down the age of all adults to the nearest multiple of five, although some ignored this and entered the actual age.

The 1851 Census now includes family relationships and place of birth, which is very helpful in trying to pinpoint pre Civil Registration birthplaces.

A large portion of Manchester, Salford, Oldham and Ashton-under-Lyne was originally too poor to be filmed due to water damage. To make good this gap Manchester and Lancashire Family History Society has had a team, led by Ray Hulley, working at the Public Record Office in London for several years, trying various methods to recapture as much information as possible. Ray was eventually given permission to use UV light and the capture rate increased dramatically.

This project is now complete and **Manchester and Lancs FHS** has an on-line index on their website, full details are then available via **Find My Past** or by purchasing the CDs they have produced.

Census Returns to Purchase on CD Rom

Various organizations publish copies of original census data on CD:

- The Family History Society of Cheshire fhsc.org.uk
- Manchester and Lancs FHS mlfhs.org.uk
- S & N Genealogy Supplies thegenealogist.co.uk

Census Returns On-line

Ancestry: I was rather against subscription websites a few years ago, but now can't seem to live without them. All census records 1841-1901 are now searchable on-line. Complete subscription is now £107.40 or £83.40 without their pre 1837 records. However, many libraries have access to ancestry.com library edition which you can use for free. www.ancestry.co.uk

Find My Past Is now the only website which offers the complete census returns 1841-1911. FMP supposedly has the most accurate transcriptions: they are also the only website which allows address as well as surname searches. Complete subscription without 1911 census, currently £79.95; with 1911 Census £109.95; 1911 only £59.95. There are also reduced rates for six month's subscriptions, watch out for special offers and they do offer a 10% loyalty bonus when renewing. Find My Past is now available at Tameside Local Studies and Archives Centre on one computer, but you must book.

The Genealogist S & N Genealogy Supplies now has the full 1841-1901 searchable on-line. Their Diamond subscription currently costs £119.45 this is in preparation for their launch of the 1911 census www.thegenealogist.co.uk Also available at the Family History Society's research rooms at Alderley Edge.

British Origins Census returns complete for 1841, 1861 and 1871 £7.00 for 72 hours and £9.50 for one month - excellent value for a month's access because of all their other on-line databases. www.britishorigins.com

Family Search The whole of the 1881 census – this was the very first census to be fully transcribed and is available via www.familysearch.org They also have indexes to all other census returns but no images just a link through to Find My Past. Find My Past also have very accurate transcriptions of the 1841 and 1851 Scottish Census Returns. The Scottish GRO will not allow access to original images.

FreeCen volunteer census indexing site on the lines of FreeBMD. Excellent Scottish coverage and some counties e.g. Cornwall and Wiltshire are almost complete. www.freecen.org.uk

Scotland's People: The main pay per view site for Scottish research all the 1841-1901 census returns are available to search. Be careful, it's addictive and can run away with the units you pay for ☺ www.scotlandsppeople.gov.uk

Irish National Archives: In general for various historical reasons only the 1901 and the 1911 census returns for Ireland survive and these are available to search for free at: www.nationalarchives.ie

1911 Census

The 1911 Census images are completely different from those which went before. Each return is the actual form completed by your ancestor in his/her own handwriting. The only enumerators' marks seem to be statistical numbers given to occupations in green and mistakes corrected in red. Sensitive information in the last column is blanked out and those returns for institutions ie mental hospitals will not be issued until the formal launch in 2012. I love the way people have had to say where they work, the number of rooms in their house and married women are asked how many years they have been married and to show how many children they have had and if any have not survived. For the first time, people born in Ireland were asked where they were born in Ireland

Some Pitfalls when using Census Returns.

Transcription Errors - Even with the best will in the world everyone is open to human error and it can be extraordinarily difficult sometimes to read some names and places on the enumerators' census sheets; even if you are familiar with local names and places. How much more difficult is it then for transcribers outside these shores when they also have targets to meet. You must start to think laterally and use soundex or wildcard search techniques. Despite trying everything including using siblings or spouse's forenames, some people refuse to be found.

Age Differences - Remember that your ancestors were human and could lie about their age, especially when one member of a couple was much older than the other, and they had to continue this subterfuge on census night. Sometimes people born before civil registration only had a vague idea of when they were born or how old they were. Remember that the information was only as good as the person giving it to the census enumerator, and that on the 1841 census, the enumerator could round the age down by as much as 4 years.

Birth Places - You might find that your ancestor gives different places of birth on separate census returns. They might give the name of the first place they remember living, the nearest big town or the name of the actual village, or any name they think the enumerator might be familiar with.