

Dorset History Centre - Guide to Sources

Census Returns 1801-1901

- The idea of conducting a population census of the country was **first considered in the 18th century**
- **1753** a Bill was introduced in the House of Commons to carry out an annual census, but it was **defeated in the Lords** because of fears that potential invaders might be encouraged by any signs of weakness or that it might be used to increase taxation
- A second Bill was introduced in 1800. **Britain was at war with France** and there had been a succession of bad harvests which created widespread concern that a growing population would be unable to grow enough food to support itself. The Bill was passed and the first national census was taken on 10 March 1801
- Since 1801 a census has been **taken every 10 years** with the exception of 1941 – due to WW2
- It has always been taken on a **Sunday night** on the assumption that this is the time when most people are likely to be at home
- As census records contain a substantial amount of personal data, they are **closed for 100 years**

How was the Information Taken?

- Until 1841 the **clergy and parish overseers of the poor took the censuses**. The census recorded how many males and females there were in each parish, and whether they were employed in agriculture or trade and manufacturing. The **statistical summaries** that do still survive are of little use for family history, but many of these early returns were destroyed
- In 1841 an official – called the **enumerator** – was allocated a district with responsibility for taking the census. The newly created civil registration districts were seen as a convenient framework for census taking. The new information that was required was **unpopular with the public**. They suspected that it was an attempt by the government to extract more taxes. Local enumerators were appointed rather than officials from London. It was also hoped that local enumerators – familiar with the families in the area – would be able to spot false information more easily
- The district could be a whole village, in the case of small places, or an area of a town/city. In a town/city the district may not include all or both sides of all the streets within that district
- The enumerator gave out a form – called a **schedule** – to the head of each household

- The householder or enumerator completed this. The information provided relates only to one specific night
- The enumerator then collected the schedule
- The enumerator then copied up the information into a pre-printed book. It is these that are available for consultation
- The returns are copied up in the order in which the enumerator collected them. So they are **arranged by street**

Where to Find Census Returns

The **original books** of the Census Enumerators Returns are held at the National Archives in Kew. What is made available to the public are the **microfilm copies** of these books

- **County Record Offices** - You will find that most county record offices or local history centres have microform copies of the returns for that particular county. Dorset History Centre has copies of all returns for Dorset and some neighbouring parishes in Wiltshire, Somerset, Devon and Hampshire.
- **Local Studies Centres and Libraries** - You may find that local studies centres and larger libraries have copies of the returns
- **Family Records Centre in London** - They hold microform copies of all census returns for England and Wales from 1841-1891.
- **Internet** - The Census for 1841-1901 is now **available on-line** through 'Ancestry' at www.ancestry.co.uk. There is a charge for obtaining information off the website
- The 1901 census for the whole country is available on-line on the TNA website at www.pro.gov.uk. **Searching the index is free**, but if you wish to view the full records there is a charge. You can buy vouchers to pay for this at many libraries and Record Offices
- **CD-ROM** - The 1881 census returns for England and Wales have been put onto CD-Rom and can be searched by name

What Information is Available in the Census?

1901 Census: taken on 31 March 1901, contains the most detailed information:

- Road, Street, House name or number
- If inhabited and if not, whether the house is occupied or not
- Number of rooms if less than three
- Name and surname of each person
- Relation to head of household
- Condition as to marriage
- Age last birthday
- Profession or occupation
- Employer, worker or own account
- Whether working at home
- Place of birth
- If death and dumb, blind, lunatic or imbecile or feeble-minded

1891 Census: taken on 5 April 1891, includes the following information:

- Road, Street, House name and number
- If inhabited and if not, whether the house is uninhabited or a building
- Number of rooms if less than three
- Name and surname of each person
- Relation to head of household
- Condition as to marriage
- Age last birthday
- Profession or occupation
- Employer, employed or neither employee or employed
- Place of birth
- If deaf, dumb, blind, lunatic or idiot

1851- 1881 Censuses: The 1851-1881 Returns include the same information as the 1891 census but only asks about the profession and not whether they are the employer or the employed. The dates they were taken are as follows:

- 1881 census - 3 April
- 1871 census - 2 April

- 1861 census - 7 April (This has a patchy survival rate. The returns for Dorset seem to have survived without incident but you may find this to be a problem elsewhere in the country)
- 1851 census - 30 March (This does not include the questions about whether the house was inhabited or how many rooms it had)

1841 Census: The 1841 census was taken on 6th June. It is less useful for family historians

- The ages of people over 15 were rounded down to the nearest five years. This means that if the returns list someone as 20 and you want to locate their baptism entry, you will have to search up to five years in the register. This is time-consuming and potentially very confusing
- The relationship to the head of the house was not noted and while you can make assumptions based on name and age, it may be possible to make a mistake. As mothers, wives, sisters, fathers, husbands and brothers may all share the same surname in the one house
- For place of birth only whether or not they were born in the county is recorded as 'yes' or 'no', rather than specifically where they were born
- As this census was taken during the summer there were lots of itinerant workers moving from their usual home to gain summer employment

Census returns are one of the best sources for tracing your family tree. The 1901 and 1881 returns are particularly useful if you search the national indexes. If you have lost your ancestors you stand a fairly good chance of finding them through these two censuses. The Dorset History Centre has a personal names index for the 1851 census and the 1891 census. There is also a partial index for 1841. It is worth checking with other Record Offices if they have indexes if you feel your ancestors moved.

Some Problems with Census Returns

- Unfortunately they only cover the period 1841 to 1901. Any earlier or later than that and you have to use other sources
- It is only **taken every 10 years** therefore it is possible to lose people especially children. If someone is born in 1862 and then dies in 1868 and you are relying on the census returns you will not pick up any details about them. Therefore you must **use them in conjunction** with other sources
- The information is **not always accurate**. The enumerators may have misheard or incorrectly spelt a name, or age or occupation. If your ancestors were illiterate, as many were, they would not have known if the correct spelling or name was being written down

- Sometimes deliberately **false information** was given, such as age, for a number of reasons
- Often people did not know where they had been born
- Family relationships were less rigid than they are today. The term 'in-law' was often used where we would use the 'step' prefix. **Illegitimate** children of the daughter of the house may well be listed as the children of the grandparents
- Your ancestors may have **moved all over the country** and without indexes it is very difficult and time-consuming to locate them again