Extract From

Census

THE FAMILY HISTORIAN'S GUIDE, SECOND EDITION

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What you will find in this book

On 2 January 2002, a remarkable event occurred which thrust the previously quiet and peaceful world of family history research into the glare of the national media. An ambitious plan to make the records of the 1901 census for England and Wales available online proved a victim of its own success when thousands of family historians who had been waiting ten years for its release and many others, inspired by press coverage but with perhaps no more than a passing interest in the subject, logged on to the 1901 census website – causing it to crash within hours of its launch. The 1901 census included the details of more than 30 million people, and this was the first time that an attempt had been made to provide access to such a large volume of family history data via the internet. Earlier censuses had been made available on microfilm and although each successive release had provoked excitement and interest in the family history community, no previous census release had captured the attention of the national press in quite the same way.

The experience of the 1901 census release, together with advances in online technology, led to a successful and trouble-free launch of the 1911 census. As a result of a ruling made under the Freedom of Information Act, the National Archives released the 1911 returns for England and Wales early – that is, before the customary 100 years had passed. The records were released gradually, county-by-county during 2009, and are now fully available online.

The release of the 1921 census is (at the time of writing) some eight years away, and as the terms of the 1920 Census Act mean that the records will not be released early, family historians will have to be patient for a while yet.

But why is such importance attached to census returns? Why does the release of another set of census records provoke such avid, some might even say obsessive, interest? What is it about the census that has led to questions being asked on a number of occasions in the House of Commons? This book will attempt to answer these questions, as well as explaining what the census is, how and why it was taken, and most importantly how researchers can use, understand and access the returns today – with the focus on online research.

Census returns are one of the key nineteenth-century sources for family historians, delivering a wealth of information about their ancestors including names, addresses, ages, family relationships and occupations. The documents may appear on the surface to be quite straightforward, but the process by which they were compiled means that the unwary researcher can easily fall foul of them. This book aims to help you navigate your way through the census returns and show you how to avoid the major pitfalls.

We begin with an exploration of the origins of the census in Chapter 1. The returns for the years 1841 (the first that recorded our ancestors' names) to 1901 are fully open, and we take a detailed look at these remarkable records in Chapter 2. The 1911 census is treated separately in Chapter 3. Although there are broad similarities between it and its Victorian predecessors, the layout of the schedules, the range of questions asked and, perhaps most importantly, the process that led to the creation of the records are different enough to warrant a separate chapter.

In Chapter 4 we explain why finding your ancestors in the returns isn't always as easy as it might be and we will offer some advice to help you to untangle these problems.

The book then goes on to explain how to access the census returns. Chapters 5 to 7 cover the census online, what you can access for free, and the best techniques to maximise the success of your searches. Chapters 8 to 15 take you on a guided tour of the most important census websites. Appendix A looks at the advantages and disadvantages of each of the sites and helps you to decide which best suits your needs.

For the most part, the book deals with the census returns for England and Wales, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man, which were taken every ten years from 1841 to 1911 – essentially the records held by The National Archives of England and Wales. The Scottish census is

generally treated alongside the English one because it is similar in most respects while reference is made to Ireland, highlighting the significant differences, in the relevant chapters. Chapter 14 looks at the ScotlandsPeople website while Chapter 15 explores the most important websites for accessing the surviving Irish censuses.

Chapters 16 and 17 cover topics that may seem old-fashioned, but will still be incredibly useful for some researchers. Chapter 16 is about the census products available on CD-ROM, and in Chapter 17 we will take a brief look at some of the offline search tools available to help you to access the census on microfilm. Some people prefer to access the returns this way and in certain cases it might be the best option for you.

Serious researchers will want to ensure that the results of their work are fully accessible and that the sources they use are correctly cited. Chapter 18 explains how the various National Archives' referencing systems work and provides a guide to citing census returns.

Lastly, the book assumes that most readers are interested in census returns from a family history perspective, but we need to remember some important points here. Firstly, the census was not taken with family historians in mind; the arrangement of the returns and the information they record may sometimes make us feel that this was the case but we have to put that idea out of our minds. The census returns were taken by the government of the day for a variety of social and political reasons, which we will explore below. Also, although family historians may form the main body of users today, we must not ignore the requirements of academics and local historians; the census returns can be vital to their research and this book is aimed at them too. To that end, Chapter 19 takes a look at the supplementary sources that researchers can access to help provide a more in-depth understanding of these remarkable records. Appendix B contains a list of the dates of all the UK censuses together with some useful notes regarding their status.

Online

The chapters devoted to the main census websites describe them as they were at the start of 2014. All of these data services are on the whole very mature and very stable, but they are subject to the occasional facelift so you should not be surprised if what appears on your screen is slightly different from our screenshots. Also, the large data services

are regularly making improvements, whether to enhance existing features or to add new facilities. For this reason, you may also encounter less superficial differences by the time you access sites yourself. FamilySearch in particular (Chapter 6) is constantly being improved or tweaked. In the case of Ancestry (Chapter 7) and Findmypast (Chapter 9), both the search options and the image-viewing facilities had recently been updated when we tested them, and may well have been further modified in the light of user feedback by the time you read this.

The chapters on the major data services are in many cases the most detailed discussions of census records on these sites ever published. Nonetheless, the coverage is not and could not be exhaustive. It is simply not realistic to try out every possible combination of search fields for every census year on all the sites. Ancestry, for example, has 35 different census datasets for the British Isles, while TheGenealogist has over 300. There will certainly be slight differences in search options that we have failed to spot. Occasionally — not too often, we hope — we may have overlooked some useful trick that solves what seems to be a problem on a particular site.

In the discussion of individual sites, we have given a number of examples of errors in indexing and transcription. However, with any luck, some of them at least will have been corrected by the time you read this (indeed, we submitted a number of corrections during the testing process). You may, therefore, not be able to locate the specific errors cited, but they retain their value as an example of the *types* of error found in online censuses. Likewise we have occasionally felt compelled to comment on poor site design or poor navigation, things that make life difficult for the user, but we are glad to report that some sites have already taken note of difficulties we raised queries about during writing, and all the sites *do* take feedback on usability from users seriously. While the data services have been very helpful in responding to our queries, we have not submitted the text to them for comment or correction, so we remain entirely responsible for any errors and omissions in the description. However, we would like to think that if, after weeks of testing a site, we have failed to spot something important it offers or misunderstood some aspect of how it works, then it is not *entirely* our fault!

In the first instance, the descriptions of the census data services are designed to guide the newcomer. Although the major sites have much

more data than just the censuses, these are probably the most important single group of genealogical records available online for the British Isles, and the benefits and limitations of each site are often not readily apparent at first glance. You cannot see what the search results are like, for example, until you have signed up, and often limitations only become apparent when you have repeatedly failed to get something to work the way you have been expecting it to. It is simply not possible for the newcomer, whether to family history in general or to using the Web for genealogical research, to make more than a superficial comparison of what these sites have to offer, and one aim of this book is to remedy that difficulty. We hope also that it will be of help to those involved in the teaching of family history by providing an overview of all the main census sites.

On the other hand, if you have already signed up with a particular data service, we hope that the description of that particular service will help you to get more out of it by alerting you to features you may have missed and showing you which limitations you have to live with and which you can get round. But when renewal time comes round or you run out of pay-per-view credits, the descriptions of the other services should also help you evaluate the decision on whether to stay where you are or switch to another site.

While we have attempted to give you all the information you need to decide which of the commercial services (if any) best meets your needs, there is one aspect of them we have not attempted to test: the response to customer support requests. The various companies have very different reputations in this regard, but since the comments found in the online discussion groups have only anecdotal value and could not easily be verified, we have felt it was inappropriate to take them into account. If you want to find out what others think of a particular data service, a question in a suitable discussion forum will undoubtedly elicit a range of responses. You can easily find past comments from users in the archives of relevant mailing lists. The archives of GENBRIT at **<lists.rootsweb.com/index/other/Newsgroup_Gateways/GENBRIT. html>** or **<groups.google.com/group/soc.genealogy.britain/>** would be a good place to start.

When evaluating sites, we have used Firefox 25.0 and Internet Explorer 8.0 running on Windows 7 PC systems, and have drawn attention to one or two browser problems encountered. However, we

have not attempted to test the sites methodically for browser compati-
bility, check how these sites look with Macintosh or Linux browsers, or
look at how well they work on smartphones and tablets.

The traditional caveat about the longevity of internet resources
applies. Web addresses for the long-established commercial sites are
not very likely to change – these sites are *very* stable in internet terms
– but one or two of the smaller websites mentioned in the text, particu-
larly those run by individuals or informal volunteer groups, are bound
to move or even, alas, close down in the lifetime of this book.

Diagrams

In general, all the websites offering census data and images of the orig-
inal records work in the same way (see Fig. 1): you complete a search
form and click on the search button. This brings up a list of matching
individuals, from which you select the one you want to see the full details
of. From there you can choose to look at a digital image of the original
census enumeration schedule. Beyond this commonality, though, there
are usually many more options and they differ considerably from site to
site. For this reason, we have provided flowcharts showing you how all
the main screens and options inter-relate. The census images usually
pop up in a separate browser window (with controls for zooming,
panning and saving the image), and this is indicated by the rounded
corners on the box. For pay-per-view sites, the flowchart will also indi-
cate which steps you need to pay for and how much each costs.
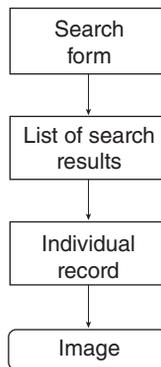
Figure 0.1 Census websites' process for delivering search results.

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