

Census Returns

Background

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. To ensure the confidentiality of the information provided, census returns are closed for 100 years, so the 1901 census is the latest that is currently available.

Where to see the census returns

The Family Records Centre (FRC) provides free onsite access to digitised images of all census returns from 1841 to 1901 for England, Wales, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man. These can also be accessed online for a fee at www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/census. The FRC 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.

Most local and county record offices hold microfilm or microfiche copies of the census returns for their own areas and census returns can also be viewed at Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints' Family History Centres. You should always contact any record office or library you intend to visit to ensure that they have the records you want to see.

Census dates

The dates of the censuses are as follows:

1801	10 March
1811	27 May
1821	28 May
1831	29 May

1841	6 June
1851	30 March
1861	7 April
1871	2 April

1881	3 April
1891	5 April
1901	31 March

Arrangement of 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 and which can be seen today on microform, or in some cases digitally online. The original householders' schedules were later destroyed. 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.

Census Indexes

Name indexes, with links to digitised images, are available for all census years at www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/census. An index to the 1881 returns is also available online at www.familysearch.org. Additionally, you can access the 1881 census index electronically at the FRC via the Online Publications (OPERA) or on microfiche. Many family history societies have 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 FRC has a good collection of census indexes on CD-Rom (accessible through OPERA), on microfiche and in booklet form.

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.scotlandsppeople.gov.uk. The site offers links to digitised images for all census years except 1881. The 1881 Census Index for Scotland can be accessed through OPERA at the FRC, and indexes to the Scottish censuses are available free of charge at the FRC and 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, Bishop Street, Dublin 8, Republic of Ireland. Those for the 1901 census of Northern Ireland only can be viewed at the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, 66 Balmoral Avenue, Belfast BT9 6NY.