

The Census Act 1800: 'An Act for taking an Account of the Population of Great Britain and the increase or diminution thereof'

The first census of modern times was taken in 1801 and (save for the 1941 census, cancelled because of the Second World War) has been taken every ten years since through to 2011.

The exact dates of censuses are important for calculating dates of birth from the ages given. In 1841 exact ages are given only for children up to the age of 15. After the age of 15 ages are rounded down to the nearest five years. Someone entering their age as 40 – and therefore being born at any time from 7 June 1796 to 6 June 1801. Children are usually entered by their order of birth with the firstborn listed first, so the order of birth of old children can usually be determined, even when two or more children are entered as '15'. In 1841 the place of birth is given only by a yes or no in answer to the question 'whether born in the same county'. This rarely causes problems of interpretation though there are a few instances of county boundary changes which may cause confusion.

From 1851 the census records the age of all, as well as a place of birth, which should be expressed in the form of parish and county, and this is the basic format for subsequent censuses also. The 1911 census was the first to be completed by a member of the household (rather than by a census enumerator) and will therefore include a specimen of a person's handwriting.

The genealogist is familiar with the censuses from 1841 to 1911 but may forget that 1801, 1811, 1821 and 1831 were also census years. Most of the original returns were destroyed, leaving just statistical summaries. None the less, some schedules have survived and are available online at <http://www.histpop.org/> The 1801 census collected information about the population as it was in 1801, it also required the enumerators to draw up information about the numbers of baptisms and burials every five years from 1700 to 1780, and every year from 1780 to 1800. This single census therefore reflected population not in a single year but over 101 years.

The enumerators – for the 1801 census the overseers of the poor – drew up their own listings which frequently included full nominal listings for each household i.e. a list of all names, along with their collations from the parish registers for the previous century. They then sent the required information – basically the names of heads of households and statistics for age and employment – to the London census office.

These were later destroyed. However the original listings which the enumerators drew up should have been preserved in the parish chest. Some have certainly survived, frequently found today in county record offices. Many no doubt have perished.

The 1801 census – and the 1811, 1821 and 1831 – may come to be more of interest to genealogists in the future...

Census dates

Census	Date
1801	10 March
1811	27 May
1821	28 May
1831	30 May
1841	6 June
1851	30 March
1861	7 April
1871	2 April
1881	3 April
1891	5 April
1901	31 March
1911	2 April

Citation:

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