



The History of Census in Ireland

Understanding the history:

Irish research has difficulties not faced in England, and more extreme than those faced in Wales and Scotland, many records which exist in England never existed in Ireland, many records which once existed in Ireland have been destroyed and the indexing of Irish records is frequently less good than for many comparable records elsewhere. That records never existed is a reality that the Irish researcher has to take on board.

It is hard to take most Irish family lines back beyond the late eighteenth century. This is because parish registers that were kept by the Church of England and other protestant churches in Great Britain are not directly paralleled by the records of the Roman Catholic church in Ireland – and the majority of people were Roman Catholic.

Much of the indexing of parish registers for the British Isles has been carried out by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons). The Roman Catholic church has reservations about the use made of parish registers by this group – their unease is around the Mormon practice of posthumous baptism of relatives of Mormons into the Mormon faith, something which is considered to be an aberrant practice of a heretical group. As a result many Roman Catholic church registers have not been made available to the Mormons, including most of those in Ireland.

However, the Roman Catholic church's decision to restrict access to the Mormons is only practical if access is severely restricted. Frequently access to Roman Catholic church records in Ireland has been only through the physical register, whether at the church or through the local record offices. These sources are almost always un-indexed so, the process of searching is very slow for the researcher.

The big destruction of Irish records came in 1922 during the Irish Civil War when the Public Record Office of Ireland in Dublin was destroyed. As well as most nineteenth century census returns the destruction consumed pre-1858 wills and administrations, and about half of the Church of Ireland parish records, along with a mass of documents going back almost a thousand years. This was a terrible loss of a nation's cultural heritage.

One set of records that may help the researcher is **Griffith's Valuations** (1830s-1860s), these boundary surveys and land valuations were carried out under the direction of Richard John Griffith and while the actual publication of the results was some years later, starting in 1847, they provide extensive information both about the landowners and those renting the land, these records have no counterpart outside of Ireland. Griffith's valuations are often described by genealogists as a 'census substitute'. They are not as useful as census returns – but they are better than nothing. It is one of the most important surviving 19th century genealogical sources. They are available free online, and are supported by an excellent search engine www.askaboutireland.ie/griffith-valuation

The first full census of Ireland was taken in 1821 and then in 1831 when the enumerators recorded the particulars of name, age and occupation. The first major modern census, was the so-called **Great Census of 1841**, this was the first time that a separate census form was used for each family and delivered to the dwelling by the enumerator before Census Day (Sunday 6th June 1841) and subsequently collected. Everyone present in the household on census night was included on the census form where they spent the night however, details of persons who normally lived in the household but were absent on Census night were also recorded.

Questions were asked relating to surname and first name, age, sex, relation to head of house, condition as to marriage and duration of marriage, occupation, education, birth-place, persons employed in agriculture, days labour and wages, members of the family alive but absent from home and particulars of the house including material of which built, nature of dwelling, number of rooms and the number of families living there. The 1841 census is also notable for enormous advances in the scope, presentation and technique of its published reports, including the first ever constructed anywhere 'Life tables for the civic and rural districts of the country'.

Censuses were subsequently taken at 10 year intervals up to 1911 however; no census was taken in 1921, because of the War of Independence and the Civil War.

Unfortunately, the returns for 1821, 1831, 1841 and 1851 were, apart from a few survivals, destroyed in 1922 in the fire at the Public Records Office in Dublin. The 1861 and 1871 census returns were deliberately destroyed as authorised by the Government of the day to protect confidentiality and ensure that "returns should not be used for the gratification of curiosity". Staff at the Public Record Office of Ireland petitioned for the retention of the 1881 and 1891 census returns however they were pulped in 1918 possibly because of paper shortages during the First World War.

The 1926 census was the first undertaken following the formation of the State and censuses continued to be taken at ten year intervals up to 1946 and commencing in 1951, censuses have generally been taken at five yearly intervals however, the census planned for 1976 was cancelled at a late stage as a Government economy measure. This proved to be somewhat of a false economy resulting in a census being specially undertaken in 1979 and followed by a full census in 1981 but in 2001, when the census originally due to take place in April, was postponed until 2002 due to the foot and mouth disease situation at the time. The most recent census was carried out on Sunday 24th April 2016 and the next census will take place in 2021.

Further information on the history of Irish census records and some of the pre-1901 census fragments are available and can be found at:

<http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/help/pre1901.html>

For more information on the 1901 and 1911 censuses, please visit:

<http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/help/about19011911census.html> and the returns held at the National Archives are available to view online

With regard to the Roman Catholic Church of Ireland, Findmypast has launched a ground breaking initiative to digitize these historic records of the Catholic Church. Millions of Irish records are already online, and they're being joined by the sacramental registers of England, Scotland and the USA.

<https://www.findmypast.ie/catholicrecords>

This project **THE CATHOLIC HERITAGE ARCHIVE** is commencing with the registers for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia in the USA and the Archdioceses of Birmingham and Westminster in England. The Philadelphia records start back in 1757, while those for Westminster and Birmingham in 1657. Most of these records have never been accessible before by the public – either offline or online and have been developed by a close collaboration with the Catholic Church.

FindmyPast has the biggest collection of Irish records available...

CITATIONS:

Davis, Graeme. 2012. *Solving genealogy problems*. Oxford: How To Books Ltd.
Central Statistics Office **<https://www.cso.ie/en/census/censusthroughhistory/>**
Findmypast, Dublin, Ireland **<https://www.findmypast.ie/>**

