

Census Returns - England and Wales – 1841-1911

What is a Census Return?

Census Returns are incredibly useful resources when tracing your family history as they record details of people, including children, present in every household on a specific date. They give the names, age, sex and occupation of individual members of the population for England, Wales, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man.

Electronic images of these records can be searched online through various genealogical website, such as Find my Past and Ancestry, normally the sites are free to search at Doncaster Local Studies Library and all community libraries, but as all libraries are closed they can be accessed via the details below.

N.B. access is available via Doncaster Library service's 24-hour online resources, during the Coronavirus lockdown <https://library.doncaster.gov.uk/web/arena/a-z-eresources>

Collecting census information started in 1801 and has taken place every ten years since. The purpose of census returns is not for family history although it is a fantastic family history resource. The census returns collect information to plan for future provision of resources and facilities, such as schools for the children recorded and care for the elderly. Census information is closed for 100 years and only statistical data is available. Due to this, the 1911 census is the last one you can see details of at present. However, there is a recently available resource that helps fill the gap and this is the 1939 Register (more information below). The last census return completed was taken in 2011.

N.B. In 2021 the next census will be carried out.

Census Returns 1801-1831

The 1801, 1811, 1821, and 1831 census returns required a head count only and there was no requirement to write anything down or collect personal information. However, for some villages the enumerator* did write and keep some written information but few of these survive.

***N.B.** As many people were illiterate some of the census forms (known as schedules) were filled in by an enumerator, which was often the local vicar or schoolmaster. For this reason the early census returns, if they survive, are usually to be found in parish records.

1841 Census Returns onwards

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 for 1841 to 1901 and which can be seen today online or on microform. The original householders' schedules were later destroyed. The 1911 census was the first for which the schedules were kept. Special schedules were provided for vessels and institutions.

An important fact to remember with census records is that the information was taken on an exact date and was to record who was present in a house at midnight on that date. All members of the household would be recorded from young babies, to the eldest member and would include visitors, servants and lodgers. The dates for each census are listed below.

1841	6th June
1851	30th March
1861	7th April
1871	2nd April
1881	3rd April
1891	5th April
1901	31st March
1911	2nd April

N.B. If family members were visiting other family households, they were sometimes recorded twice (where they normally lived or where they were visiting) or missed on both census forms assuming they were being recorded on the other household form.

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 (exact age for those under 15 but rounded down to the nearest five for those aged 15 or over)
- sex
- occupation (this was often very generic)
- 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

In the 1851 census, the format was expanded and answers that are more precise were required. 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 (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, including house number or name, is given, though in villages and rural areas this is limited to the street (no house numbers) or just the village name.

1911

As well as the information provided in the previous censuses, the 1911 census supplies extra information and the returns completed by the householders themselves were kept for the first time. This allows researchers to see their ancestor's handwriting as well as some extra information. The extra information/details included:

- a married woman's 'fertility in marriage' - length of present marriage and children born to that marriage, the number still living and how many have died.
- detailed occupational data
- infirmity

1921

Due to the 1921 Census Act this will not be released early unlike the 1911 census. It will be released at the start of 2022 and will be available on the Find my Past website.

TIP: When filling in a census form (the next will be 2021) photocopy the completed form and put with your family history documents.

Scotland

Census records (1841 to 1911)

The open census records are transcript books prepared by the enumerators after collection of household schedules from the head of every dwelling, institution and vessel. They are made available as index-linked digital images on our <https://www.scotlandspople.gov.uk/guides/census-returns> website and at the [Scotlandspople Centre](#) and [Local Family History Centres](#). The preliminary pages, which include a detailed description of the enumeration district, can be viewed by selecting the browse option. The original household schedules were destroyed.

Ireland

The 1901 and 1911 censuses are the only complete surviving census records for the pre-Independence period. Fragments survive for 1821 – 1851 for some counties. Both the 1901 and 1911 censuses cover the island of Ireland.

The 1901 census was taken on **31st March 1901**. The 1911 census was taken on **2 April 1911**. The census returns are searchable at <http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/search/>

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