

CENSUS RETURNS

Problems Encountered and Surmised

Have you ever wondered why the census returns of Great Britain (every ten years) vary so much in accuracy and in information available?

Several answers spring to mind. The main answer is that the returns were not gathered by one man nor to that matter one Government.

The census provides the Government and local authorities the facts and figures to enable them to spend money in the right places, to build homes, schools and hospitals to cater for the needs of the population in a certain area or catchment.

This required information has grown over the years from the basic in the 1841 census to the much more complicated forms we have been asked to complete in the recent 2011 census.

Although the same information was gathered for each census year for the whole of the country, you only need to compare the sheets from county to county and even district by district within the county to see the differences in the answers given.

This is by large the fact that the enumerator responsible for a certain district although guided by instructions from a higher authority either misinterpreted the remit or misinterpreted the answers given by householders. Of course the enumerator would or should only have recorded the answers given by the head of the household. Also of course these replies would be given to however the enumerator posed the question too. However, even in this day and age of freedom of information, I think most of us would be suspicious of someone armed with a clipboard knocking at our doors and asking pertinent, personal and private questions. Therefore with this in mind we should all be wary of the accuracy of such returns.

Some census returns were lost after the information had been extracted and analysed. Only after 1841 did authorities retain and archive such returns as a matter of course. Therefore the coverage of the 1841 and 1851 census is a little hit and miss.

So we come to some of the items required on the census returns that are open to the question of accuracy. Once again we must remember that the earlier census returns

were carried out by someone from the area or perhaps even further afield physically knocking on the door and interviewing the head of the household or a senior member of the household - what in today's terms would be an appropriate adult.

This system of information gathering would have obviously aroused the suspicions of some of the locals and therefore their responses may have been guarded or at worst out and out lies.

Age or Year of Birth - Examples of inaccuracies in this field could be that the head of the household had really no idea about the other people in their household - the old adage ask a man about dates or family information and you would probably get the answer 'you will need to ask my wife or mother about that, she is the one that remembers those things'. Of course it may be that the ladies would have lied about their ages (Never ask a lady her age etc. etc.!!!!). In earlier censuses the age may have been rounded up or down to the nearest factor of 5 unless a child then the actual age would probably have been recorded. For example a person aged 23 may well have been recorded as being 25 or a person aged 63 could be recorded as either 60 or 65 - again it would be dependent on how the enumerator interpreted the answers.

Birth County or Town - Some people could be confused in which county their birth place lay, especially those border areas where a village or town could change authority jurisdiction between census years. The elderly may just not remember, the uneducated may not realise that they were born elsewhere. The one big problem here is local dialect and what local people would name areas of the town or village. One example I came across recently was "under the stars". Having seen the birth certificate of 1839 and from other information gleaned about the household at that time it can be safely assumed that the person was born at home and under the stairs, since this is where the parents had their bed, the children sleeping in a kind of loft or upper level of the small house.

Names - Again these are left to interpretation many people could not read nor write so had no idea of how to spell their names. The enumerator would probably have written what he heard hence - Hughes - could become Hughs, Hews, Huse, Ewes and even Yous and probably many more possibilities. We also have names such as Peggy - the person would probably have been baptised or registered as Margaret.

Relationship - Again this is dependent on who answered the enumerators questions. We must also remember that what we perceive in 2011 as a relationship may be totally different to the interpretation in the mid 1800's. One example is the word step as in stepson. I have seen this written for son in law. Sometimes also a visitor may be recorded but is in fact a closer member of the family who has moved away.

All of the above cause the family historian many sleepless nights and headaches but as you become more aware of your roots - the more likely you know where to look for those misinterpretations.

Here are some examples of answers to questions in various census returns that show exactly what we are up against.

Enumerator - Are all these children your own?

Reply - They are all my wife's, gentlemen.

Enumerator - Do you work?

Reply - But my wife works at 3 jobs

Enumerator - Do you work?

Reply - Aye sir. 'Part from this 'ere leg and my eyes ain't wot they used to be.

Enumerator - How many children have you more than twenty, ma'am?

Reply - La! Sir. I've only fifteen besides three that are dead.

Enumerator - So you have only a single servant then?

Reply - We have only one sir, but she's not single, she's married.

Enumerator - Do you keep a man in the house?

Reply - No sir, but I wish I could keep one out of it.

Enumerator - Are you the master in the house?

No, sir. I'm only the landlord, my wife's the master.

Enumerator - Where were you born?

Reply - I suppose sir in bed

Enumerator - Where were you born?

Reply - Don't know sir, I was found in the church porch.

Enumerator - When was you born?

Reply - In the middle of the night, me ma tells me she tried to hang on t' morning .

Enumerator - What is your occupation?

Reply - I don't understand that question.

Enumerator - How are you employed?

Reply - I am a labourer, sir. If you are needing a brace or two of pheasants or a rabbit for the pot then you know where I live!

These are just a few of the funny and not so funny answers given to probably very surprised, confused and exasperated enumerating officials .