

BRITISH CENSUSES (England, Wales, Channel Islands, Isle of Man; Scotland)

The first census was in 1801 and there has been a census every 10 years since then. Until 1841, detailed records were not kept as the early censuses were really only headcounts, although in a few rare cases some local records have survived. Until 2001, the principle was always to list people at the place they happened to be on a given night, so the census has never necessarily been an actual family record.

The dates ("night of...") on which censuses were taken were:

1841 June 6 th	1851 March 30 th	1861 April 7 th	1871 April 2 nd	1881 April 3 rd
1891 April 5 th	1901 March 31 st	1911 April 2 nd	1921 June 19 th	

The quantity of information recorded increased from time to time between 1841 and 1911, as shown below:

- 1841 Name; usually only one first name was recorded.
 Age; usually rounded down to nearest five years except for children up to 15.
 Sex.
 Occupation; many abbreviations used.
 Where born; only whether born in county or not, or born in Scotland, Ireland or foreign parts.

- 1851-1881 Name; should include full name but not necessarily so.
 Relationship to head of family; "step" and "in law" not necessarily as we understand them today.
 Condition: married, unmarried, widow, etc.
 Age; intended to be as at last birthday but cannot be assumed to be correct.
 Sex.
 Occupation; many abbreviations used.
 Where born; only as specific as information provided.
 Whether blind, deaf or dumb (1851 & 1861), also whether imbecile, idiot or lunatic (1871 & 1881)

- 1891 As 1881 plus:
 Number of rooms (if less than five) occupied by a family.
 Whether employer, employee or neither.

- 1901 Similar to 1891 except:
 Whether "employer", "worker" (i.e. employee) or "own account" (i.e. living off own means).
 Whether or not working at home.

- 1911 Similar to 1901 plus:
 Number of years married, numbers of children born alive, number still living and number who have died.
 Guests
 Number of servants
 Nationality

In Scotland, from 1861 the number of rooms with one or more windows was recorded, also, for an employer, the number of employees.

For every census from 1851 onwards, the country was divided into Registration Districts, each with its own Superintendent Registrar. Each District had some tens of thousands of inhabitants and was divided into Sub-Districts, which in turn were divided into Enumeration Districts. An Enumeration District was the area which could reasonably be covered by one person in a day. The number of people in an Enumeration District varied – more in a town, less in rural areas where most time would be spent travelling between farms. The enumerator had to fill in printed booklets from the information he had gathered. Each booklet had standard pages at the front where the area covered was described and with an example of how to fill in the returns. Every page was numbered, usually at the top centre. After they had been handed in, the booklets were bundled together in convenient quantities, each bundle being given a Piece Number. Every sheet in the bundle was given a consecutive Folio Number, stamped in the top right hand corner of the front of the sheet. This means that (a) the Folio Numbers run consecutively through several booklets, in each of which the page numbers start at 1, and (b) the Folio Numbers only appear on alternate sides. The crucial information to record when making a note of an entry is therefore the Piece Number and the Folio Number. The page number is really only useful for identifying which side of the folio is of interest.

The 1911 census was originally not scheduled for release until 2012. Consequent to a challenge under the Freedom of Information Act, most of the content was released at the beginning of 2009. Medical information will not be released until 2012. The individual household schedules were retained in 1911, unlike in previous years, and these are now available on line. In theory this should yield more accurate data, being the actual householder's record. On the other hand, the legibility of individual schedules may vary. Some will, in fact, have been completed by another family member or a friend, or even by the enumerator if the householder was illiterate or perhaps not co-operative. The 1921 census was subject to a clearer secrecy definition and will not be released before 2022. The 1931 census returns were destroyed by fire during WW2. There was no census in 1941, although National Registration records of 1939 may one day become available.