

The Census

Background

The first national census was taken in the UK in 1801. At the time, the country was at war with France and there was a food shortage because of bad harvests. The government needed to know how many people there were so that they could plan ahead. The first census and the next three (1811, 1821 and 1831) only counted the number of people in each parish along with some other statistics. No information about individuals was recorded. The 1841 census was the first one to record names, ages, occupations and place of birth.

Since then the census has been held every 10 years in much the same way. On one night of the year (usually a Sunday close to April 1st) an enumerator (a local man employed by the General Register Office, probably a teacher, clerk or churchwarden) would visit each house in a parish and drop off a form called a household schedule. The head of the household would then fill this in with the information about all those staying in that house on that night. On the next day the enumerator would visit each house again to collect the form. As some householders could not write, the enumerator sometimes helped them fill in the form.

The forms were then copied into enumerators' books. These were sent to the General Register Office which would prepare the census reports. Personal information from a census is only released after 100 years. Therefore the latest census you can access now is the 1911 census.

What information does the census contain?

1801-1831

No official information about individuals survives. Statistical information for each census can be viewed at Gloucestershire Archives. Unofficial census lists were sometimes kept by the local enumerator. These often survive in the local parish church collection. Try searching the online catalogue to see if any survive.

1841: Enumerators Books

- Address (may just be a street or village name)
- Name
- Age & sex
- Occupation (usually only the head of the household's occupation is given)
- Whether born in the county (Y), elsewhere in England & Wales (N), in Scotland (S), in Ireland (I) or in "Foreign Parts" (F)
- No relation to the head of the household is given

1851-1901: Enumerators Books

- Parish, Ward, Parliamentary Borough and other administrative districts
- Address (may just be a street or village name)
- Name
- Relationship to the head of the household
- Condition - whether married, single/unmarried or widowed
- Age & sex
- Occupation
- Whether employer, employed or unemployed (1891 onwards)
- Where born – may be a parish and county, a city or a country, e.g. Scotland or Ireland
- Whether blind or deaf and dumb. (also "lunatic", "imbecile" or "idiot" 1871 onwards only)
- Number of rooms with a window (1891 & 1901 only)

1911: Household Returns

Unlike the 1841-1901 censuses, the household returns for 1911 have survived. When you search the records you will see these and not the enumerators' books, therefore they look a little different – only one household is on each page.

- Address (should be in the bottom right hand corner)
- Name
- Relationship to the head of the household
- Condition - whether married, single/unmarried or widowed
- Age & sex
- The number of years a woman has been married, number of children born to that marriage, number of children still alive and number of those who have died.
- Occupation & industry
- Whether employer, employed or unemployed
- Where born – may be a parish and county, a city or a country, e.g. Scotland or Ireland
- Whether blind or deaf and dumb, "lunatic", "imbecile" or "idiot"
- Number of rooms (at the bottom of the page)

How to Find the Records

The 1841-1911 censuses are indexed by name on various websites, including www.ancestry.co.uk and www.findmypast.co.uk. You can access both of these websites for free at Gloucestershire Archives and any library in Gloucestershire. This is generally the quickest way to search for people in the census.

Gloucestershire Archives also holds copies of the 1841-1901 censuses on microfilm. These are indexed by parish name. We also hold copies of the census reports and population tables for 1801-1981. There was no census in 1941 due to WW2.

Points to Remember

- Names can be spelt wrongly – either by the enumerator or the indexer
- Ages as given can be wrong
- Middle names are often not noted
- Places of birth may not be exact, or true! A person may have thought they were born in one place but just grew up there and were born somewhere else
- Someone who is noted as being married may not be
- People may have given their middle name as their first name if they were known by that name
- People may not be where you expect them to be – they could be visiting friends or relatives on the night of the census. They might even be in hospital or jail!

Remember that all of the information is what the head of the household wrote (or said). They may have lied or not known the truth. The enumerator may have also heard, or copied, things incorrectly.

Further Reading

E. Higgs *Making Sense of the Census* (Public Record Office). Various editions are available.