

Census Records

Introduction

A census has been taken in England and Wales every 10 years since 1801 (apart from 1941, which only covered small areas). Before 1841 the Government only wanted to know numbers of people in each area, so only statistical data was sent to central authorities. From 1841 more data were required and the names of individuals and personal information were recorded. All the information in the 1841-1911 censuses can be seen.

Organisation of the census

The census is a list of people, arranged in household groups, by order of place. To find a person you need to know where they were living. Normally a parish is enough, but in larger towns it is useful to have a street address or area. On census night the enumerator distributed forms (or schedules) to every household for the head to complete, giving details of all persons in the home that night. The administrative area responsible for data collection was the civil registration district, so returns are listed by district, then by parish and then by enumeration districts. In larger parishes or urban areas, a number of enumeration districts will cover the area; in small rural parishes, one enumeration district may cover the whole parish.

At the beginning of each enumerator's book is a description of the area covered. This can be useful if you are trying to find a particular property or street, which is not shown on modern maps. The top of each page lists the administrative areas of district, civil parish or township, city or municipal borough, town, village or hamlet.

What can I find out?

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| 1841 | Census night: 6 June. Provides details of the address or location of the property, the names of the persons (although only one forename is recorded), ages (the age of those over 15 was often rounded down to the nearest 5, so someone who was 23 would be shown on the census as 20) and gender. Occupations, if any were also recorded. The final column states if they were born in the same county as they were living at the time of the census (Y = yes, N = no, NK = not known). No relationships between members of the household are noted, so it can be easy to confuse husbands and wives with brothers and sisters. |
| 1851-1881 | Census nights: 30 March 1851, 7 April 1861, 2 April 1871 and 3 April 1881. More information is included: the actual age and place of birth, each adult's occupation and marital status, and relationships with the head of the household. |
| 1891-1901 | Census nights: 5 April 1891 and 31 March 1901. Along with the information provided in the earlier censuses, the 1891 and 1901 returns record the number of rooms occupied by the family and whether a working person was employer, employee or self-employed. |
| 1911 | Census night: 2 April. Along with information provided in the earlier censuses, the 1911 returns record the number of years a couple has been married, the number of children born to the couple, the number of children still living and the number of infants deceased. This census also asks whether the respondents have any 'infirmity' and the age from which they were afflicted. |

Where can I find the census?

Somerset Heritage Centre

The census is held for the whole county, 1841-1901 on microfiche (microfilm for 1881). The card index is organised by parish, and provides a 'MC' number for each census year. The fiche are arranged by year and each fiche envelope is marked with the 'MC' number.

Census name indexes have been compiled by the Somerset and Dorset Family History Society and Weston super Mare Family History Society, for 1841, 1851 and 1891. Not all parishes have been indexed yet, so please check with staff to see if your parish is covered.

The Bath and Avon Family History Society have also compiled a name index for 1851 for the parishes in and around Bath.

Indexes compiled by individuals are also held for certain parishes. Please check with staff for areas covered. For the 1881 census there is a full name and place index for Somerset on fiche, along with a searchable CD-ROM.

Street indexes for 1841-1901 are available for major towns in Somerset (Bath, Bridgwater, Chard, Frome, Shepton Mallet, Taunton, Wells, Weston super Mare and Yeovil). These are helpful if you know an address for the person you are trying to trace, possibly from a birth, marriage or death certificate.

Online

The 1841-1901 census returns are available on www.ancestry.co.uk. This is available for free in Somerset libraries and at the Heritage Centre, but is otherwise a pay-per-view website. The 1881 census is available free of charge at www.familysearch.org. The 1911 census is online at www.1911census.co.uk, which is a pay-per-view website, and www.findmypast.co.uk, which is a subscription-only website.

Other County Record Offices

Most County Record Offices hold census returns for their county. Please ask staff for relevant contact details.

Pre-1841 census returns

The census returns for 1801-1831 were not kept centrally, but some copies have survived in parish and private collections. The information provided varies from census to census and coverage is sporadic. There is a list of Somerset parishes with earlier census returns in *Census Schedules and Listings, 1801-1831: an introduction and guide* (ref. PAM 2774). Alternatively, please ask staff for details and the index.

Some common abbreviations

//	Follows the name of the last person in each building
/	Follows the name of the last person in each household within a building
M or Mar	Married person
U/Un/Unm/S	Unmarried or single person
W/Widr/Wid	Widow
Ag.Lab	Agricultural labourer
App	Apprentice
Cl	Clerk
Dom	Domestic servant
FS	Female servant
H.P.	Member of armed forces on half pay
J	Journeyman
M.	Manufacturer
MS	Male servant
P.	Pensioners in armed forces
Rail.Lab.	Railway Labourer
Sh.	Shopman

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