

A Guide to Census Records

Introduction

The first official census of the population was taken on 10th March 1801. Censuses have been taken once every ten years since then, except for 1941, when the country was at war - but it was only from 1841 onwards that details about individual persons were recorded and preserved. Because censuses are generally closed to public inspection for one hundred years from the date they were taken, the 1911 census has been the latest to become available to family history researchers.

Each census records those in each household on census night. The head of the household filled in a return or household schedule, which was collected by the enumerator on the Monday after census night. If the householder could not write, the enumerator, another member of the household, or perhaps a neighbour completed the form for him/her. These individual household schedules were then transcribed into the census enumerators' books, together with statistical information, and it is from these books that copies of the census returns from 1841 to 1901 can be obtained. After the census was taken in 1911 the household schedules themselves were preserved, and it is these which have been made available for research for that particular census. The 1911 census is thus the first census where the householder's schedule has been made available to researchers, rather than the enumerator's books, and if the head of the household was able to write, his or her original handwriting together with a signature, can be seen when looking at 1911 census entries.

Censuses were taken on the night of Sunday/Monday as follows:

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

How the census is organized

Census returns are organised by county, and within each county by enumeration districts, which were based on the sub-districts used by the registrars of births, marriages and deaths from the introduction of civil registration in July 1837. An enumeration district may cover a whole village, or, in more populous areas, just a few streets. Until the census became available online, this meant that, unless your ancestors lived in a small village, it could be time-consuming to find them in a census return which had no accompanying index.

Information found in the census

The 1841 census records names, the occupation of the head of the household, approximate ages, and whether each person was born in the county, Y(es) or N(o). In 1841, ages were supposed to be recorded in months for babies up to one year old, and in years for children up to fifteen. After fifteen, ages were meant to be [but was not always] rounded down to the nearest 5 or 0, e.g. thirty four was recorded as 30, and twenty nine as 25. The relationships of members of a household to its head were not recorded.

From 1851 onwards, the census enumerators requested that accurate ages be recorded, and also asked for the relationship to the head of the household, marital status, and place of birth, where known.

The information recorded on individuals tended to increase with each census. Additional details recorded in the 1911 census included the number of years married (this referred only to a present marriage, and the question was only supposed to be answered by married women); the number of children born in that present marriage; the number that were still living, and the number who had died. Additional details relating to employment were meant to be recorded, as well as details of nationality. More details on the information provided in all the available censuses are provided on the website at <http://www.1911census.org.uk> .

Finding the census online

Census returns for the whole of England and Wales, including Devon (as well as for the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man) for 1841, 1851, 1861, 1871, 1881, 1891, 1901 and 1911 are all digitised and are accessible on-line through several commercial genealogical websites. The 1901 census was the first to be made available in this format. The 1911 census was only made available online – no film version is available. There are several web sites, including Find My Past and Ancestry, which offer scanned images of all the available census returns, and they all have a facility to search by name, but the indexes vary in quality according to the website.

These websites are available through subscription, and payment is required if you wish to access the digitised images of the original census online.

However, free access is available at some research centres, record offices and libraries in Devon, as well as at similar places in other parts of Britain and overseas.

The following Devon-based organisations have paid an annual subscription to allow access to the websites at their centres. Devon Heritage Centre, North Devon Record Office and Plymouth and West Devon Record Office offer free access to these two websites on their public access computers. These websites are also available at Devon Family History Society's Tree House Research Centre in King Street, Exeter and at Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints' (Mormon) Family History Centres in Devon.

Devon Libraries (now managed by Libraries Unlimited), Torbay Library Services and Plymouth Library Services may also have subscribed to one or both of these websites, to make them available through public access computers in their own local libraries.

For more detail on access to commercial genealogical websites, see the Devon Archives and Local Studies Research Guide/Information Leaflet titled **Family History Research**.

Online census transcripts

There are also online transcripts of some censuses on free-to-use websites.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormon) FamilySearch website includes a free indexed transcript of the 1881 census for England and Wales, and transcribed index information for the other censuses up to 1911. See the FamilySearch website page at <https://familysearch.org/search> .

The censuses for Devon between 1841 to 1891 are being transcribed and made available on-line for free through the FreeCEN – UK On-line Census Project website. This project aims to provide a "free-to-view"

online searchable database of the 19th century UK census returns, including England, Wales and Scotland (1841 to 1891). Devon census returns for 1841, 1861 and 1891 are currently completed. Other census years are continually being added. See the website at <http://www.freecen.org.uk> .

Finding the census on film

For those who prefer to search the census on film, census years for Devon dating from 1841 to 1901 are also available on microfiche or microfilm at Devon Heritage Centre in Exeter. We also hold scanned copies on CD-Rom of Devon censuses from 1841 to 1871 and for 1891. These are not indexed by name, but are indexed by area and by street for areas of high population. They are therefore of most use where you wish to search through a specific parish or parishes.

North Devon Local Studies Centre at Barnstaple, which incorporates the North Devon Record Office, holds filmed census returns covering the North Devon area. Plymouth Central Library (now on the corner of Armada Way and Mayflower Street, Plymouth), Torquay Library's Local Studies section and Exmouth Library originally held census returns on microfiche or film for their own areas. Please enquire at these libraries to see if they still do so.

Researchers living in other parts of Britain or overseas who do not have access to on-line censuses, can order Devon census microfilms or microfiche through their local Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormon) Family History Centre. To find a local centre, see the website page at <https://familysearch.org/locations/centerlocator> .

Census indexes

Normally, those using online census databases do not need to search other indexes, as searching is generally done through the websites' own indexes. However, for those who are using censuses on film and CD-Rom, the following indexes are available.

At Devon Heritage Centre, we hold microfiche indexes to the 1851 and 1881 censuses. These were compiled by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons). These are indexed by surname, birthplace and as enumerated. These indexes are also available in CD-Rom format. There is also an older index to the 1851 census, produced in booklet form by the Devon Family History Society. Copies of these booklets are also available at Devon Family History Society's Tree House Research Centre in King Street, Exeter.

For contact details, see their website page at <http://www.devonfhs.org.uk/treehouse.htm> .

There are microfiche indexes to most other years of the census for North Devon parishes. These indexes are also found locally in North Devon Local Studies Centre at Barnstaple and Devon Family History Society's Tree House Research Centre.

Devon Heritage Centre
Great Moor House
Bittern Road
Exeter
EX2 7NL

01392 888700

devonarchives@swheritage.org.uk

Website: www.swheritage.org.uk/devon-archives

South West Heritage Trust is a charity and a company limited by guarantee registered in England.
Registered office: Somerset Heritage Centre, Brunel Way, Norton Fitzwarren, Taunton, Somerset TA2 6SF
Company number: 09053532 Charity Number: 1158791 VAT Registration Number: 197221592