

Census taking through the ages

History in the making

On Sunday 29 April 2001 the people of Britain will take part in the twentieth full national Census of population. It will be 200 years since the first census in modern times was carried out in the United Kingdom.

Census taking throughout the ancient world

Civilisations of every era have recognised the need to collect information on their most valuable asset - their people. Throughout history, slaves, peasants and serfs, nobles, clergymen and monarchs have all taken part in censuses.

The Babylonians and the Chinese held censuses mainly for military and taxation purposes. The Egyptians collected information on the population so that they could plan armies of people to build their giant pyramids and to redistribute land following the annual flooding of the Nile.

The Greeks and Romans held censuses of population many years before the birth of Christ. It was the five-yearly census ordered by Caesar Augustus which required every man in the Roman Empire to return to his place of origin, thus ensuring that Joseph and Mary travelled to Bethlehem for the birth of Jesus.

Domesday and beyond - censuses in Britain

The first census to be held in England and Wales was in 1086 when William the Conqueror ordered the production of the Domesday Book. This detailed inventory of land and property was a massive undertaking at the time. It took many years to complete, and provides us with a remarkable picture of life in Norman Britain.

In Tudor and Stuart times bishops were made responsible for counting the number of families in their diocese, but Britain was very reluctant to adopt the idea of a regular official Census.

While Quebec held its first official Census in 1666, Iceland in 1703 and Sweden in 1749, Britain was slow to follow suit. God-fearing churchgoers believed that any type of people count was sacrilegious. They quoted the notorious Hebrew census order by King David in Biblical times which was interrupted by a terrible plague and never completed. Others said that a population count would reveal the nation's strengths and weaknesses to foreign enemies.

Towards the end of the 18th Century, however, it became increasingly obvious that nobody had any idea about the number of people living in Britain. Some said the population was rising while others were sure it was falling.

Seeing sense in the Census

Opposition to an official census finally withered away after the famous demographer Thomas Malthus published his essay on the 'principle of population' in 1798.

Malthus caused great concern by suggesting that population growth would soon outstrip supplies of food and other resources. Unable to support itself, Britain would be hit by famine, disease and other disasters.

Frightened by this alarmist view of the future, people began to see the need for a census. Parliament passed the Census Act in 1800 and the first official Census in England and Wales was on 10 March 1801.

Information was collected from every household by the Overseers of the Poor, aided and abetted by constables, tithingmen, headboroughs and other officers of the peace. The Act also applied to Scotland, where the responsibility for taking the count was placed on schoolmasters. In Ireland, the first modern census was taken 20 years later, in 1821.

The first official head count revealed that Great Britain's population at the time was 9 million. Previous estimates had varied between 8 million and 11 million.

Information about every person in the land was processed by an army of clerks using nothing more than pens and paper. Technology did not make census taking simpler until 1911, when punch cards and mechanical sorting were introduced. Computers were first used in 1961 and now play an essential role.

The modern Census

The census taken in 1841 is widely regarded as the first truly modern census, when the first Registrar General of England and Wales, John Lister, was made responsible for organising the count. The task of counting was passed on to local officers of the newly created registration service.

For the first time the head of each household was given a form to fill in on behalf of everyone in the dwelling on a certain day. This system has stood the test of time and it still forms the basis of the method we use today.

In Scotland there was no local registration service until 1855. A separate Act in 1860 gave the Registrar General for Scotland responsibility for taking the 1861 Census. Prior to the passing of the Northern Ireland Census Act 1969, censuses in the Province were taken under the authority of separate Acts of the Parliament of Northern Ireland.

Since 1801 there has been a census every ten years except in 1941 during the Second World War. The basic principle remains the same, though new questions have been added from time to time and others have disappeared. Up until 1911 the Government needed to introduce a new Census Act for every census it held. This was changed by the 1920 Census Act which made it possible for the Government to hold a census at any time no sooner than five years after the last census.

Controversial questions

Some of the questions can prove controversial. Before the 1951 Census the then Registrar General for England and Wales, Sir George North, needed to ask women to be more honest about their age. Many women of the time felt that this was too personal a question. Problem pages in newspapers and magazines were flooded with queries from distraught women, fearful that their true age would become public knowledge.

They need not have worried. As with all censuses, personal information of this nature is treated in the strictest confidence and kept closed to the public for 100 years.

The 2001 Census

The 2001 Census will collect more information than ever before to create an accurate and detailed picture of life in modern Britain. It is a huge task and will cost in the region of £255 million over the period 1993 to 2006, by which time all the information will have been processed and published.

But there can be no doubt that the information collected in April 2001 will be just as significant as that which William I collected on the land he had conquered in 1066 - the Census of today will be the history of tomorrow.

Other factsheets:

1. The Census
2. Why We Need a Census
3. Census 2001 – What's New?
4. Counting Everyone In – the Big Challenge
5. The Census Organisation
6. Census Jobs
7. The Census and the Law

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