

UK CENSUS

a decennial survey:

A national census helps build a detailed snapshot of our society. Information from the census helps the government and local authorities to plan and fund local services, such as education, doctors' surgeries and roads. They are held every **10 years**, although there is provision in the Census Act 1920 for a census to take place at intervals of five years or more.

There are 3 separate censuses in the United Kingdom - in England and Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, although they are often coordinated. From 1821 until 1911, the census included the whole of Ireland. The National Archives has a good [Census Guide](#) online.



Published Censuses

The United Kingdom Census records which have been published provide information about the residents of each house on the date the census was taken, & listed below with PRO Ref:

Year	Date	PRORef	Content & significant changes
1841	Sunday, 6 June	HO107	only recorded approximate age, limited place of birth information
1851	Sunday, 30 March	HO107	exact age, place of birth added, relationship given to head of household, asks if deaf, dumb or blind & marital status
1861	Sunday, 7 April	RG09	records uninhabited houses & some change to administrative divisions
1871	Sunday, 2 April	RG10	now asks if each person is Deaf and Dumb, Blind, Imbecile or Idiot or Lunatic
1881	Sunday, 3 April	RG11	some changes to administrative headings
1891	Sunday, 5 April	RG12	some changes to administrative headings
1901	Sunday, 31 March	RG13	asks if employer, worker or working on own account, wording changed to 'Idiot or feeble minded', (more acceptable to admit to!) and changes to administrative headings
1911	Sunday, 2 April	RG14	each family group to one schedule, in addition to previous censuses there is information how long the head of the household and his wife have been married, how many children they have alive and how many have died, each schedule is signed by the head of the household and there are details on the number of rooms in the property.
1921	Sunday, 19 June	RG15*	each family group to one schedule, ages are in years / months and employer's names and their addresses are included. Details of the number and ages of children under 16 are included. Each schedule is signed by the head of the household and there are details on the number of rooms in the property.

*The intended date for the 1921 census was 24 April, but was postponed due to industrial unrest, which the GRO decided would have made it impossible to collect accurate information in some areas.

Pre 1841:

The first proper national census was taken in 1841, prior to that there had been head counts taken of residents. Some parishes took more detailed censuses of their residents and some of these censuses have survived.

- 1801 - Tuesday, 10 March
- 1811 - Monday, 27 May
- 1821 - Monday, 28 March
- 1831 - Monday, 30 May

The SFHG have produced transcripts for pre 1841 censuses for parishes that include Ticehurst (1801 and 1831); Kirdford (1811); East Grinstead (1811, 1821 and 1831); Hailsham (1821 and 1831); Hastings (1821 and 1831); Hartfield (1821); Lewes St John Sub Castro, East Dean, Friston and Uckfield (1831); Rusper, Chiddingly and East Hoathly (1821); Lewes St Michael (1811).

Later Censuses

Post 1921:

- 1931 - Sunday 26 April 1931

However, on the night of Saturday 19 December 1942 there was a fire at a store in Hayes, Middlesex. This contained the census records for England & Wales for 1931, that is the whole of the schedules, enumeration books and plans. They were all **completely destroyed**.

- 1939 - not a census but a National Register. *Please see [handout: 1939 Register](#)*
- 1941 - no census in 1941 due to the war
- 1966 - 24 April 1966, a mini-census using a 10% sample of the population was taken.

IMPORTANT CENSUS TIPS

1. **Information was provided by the head of each household** - it may not be correct. People lied about their age, forgot or didn't know where they were born and simplified their answers. People could not necessarily read or write (especially with the earlier censuses), so they relied on help to fill them in from people who may have made errors in spelling place names, misheard information or simply made errors when entering it.
2. **People were suspicious of the census when it started in 1841**. They did not always want to provide information and may have avoided being present, or deliberately given false details.
3. **Census taking got more efficient with each census** but earlier censuses failed to include those working nights, working at sea, travellers such as those on canal boats or Gypsies. The 1841 census only recorded the age rounded down to the nearest 5, for people over 15 years old, and had no place of birth recorded. Each of the subsequent censuses improved with the 1851 requiring place of birth and exact age. By the 1911 census we find out how many children in each family (living and deceased) and how many rooms to the families home.
4. **The 1911 & 1921 censuses are the only ones for which the original household schedules have survived**. They were destroyed for earlier censuses so that the information we see is that which was collated by the enumerator. With the 1911 & 1921 censuses, we see the actual form our ancestors filled in and signed.
5. **People changed their names, ages, places of birth from one census to another** depending on what has happened to them in the intervening 10 years. A man marrying a younger woman may lose some years of his age, a woman moving away from the small village she was born in may give the nearest town as her place of birth whilst a housemaid for a family relies on the head of the household to give her details as they believe them to be.
6. **Be aware that errors may arise when the census records are transcribed**. It may be that the words or names are not clear, and the transcriber has made a guess or even made an error. If you can't find the record on (say) FindMyPast, try another source such as Ancestry. View the image before the transcript as your reading may be better than the transcribers. Think laterally. For example - if you know they were born in a particular place, they may not have known that! Be less precise in the search.

Accessing the census online

Ancestry - all UK censuses except 1921 but transcripts only for the Scottish censuses. Access to original images. (Subscription charge but free at the SFHG library and many public libraries and record offices).

FindMyPast - all UK censuses, but transcripts only for the Scottish censuses. Access to original images. (Subscription charge but free at the SFHG library in The Keep and at record offices. 1921 Census not available in the SFHG Library).

Scotlands People - Scottish censuses with access to original images (Subscription charge)

FreeUKCEN - incomplete database of UK censuses. varied coverage but added to all the time.

FamilySearch - complete coverage of the 1881 census, limited access to other years