



SUSSEX FAMILY HISTORY GROUP

CENSUS INFORMATION

The census in the United Kingdom is decennial, that is, held every ten years, although there is provision in the Census Act 1920 for a census to take place at intervals of five years or more. There have only been two occasions where the census has not been decennial: There was no census in 1941 due to the war; and a minicensus using a ten percent sample of the population was conducted on 24 April 1966. There are actually three 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.

Published Censuses - The census records which have been published provide information about the residents of each house on the date the census was taken, as shown below:

- United Kingdom Census 1801 - Tuesday, 10 March
- United Kingdom Census 1811 - Monday, 27 May
- United Kingdom Census 1821 - Monday, 28 March
- United Kingdom Census 1831 - Monday, 30 May
- United Kingdom Census 1841 - Sunday, 6 June HO107
- United Kingdom Census 1851 - Sunday, 30 March HO107
- United Kingdom Census 1861 - Sunday, 7 April RG09
- United Kingdom Census 1871 - Sunday, 2 April RG10
- United Kingdom Census 1881 - Sunday, 3 April RG11
- United Kingdom Census 1891 - Sunday, 5 April RG12
- United Kingdom Census 1901 - Sunday, 31 March RG13
- United Kingdom Census 1911 - Sunday, 2 April RG14

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.

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); Ruser, Chiddingly and East Hoathly (1821); Lewes St Michael (1811).

Things to be aware of when using the census

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 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 census is the only census 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 census, 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) Ancestry, try another source such as FindMyPast. If you can, examine the original document. 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.

Information included in the censuses and significant changes to each census.

1841 - only recorded approximate age, limited place of birth information

1851 - exact age, place of birth added, relationship given to head of household, asks if deaf, dumb or blind & marital status

1861 - records uninhabited houses & some change to administrative divisions

1871 - now asks if each person is Deaf and Dumb, Blind, Imbecile or Idiot or Lunatic

1881 - some changes to administrative headings

1891 - some changes to administrative headings

1901 - asks if employer, worker or working on own account, wording changed to 'Idiot or feeble minded', (the change in wording made it more acceptable to admit to) and changes to administrative headings

1911 - 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.

Accessing the census online

Ancestry - all UK censuses but transcripts only for the Scottish censuses. Access to original images. (Subscription charge but free at the SFHG library)

FindMyPast - all UK censuses, but transcripts only for the Scottish censuses. Access to original images . (Subscription charge but free at the SFHG library: the Philip Lucas Room in The Keep)

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

FreeCEN - an incomplete database of UK censuses with varied coverage but being added to all the time.

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

See also Handout Electoral Information and 1939 Register.