



Somerset Archive and Record Service

Information Leaflet

Censuses in Somerset

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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). Prior to 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 was required and names of individuals and personal information was recorded. Census records are subject to a 100-year closure period, and current access is only allowed for those taken up until 1901.

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 locate 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?

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 sex. 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 returns record the number of rooms occupied by the family and whether a working person was employer, employee or self-employed.

Where can I find the census?

Somerset Record Office

The census is held for the whole county, 1841-1871 and 1891-1901 on microfiche. The card index is organised by parish, and provides a 'MC' number for each census year. The fiche are divided by year and each fiche envelope is marked with the 'MC' number. The 1881 census is on fiche and film for Somerset and on CD-Rom for the whole country.

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 the 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.

The Family Records Centre

The Family Records Centre, London, holds census returns for the whole of England and Wales, 1841-1901 on microfilm or microfiche. Go to www.familyrecords.gov.uk, for more information.

Online

The 1901 census returns are available on a pay per view basis on the National Archives website, www.nationalarchives.gov.uk. The 1841-1891 census returns are available on a pay per view basis through www.ancestry.co.uk. The 1881 census is also available free of charge at www.familysearch.org.

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 retained centrally, but some copies have survived in parish and private collections. The information provided varies from census to census and coverage is sporadic. A list of Somerset parishes with earlier census returns is contained 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

Contact details

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