Some returns relate to institutions such as hospitals, prisons and hotels. In these returns, the position of the individual in the institution (officer, visitor, servant, patient, inmate) is indicated by an abbreviation (O,V,S, P, I).

Geolocation

Another innovative feature which appears on the 1939 dataset on Findmypast, is that each household is geo-located onto a contemporary map of the place where they were living. Alternative overlays allow the maps to be exchanged for one dated circa 1880 and for one from the present day, so it is possible to gain some information about the development of the area in which the household lived.

Other UK Records

The 1939 Register dataset relates only to England and Wales. There are separate records for Scotland and Northern Ireland and the Channel Islands and Isle of Man (although the last of these appears to have been temporarily 'mislaid'). There are no immediate plans to publish these registers. There are no registers for the Irish Republic, which was neutral during the war and which did not implement a similar system. As has been noted earlier, members of the armed forces were registered separately, and these records too are currently unavailable.

Using the Information

As with all information, you can use the details as a key to unlock other sources. Knowing the address may allow you to find a rate book, which names the householder or an electoral register, which will name all those resident and over the age of 21. This may give a clue to the identities of some of those whose records are still closed. If the family has remained in the same place for a long time, it may be worth checking the address in the 1921 census. Street directories may also be helpful.

Other Resources

These include over 1,000 photographs from the Trinity Mirror archive and a selection of contemporary newspaper articles.

The 1939 Register

What is the 1939 Register?

The 1939 Register was introduced to provide up to date population statistics in order to assist with control and planning for mobilisation and evacuation purposes. At the outbreak of war when the register was compiled identity cards were issued and in 1940 this enabled the distribution of ration cards.

Registration is Introduced

On 5 September 1939, just two days after war had been declared, the National Registration Act received royal assent. On the 29th of the same month, some 65,000 enumerators collected completed registration forms from every household in the UK, a logistical exercise of impressive dimensions.

The Act required every person, adult or child, and not serving in the armed forces, to register. Each registered person was issued with an identity card and a ration book. While it is possible that some people may have evaded registration, it can be assumed, for all practical purposes, to be complete.

The Registers

The information collected was limited to name, birth date, marital status, occupation and address. It was also recorded if the individual was serving in organisations such as the ARP or in a reserved occupation. Details of birthplace were not collected. It is believed that this was to avoid the persecution of minorities in the event of an invasion (though is, of course, of great regret to family historians). The forms were transcribed into registers; one line per individual with entries for each household kept together. They are therefore not dissimilar to census enumeration books. The final register consisted of 7,000 volumes, each holding details of about 2,000 residences. In all 1.2 million pages record details of around 41 million individuals.

Registration continued well beyond the end of the war. Individuals were still required to register and to carry identity cards up to 1952. However, the

registers achieved a much more permanent status in 1948 when they were used as the basis for registration of the population into the newly established National Health Service. An individual's registration number became their NHS number. The registers were updated manually until 1991 when they were replaced by a computerised system.

Why are the Registers Important?

The latest national census to be released is the 1921 census which was opened to the public in January 2022. The census returns for 1931 were completely destroyed in a fire. There was no census in 1941. Consequently, the next census, for 1951, will be released on 1 Jan 2052 and so there will be a gap of 30 years facing future family historians. The 1939 Registers are therefore an important census substitute in the middle of this void.

Digitisation

Findmypast, who initially won the contract scanned and transcribed the 1.2 million pages of the registers and published them. The accuracy of the data is claimed to be as good as 98.5% of legible details. For a variety of reasons some details are not legible, for example obscured by an ink blot!

Record Closure

Registration took place only 80 years ago so some people who appear in the registers will be alive today. A 100 year closure is usual for such records so not all of the records can be opened to public view. Only records for people who are known (or assumed to be) dead can be treated as 'open'. All others must be treated as 'closed'. Many records are open because the person's age today would be more than 100 years and one day. Others are known to be dead because their register entry is annotated with their date of death. Nevertheless, there are many records for people who are undoubtedly deceased but do not meet either of these conditions. Many will have died after 1991, when the records were computerised and annotation of the registers discontinued, other records will not have been annotated with date of death by clerical oversight.

Originally Findmypast attempted to reconcile the registers with other sources for deaths, such as civil registration records. Where death can be proved from these sources, the record will be opened automatically. Records may also be opened by user request if a user can show, by submitting a scanned copy of the person's death certificate, that they are deceased. Even if death cannot be established by either of these methods, the record will be opened in due course once the calculated age exceeds one hundred years and one day. This is reviewed weekly so the database of open records will be expanded continuously, even if it may not be until 2039 that the last record might be opened. We assume that Ancestry will be equally as diligent.

Accessing the Records

These registers can now be found on both Findmypast and Ancestry websites.

The register may be searched either by personal name (with optional filters for date of birth, occupation, gender, marital status and address) or also by street address on Findmypast. This route which can be particularly useful if you are dealing with a common name but know where the people were living in September 1939. The additional filters can be invaluable, particularly date of birth, which can be valuable when researching a common name.

Occupations can be very specific and could lead to entries being accidentally filtered out. A good tip is to use a general term such as 'coal' which will find 'coal miner',' coal hewer' and many other coal mining related entries.

Searches produce a list of 'matches' and shows names, year of birth and the borough and county where the person was registered. A 'Preview' button leads to a listing of the same limited information plus this same information for another individual in the household (assuming there is more than one in the household) and the number of other people in the household. This can help increase confidence that you have the correct household.

Viewing the original page will display the scanned image of the register on which the household appears. Where entries for individuals are still closed, the relevant lines will be redacted and blanked out.