Useful Information

Ancestry
www.ancestry.co.uk

Find my Past
www.findmypast.co.uk

Genes Reunited
www.genesreunited.co.uk

The Genealogist
www.thegenealogist.co.uk

Top Tip
if you are having trouble finding your ancestors in the Census, try looking for parents, siblings, children, or names of other family members. You may find them this way.

Original Scottish census returns can be viewed at:

Scotland's People
www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk

Irish census returns for 1901 and 1911 can be viewed at:

National Archives of Ireland
www.nationalarchives.ie

For more information:
mlfhs.uk/research/getting-help/research-guides

Archives +

Manchester & Lancashire Family History Society
3rd Floor, Manchester Central Library
St Peter's Square, Manchester M2 5PD
Email: office@mlfhs.org.uk

Census

A census is a survey which was put together by the government. It contains a particular set of questions in order to find out and record information about the country's population. It is unique because it covers everyone at the same time and asks the same questions of each person.

History of the Census
Since 1801 and every ten years since (except during World War 2) the government has set aside one day for holding a census in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland (from 1921 onwards this covered Northern Ireland only). The last census that was held in the UK was in March 2021.

The early census returns for 1801-1831, with a few local exceptions, did not contain names or personal details and so are of no value to family historians. The census material that is available today and that family historians find most useful are the census returns from 1841-1921.

What information will the census show me?
The 1841 census, although the least detailed, will give you valuable information about your ancestors. It shows for each person in the household on census night:

- First name and surname
- place where they were living
- gender
- age (for those over 15 this is rounded down to the nearest 5 years)
- occupation (job)
- whether they were born in the county (Y or N)
- whether they were born in Scotland (S), Ireland (I) or Foreign parts (F)

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From 1851 onwards the returns are more useful as they also show:

- the relationship of each person to the head of household (Note: sometimes brother/sister-in-law refers to a step brother/sister)
- whether they were married or single
- Their precise age in years (or months/weeks for infants)
- certain medical disabilities
- county and parish of birth
- country of birth if they were born outside England or Wales

Please note: You are unable to view census material earlier than 100 years as it is protected by the 100 year rule to safeguard the confidentiality of the living. The latest census that we are currently able to view is 1921.

How will this help me?

Census returns show your ancestors as part of a family unit and provide place of residence, place of birth, age and occupation. This can help you to obtain birth, marriage and death certificates which can provide more specific information to enable you to gain a fuller picture of the lives of your ancestors. The census returns will also show their neighbours, to whom they might be related either at the time or, through marriage, in the future.

Census returns from 1841-1911 in England and Wales are readily available online on a variety of pay per view sites. Access to the 1921 census is currently on Find my Past only. You can access two of the larger genealogical websites: Ancestry and Find my Past on the computers at Manchester Central Library.

1841-1901 Census

From 1841 to 1901 a census schedule was completed for each household, this was then collected by the enumerator who copied the information into enumeration books before the schedules were destroyed. It is the enumeration books which you view online. Special enumeration books were completed for institutions such as workhouses, barracks and hospitals. There were also special schedules for vessels from 1851 onwards.

1911 Census

In 1911 the household schedules were not copied into enumeration books but were analysed directly and have been preserved. When viewing these you see the return as filled in and signed by your ancestor (if they were literate). This is also the last census to show complete families before WW1. Particularly useful to family historians, the 1911 census is the first census that shows how many years a couple had been married, how many of their children are living and how many have died. This census was also the first where the army overseas was enumerated by name.

1921 Census

The 1921 census was delayed and finally taken on Sunday 19 June 1921 and offers more detailed information than in previous census enumerations.

- Age was recorded in years and months
- Name of employer and place of work was recorded
- Marital status for those 15 or older with 'divorce' as a status for the first time on the census
- Details of whether or not parents still alive for those under 15
- It also included detailed questions on education - full time or part time
- Ages and numbers of children assessed dependency and numbers of orphans, assisting the introduction of the Widows', Orphans' and Old Age Pensions Act of 1925.
- Removal of the 'infirmity' question
- It was the first census that allowed people to submit a confidential return, meaning that people may have been more willing to reveal information.
- Returns for the Isle of Man and Wales included whether the person spoken an additional language

How trustworthy is census information?

- You should always be cautious about ages.
- A person may not know their precise age or may have reasons to 'adjust' it. Birthplaces may be the first place of which a person has any memory and not where they were actually born. It is useful to look at the census for several years to compare details.