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# Census taking through the ages

## A glimpse at earlier Censuses



### **Early Censuses**

Civilisations of every era have recognised the need to collect information on their most valuable asset – their people. Throughout history, slaves, peasants and serfs, nobles, clergymen and monarchs have all taken part in censuses.

The Babylonians and the Chinese held censuses mainly for military and taxation purposes. The Egyptians collected information on the population so that they could plan armies of people to build their giant pyramids and to redistribute land following the annual flooding of the Nile.

The Greeks and Romans held censuses of population many years before the birth of Christ. It was the five-yearly census ordered by Caesar Augustus which required every man in the Roman Empire to return to his place of origin, thus ensuring that Joseph and Mary travelled to Bethlehem for the birth of Jesus.



### **Domesday and beyond**

The first census to be held anywhere in the British Isles was in 1086 when William the Conqueror ordered the production of the Domesday book. This detailed inventory of land and property was a massive undertaking for the time and took many years to complete.

While Quebec held its first official Census in 1666, Iceland in 1703 and Sweden in 1749, Great Britain and Ireland were slow to follow suit. In Britain some believed that any type of people count was sacrilegious. Others said that a population count would reveal the nation's strengths and weaknesses to foreign enemies.

Towards the end of the 18th Century, however, it became increasingly obvious that nobody had any idea about the number of people living in the British Isles. Some said the population of Britain was rising while others were sure it was falling.



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### ***Seeing sense in the Census***

Opposition to an official census finally withered away after the famous demographer Thomas Malthus published his essay on the 'principle of population' in 1798. Malthus caused great concern by suggesting that population growth would soon outstrip supplies of food and other resources. Unable to support itself, Britain would be hit by famine, disease and other disasters.

Frightened by this alarmist view of the future, people began to see the need for a census. Parliament passed the Census Act in 1800 and the first official Census in England and Wales was held on 10 March 1801.



### ***Census Taking in Ireland***

Official census taking came later to Ireland although social historians rightly point to the rich source of demographic and socio-economic data available from earlier work such as that of Sir William Petty in the Down Survey. (Petty had estimated the population of Ireland at 1.1 million in 1672). However, the first official attempt at modern enumeration came in 1813. Sadly, it was not a success, the supervision of the enumeration having been passed to the Grand Juries of the various counties who were not adequately structured to accomplish the task. In some counties no steps were taken whilst in others the work completed was unsatisfactory. After two years the attempt was abandoned. Both the censuses of 1821 and 1831 also experienced certain difficulties – and it was not until 1841 when Ordnance Survey Maps were available that a total comprehensive enumeration was achieved.

From 1821 censuses were taken at ten yearly intervals until 1911. Subsequently, events in Ireland resulted in the postponement of the 1921 census. Thus resulted a break with Great Britain census timing – one which was not restored until 1951. It was not until 1925 that the Northern Ireland Minister of Finance introduced the second reading on a Census Bill. He indicated that it was nearly 15 years since the last Census in Ireland and that intervening events such as the Great War and the 1918-19 flu epidemic required a census to be carried out. It was accordingly held on 18 April 1926 (the day also of a census in the rest of Ireland). The head of each household was given a form to fill in on behalf of everyone in the dwelling on a certain day. This system has stood the test of time and it still forms the basis of the method we use today.

In order to bridge the gap between the census of 1926 and the planned census of 1941 a census of more limited scope (e.g. omitting questions regarding occupation and industry) was taken in 1937. The outbreak of war and the subsequent paper shortage led to a restricted publication programme and later, inevitably, to the abandonment of plans for the 1941 census. Since 1951 Censuses in Northern Ireland have been held at the same time as the rest of the United Kingdom at ten yearly intervals, with the exception of the additional 1966 mid term census.



### ***The 2001 Census***

The 2001 Census will collect more information than ever before to create an accurate and detailed picture of life in modern Northern Ireland. It is a huge task but there can be no doubt that the information collected in April 2001 will be just as significant as that collected in earlier censuses – the Census of today will be the history of tomorrow.