

TEACHERS' NOTES **Understanding the Census**

Census taking began in 1801 with parishes being asked questions about their local populations. Information gathered included numbers of individuals and families in a parish, baptisms, marriages and burials. Questions about occupation would also occasionally be asked.

Census taking grew more detailed by 1831, and by the time of the 1841 census, a committee was founded by the London Statistical Society which made recommendations on the way that the census should be carried out.

The census questionnaires were carried out by local enumerators who were appointed to the position temporarily by registrars. Enumerators had to be:

- A person of 'intelligence and ability'.
- Able to 'read and write well'.
- Have basic mathematical ability.
- Able bodied to the extent that he could the full length of the area he was enumerating.
- At least 18 years old.
- 'Temperate, orderly and respectable'.
- Male – until 1891 when women were permitted to become enumerators.

Despite these requirements, and the post being paid, the quality of enumerators varied. Those from rural areas tended to be more knowledgeable about their communities than their urban counterparts.

Census forms would be left with households overnight and enumerators were responsible for collecting completed forms. If questionnaires were incomplete or the householders were illiterate, the local enumerator was responsible for asking the questions and filling in the forms.

Falsifying census returns was a criminal offense but this did not ensure complete accuracy since people may not have been aware of the precise details that were requested of them; for example not everyone would have known their exact date of birth.

All this meant that census returns varied in accuracy and completeness and now makes for difficulties using them for research today.

Other issues include changes to house numbers. This is a problem in Swindon which experienced rapid growth following the arrival of the Great Western Railway. House-building could be piecemeal and in order to create a consecutive line of houses along a road, the house numbers could be subject to change if new developments sprung up.

An example of this is *34 Cambria Place* in Swindon: in 1871 it was regular house but by 1891 it was a Baptist Chapel. The *Grey Hound Inn* was located at *30 Cambria Place* in 1871 but by 1891 had been renumbered *22 Cambria Place*.