



1911 and 1921 Censuses

Request asked how the censuses of 1911 and 1921 could be accessed.

Information provided

The 1911 census form included the following emphatic assurance to Householders: 'The contents of the Schedule will be treated as confidential. Strict Care will be taken that no information is disclosed with regard to individual persons. The returns are not to be used for proof of age, as in connection with Old Age Pensions, or for any other purpose than the Preparation of Statistical Tables.

In 1966 the Lord Chancellor determined that all decennial census returns should be closed for a period of 100 years, on the grounds that they contained personal information supplied by citizens about themselves, the disclosure of which would constitute a breach of good faith. Since 1966 successive Governments have consistently maintained this position, and from 1981 onwards there has been an explicit assurance on census forms that they will remain closed to the public for 100 years.

In a debate in the House of Commons held on 29 March 2004, the Minister at the Department of Constitutional Affairs reaffirmed that, in the Government's view, a closure period of 100 years strikes the right balance between the access interests of family historians and the right of citizens to have the personal information about themselves in their census returns kept confidential. As he explained, 'the Government believe that maintaining the security and confidentiality of the information that citizens supply about themselves in their census returns is of paramount importance. It is strongly in the national interest that public confidence in these confidentiality assurances is maintained'.

Now that the FOI Act has taken effect, the National Archives will be mindful of this most recent restatement of government policy when it considers requests for access to information contained in the 1911 census returns, in consultation with the Office for National Statistics (ONS) as the transferring department. Consultations have taken place on the specific enquiries received to date, and it has not been possible to release the information that has been sought on the grounds that the exemption (section 41) relating to information provided in confidence applies.

Censuses from 1921 onwards were taken under the provisions of the Census Act 1920. This legislation prohibits the release of personal information by the Registrar-General, those under his control or those supplying services to him without lawful authority. The census returns from 1921 onwards which are in the custody of the Registrar-General for England and Wales are, as a consequence, exempt information under Section 44 of the FOI Act relating to information prohibited from disclosure by or under any enactment.

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