

CENSUS, A TIME CAPSULE

Some months ago the following article by Ralph Whitlock appeared in the Manchester Guardian and I thought it summed up what Census records mean to us.

"Perhaps the most useful of all aids to the study of parish registers and the unraveling of a family tree is the 1851 census. This comprehensive document records the population of each parish as the census officer found it on a March day in that year. The details recorded are the names of each person residing in each house, their relationship to the head of the family, their "condition" (i.e. married, single or widowed), their age, their rank, profession or occupation and their place of birth.

No earlier census provided such a wealth of information. Moreover, the date is exactly right to be of the maximum use. Many of the younger individuals mentioned in the census lived on till within living memory, so providing a path deep into the past.

For instance, here on the first page is my great-grandfather William, who with his son aged nine and two daughters, aged five and three, and a twenty-eight year old niece as a housekeeper. Later in the census we discover a widow lady, aged 52, with a daughter aged 18 who is classified as a school-teacher, no doubt at a local dame's school.

We know, though they could have had no inkling of the course of events on that March morning of 1851, that William was destined to marry that eighteen year old girl and that much family friction would result.

Here too is my great-uncle Arthur aged seven months, who, twelve years later, was widely blamed for setting fire to a barn and so starting a conflagration which burned down half the village. We who pore over the records and try to visualise the village as it was on that March day have a queer sense of feeling like God! Observing these good people going about their daily business we can say, "Ah, you don't know what is going to happen to you, but we do!"

The 1851 census of Britain that Ralph writes about was the first to give such detail and we know from the current forms (June 3 was census day in Canada) there is not a lot more information of a genealogical nature asked for today. The 1900 census of the United States is certainly one of the most useful I have seen as it asks for the month and year of birth which for some reason has made the ages given much more accurate. With the month, year and place of birth it is possible to use the 1900 census to connect families together. An index of the census records included in our files is given in this Newsletter.

(Ralph Whitlock's Main Line is ML19, included with this issue)