Understanding the 1921 census

5th July 2023 – Guild of One-name Studies
By John Hanson FSG

At the time of writing/lecture the 1921 is only available on the Findmypast website - screen shots/information are correct at the time of publication

What are we covering?

Before we start
How to find out more
Scanning and transcription
What is different about the 1921 census?
Useful information
Searching for records

Understanding the census

The key to this and any real problem in finding people is understanding the records.
It doesn't matter whether it is:-

- the census
- civil registration
- parish records
- probate or anything else

So, you need to understand how and why the records were created in the first place
And what may have changed since the 1911 census
Would they make a difference?
Legal requirements of the 1920 census Act
The process

Before we start

Many might think – "It's just another census"

But it is more than that!

Remember that it is last census we will see till 2052
The 1931 was destroyed in WW2
1941 was not taken
Whilst the 1939 can help is NOT a census

Understanding the 1921

The key to this and any real problem in finding people is understanding the records
It doesn't matter whether it is

- the census
- civil registration, parish records, probate or anything else

So, you need to understand how and why the records were created in the first place
Were there any changes that might affect them
Would they make a difference?

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With the 1921 specifically we also need to consider
Legal requirements of the 1920 Census Act
The process to achieve it going online

I have listened to many 1921 census lectures recently and Myco Clelland of FindMyPast made the point in one about the 1921 census but it applies to all

“Remember that it is where they were not where they lived”
“It asks who you are with not who’s in your family”

Therefore, ask yourself the question “who are the boarders, visitors and lodgers” – are they related

Find Out More about the 1921 census

Explore what else was happening in the 1920’s
Not just the census
Articles in the family history magazines
Blogs, webinars and videos
Lots of YouTube videos by findmypast – they have their own channel
Even the Q&A sessions can be useful
www.youtube.com/user/findmypast

There were also over 20 lectures on the 1921 census at Rootstech 3rd-5th March 2022
https://www.familysearch.org/rootstech/
Sign-in with your family search ID and search for 1921
Of particular interest were

“Building the online product experience for the 1921 England & Wales Census”
https://tinyurl.com/4c4a2n5b which explained what they needed to do prior to the launch but also some of the issues caused by not being able to see the data till the last minute. A fascinating insight into the background.

If you have Irish ancestors then Brian Donovan’s “The Irish in the 1921 Census of England & Wales” might be of interest as there was a census in Ireland in 1921

The series by Aoife O’Connor on “1921 Census of England & Wales, Digitisation, Exploration, Discoveries” has some interesting details especially the third part on discoveries – she was the manager of the entire project at FMP.

Part three of the Jen Baldwin series on “Around the World with the 1921 Census of England & Wales” is interesting again for the background information

Sophie Kay in her lecture series “Ancestral Hide-and-Seek in the Roaring Twenties: The 1921 Census of England & Wales” talks about “private census returns” not covered by any of the others I have seen and need investigation. Turns out she was talking about “**confidential census return”** which is covered on the website in paragraph 5 of “How the census was taken in 1921” in the “Discover more about the 1921 Census of England & Wales” under the search screen.

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Background information

The census came after …

- A global pandemic – Spanish Flu
- World War one still had the ongoing impact
- Protests, civil and industrial unrest
- Distrust of politicians
- All often commented on in the returns

I think it is all summed it up well in the Registrar General's pamphlet issued early in 1921:-

"The first census since the war is to be taken on the April 24; it is safe to say that this will be the most important yet made in British history. The war has cut clean across every branch of our national life, broken up and disrupted populations and violently upset all birth, marriage and death rates, so that there is hardly a single question upon which we can look back to the last census figures for any guidance"

The 1921 Census was scheduled for 24th April 1921
There was a threat of major civil unrest and strikes from the 15th April so it was delayed till 19th June
The threat/strikes didn't happen but it was too late to turn the clocks back
However, it does cause issues because many could be away on holiday – but remember what Myko said earlier

Enumeration process

It includes
England and Wales
Channel Islands
Isle of Man
Armed forces – home and overseas (except those in Scotland)
Merchant Navy and fishing fleets (in port or arriving a few days afterwards)
Scotland – has its own and not due for release till late 2022
Ireland – wasn't taken due to the unrest

Schedule types – above crest on address page
See the list online for more details on each but
https://www.findmypast.co.uk/articles/world-records/1921-census---schedule-type-codes
A, AA, AS – Channel Islands
E, EE, EEE – England
W, WW, WWW – Welsh (English language)
C, CC – Welsh (Welsh language)
NM – Armed forces
P, PP, PPP – Prison
I, II, III – Institution
S, SS - Shipping
M, MM, MS – Isle of Man

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Put back to the 19th June
Forms had already been printed when the change of date was decided but not reprinted
A single sheet explaining the change was printed for all, with an advert on the back to cover the cost (the one and only time advertising issued with the census – the ironic point is that it was never paid for as the instigator was charged with fraud – but not for this)
Check out local papers for the uproar over the notice sent out with the forms
Schedules delivered between 11th and 18th June – but which one!
Collected on the 20th June
Bound into 28,162 volumes
300 to 600 schedules per volume
Multiple parishes but no separation!
20 million digital images created
Which include 38,443,248 names
NO enumerators books to complete

1921 Census statistics

Almost 1 million never came home from WW1
Of those that came home around 2 million returned with some form of disability
1.75 million more women than men (1,096 per 1,000) largest group in the 20-45 age range
35% increase in the number of people in hospital over the 1911 census
Over 730,000 fatherless children but only 261,000 without a mother

Scanning and Transcription

Constrained by the 1920 census Act
And not helped by a global pandemic and all its lockdown and social distancing restrictions affecting both scanning and transcription
Two and a half years to conserve, digitise and transcribe – scanning only completed in Sept 2021
Like 1939 no one saw a complete page – front and back transcribed by three different people
Transcription completed October 2021
Transcripts and images encrypted till 50 working days before release
Once all was opened up not enough time to cleanup everything but released on schedule
Cleanups have been happening on a daily basis since and Paul Nixon (FMP head of Licencing) (in a lecture to the Goons recently) said that it is likely to continue for several months at least
So, if you still haven't found them check back later

Access the records

Unfortunately, like the 1901, 1911 and the 1939 register, the 1921 census was not free at the outset.
The cost for the 1921 census was in fact the same as the 1911 census released in 2009 and also the 1939 – so in real terms it is cheaper.
They introduced a premium subscription at the end of 2022 for an additional £19.99 for a year. To me is a no brainer (as they say) as it is less than the cost of looking at 6 images.

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What is different to the 1911 census

All censuses have something that wasn't on a previous one
And often remove things the government are no longer interested in
1911 added
Length of marriage
Number of children born and died
Infirmity
All disappear in 1921

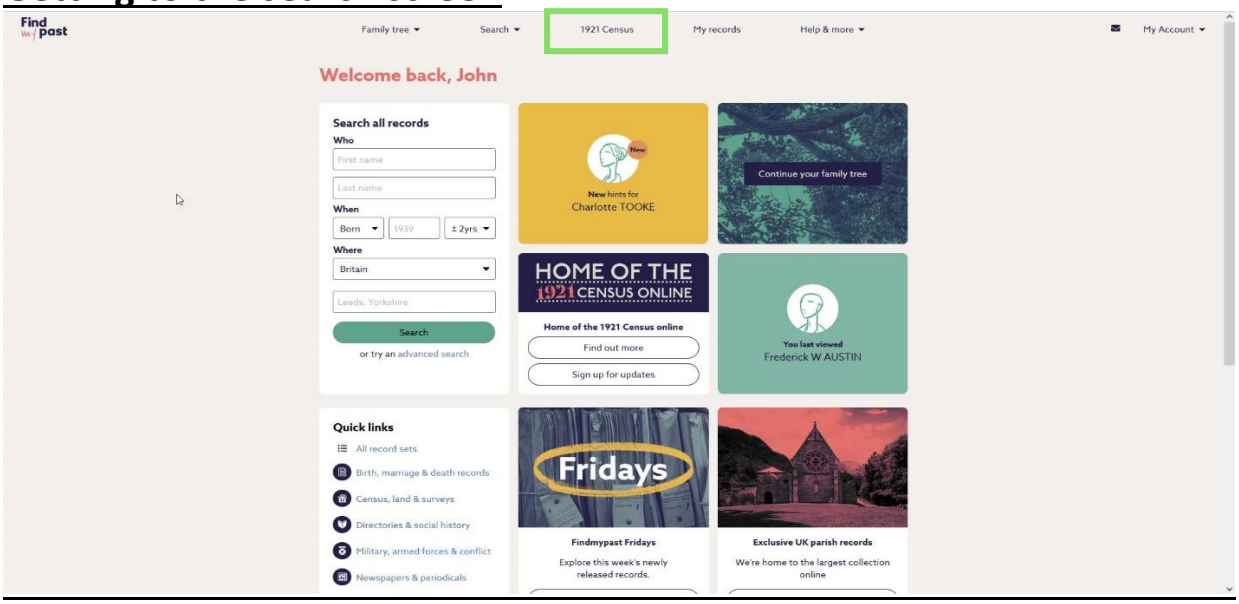
What was added to the 1921 census?

Age in more detail – year and months
Divorce included in marital status
If at school – part time or full
Precise details of occupation
Name of business employed by
Place of employment
Number of dependent children added – many were confused

Transcription

More information transcribed than any previous census
There are 36 fields on the advanced search
But as always don't add too much to your search screen – remember "Lest is Best"
Compare the number of fields you can fill in each year

Getting to the search screen



The search on the main menu only takes you to the "quick search" useful for unusual names not John Smith though!

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Using the search option is better

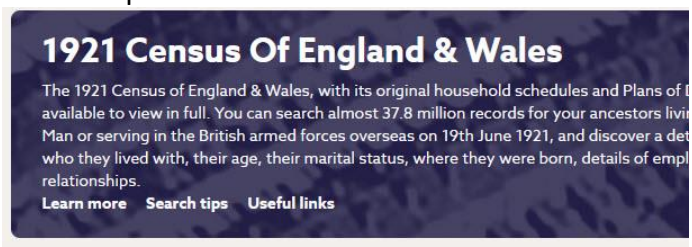
1921 Census will take you to the advanced search
1921 Address does what it says!

Use the A-Z to get more details – search for “1921 census”

5 record sets

Record Set	Category	Subcategory	No. of Records
1921 Census Of England & Wales	Census, Land & Surveys	Census	38,443,179
1921 Census Of England & Wales Image Browse	Census, Land & Surveys	Census	18,236,108
1921 Census Of England & Wales Plans Of Division Image Browse	Census, Land & Surveys	Census	96,626
1921 Census Of England & Wales Official Reports	Directories & Social History	Social History	7,233
1921 Census Of England & Wales Official Reports Browse	Directories & Social History	Social History	7,233

On the top of the advanced search there is



Learn more takes you to the explanations about what you get, copyright, etc
Search tips takes you to some ideas on search help – useful tips for searching say for Jewish ancestors

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Useful links – Always worth exploring and with the 1921 constantly being updated

Census address search	1921 Census institutions & prisons
1921 Census browse (RG 15)	1921 Census armed forces overseas
1921 Census plans of division browse (RG 114)	50 Welsh cultural figures in the 1921 Census – mapped
1921 Census official reports	101 cultural figures in the 1921 Census – mapped
1921 Census official reports browse	Deaf history in the 1921 Census – mapped
1921 Census schedule type codes	Famous babies in the 1921 Census - mapped
1921 Census occupation codes	Immigrant stories in the 1921 Census – mapped
1921 Census employment (industry) codes	Influential women in the 1921 Census - mapped
1921 Census registration districts (RDs) & sub-districts (SDs)	Pets of the 1921 Census - mapped
Welsh civil parishes in the 1921 Census	1921 Police Gazette

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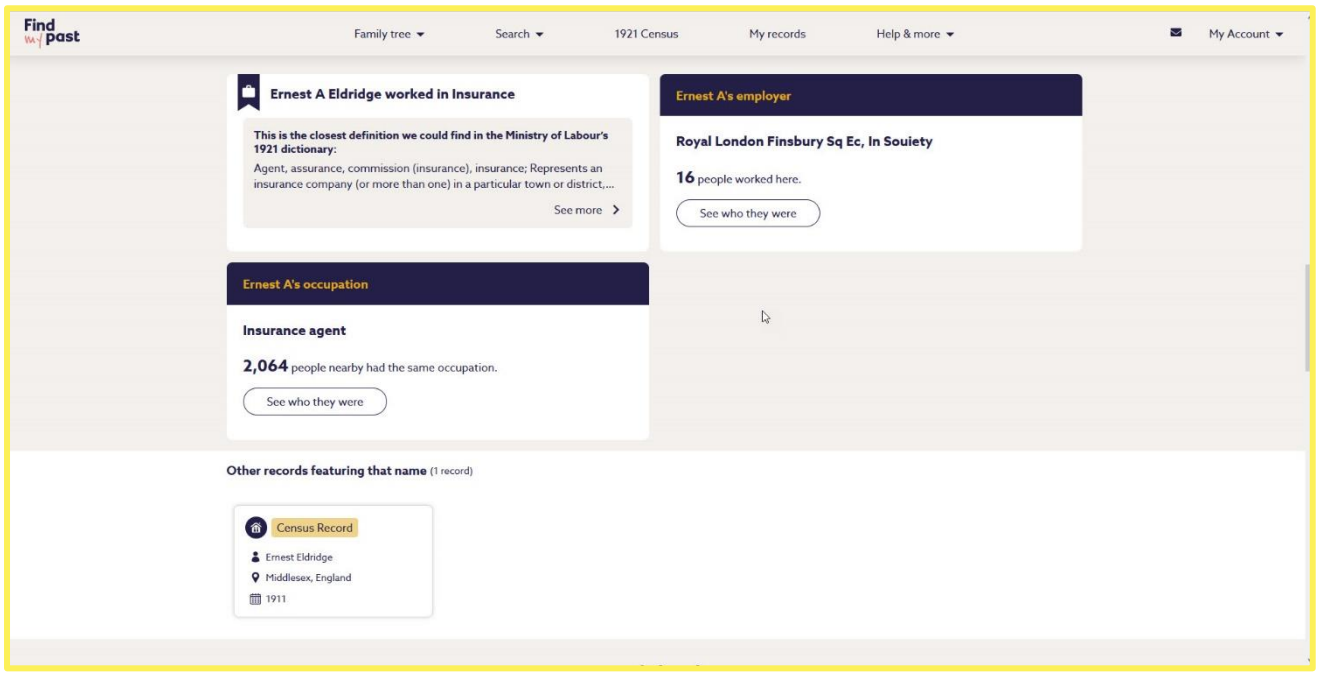
Search Results

As the images, etc used are my immediate family I am not including them here, however
Explore all of the result that you get from your searching – not just the transcription



You get details of the occupation (and "hopefully" a link to the ministry of labour definitions), the company he worked for and the other employees
Also links to other parts of the database that may or may not be useful

Map showing the location of the address and a link to a contemporary newspaper

Then the global and local demographic picture

The image needs careful consideration with all the additional information
Name often don't include second and third forenames as there wasn't the space
Orphanhood can be useful if you are not sure about whether someone dies or not
However (and I haven't checked it thoroughly yet) if the wife re-married children were supposed to be listed as son rather than step-son
Occupations are now more specific – so Silk Warehouseman rather then just Warehouseman
Employment contains the name or the employer or if it says "out of work" then was the name of the last employer
The box on the end was meant to include an X in the columns of the ages of children that were dependent on you – many got confused!
When you pay for the image, you also get the reverse which has the address and the cover of the piece which has the useful district information
You also get the map of the area (often with useful handwritten notes of boundary changes) and also the Plan of Division – is it the old fashioned "Enumerators walk" – they are in separate series RG114

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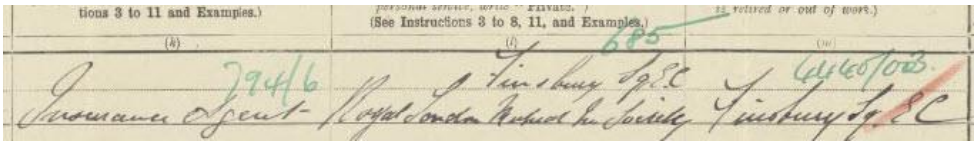
Plans of Divisions (RG114)

Scoped how the census should be taken
Divided the country into manageable units (enumeration districts) covered by a single enumerator
No surviving Summary books (as in the 1911 census)
No enumeration books as in 1841-1901
If you have a scription with full free access to the 1921 census then they will be free to look at otherwise all you can see is the one applicable to the household

Useful Links within the site

Some of the useful ones
1921 Census Occupation Codes
https://www.findmypast.co.uk/articles/world-records/1921-census---occupation-codes
We saw that there had been a code added to the image



He is an Insurance Agent with a code 794/6 but the site seems to imply it was having difficulty finding the definition
On listening to the lectures from FMP they seem to think that the code means 794-6. However, their own site contradicts that
The useful link of 1921 Census Occupation Codes is worth checking
They are all in the
"A Dictionary of Occupational Terms Based on the Classification of Occupations used in the Census of Population, 1921"
There is a better description of most in the online site created by Peter Christian
http://doot.spub.co.uk/
It is also available as a CR-Rom but no word searchable
Details on Peter's website on where to obtain one

1921 Census employment (industry) codes
https://www.findmypast.co.uk/articles/world-records/1921-census---employment-industry-codes
You can see on the image above that a code added to the image for his occupation – the middle column - 685

Occupations have always been an issue to search for because you can never be sure what it was called
Using the code in the search engine enables you to search over a wider field
Whilst on the topic of Employment you might want to expand on one of the features of the site
In the case of Ernest, it said that there were 16 people working at the same address
However, that is just in the Edmonton Registration District
With a place like that in London is likely to be others from further afield
Copy the first part of the Employer into a clean search screen and just search on that
You might be surprised

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1921 Census registration districts (RDs) & sub-districts (SDs)
https://www.findmypast.co.uk/articles/world-records/1921-census---registration-districts-rds-and-sub-districts-sds
As we know every place falls into a Registration District and within that a Sub-district
We can use that to our advantage
Lets says that you know that John Smith lived in Enfield but not were
Whilst you could search for a parish it might not be called Enfield
By using the RD and SD we narrow the search

1921 Census institutions & prisons
https://www.findmypast.co.uk/articles/world-records/1921-census---institutions-and-prisons
In previous censuses has never been easy to find institutions
But this is where the "Institution" or "Prison" forms can be useful
Say you know that your John Smith was in Prison
Just search for "John Smith" where the "Schedule type code" is P, PP or PPP – use the drop down to select them
You can do the same with any type of form
However, FMP have been kind and have actually created an index of them
This is where the "Institutions and Prisons" link is useful
They have categorised them to make things easier
Pick a category and explore

1921 Census armed forces overseas
https://www.findmypast.co.uk/articles/world-records/1921-census---british-armed-forces-overseas
The armed forces overseas
Useful for finding wives and children as well
List the piece numbers and where the Army, Navy or Air Force was at the time

For the awkward ones

Several possibilities
Forget the surname and use other fields
Look for the most uncommon name
Look for others in the same household
If Ex-military check the hospitals
Use the address search
Use the optional keyword field
Check for previous and future addresses
Check out electoral registers (women over 30 had the vote in 1919)

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