Section Three: Process of Census Taking

The first step in conducting a census was to have a Census Act passed by parliament sometime in the twelve months before a given census year. From the census of 1841 onwards, the General Register Office (GRO)\(^1\) initiated the census legislation by securing Home Office support for its passage through parliament. The task of piloting the legislation through parliament later devolved from the Home Office to the Local Government Board. In Scotland, where separate censuses were taken from 1861 to 1891, the relevant body undertaking this process was the Register General Office for Scotland and the Scottish Office.

The passage of a Census Act was necessary to allow funds to be allocated by parliament to pay for administering the census. The legislation also determined which questions were asked in any particular census. The GRO then designed and printed census schedules and set up a central office in London for the processing and classification of all census returns. Local registrars were appointed for each division. Registration divisions were then broken down into enumeration districts each containing no more than about 200 inhabited houses. The size of enumeration districts was dependent on location. The figure of about 200 houses to be assessed per enumerator\(^2\) was based on urban settings. In a rural environment where houses could be scattered over a much broader area the number of houses covered could be much fewer. The final number of houses allocated per enumerator depended on the distance each enumerator would have to cover.

\(^1\) The General Register Office (GRO) was set up under the auspices of the 1836 'Act for Registering Births, Marriages and Deaths in England' as a central location for the registration of births, deaths and marriages in England and Wales. Control of census administration and procedure passed from the office of the House of Commons to the General Register Office during the planning of the 1841 census. From the census of 1851 the GRO controlled census administration. The GRO was later renamed the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys.

\(^2\) Enumerators were the foot soldiers of the census administration process. They were locally appointed by district registrars to undertake the counting (enumeration) of the population. Each enumerator counted the number of inhabitants in an allocated area of around 200 houses. As the census became more detailed the enumerator's responsibilities increased. Ideally, those appointed as enumerators had some background of service to the local community. For example, enumerators were often local officials, members of the clergy, teachers or overseers of the poor law. Otherwise, qualifications were few; the phrase 'fit person' was often used to define a suitable enumerator. Literate individuals aged 18 to 65 were employed. Enumerators were male until the appointment of a few female enumerators to conduct the census of 1891.
Contemporary newspaper accounts suggest that enumerators' were unhappy at the pay they received in return for the heavy workload they had to undertake during the 1851 census.

**Exploration 2: An account in the *Weekly Dispatch* newspaper of a protest meeting by London enumerators in May 1851**

Note: to complete this activity you will need to have access to the world wide web.

You will find this newspaper article at the British Library's online newspaper resources.

[http://www.uk.olivesoftware.com/archive/skins/bl/navigator.asp](http://www.uk.olivesoftware.com/archive/skins/bl/navigator.asp)

At 'Publication Options', choose *Weekly Dispatch*. Then at the search request type in '1851 census'. Now, open up and read through the 3 May 1851 WD article and answer the following questions:

What were the enumerators' main complaints?

Does this article suggest that enumerators' duties had increased due to the introduction of the household schedule at the 1851 census?

The local registrar supplied each enumerator with a set of household schedules, an enumerator's book, and an instruction and memorandum book. The memorandum book included spaces for recording the numbers of people temporarily present or absent from the district. One reason for generally holding the census in spring was to reduce the number of household residents temporarily absent due to seasonal work elsewhere. The enumerator had also to take note of the number of uninhabited houses in the district. The enumerator left a household schedule with each householder. The schedule contained instructions to the householder on how to enter the details required on each individual in the household on the census day.

**Exploration 3: *News of the World* article in April 1851 highlighting problems encountered by individuals in filling out their census schedules**

Note: to complete this activity you will need to have access to the world wide web.

Click on the link to the British Library's online newspaper resources (address shown above).

At 'Publication Options', choose *News of the World*. At the search request, type in '1851 census' once again. Scroll down the list of articles and use the arrow till you find the *NTW* article from 12 April 1851.

This article gives light-hearted examples of the difficulties posed in understanding the new household census.

*Continued overleaf*
How might these interpretation problems affect the accuracy of the census?

The article also suggests a certain amount of evasion being practiced. Why might single adults wish to avoid being recorded as living at certain addresses?

The enumerators returned to collect completed schedules the day after census day. If the householder was not able to fill in the schedule (for example, due to illiteracy) the enumerator helped complete it. The enumerators then copied the information from the household schedules into their enumerators' books in rows under the appropriate column headings. Care had to be taken to distinguish between houses and the different households they contained. It was possible that enumerators might slip down a row or across a column and enter misinformation. In the process of transcribing the data supplied on the schedules, some enumerators tended to standardise the information supplied by each household. This is an important point to note when considering the accuracy of the census material. The books were supposed to be checked by the local registrars and superintendent registrars before dispatch to the London Census Office, but this additional checking was not frequently undertaken.

Exploration 4: Sample enumerator's entries 1851 and 1881
Take a look at these two sample pages from two different census enumerator's books for 1851.

(1)

Courtesy of the Public Record Office

The first sample is from the household of Queen Victoria. What peculiarities are there in the census return for the royal household? (apologies: we have been unable to provide a more readable copy of this page for print-out)

Five servants are also recorded in this enumerator's book page for the Royal household; does this group possess any distinguishing features?

The other sample entry is a typical extract from a census enumerator's book for the Gorbals district of Glasgow. Looking at the inhabitants of 29 Malta Street, what roles do you think Janet and Robert Hussey played in the first household?

What position did teenagers have in the Malta Street households?

In both extracts more than one household occupies a single address, what sort of information might be used to separate such households?

Compare the two samples and note down the different occupation types recorded in the two extracts.

Both the enumerator's books and the individual household schedules were sent to the London Census Office. Clerks at the central office checked the enumerator's books for accuracy, cross-referring them with the completed household schedules. Clerks could alter entries in the books if errors were discovered. Other clerks were assigned to specific tasks. They went through the enumerator's books abstracting particular series of information for the published tables, for example on occupation types. The original householders' schedules were generally destroyed after the clerks in London had abstracted the various types of required information. The enumerator's books
were retained. It is these books, plus the printed abstracts of information, which form the body of historical knowledge about the nineteenth-century census.