British censuses have been held since 1801, but at first the range of questions asked was limited. The first four censuses from 1801-31 were not the comprehensive exercise the census gradually became. The first four censuses were carried out on 10 March 1801, 27 May 1811, 28 May 1821, and 30 May 1831. All local census returns had to be made on prescribed forms which were attached to the schedule of the Census Act. These forms merely asked for broad statistical outlines of each district, namely: the totals (by parish) of occupied and unoccupied houses, and the number of families, and men and women in each district. Occupations were placed in broad categories, ages were put into five-year and ten-year bands and no one appeared at an individual level. Those appointed locally to make calculations for each parish or district were entitled 'enumerators'. For the early censuses, enumerators were generally members of the clergy or overseers of the Poor Law. In Scotland, local schoolteachers were often employed to carry out the census enumerations.

The beginning of the Victorian era marked the establishment of permanent government machinery for both the recording of vital statistics and the organisation and taking of the census. 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.

---

1 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.

2 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.

© 2002. This unit is one of eight in the 'British History and the Census' web site which forms part of the CHCC (Collection of Historical and Contemporary Census data and related materials) Project site. The text may be copied for educational use only.
a central location for the registration of births, deaths and marriages in England and Wales. The administrative pattern of the new civil registration system operational from 1837 grew out of the framework of Poor Law Unions set up under the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. The 624 Poor Law Unions were adopted as registration districts for the 1841 census, and within these 2,190 registrar's sub-districts were created. Poor Law officials still carried out the census enumeration, although other civilians (males between the ages of 18 and 65) were also employed.

The enumeration process was a vast enterprise, in 1851 over 30,000 enumerators carried out the censuses for England and Wales, while almost 10,000 were employed in undertaking the censuses in Scotland and Ireland. Given the numbers involved it is no surprise that enumerators were of mixed ability. In 1860 the *Times* alleged that enumerators were 'no better than labourers in point of education.'

In Scotland, where there was no similar Poor Law re-organisation until 1845, and no civil registration system until 1855, the census districts were still based on the church parish system. Scottish enumeration work continued to be carried out by schoolmasters and 'other fit persons.' This rather vague criterion for selecting Scottish enumerators meant a flexible approach to the decennial appointments. For example, 300 of the 500 enumerators employed in carrying out the 1861 census in Edinburgh were drawn from the city's Volunteer Regiment of militia. In this case the payment given to enumerators was used to raise money for the regiment.

In 1840, responsibility for taking the census in England and Wales changed hands. John Rickman, who had administered the first four censuses down to 1831 and who been planning the 1841 census over the previous five years, died in 1840. The 1841 census then came under the auspices of the new General Register Office, with overall responsibility for the census falling to the first Registrar General, Thomas Henry Lister.

---

3 Times, 25 January 1860, p. 10, column d.
4 John Rickman (1771-1840) was a civil servant and statistician. Rickman was born at Newburn, Northumberland. He entered university in 1788 and graduated BA from Lincoln College, Oxford in 1792. Rickman became Secretary to Charles Abbot, MP (later Lord Colchester). Rickman was a motivating force in the call for the introduction of a population census to Britain. In 1796 he produced a memorandum 'thoughts on the utility and facility of a general enumeration of the people of the British Empire ascertaining the population'. After the success of Abbot's 1800 bill, (based on the memorandum) proposing the introduction of a census, Rickman was appointed by parliament to conduct the first census in 1801. He also carried out the next three censuses in 1811, 1821 and 1831. In 1820 Rickman was employed as Clerk Assistant to the Office of the House of Commons. He died in 1840.
5 Thomas Henry Lister (1800-1842) was born near Lichfield. He was educated at Westminster School and Trinity College, Cambridge (although he did not graduate). In 1834 he served on the commission of enquiry into religious instruction in Ireland and on a similar commission into religious education in Scotland in 1835. On 19 August 1836 he was appointed first Registrar General (of Births, Deaths and Marriages) after the creation of the General Register Office under the 1836 'Act for Registering Births, Marriages and Deaths in England'. This legislation made compulsory the registration of births, deaths and marriages in England and Wales. Lister became one of the three Census Commissioners for the census of 1841 as control of the census procedure passed from the office of the House of Commons to the General Register Office. Lister was also a well-known author and playwright. He wrote seven novels, the best known was his society novel *Granby* published in 3 volumes in 1826. In 1829 his play,
Under this new regime, the 1841 census marked a clear transitional stage between the early censuses and those more modern-day equivalents held from 1851 onwards. Although displaying some of the restrictions of earlier censuses (ages were still not listed precisely and relationships of household occupants were not listed), the names of individuals were first recorded in the 1841 census.

The 1841 census marked a staging post both in the range of information collected and in the procedures followed in the enumeration and processing of the results. The census of 1841 witnessed the first use in Britain of a self-administered household schedule, requesting information by name and characteristics of every individual in each household in Britain. Enumerators distributed the household schedules and collected them the day after census day. Enumerators no longer simply counted heads. In fact, their responsibilities increased as they now gave help to householders in completing the census schedule; in particular to those householders who were illiterate. Illiteracy posed a major problem for mid-nineteenth century enumerators. For example in 1852, the Eleventh Annual Report of the Registrar General (for England and Wales) recorded that between 1839-1841 one third of all bridegrooms and almost one half of all brides were unable to sign their marriage registers and were forced to make a mark on the official record.

The 1841 changes in the census contents and procedure had come from a combination of the shift in census administration to the GRO and due to pressure from outside agencies, chiefly, the London Statistical Society. The London Statistical Society was formed in 1834. In April 1840 a committee of the Society put forward proposals to increase the scope of the 1841 census. The committee recommended the adoption of a household schedule listing the names and characteristics of each individual enumerated. It also proposed the introduction of enumerators' transcripts of the household schedule information, the central tabulation of data - and a much wider range of questions. The committee's report was sent to the Home Secretary. The original bill for the 1841 census which was along much the same lines as the previous censuses was then withdrawn and an amended bill put forward incorporating many of the London Statistical Society's recommendations (questions suggested on marital condition, religion and state of health were not included).

In the census taken on 6 June 1841, information collected for each person included full name; sex; and occupation. For those under 15, ages were given exactly (if known); for people over 15, ages were rounded down to the nearest five years. Some information relating to the place of birth was also given, but was restricted to whether or not a person was born in the county of residence (Y for Yes, N for No), and, if not, whether in England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales or in foreign parts (F). The 1841 census

---

*Epicharis* was performed at the Drury Lane Theatre in London. Lister also contributed to the *Edinburgh Review* magazine and to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. He died in 1842.

6 The London Statistical Society (now the Royal Statistical Society) was founded in 1834 at a meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. In 1840, the Society set up a committee to make recommendations for the contents of the 1841 census. Many of the London Statistical Society's recommendations were introduced and helped to shape the census as it is known today. The Society suggested the introduction of a household schedule to list each individual by name and characteristics. It also proposed the introduction of enumerators' transcripts of the household schedule information, a wider range of questions and the central tabulation of data.

© 2002. This unit is one of eight in the 'British History and the Census' web site which forms part of the CHCC (Collection of Historical and Contemporary Census data and related materials) Project site. The text may be copied for educational use only.
also requested the same kind of information as earlier censuses on numbers of occupied and unoccupied houses.

Following the changes introduced in the census of 1841, subsequent nineteenth-century censuses began to ask further questions about the nature of households and the types of persons within them. The census of 1851 was the first to include questions on the relationship of individuals within each household. It also requested details of precise age and actual place of birth. The 1851-1891 censuses were taken on 30 March 1851, 7 April 1861, 2 April 1871, 4 April 1881 and 5 April 1891. The schedules for each of these five censuses recorded for each person full name; exact age; relationship to head of household; sex; occupation; parish and county of birth; and various medical disabilities (whether deaf and dumb; blind; imbecile or idiot; lunatic).

Between 1861 and 1891 there were some marked differences in the censuses for England and Wales and for Scotland. After the passage of the Civil Registration Scotland Act of 1854, the Scottish census became the responsibility of the Register General Office for Scotland. The four censuses (1861-1891) were enacted by separate parliamentary legislation for Scotland. The census in Ireland was also subject to a separate Census Act. However, Brenda Collins has stated that the nineteenth-century Irish censuses were taken with very similar administrative machinery as for Great Britain. In 1901 a single Census Act was re-introduced for the whole of Great Britain.

The separate administration of the census in Scotland between 1861 - 1891 soon led to differences in the range of questions posed. In the 1861 Scottish census questions on the number of rooms per household, the number of persons in each family, and whether the house had or did not have windows, were added for the first time. A further question asked householders to state the total number of children in their household aged less than 15 attending school. With the inclusion of such additional questions, the implication of the census as a tool for social investigation and improvement as well as statistical information was becoming increasingly apparent.

In 1870, a *Times* correspondent pressed for a question on room numbers to be introduced into the 1871 census for England and Wales, on the grounds that the data had given a great impulse to housing and sanitary reform in the large urban areas of Scotland. The pressure for additional questions on room numbers to be introduced into the 1871 census for England and Wales was intense, and a motion to require householders to give details of their accommodation was discussed in the House of Commons in July 1870. However, the motion was opposed by Gladstone’s Liberal Government, and was defeated by a single vote.

---

7 The Register General Office for Scotland/Registrar General for Scotland. In 1855 the Register General Office for Scotland was set up to administer Scottish civil vital statistics following the passage of the 1854 Act 'to provide for the better Registration of Births, Deaths and Marriages in Scotland'. It was headed by the Registrar General for Scotland. The Register General Office compiled and produced statistics on all registered Scottish birth, marriage and death certificates. From 1861-1891 it administered the census in Scotland.

8 B. Collins (1990), Census studies, comparatively speaking. In History and computing III. Edited by E. Mawdsley et al. Manchester: Manchester University Press, p. 182.
Another innovation of the distinct Scottish census was introduced in the 1881 census. The 1881 Scottish returns contained a question on whether each individual spoke Gaelic. Unlike the question on the number of rooms, this innovation was taken on board in the 1891 census when a question on Welsh-speaking was added to the census schedule for that country. Arrangements had been in place in Wales since 1841 to have census schedules printed in Welsh. However, there had been no attempt to tabulate the Welsh-speaking population of Great Britain until the 1891 introduction of the question on Welsh-speaking. A further recognition of non-English speakers in Britain came with the provision of dummy copies of the household schedules in Yiddish and in German for the guidance of immigrant groups in the East End of London in the 1891 census.

Other questions in the 1891 census in both England and Wales and in Scotland were added on employment status. Individuals were also now recorded in the households and houses in which they lived. In the 1891 census for England and Wales, a question was at last included on the number of rooms per household, if this was less than five.

The range of questions included in the census was always limited for reasons of simplicity and clarity. It also made the process of tabulation and interpretation of census information by government authorities easier. As the census became more familiar and the possible use of census data widened in the nineteenth-century fresh questions were added.

Exercise: The Recording of Gaelic Speaking
Note: to complete this activity you will need to access our web site for databases and worksheets: [http://chcc.gla.ac.uk/19th_Century_Census/section02/page07.php](http://chcc.gla.ac.uk/19th_Century_Census/section02/page07.php)

For this exercise you will be using the Gorb81 and Sand81 tables. Open the tables and answer the following questions.

A question on whether an individual spoke Gaelic was included in the Scottish census for the first time in the census of 1881. (Note - the information on whether an individual spoke Gaelic is included in the 'remarks' field of the tables).

a. How many people in the samples from the 1881 census from Glasgow's working class Gorbals and middle class Sandyford areas were Gaelic-speakers?

b. What percentage of the populations of these two areas did Gaelic speakers represent?

c. Look at the other census information provided on the identified Gaelic speakers. Is there any evidence that these groups of people formed distinct communities?