

Reflections on the 1921 Census

My research unearthed some interesting and sometimes surprising facts and figures. These relate both to the census itself and also to wider UK civil society in 1921.

The Census shows clearly the devastating impact of the First World War and the flu pandemic which followed. Two utterly poignant facts underline the impact of the carnage:

- The census records that there were 1.7 million more women than men
- And, the number of two-, three- and four-year-olds recorded is significantly lower than the number of five-, six-, seven- and eight-year-olds

Clearly the nation was in a parlous state. The census snapshot shows families faced crippling unemployment and a shortage of good homes which led to social unrest. Unemployment peaked at 2.2million in 1921. The housing stock numbered just 8 million compared to 39 million homes today.

Another telling comparison.

The number of motor vehicles on the road in 1921 was 189,000 compared to 39 million today, with the all too evident pressure on our totally inadequate modern road system.

Noteworthy people who completed the census form included Alexander Fleming who was working as a bacteriologist at St Mary's Hospital in London – the same hospital where he would discover penicillin seven years later.

Beatrix Potter was listed under her married name of Helen Heelis and stated her occupation as 'farmer.'

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle counted three overnight visitors to his home, prompting speculation from historians that the well-known paranormal investigator was taking part in a séance to make contact with the dead. His two visitors were Ada Besinnet an American medium and a Mr Mackenzie, a parapsychologist who founded the College of Psychic Science.

The census also included hand-written pleas for more affordable housing or greater social justice.

“What a wicked waste of taxpayers’ money at this time of unemployment,” wrote one woman. Dad of three James Bartley told the government to stop making false promises – sound familiar? He recorded five persons living in one room and wrote, “Stop talking about homes for heroes and start building some houses and let them at a rent working men can afford to pay.”

One man wanted to highlight that he couldn’t divorce his cheating wife. “Have I to serve lifelong misery for her infidelity?”

Others were keen to add a joke to the official document. A thirty-one-year-old printer described his three-year-old daughter Joan’s occupation as, “Keeping mum busy.”

These big news items in 1921 caught my eye:

In March Australia whitewashed the touring England cricket team – no change there then!

In May the London Schedule of Payments set out the World War 1 reparations payable by the German Weimar Republic, thereby sowing the seeds for the rise of Nazism

Also in May, Crown Prince Hirohito of Japan arrived on a state visit and that didn’t turn out too well either

In September, Ernest Shackleton set out on his last expedition to Antarctica

On 6th December, the Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed, granting independence to the Irish Free State.

Sadly, this will be the last release of full census information for thirty years.. Each ten-year census remains closed for one hundred years before being opened to the public. The 1931 census was destroyed during the Blitz. The 1941 census was never taken due to the outbreak of war – so the 1951 census is not due to be released until 2052.