

STEEPLE ASTON AND THE CENSUS

It's Census time, and some of the old arguments have broken out again – whether the right information is being sought, and whether some questions are too intrusive. Filling in a census return every 10 years is required by law, but some protesters threaten to boycott it this time because the operation has been handed to a private company, raising fears about data security. Others say they won't touch it because Lockheed Martin – the firm in question – is part of the armaments industry. Some object on both grounds, worrying that the data could be sent overseas, although the government says the analysis will be carried out by a British subsidiary, Lockheed Martin UK, not the US parent company.

In the short term, only the statistics will be released. All the personal information about family circumstances, relationships, beliefs, ethnicity, mental health, education and the rest is protected by law, as the form states, and must be “kept confidential for 100 years”. This has been the case, more or less, since the very first British census in 1801. Up to 1831 the returns themselves were discarded. From 1841 the enumerators' summary books were preserved, and from 1911 the schedules filled in by individual householders were also kept.

Such detailed information is a gold mine for local and family historians, who look forward eagerly to each release. They had to wait until 2002 to see the information harvested in 1901, and even then there were long delays as massive demand caused the on-line version to crash repeatedly. The 1911 census was released several years early, in December 2006, under a one-off ruling by the Information Commissioner, but some sensitive information was still withheld for the full 100 years. It was also published in a way that made it much easier (and cheaper) to study individual families than, say, a whole village.

The earliest Censuses

Steeple Aston is one of the very few places in Britain that has detailed records of Censuses taken before 1841. This is because the Rector of the day, the Rev James Armetriding, kept copies for his own use. For 1811 and 1821, he entered fair copies for both Steeple and Middle Aston, in his Parish Register, and these were published with other early documents in a booklet *The People of Steeple Aston and Middle Aston* (The Eureka Partnership, 2005).

The Rector also kept details of the 1801 census, but only for Steeple Aston, and on a scrappy piece of paper with no heading. This has recently been identified by SAVA, and is still being analysed. (If Armetriding kept the 1831 census it has been lost – only the statistics were copied into his register)

As Armetriding's copy shows, the 1801 Census was pretty basic compared to the one we face in 2011. It had just seven columns, the first naming the head of household. (But in many cases only the surname was put down with no first name or just an initial – sometimes with “Mr” or “Mrs” added as an indication of social standing). Alongside these are just six columns of figures, answering these questions:

how many families in the household?
how many families in agriculture?
how many in trade?
how many in neither?
how many males?
how many females?

By 1811 an extra column for remarks had been added, and these can be illuminating: “employed chiefly in breaking horses”, “his wife teaches to read”, “deserted by her husband”, are typical examples.

GEOFFREY LANE