

I've lost an ancestor in the online censuses! How can I find him/her?

By ROY STOCKDILL

This is a very common problem, especially when an individual is found in one census but not in another. It's important to remember that census returns can contain many errors of mistranscription and indexing, plus enumerator's errors and the fact that information often varies, sometimes wildly, from one census to another.

But remember also that transcribers are told to transcribe exactly what they SEE and not what someone thinks it ought to be! Remember the maxim that "an enumerator's error is not an error" and you should never try to correct what is clearly an enumerator's error based on some other information you may possess. All you can do is add a note of annotation in your records, clearly explaining why you think something is incorrect.

Individuals and families moved about in Victorian times far more than we imagine and the likelihood of finding people at the same address in successive censuses is not high. Often you may find someone has moved many miles away for work purposes. Occupations particularly susceptible to this were railway workers, commercial travellers, merchants, seamen and fishermen, and so on – even agricultural labourers who may have left the land to go and find work in factories in a town.

And then there's the fact that sometimes our ancestors told fibs, varying from little white lies to whopping great big ones! Perhaps they'd told a lie to their spouse about their age and had to maintain it, or possibly there was a more sinister reason - like someone in authority was looking for them. I've come across a number of cases where the name has changed altogether but one can still tell from the family pattern (children's names, ages, birthplaces etc) that it was the same family. Some people elevated their social situation in the censuses.

There may be other reasons why ages and birth places can differ in censuses. Many people genuinely didn't know precisely how old they were, particularly if they'd been born before 1837. Or they might give their birth place as a village in one census and the nearest town in another, sometimes different places altogether. Maybe they thought they'd been born in a particular place and, by the time of the next census, they'd found out they were actually born somewhere else. Some gave the name of the earliest place they could remember living in, which might not have been where they were born at all.

How can you break down these brick walls when searching the online censuses?

There's a family historian's motto that says "Less is more". What this means is that it is possible to enter too much information into the search fields, especially if you've ticked the "exact" box. If just one detail is wrong, then you may well not find your ancestor. To solve the problem try these things...

1. Uncheck the "exact match only" box.

2. Try variant surnames and allow soundex and/or phonetic matches, using every variant you can think of.
3. Use wildcards. Use only some of the surname and an asterisk to allow the search engine to fill in the rest. The drawback to this approach is that you may return too many results. In these cases you may have to gradually add information a bit at a time to eliminate some of them.
4. Omit the surname altogether. It's surprising how often this can work! I often try entering just a forename or forenames, an approximate age and birth place and you may be fortunate enough to find your ancestor appearing in a surname that has become seriously garbled, either in the original census or in the transcription, but which you can recognise by the forenames of the spouse and children.
5. If you can't find an individual with his/her family, consider that they might have been living away from home in service; in an institution, such as a school, hospital, workhouse, prison or asylum; gone into the army or navy and serving abroad or in a military establishment somewhere; working overseas. Don't forget to look for them in shipping lists and other resources.
6. Always look at the neighbours and up and down the street. In Victorian times when homes were seriously over-crowded, some families often "farmed out" some of the kids to other family members like uncles and aunts, cousins and even neighbours who weren't relatives.
7. Has the missing person you're looking for died/got married/gone abroad/changed their name, etc, etc.
8. Read the help and advice sections at Findmypast, Ancestry, etc, thoroughly before starting out on your search. These give very similar advice to that I have given above.
9. ALWAYS check to see whether there are what Findmypast calls "Known issues" in the censuses. For instance, there are missing pages, missing piece numbers and other known problems. I was recently looking for people I thought ought to be in the parish of Malpas, Cheshire, in the 1841, but then I looked at the Help page and discovered substantial parts of the parish were missing. In Yorkshire in 1841 parts of the parish of Ripon are missing. The damaged (and many recovered) pages in the Manchester area in the 1851 are well known but in Yorkshire in 1851 pages in the parish of Darton were damaged by flooding. The distinguished Yorkshire genealogist Pauline Litton says in her excellent book *Pitfalls and Possibilities in Family History Research* that in 1861 16 piece numbers have not survived and sections of another 81 are missing. In Yorkshire, parts of Leeds and Halifax are missing, also parts of Guisborough. If you are unlucky enough to have had an ancestor in the missing bits, well - TOUGH!

10. Are there alternative records that can be checked? A good source, especially if your ancestor was from a gentry, ecclesiastical or land-owning family or a tradesman, is to look at directories around the time of the census (though of course they won't normally name other members of the family). Also land and house records, though this will rarely apply to a humble working family.

11. Many men are absent from the 1901 census because they were fighting in the Second Boer War in South Africa. My wife's grandfather, William John Troth, was among them.

12. Several thousand women are missing from the 1911 census because they were suffragettes and deliberately refused to have themselves put down on the schedule, or absented themselves from the household on census night to avoid being counted, in protest at the government's refusal to allow them the vote.

13. Forenames can be as much of a problem as surnames! Sometimes nicknames or pet names were used, especially for children, and forenames often got reversed. For instance, my wife's grandfather (as above) was born at Stratford-on-Avon in 1878 as William John Troth and appears as such in the 1911 census in that name in Coventry. But his marriage appears on FreeBMD in Coventry in 1910 as John W Troth and his daughter, my wife's mother, now aged 101 who appears in 1911 as being 2 months old, swears he was always known to the family as "John Willie". So if you can't find someone with an advanced search, try reversing the forenames and/or initials.

In similar vein, pet names and nicknames are often found in the censuses. Was your ancestor whose forename was Elizabeth entered as Bess or Bessie or Lizzie? Did Florence become Florrie or Flo and did Frederick become plain Fred?

14. If you still can't find an ancestor, can you find other family members based on your searches in an earlier census? Perhaps this will give you a clue.

15. Above all, use your imagination and persevere!

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