



## Transcribing the Census – Its' Pleasures and Pitfalls!

Like many family history enthusiasts, I love transcribing and as an OPC [Online Parish Clerk] for the Wiltshire OPC project, along with many others, I have transcribed various documents for the website to enable the widest availability of information for anyone seeking information for their own research. Currently we are transcribing censuses and what a fantastic opportunity for me to learn about the villages that I am responsible for i.e. Great Somerford, Dauntsey and South Marston. You start to 'get to know' the local characters, see how their families grow and of course, not their passing, not just through their sudden absence from a census but also when you transcribe other documents or information such as churchyard memorials and burial indexes.

Transcribing the census for a whole village is a wonderful way to learn social history. I have witnessed the growth and expansion of Great Somerford from 1841 to 1911. Watched how the number of trades and other occupations have grown in the village. For example, in 1851, the majority of those living in the village were either landowners and farmers employing agricultural labourers and plough boys. By 1881, we see people moving in to the village from long distances e.g. a Railway Policeman from Northumberland. Other supporting trades also grow up in the village such as boot and shoe makers and laundresses.

As I've transcribed these censuses, I've seen large families grow, one family has tried year after year, often without success, to produce a male heir whilst others have produced a healthy crop of male heirs, most of whom continue in the same occupation as their father, usually as an agricultural labourer. Sadly, time constraints mean that I can't investigate every trend or occurrence, but I do wonder how many of those households of mostly girls end up marrying some of those large crops of male heirs! Probably one of the first things I noticed was what I like to call the 'Seven brides for seven brothers' syndrome. Many of the men of Great Somerford had wives who all came from the same neighbouring village.

Those who own land have proudly stated in the 'occupation' column that their offspring are a 'farmer's son' as if that is enough, hinting that they are well off and don't need to say anything further. Of course, the presence of servants, especially household/domestic servants, helps to build up the picture of the affluence of that family.

We often assume [wrongly, of course], that there is little movement of people around the country and even just throughout the county but no, there is movement. Often it is incoming, established households who bring their own servants from further afield as well as their own families who have been born in other parts of the country or county. The changing face of Victorian England is so evident as we look through the censuses and note the increase in occupation variance and the number of 'outsiders' such as the Railway Policeman who moved down to Great Somerford from Northumberland, together with his Scottish wife and their young family. We can see how he moved around the country with his job by looking at the various birth places of his young family and can also estimate how long they have lived in the village by the same process i.e. the youngest two children were born in Great Somerford and they are aged four and two.

Perhaps the most frustrating thing about transcribing [and the biggest pitfall] is the challenge of reading someone's scrawling handwriting. Not so much with legal documents but certainly with censuses. You can tell how tired and fed up the enumerator gets as the day goes on. I could almost feel sorry for them if I didn't get so annoyed and frustrated with them as they made more and more mistakes and began to take short cuts and cut corners as the day wore on! I can well imagine the enumerator of the 1851 census taking a respite in the 'Volunteer Inn' in Great Somerford with a pie and a pint! Of course, the problems don't end there. Firstly, the clerk who checked the census schedules had a tendency to strike lines through some important information, usually the ages of people as they checked off the sheets and then of course, the sheets were scanned many years ago and so they are often dark and/or blurred. I can't tell you how often I had to use the magnifying facility when viewing the sheets as I worked through them.

Most of the OPC's 'adopt' towns or villages that are personal to them. We can help with breaking down walls or just pointing you in the right direction for information. Like many others, I have been helped by people across the world who have been generous with their time and energy and being an OPC and volunteering to transcribe is my way of giving back. Don't get me wrong, I'm no martyr! I love transcribing. In 'normal' life, that makes me weird but in 'Family History World' that makes me perfectly normal!

In conclusion, there is so much more to be learned from looking at the censuses, whether it is just for your own family research or as a social/local historian. You will be able to map the progress [or regression] of a whole community through the censuses, spot trends, find missing persons, discover why people aren't at home on the day of the census e.g. they are visiting a next-door neighbour, or, in the case of my great, great grandfather, possibly out on patrol as he was the local policeman for a neighbouring village. It allows you to put 'flesh on the bones' so to speak.

If you would like to know more about the Wiltshire OPC Project, either to volunteer or to make enquiries about your own family history, please [visit the website](#) where you will find links to individual parishes, photo galleries, uploaded documents and historical data, research templates and so much more.