A FLOATING POPULATION: VESSEL ENUMERATION RETURNS IN CENSUSES, 1851-1921

V. C. Burton

V. C. Burton is the Mcquie Mather Fellow in Maritime History at the University of Liverpool and is nearing completion of a doctoral thesis on the work and home life of seafarers with special reference to the port of Southampton 1871-1921.

Demographic historians are familiar with the scope of the census household enumeration, but less so with vessel enumeration, although vessel schedules are important records of maritime and riverine settlements. Moreover, historians are not fully aware of the use which the Registrar General's census office made of the data extracted from vessel schedules; yet this data could appreciably affect the demographic and other characteristics of communities as represented on the official census volumes. The scopes of, and procedures for, vessel enumeration will first be outlined in this paper, preliminary to examining some of the methodological errors of the census office in processing the data for publication. Since these errors arose from the attempt to find standardised, if over-simple, administrative procedures thay are at best demonstrated through specific examples which will serve to alert the local historian to potential fallibilities in the census wherever a floating population is concerned.

Procedures for Vessel enumeration

Vessel enumeration applied to persons aboard craft in home waters or on inland rivers and waterways at the time of a census.[1] These nominal residents of Great Britain numbered 50,664 in 1851 (when vessel enumeration was first introduced) rising to 109,603 in 1911, Table 1. The greatest concentrations of floating residents were, predictably, in major commercial and naval ports, in the counties of Devon, Dorset, Lancashire and Hampshire for example, Table 2. However, the crew of a ship or river vessel could be returned in any part of the country and this, on occasion, had some remarkable consequences to be illustrated below.

The categories of data recorded on vessel schedules were similar to those of the household schedules with modifications to take account of the vessel as a unit of enumeration: the craft's tonnage, type and (where applicable) port of registry were noted; the inappropriate designation 'relationship to head of household' was replaced by a description of the individual's capacity on board vessel — Mate or A.B. (Able Bodied Seaman), for instance (fig. 1). However, one potentially useful piece of information about this itinerant population, usual place of residence, was not required.[2] Enumeration was done by ships' captains, naval officers and others in command of craft. Completed forms were collected by customs personnel in UK ports, or by the ordinary local enumerators if returned outside the limits of a port, and forwarded to the census office.[3] Officials then processed the data for publication by amalgamating them with data from household

schedules for the enumeration districts contiguous to the recorded location of the vessels.[4] This procedure was carried out regardless of evidence that, for the most part, persons aboard vessels had none but the most tenuous connections with the population on **terra firma** close to which their vessels were afloat on census night. It was an ill-judged expedient, too unquestioningly adopted by the census office, with consequences which are to be demonstrated below.

Table 1. Numbers of persons enumerated on census vessel schedules in Great Britain, 1851-1921

Census date	Category of vessel enumerated: Royal navy	Merchant navy	Foreign & colonial	Barges & boats	Total
1851	6,440	28,536	7,714	7,974	50,664
1861	15,174	29,393	18,263	6,990	69,820
1871	14,141	39,824	12,545	17,617	84,127
1881	10,574	54,325	9,728	10,190	84,817
1891	18,598*	35,546	11,938	12,277	78,395
1901	24,766	36,503	12,166	8,130	81,565
1911	46,375		63,228 +		109,603
1921	26,445		58,229 +		84,674

Notes: * figures for the royal navy in 1891 include men in naval barracks
+ there were no separate returns in the three categories merchant navy, foreign and colonial and barges and boats in the censuses of 1911 and 1921.

Sources: Census of Great Britain, 1851, PP 1852-3, LXXXV, p.cxxx.

Censuses of England and Wales: 1861 PP 1862, L, p.xxx; **1871** PP 1872, LXVI. i, p.x1; **1881** PP 1883, LXXIX, p.xix; **1891** PP 1893-4, CV, pp.xxxiii-xxxiv; **1901** PP 1903, XLV, pp. 136-8; **1911** PP 1914-15, LXXI, p.73; 1921 HMSO, 1925, p.12 **Censuses of Scotland: 1861** PP 1862, L, p.xxxvi; **1871** PP 1873, LXXIII, p.xl; **1881** PP 1882, LXXXVI, p.188; **1891** PP 1892, XCVI, p.204-5; **1901** PP 1902, CXXIX, p.309; **1911** PP 1914, LXXX, p.90; **1921** County Volumes HMSO.

Table 2. British counties where persons enumerated on vessel schedules in the census of 1911 exceeded 3,000

County	No. enumerated on vessel schedules	% of total entd aboard royal navy vessels
Hampshire	12,490	81.7%
Devon	10,819	90.9%
Kent	9,807	65.7%
Dorset	6,925	94.9%
Essex	6,914	44.3%
Lancashire	6,328	4.8%
Glamorgan	4,925	—
London	4,219	0.1%
Ross & Cromarty	4,195	95.3%
Cornwall	3,501	29.4%
Cheshire	3,126	7.2%
Total	73,249*	

* Total of persons enumerated on board vessels in Great Britain 109,603.

Sources: Census of England and Wales, 1911, vol. I, PP 1912-13, CXI, pp. 604-14; **Census of Scotland, 1911 County vols** PP 1912-13, CXIX, PP 1912-3, CXX.

The Floating Population

It should first be emphasised that the floating population was highly untypical of the population at large in terms of gender, age, birthplace and occupation. Unfortunately, for the researcher dependent on published census returns alone the data are intractable: the age, birthplace and occupational profile of the floating population was nowhere given separately from that of the resident population. Indeed the local historian might remain unaware even of the existence of floating 'residents' in his or her chosen community but for a table indicating the numbers of persons enumerated on vessel-schedules (by parish) which was appended to the published population returns for each county. The only characteristic of the floating population to be systematically recorded there was gender. These data, aggregated for England and Wales from the census volumes of 1891 and 1901, indicate that over 97 per cent of the persons enumerated on vessel schedules were male.[5] This was, perhaps, to be anticipated given that the majority of persons aboard vessels were seafarers, either of the royal navy or merchant navy. Furthermore, extrapolation from other sources suggests that the floating population was predominantly composed of young men between the ages of twenty and thirty-five years who were disproportionately of Welsh, Scottish or Irish extraction. It was a characteristic of seafaring that men went to sea in their youth, quitting for a job ashore in middle age.[6] Vessel schedules related to a unit of employment not to a unit of residence as did household schedules.[7] When the census office treated vessel schedules as comparable with household schedules the result was to introduce distortions of varying degrees into the published census returns of communities.

A Mobile Population

It might be questioned whether the distortions were overly significant given that every port was bereft of some of its customarily resident seafarers on census night: was the addition of the floating population offshore merely compensation for absentees, the characteristics of the two groups being in some way interchangeable? This possibility can be dismissed, for it fails to take account of the itinerant nature of seafaring employment and the variability of shipping movements. The national and international flux of shipping meant that at any one time (i.e. at the time of a census) a motley assortment of British and foreign crews were to be found in most ports. Thus, for instance, the floating population of a port was liable to include greater proportions of foreigners than the population ashore. Cardiff, a cosmopolitan port, was an extreme example: two-fifths or more of the seafarers enumerated on board ship at each census between 1861 and 1901 were foreigners.[8] In England and Wales at large as many as one in four of the ships enumerated at the censuses of 1891 and 1901 were foreign.[9] This explains why the most common occupation of foreigners as recorded in censuses was seafaring. However, taking 1891 as an example, three-quarters of foreign seafarers were not enumerated on shore but in coastal waters, and few of them were truly residents of the country.[10]

Remarkably, the Registrar General professed to believe that seafarers in home waters at the time of a census were located in the very ports where they had 'wives, children and homes'.[11] However, even the most cursory examination of shipping movements would have revealed the error of this assumption. Interpretation of

vessel schedules should be informed by insight into the longer term pattern and type of a port's shipping.[12] A specific example may be made of the vessel schedule reproduced in fig. 1. **Challenger** was engaged on regular coal carrying runs between South Wales and Southampton and, although her crew were enumerated in Southampton, the strong probability is that their homes and families were in the port of Llanelly, to which their vessel returned.[13] This schedule is evidence of a general trend; that of strangers to a port remaining on board ship, thus avoiding expenditure on lodgings, particularly if their voyage was uncompleted and their wages unpaid. Conversely local seafarers went ashore to the company of family and friends and were, therefore, subject to household enumeration.

With few exceptions vessels were not localised around home ports in the way which the Registrar General supposed. The fishing port of Grimsby had a staple trade which involved many local men and yet census returns reveal that the predominance of fishing boats owned and crewed from Grimsby did not preclude the craft of other U.K. and foreign ports. In 1881 1,403 of the 2,292 persons enumerated on vessel schedules for Grimsby were aboard local fishing boats; with some justification were they regarded as residents of the port.[14] Nevertheless trawling fleets from further afield were drawn by the rich fishing grounds off Grimsby with the result that vessel enumeration also included 441 fishermen from such places as Hull, Lowestoft and Yarmouth and from ports in Scandinavia; they were likewise returned as 'residents' of Grimsby though, in this case, with little justification.[15] The errors of the Registrar General's supposition are further illustrated by the example of Falmouth. The small-scale local traffic of this port was over-shadowed by North Atlantic liners which made a port of call at Falmouth and by the vessels of the royal navy base. Thus at the census of 1881 a total of 2,301 persons were enumerated on vessel schedules of whom 1,142 were naval personnel (aboard three vessels) and 421 were foreign seafarers. Only fifty-one individuals in these returns could be legitimately connected with the Falmouth community. Conspicuous by their more distant origins were the crews of vessels on the North Atlantic passage registered at Liverpool, Dublin, Hamburg and Le Havre.[16] Any ship in harbour at the time of a census, however temporarily, was liable to the enumeration of its crew and passengers.[17] It was, though, a travesty to enumerate birds of passage as if they were customary residents. The objections were particularly strong in the case of Falmouth where the floating population constituted over one-third of the borough's total population as returned in the census of 1881.[18]

The example of Falmouth highlights the importance of taking note of royal navy vessels, which added considerably to the floating population of some counties, Table 2. Most, but by no means all, of these ships' crews were incorporated in the returns of settlements conspicious for their naval establishments. Several such exceptions may be detected in the population returns for Cornwall and Kent where vessels technically based at naval ports were enumerated off the shores of small rural parishes. Thus in 1901 the crews of royal navy ships off the parish of Maker (across the Tamar estuary from Devonport) effectively doubled its enumerated population to 2,274 persons. The parish of Hoo in Kent with 301 residents in 1911 gained a floating population of 154 by virtue of one naval vessel off its shores.[19] Civilian ports were occasionally turned to military use, as was the case with Southampton in 1901 when troop movements connected with the Boer War probably

accounted for most of the 1,090 persons returned on vessel schedules.[20] By no means could it be supposed that these troops were resident in the town, yet their inclusion on the total of population for the contiguous enumeration district gives an exaggerated impression of crowded housing conditions in the dock area of Southampton.

The amalgamation of data from vessel schedules with data from household schedules of contiguous enumeration districts was not, therefore, justified by the rationale which the Registrar General suggested. The over-burdened officials of the census office were content with any expedient which made easier the complex job of processing data.[21] Moreover, further errors were perpetrated.

A Population at Sea

Captains of ships at sea, but supposedly in home waters at the time of a census, were required to complete vessel schedules, noting their position at midnight. Subsequently the census officials used this reference to 're-allocate' the floating population to what was judged to be the nearest enumeration district, however arbitrary their decision. The Registrar General himself confessed '. . . it has been a matter of guesswork to allocate a considerable proportion of the shipping population'.[22] Amongst the 1881 manuscript census returns for Cardiff, Swansea and Sunderland are schedules of vessels which were as far from those ports on census night as Rotterdam, Antwerp, Bilbao and Bordeaux.[23] The crews had no evident connection with these three British ports, yet their enumeration details were incorporated with those of the inhabitants of Cardiff, Swansea and Sunderland.[24] The implications of this practice may disconcert local historians, especially those who are dependent on published rather than manuscript returns, when it is appreciated that at the time of a census ships were, inevitably, randomly located around the British Isles. On census night, 1901 a liner in transit to the East India Dock dropped anchor in the Downs. Her crew, consisting of men from Poplar and Canning Town were, therefore, enumerated as residents of St Margaret-at-Cliffe, Kent and constituted as much as 15 per cent of the population of this small rural parish.[25] Similar anomalies in the published census returns for 1901 were noted by the Registrar General. These included the addition of 242 persons to the Isle of Grain's resident population of 532; remarkably, 164 of the floating population were aboard foreign vessels at the mouth of the river Scheldt.[26] It is not therefore surprising that the Registrar General concluded; 'For many reasons it appears undesirable to include (the shipping population) in the age, occupation and birthplace tables' of the published census, but the surprising aspect is that the practice was not altered until 1931.[27]

In several of the examples cited in this paper 10 per cent or more of the population of a parish was constituted by persons aboard vessels either in port or at sea off the parish at the time of a census. Their connection with the resident community was often no more substantive than the geographical accident of their vessel's location on census night. Furthermore, the demographic and other characteristics of the floating population as recorded on vessel schedules were quite unlike those of the resident population enumerated on household schedules. Therefore, the conflation of data from vessel schedules and from household schedules respectively was an

administrative expedient adopted by the census office with little regard to the resulting distortions in the published census returns. The cases given here are but limited exemplification of the anomalies to which the local historian should be alert when using the published census statistics of maritime and riverine settlements.

CENSUS
of
THE POPULATION,
1871.

SCHEDULE FOR VESSELS.

PREPARED UNDER THE DIRECTION OF ONE OF HER MAJESTY'S PRINCIPAL SECRETARIES OF STATE, PURSUANT TO THE ACT OF 33 & 34 VICT. c. 107.

NAME of VESSEL: Challenger

Official Number if any: 11708

PORT or Place to which she belongs: Waterford

Her Tonnage: 132

DESCRIPTION, and the Trade in which she is employed: Schooner Coasting

NAME of MASTER: William Hughes

Place at which the Schedule is delivered to the Master and the Date of Delivery: Southampton 29th March 1871

Position of the Vessel at Midnight of April 2nd, 1871: Laying ~~in the Loading~~ ~~Berth~~ at Southampton

To the MASTER or PERSON in CHARGE of the VESSEL.

1. You are requested to insert the particulars specified on the other side respecting all the persons who slept or abode on board the Vessel **ON THE NIGHT OF APRIL 2nd,** in compliance with an Act which passed the House of Commons and the House of Lords in the last Session of Parliament, and received the assent of Her Majesty The Queen on the 10th of August, 1870.

2. This Paper must be properly filled up **ON THE MORNING OF APRIL 3rd,** signed by yourself and delivered to the appointed Officer, who will apply to you for it.

[3. Should you be the **MASTER** of a **BRITISH VESSEL** and be out *on the night of April 2nd,* on a Coasting or short foreign voyage, you must fill up the Form on *April 3rd* and deliver it with the *LEAST POSSIBLE DELAY either at the Custom House or the British Port of arrival, or to the Officer who may apply for it.*]

4. Persons who refuse to give correct information incur a penalty of Five Pounds.

5. The Return is required to enable the Secretary of State to complete the Eighth Census, which is to show the exact numbers, ages, and conditions of the people—their arrangement in different ranks, professions, and trades—their distribution over sea and land—their increase and progress during the last ten years.

Approved,

H. A. BRUCE, *Home Office, Whitehall, Dec. 9th, 1870.*

GEORGE GRAHAM, *Registrar General.*

NUMBER of PERSONS belonging to the Vessel **ON SHORE** on the night of Sunday, **APRIL 2nd:—**

	ABSENT ON SHORE. (Names not entered in the Schedule on the other side.) Males	Females	Total
Crew			
Passengers			
Total			

Fig. 1. Completed Vessel Schedule, 1871 Census
Source: PRO RG10/1194 Southampton.

NAME and SURNAME (Write, after the Name of the Master, the Names of the Officers and Crew, and then the Names of Passengers and of all other Persons.)	CONDITION (Write "Married" or "Unmarried," "Widower" or "Widow," against the Names of all Persons except Young Children.)	AGE (Last Birthday) of Males	Females	RANK or OCCUPATION (State here the rank of the Officers, and the rating of the Men and Boys of the Crew. The rank or occupation of Passengers and of all other Persons should be stated as fully and clearly as possible.)	WHERE BORN	Deaf-and-Dumb, Blind, Imbecile or Idiot, Lunatic
William Hughes	Widower	46		Master	Pembrey S. Wales	Nil
John " Thomas	Married	38		Mate	Llanelly S. Wales	Nil
David Charles	Married	34		A. B	do do do	Nil
Hugh " Skelley	Married	29		A. B	Bellaville Ireland	Nil
Julian Le Jaune	Married	30		A. B	Ringreville France	Nil
John " Boys	Single	14		Boy	Bideford Devon	Nil

I declare the foregoing to be a true Return, according to the best of my knowledge and belief.

6 —

Witness my Hand. (Signature) William Hughes

NOTES

1. T. H. Lister, the first Registrar General of Births, Deaths and Marriages in England and Wales, suggested that persons afloat in British waters should be 'properly described as residents' in a Memorandum on the Census of 1841; PRO RG 27/1, p.5.
   The Standard definition of home waters was 'within the limits of the United Kingdom, the Isle of Man, the Channel Islands and of the Continent of Europe extending inclusive from the river Elbe to Brest'; **Census of England and Wales, 1851,** vol. 1, PP 1852-3, LXXV, p.xvi. Returns of seafarers in foreign waters outside these limits were made by the Registrar General of Shipping and Seamen.
2. Even had this information been gathered it is unlikely that the census office could have undertaken the massive task of re-assigning individuals to their home towns and villages.
3. Memorandum on the Census of 1841 PRO RG 27/1, p.5; Registrar General's Letterbooks PRO RG 29/9, letter dated 27 September 1890 to the Registrar General of Shipping and Seamen; Forms and Instructions for taking the census, 1861 to 1921 inclusive PRO RG 27/3 to RG 27/9.
4. Vessel schedules are preserved at the Public Record Office and are available for consultation for the censuses of 1861, 1871 and 1881: those for 1851 were, apparently, destroyed and schedules for censuses after 1881 are unavailable under the hundred year ruling.
5. **Census of England and Wales, 1891,** vol. IV, PP 1893-4, CVI, p.xxiv; **Census of England and Wales, 1901 Summary Tables** PP 1903,LXXIV, p.138.
6. V. C. Burton, 'Counting seafarers: the published records of the registry of merchant seamen', **The Mariner's Mirror,** vol. 71, no. 3, Aug. 1985, 316.
7. Vessel enumeration poses some of the same methodological problems as institutional enumeration, but there were no institutions quite so mobile as vessels.
8. Censuses of England and Wales, population returns for Cardiff 1861 to 1901 inclusive.
9. **Census of England and Wales, 1981,** vol. IV, PP 1893-4, CV, p.xxxiv; **Census of England and Wales, 1901, Summary Tables** PP 1903, LXXIV, p.138.
10. **Census of England and Wales, 1891,** vol. IV, **Ibid.,** p.67.
11. **Census of England and Wales, 1871, Preliminary Report,** PP 1871, LIX, p.xxii.
12. Sources which might be consulted for their regular reports of shipping movements are **Lloyd's Weekly Shipping Index** and **Shipping Gazette Weekly Summary.**
13. **Crew list of Challenger,** Southampton City Record Office 11708/1871.
14. Census vessel enumeration schedules, 1881 Grimsby PRO RG 11/3276 & 11/3277. The 2,292 persons enumerated on vessel schedules constituted 8.1 per cent of the population of the parish of Great Grimsby (total population 28,503). **Census of England and Wales, 1881,** vol.II PP 1863, LXXIX, p.409.
15. The remaining floating 'residents' were aboard a variety of British and foreign home trade and foreign going vessels.
16. Census vessel enumeration schedules, 1881 Falmouth PRO RG 11/2318.
17. Officials responsible for a vessel census at another international port, Southampton, complained of the practical difficulties of accurately enumerating persons aboard German liners because of their very brief call at the port; PRO RG 29/9, letter dated 21 March 1891.
18. The total population of Falmouth borough was 5,973; **Census of England and Wales, 1881,** vol.II, PP 1883, LXXIX, p.273.
19. **Census of England and Wales, 1901,** County of Cornwall, PP 1902, CXVIII, p.170 (the total population of the parish was 2,274 inclusive of 1,014 persons enumerated on board ship); **Census of England and Wales, 1911,** vol.I, PP 1912-13, CXI, p.170.
20. **Census of England and Wales, 1901,** County of Hampshire, PP 1902, CXIX, p.51; **Southampton Daily Echo,** 30 March and 1 April 1901. At the previous census only 202 persons were enumerated on vessel schedules in the same parish.
21. The limitations of the census office are made glaringly apparent in out-letters to the Treasury between the 1880s and the 1900s PRO RG 29/9 and in the **Report of the Committee appointed by the Treasury to inquire into certain questions connected with the taking of the Census,** PP 1890, LVII.
22. Memorandum on the Census of 1911 PRO RG 19/45.
23. Census vessel enumeration schedules, 1881, PRO RG 11/15001, Sunderland, PRO RG 11/5286 & 11/5291 Cardiff, PRO RG 11/5364 Swansea.

24. Some of these vessels made their first UK call at Cardiff, Swansea or Sunderland hence the schedules were collected at those ports, but the fact the ships were not re-allocated to their locations on census night indicates that the census officials were inconsistent in following their own stipulated procedures.
25. Memorandum on the Census of 1911 PRO RG 19/45, pp. 54-5. The vessel schedule is unavailable under the hundred year ruling but the crew list of the **Galician** for this voyage can be consulted; PRO BT 100/139.
26. Memorandum on the Census of 1911 **ibid.**
27. **Ibid.**