MISCELLANY

"BAG IN HAND, AND WITH A PROVISION OF PAPERS FOR AN EMERGENCY" – AN IMPRESSION OF THE 1891 CENSUS FROM THE PAGES OF SOME CONTEMPORARY NEWSPAPERS

Contributed by Christopher Charlton

The National Press covered every stage in the life cycle of the 1891 census. The awesome administrative process fascinated the leader writers and journalists and drew from them line upon line of facts, specifications and comment. Their tone was solemn and even complacent; "Never before were the arrangements so complete for ensuring the greatest possible accuracy". The numbering of the people was an essential element in the march of social progress – "Upon the information which will be collected ... many calculations will be made and inferences drawn during the next decade". The duty of every citizen must be to co-operate with the enumerators though who now in 1891 could doubt the public's intentions. "Superstitious and sentimental feelings" were no longer to be found. "Whatever it may have been ninety years ago, the country is too enlightened, too well educated for that now".

Early in March, just a month before the census day, The Times set the scene for its readers.

"The Census office is just now busily engaged in preparing for the taking of the census for England and Wales in April next. An iron building has been erected on a vacant plot of ground in Charles street, opposite the offices of the Local Government Board, and here some 20 clerks are at present employed in the preliminary operations, under the immediate direction of Mr Noel. A. Humphreys, and under the control of Sir Brydges Henniker, Registrar General, and Dr William Ogle, Superintendent of Statistics. The building will accommodate 150 clerks, whose services will be required when the returns have been sent in. The work now being performed is of considerable importance and magnitude, for, if the census is to be successfully taken, the details of the scheme must of necessity be thoroughly worked out beforehand. This fact the officials are quite alive to, and so far as the plan can be perfected everything has been done to make it perfect".

However, there were difficulties. Few of the staff who had administered the 1881 census remained in office so that an even greater responsibility rested on the shoulders of the principal officers, Henniker, Ogle and Humphreys. Nevertheless, having reviewed the administrative procedures and the staff employed The Times felt able to pronounce that "altogether the staff is superior
to that of 1881". However, there was a further problem.

"The second difficulty is, perhaps, the greater than that already mentioned as it affects the county registrars as well as the London office. It is related to the formation of enumerators' districts. Since 1881 three Acts have been passed, which have destroyed to a large extent the old local boundaries. They are the Local Government Act, which created all the administrative counties; the Redistribution of Seats Act, 1885; and the Divided Parishes Acts. The last-named Acts have complicated matters immensely. Previously in very numerous cases, the boundaries of civil parishes did not coincide with the boundaries of ecclesiastical parishes or districts, and these cases have been much increased since the Divided Parishes Acts came into operation. The result has been to transfer detached portions of civil parishes to other civil parishes without any corresponding ecclesiastical transference taking place. There is danger, therefore, unless the enumerator has made himself well acquainted with the respective civil and ecclesiastical boundaries in his district, of assuming without enquiry that a house situated in a given civil parish is also situated in the ecclesiastical parish of the same name. It is of the utmost importance to local authorities that there should be strict accuracy in this matter, and the Registrar General has given minute instructions which, if adhered to, will leave nothing to be desired."

The scale of the task to be completed before census day was brought home to the public in a series of impressive statistics. More than 35,000 enumeration districts had to be defined and millions of schedules printed and despatched. The division into districts had been completed by the end of January. The census office had been able to make considerable savings in expenditure by ensuring that some of the smaller enumeration districts had been amalgamated with their neighbouring divisions so eliminating the need for a separate enumerator.

"It is assumed that an efficient enumerator will be able to deal with from 200-300 houses in towns; but in the rural districts no general rule can be laid down owing to the great variations that prevail in the relative aggregation of houses".

There was general agreement that the enumerators employed in 1891 were of a higher quality than ten years before. At that time, "an examination of the enumerators books showed that many of the officials performed their duties in a most slovenly manner, and that even their handwriting was often as bad as to be almost illegible".

"Sir Brydges Henniker's instructions [were] that they [should] be intelligent trustworthy, and active; able to write well and having some knowledge of arithmetic and that they [should] be temperate, orderly, and respectable, and such as are likely to conduct themselves with strict propriety, civility, and tact".

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Local registrars were advised that "should any clergyman or other minister, professional man, schoolmaster, overseer or other persons of a higher station in life be willing to undertake the duties of an enumerator to secure such desirable assistance". According to The Times "many of these classes" were engaged.

In Manchester, according to the Manchester Guardian, arrangements were in the hands of the clerks to the Manchester Charities and Prestwich Boards of Guardians. The enumerators were described as "men of capacity, intelligence, and local knowledge", so far as it was possible to secure these qualifications. The financial rewards for each rank in the census hierarchy were set out in The Times. Superintendent Registrars were paid £5 and an additional sum of 2s. 6d. for every 1,000 persons enumerated over and above the first 10,000 in his district; a Registrar, £4 and 1s. for every 100 over and above the first 1,200; and Enumerators £1 1s., and an additional 2s. 6d. for every 100 over the first 400 in his district, plus an additional "allowance of 6d. for every mile above five miles necessarily traversed within his district".

The same paper also recorded, almost as an afterthought, "it is held by the Local Government Board that by the terms of the Census Act women are eligible to serve as enumerators, and in a number of districts women have been put on the list". It would be interesting to know how many female enumerators there were. Was this the first time they were employed?

The Manchester Guardian account of the collection of the householders' schedules in and around Manchester confirms the general impression of an improved level of co-operation and efficiency.

"Bag in hand, and with a provision of papers for an emergency, each enumerator began his round early yesterday morning for the purpose of collection. It was only in such districts as Hulme and Ancoats and Red Bank, where the poorer and more ignorant classes of people live, that the officials were put to any serious trouble. Such trouble is always met with at census times ... enumerators for Hulme and Ancoats speak of the great suspicion with which they were in some cases regarded. There were householders who had a lurking distrust that the papers would be used against them in evidence as to the non-attendance at school of their children of school age. There were others whose distrust was not lurking, but pretty openly expressed, that the Corporation were in some underhand way trying to find a new opening for taxation. Then, also, there were lodging-house keepers who thought that the filling up of the papers might be serious evidence against them in regard to over-populating their tenements. The reader may imagine many other objections of a like kind with which in the poorer districts the enumerators have to contend, and especially he may realize the reluctance – far from imaginary – with which some people subscribed their ages to the documents. Threats were necessary in some of these cases. The enumerators alluded to the police court and the penalty of £5 which may be incurred by a refusal to answer the printed questions. When
such threats had to be employed as a final reason for compliance they were of course effective ... One very gratifying statement was made by officers who had experience in census taking ten years ago. Taking the experience of the day they said there was distinct evidence of improved education and intelligence”.

In Manchester and in other cities with significant Jewish colonies special measures were adopted to overcome the barriers of language and suspicion. The Manchester Guardian published a detailed account of how the problem was tackled in that city.

"Difficulty was expected, but was not seriously experienced among the Jewish immigrants – a large number of them unable to speak our tongue – who dwell in Red Bank and the district of Strangeways. In the continental countries from which they come census-taking is looked upon with lively apprehension. There it is often the prelude to increased taxation or to a scheme of military conscription. It has been suggested also that the Jews might make objection on religious grounds to the counting of their heads. David when he wanted to know how many thousands there were of his people told Joab, the captain of the host, to number the multitude. This was done, we are told, in nine months and twenty days. But the instructions of Moses had been forgotten by the King, and as a consequence he was allowed the choice of one of three evils which was to afflict Israel – war, famine, or pestilence, the latter being taken as the least of the three. The instruction of Moses, it may be remembered, was that hands were to be counted by the half-shekel which rich and poor were able to offer in sacrifice. The Jewish memory still lingers on this event; but the Chief Rabbi (Dr Adlar) issued a circular, which has come to all our large towns, reassuring the people of his race not only on this religious question but on the more immediate and material matters previously mentioned. The Chief Rabbi appealed to all Jews to show their gratitude for the freedom they enjoy in England by giving the information which the Government seeks. Dr Solomon, of the Great Synagogue, Manchester, has spoken from his pulpit and among his people to the same effect. The Jewish Board of Guardians have also done what they could to facilitate the work of the counting. Instructions as to filling up the papers have been given in English, German and Russian, in addition to which missioners were sent among the poorer class of working Jews to give personal help and advice. Still further to make certain of the returns with regard to the eight or nine thousand of the Jewish population of Manchester, a number of Jewish ladies were appointed enumerators in the more densely populated districts. These ladies when they found inaccurate or incomplete returns made the necessary revision of the census papers”.

The part played by the press in promoting the census extended well beyond the publication of fulsome descriptions of its administrative structure. National and local papers reminded their readers of the "public duty of co-operating
with the enumerators". The Times referred to the Germans appealing to national pride and to personal self respect to encourage full co-operation in their census and continued "a similar appeal might be made to the British householder. For many purposes it concerns the welfare of the nation that those who are responsible for its many sided affairs should have precise information". The press also recorded the efforts made by others to encourage full participation in the census. In Nottinghamshire the trade societies urged members to co-operate in the provision of employment and occupational information a contribution which the Nottingham Daily Express recorded with evident approval. From time to time Henniker and his staff used the press for direct communication with the public. This was done either by statement or by sending letters for publication. On April 1 The Times published a letter from Sir Brydges Henniker the contents of which suggest that he did not entirely share that newspaper's confidence in the census machine.

"Sir, — in view of the approaching census, I am desirous of appealing, through the columns of the Press, to the general public for their co-operation, without which so gigantic an undertaking cannot possibly be carried out in a thoroughly satisfactory manner.

Nearly 40,000 enumerators will be employed in the distribution and collection of the householders schedules. It will be part of their duty to leave a schedule with each occupier of a tenement at some time in the week preceding the day of enumeration, and to collect these schedules, duly filled up by the occupiers, on Monday 6 April. It is hardly to be expected that out of nearly 40,000 men thus employed there will not be a few — I trust only a few — who will not perform their duties with that accuracy which is so necessary and so desirable, and, as a matter of fact, at every census there have been some few complaints, either that schedules have not been left for occupiers, or that having been left, they have not afterwards been collected.

In any case where such neglect may occur I shall be much obliged if the aggrieved occupier will forthwith put himself into communication with the Registrar of births and deaths for the sub-district in which he resides, apply for a schedule, should none have been left with him before April 6, or forwarding the schedule duly filled up, should it have been left but not afterwards collected,

I am, Sir, Your Obedient Servant
Brydges P. Henniker
Registrar General, Census Office, Charles Street"

The Times also provided an explanation of the new questions which householders would find once the enumerators had delivered the schedules. The paper expressed some doubt as to the effectiveness of the new questions. It would have preferred more radical developments including the establishment of a quinquennial census and a permanent census office. It expresses the fear that with the development of the "flat system" by which even large houses in well to do areas are divided up the occupants will count as lodgers and so may
be confused with the poor. The paper also raised doubts as to the effectiveness of the employment questions, expressing preference for a separate occupational census on the German model and adding querulously "in the minute instructions relative to this section the case of nearly every employment is provided except one. Evidently the Registrar General considers that literature and journalism are not even callings, let alone professions".

Among those who held a less than sanguine view of the census there were other fundamental issues which required attention. Surely the census was being held at the wrong time? Clericus was not alone in expressing this view.

"A very large number of persons do not return from the Easter holidays until after next Sunday. The result will be that the increase or decrease in many parishes (certainly in the west of London) will not be accurately ascertained, whilst our seaside resorts will show a purely artificial increase".

Other Londoners made the same point. "In this house of mine wherein sixteen persons usually sleep, Easter holiday making will reduce the number by exactly one half". These letters Henniker chose to ignore. It took a letter from Hastings C. Dent which appeared in The Times on 9 April to provoke him into print. Dent claimed information from clergy active in the East End of London of "many instances of absolutely incorrect return[s] in order to avoid subsequent disagreeable proceedings against them for overcrowding". In one case a household recorded eighteen inhabitants instead of twenty-eight; in another ten in place of twenty-two; and in a third ten instead of twenty. Henniker demanded that Dent reveal his sources and extracted from him the lame reply that he had in fact been alluding to the 1881 census. From Henniker's point of view the damage had already been done. As he conceded in a further letter to The Times Dent's case had already been quoted by newspapers "as affording one more instance of the inaccuracy of the census of 1891". Nevertheless he sought redress "as I cannot suppose that any of the numerous readers of Mr Hastings Dent's letter would understand that the census of 1881 was referred to therein I trust to your courtesy to give the same publicity to the explanation I have received from him as to his letter".

There was of course the inevitable spelling mistake and it fell to R.B.G. of Foley Avenue, Hampstead to bring it to public attention.

"Many besides myself must have had a shock on opening the new census paper; for here the time-honoured (or must I say honored?) English word labourer is spelled once and again laborer.... Is this done to economise the labor of writing or reduce the expenditure of printers ink, or has it some abstruse diplomatic meaning?"

In one rural Nottinghamshire community an enumerator's inadequacy was exposed to public scrutiny.

"Sir, there are four houses on the grounds where I live, but the papers have been left at one house with the request that they are all taken to
this house again when filled up, to save the collector the trouble of coming to each house. As a householder of long standing, and a voter, both parliamentary and municipal, I object to this treatment. Cannot I demand that the paper be fetched from my house, and not open my neighbour’s eyes to all we are compelled to put on the papers?"

Was the author of this letter really unaware of the procedure or was his apparent ignorance of the system conveniently assumed? No doubt then as now small communities were not without inhabitants prepared to seek any opportunity to pay off old scores.

In May and June the first results of the census began to appear and on June 9 The Times commented on the population figures for twenty-eight large towns which it described as "suggestive and interesting" showing an increase of about 20 per cent in contrast to the rate of growth of the decade preceding 1881 which had been 16.5 per cent. Also the total population of these cities at 9.3 million was more than six hundred thousand below the official estimate thus further establishing the case, long advocated by The Times, for quinquennial censuses. It was in this first table of results that The Times made its celebrated error of judgement in respect of the population figure for Liverpool. In altering the Registrar General’s figure and printing the population of the city as 617,116 The Times added a note, "we presume the 5, the first figure in the printed returns, should be ‘6’". The following day a letter from Humphreys, secretary to the census office, set the matter straight: "I am directed by the Registrar General to inform you that the enumerated population (unrevised) of Liverpool at the recent census was 517,951 persons".

In Liverpool the news was greeted with dismay by the health committee, the figures making a serious difference to the rate of mortality, revealing it to be more than 27 per '000, rather than 23 per '000: "It was a great disappointment after all the efforts of the committee to improve the sanitary condition of the City".

No general conclusion can be drawn from the newspapers of the overall efficiency of the 1891 census. If the system was widely abused it did not reach the columns of The Times. There were, however, reports of a number of cases brought to the courts where individuals had refused to complete their schedules or had made palpably false returns. In one case, heard at Wandsworth, and brought by Mr Taylor, Superintendent Registrar for Putney, Wandsworth and Battersea, by direction of Henniker, a summons was granted against a man who had written on his schedule "myself, my wife, and three children slept under the roof of this house on April 5. All the other questions are of an inquisitional nature and I absolutely refuse to answer any of them or allow anyone in my house to do so".

In the second case, at West London, Mr Rutherglen, Clerk to the Kensington Board of Guardians, and Superintendent Registrar of the district, applied for a summons against Lord James Douglas. The magistrate was shown Lord Douglas’s census paper "which purported to be a return of his household. upon
the list were the names of Lady James Douglas and her son, the former being described as "cross sweep" and lunatic, and the latter as "shoe black", born "in the darkest Africa". As in the other case a summons was granted.

When the cases came to trial the hitherto anonymous offender was revealed to be a Mr J. Morgan of 14 Aliwel Road, Battersea. He claimed he had complied with the act by giving the number of residents but beyond that government had no right to do. "Government authorities have no right to enquire into a man’s private life or his secrets unless he had committed a criminal act. He was not a sham, but a free-born Briton, a husband and a father, defending his home, his wife and children, and their secrets. There were few families without a skeleton in their cupboard and why therefore should their treasured secrets be invaded and made public property?".

Lord James Douglas of 16 Kensington Court did not attend the court. Mr Rutherglen stated he had seen his Lordship "who expressed regret and shame for the childish and foolish return. His Lordship stated that he was ill in bed and gave the return to his wife to fill up after writing his own name in pencil. Mr Rutherglen further stated that the return was filled up by the wife and step son, who thought it was a good joke to make the entry". Mr Rutherglen pointed out that Lord Douglas was responsible but there was some excuse for him and he sought leave to withdraw the summons Lord Douglas having agreed to pay all costs and having satisfied the Registrar General by completing a return. The magistrate, a Mr Bennett, remarking that he had noticed on the return a different handwriting, readily agreed to drop the case against Lord Douglas.

And how did Mr J. Morgan of Battersea fare? "Having expressed his willingness to fill in a form properly [he] was conducted to the gaoler’s room, where he answered the questions demanded of him by the Act in writing". He was fined 20s. and 17s. costs, and was offered as an alternative seven days in prison. "The defendant went to prison". Whether from choice or an inability to pay is not recorded: The Times did not see fit to make any comparison between the two cases.

By August the census was history. The provisional population totals had been released and while some local debates continued (as in Liverpool) the census would not be news again nationally until the full report appeared in 1893. But in The Times that was not quite the end of census matters for the year 1891. On August 4 the paper carried news of the Local Government Board’s proposal to destroy the enumerators’ books from the 1851 and 1861 censuses which were in store in the clock tower at Westminster. Such action, The Times argued, would be inopportune. Quite so!