

THE USE OF CENSUS ENUMERATORS' RETURNS IN LOCAL HISTORY STUDIES

An extra-curricular schoolroom project

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In summer 1977 I attended an Historical Association Revision School, at which I learnt about and took part in the analysis of census enumerators' returns for the first time. The seminar group, eighteen in number, spent about twenty-one hours in producing an analysis of a Durham village which had a population of 647 in 1851. The participants were largely involved in primary, secondary or further education. I was intrigued by the arguments, put forward in an introductory seminar, that the activity was potentially useful in school teaching. The school in which I taught at the time operated a C.S.E./G.C.E. O level course in 'British Economic and Social History, 1770 to the Present Day'. There is a strong element of local history involved, particularly in the C.S.E. syllabus. I therefore set out to convert my newly-found 'expertise' into something of practical value to my students.

The fact that this work would for me be experimental led me to undertake it as an extra-curricular activity with a small group of pupils. But before I could begin, of course, I needed to obtain a copy of the census. I duly contacted the Public Record Office and purchased part of the 1851 census for Over, Cheshire, the area in which the school I was teaching in is situated. The cost of this in 1978 was over £60 and I hastily set about persuading the school authorities to reimburse this. This was perhaps optimistic on my part and teachers might do better to ensure that the financial provision of resources is settled first. Thanks to the support of the history adviser, headmaster, and head of department all went well, but I had to justify the project first.

Firstly, this sort of project is local. This immediately has an appeal for youngsters and should fire their enthusiasm, particularly when the children realise that the people they deal with may well be members of their own families. This was, however, less true of Over as far as the majority of pupils were concerned since it is an 'overspill' town with many newcomers from Liverpool. But the general principle holds good and the project can be seen as a means of combating the general sense of dis-location which often accompanies such movement. Secondly, the project links with work

done in the school on historical research techniques as part of the Schools Council's 'What Is History?' project.¹ A concern for evidence has been seen by H.M.I. John Slater as part of the nebulous 'sense of history' which we history teachers are in business to promote.² My third point was that a study such as this was likely to promote empathy in the students more readily than a vague account of people in general, in places in general, sometime in some previous time warp! Fourthly, of course, there was a direct link with one of the existing courses. Finally, in justifying the expense which the school would incur, I pointed out the amount of 'mileage' in the project. This was not a 'one-off job'. Research into, and analysis of our findings could be undertaken with no undue repetition for many 'seasons'.

During the term beginning September 1978 I obtained the support of five volunteers from among my fifth-year C.S.E./G.C.E. O level class. Whilst they were enthusiastic and among the most capable pupils in the group, they did have limitations. (Their final O level history results were one grade B, three C and one E grade). Only three went on to do A level (none taking history). As a group we obviously did not compare well with the eighteen adults of the Historical Association Revision School, nor did the size of the censuses compare favourably: the population of Over in 1851 was 3223, as opposed to 647 in Durham. The task would be at least eighteen times as large as the Durham survey!

Analysis of census enumerators' returns produces a "still photograph" description of a place at a very specific time, in this case Sunday, 31 March 1851. The 1851 census contains a good deal more information than the 1841 census, and so it seems to be more commonly studied. It also coincides with the point at which Winsford became the greatest of the Cheshire salt towns in terms of production. (Over is the western part of Winsford). The study of the 1851 census results in a description of the people who lived in a place. It can tell us the age/sex ratios, major occupations, places of origin, marital conditions, size and composition of families and of households. Further and deeper analysis can result in additional information regarding such things as average age at first child-birth (live), incidence of child labour, and, with other sources, land use, schooling, and so on.

When not using a computer or mechanical information-retrieval-system analysis of the census requires the transcription of information off the photocopy of the returns. We transcribed it onto colour-coded retrieval slips. A copy of the 'Head of Household' and of the 'Adult Female' slips is shown in Fig. 1. We decided that they would be white and yellow respectively. These could then be sorted quite easily so that statistical data could be obtained. The task of transcription took the term from September until Christmas, using a one-hour, after-school weekly session, plus a substantial amount of time by myself. The size of the task was immense, and necessitated a great deal of time being spent on this monotonous job. The group had no previous experience of archival work and they found the handwriting and the quality of photocopy a double handicap, in some places worse than others. I estimate that the pupils,

Figure 1 Retrieval slips for 'Head of Household' and 'Adult Female'

HEAD

1. Household	2. Forename	3. Surname	4.	5. Number in household

6. Condition	7. Age	8. Occupation	9. Group

10. Birthplace	11. Group	12. Was wife born there?	13. Is wife immigrant?

14. Disabled	15. Relatives	16. Lodgers	17. Servants	18. Employees	19. Notes

ADULT FEMALE

1. Household	2. Forename	3. Surname	4. Relation to head	5. Illegit.

6. Condition	7. Age	8. Occupation	9. Group

10. Birthplace	11. Group	12. Was husband born here?	13. Is husband immigrant?

14. Disabled				18. Notes

who were borderline C.S.E./G.C.E. O level students, could copy information of about twenty-five people per hour. This was after a certain amount of experience, both of deciphering the handwriting of the five enumerators, and of the two codes developed to make easier the retrieval of birthplace and of occupation details. The coding used for occupation grouping is illustrated in the appendix. The transcription process was therefore long and drawn out. The compilation of statistical data was slow too, but for a different reason. The first problem after Christmas was that the total number of retrieval slips we had produced was too great. Somewhere along the line details had been written down twice for two residents. This problem had been made worse by the mistake of one of the 1851 enumerators who had miscalculated the number of inhabitants in his district! Finally we settled at a population of 3223: 961 men (29.8%), 935 women (29%), 647 boys (20.1%), 680 girls (21.1%). (Boys and girls are those of fourteen years and below). By this stage the small group were showing signs of weariness brought on by constant counting and re-counting of retrieval slips. They grew impatient with their own errors. It is difficult to be positive about whether they had gained and what they had gained from their early experiences of census analysis. For a start there had been no actual analysis of statistics because no useful data had been isolated. However it had been an introduction (though a brutal one) to historical research.

The next task was to take statistical information from the retrieval slips. We began with information about occupations. Although we had an example from work carried out on Billingham³ occupations there were difficulties about classifying some of these. For example, was an apprentice wheelwright to be classified with his master as a skilled craftsman? It was decided that he should be. An example occurring more regularly was that of married women listed in the returns as 'saltmakers wife', 'farmer's wife', 'surgeon's wife' and so on. Were they housewives, or did they help in the work of their husbands? Or should they be entered as having dual occupations? We decided each on its own merits. The result was that 'surgeon's wife' was assumed to take no part in her husband's occupation and was therefore group 'H' — a housewife. Very few dual occupations were allotted. The counting of occupational groups was again done with less accuracy than I had originally envisaged. The maximum number of retrieval slips now being dealt with at one time was 858, yet we had to recount several times in order to arrive at a correct total. This was depressing, frustrating and annoying at the same time. Such inefficiency was time-consuming, but more important, it lowered the pupils' interest in the work. They were prevented from discovering the results of their work, yet having gone so far nothing could now be done except to keep counting!

Finally a set of statistics was produced showing the actual numbers of people involved in each occupational group, along with percentages. By 'occupations', of course, we also meant scholars, housewives, retired persons, paupers, etc. We found that of the 58% of the population whose occupations were in fact jobs (including housewives!) 16½% were involved in the salt industry, 13.8% were skilled craftsmen, and 13% were in agriculture. We classified 29% as housewives, but many of these, as

previously mentioned, could have had full or part time jobs generally alongside their husbands in the fields or the saltsheds. We began a brief investigation of some of the statistics. For example, we wanted to know why there were so many skilled craftsmen. In another similar survey there were fewer. Cockfield in County Durham (on which I had worked) in the Historical Association Revision school seminar had only 8.26% of its population so described. Without a study in detail of this group we could not state a specific reason for the disproportionate figure, but we were aware that the production of salt from brine in the long pan sheds of Winsford (Over) created an abnormal demand for shoemakers and cobblers: the salt, apparently, shortened the life of leather shoes. Another broad group we discussed was the labourers, group 11, again a high proportion compared with other studies. The reason for this, we concluded, might be due to the way they had been classified by the five enumerators. If a man was a labourer in the salt industry he might be referred to as such, or just as a labourer. Similarly agricultural workers may have been recorded as 'labourers' rather than 'agricultural labourers'. (Group 1B).

A further study was on the number of boys attending school. We found that 38% of school age boys, but only 28½% of girls were listed as scholars. Was there a reason for this? We decided to look further afield, so a visit to Chester Record Office was arranged. I had hoped that the census survey would have been further advanced by the time we were due to visit Chester, so that the visit could have added flesh to our statistical bones, and allow suppositions to be verified or rejected. However, by this stage we had only basic — I would call them 'first stage' — statistics about occupations and age groups. We had not had the opportunity to extract 'second stage' data about individual occupations within the broad groups, or about individual age groups within the population. Though we had so few items to investigate I decided that a broadening of the exercise without statistical backup was possible. I gave the students various tasks at the Record Office in Chester. One began to use the 1846 Tithe Apportionment map of Over in conjunction with the third edition (1909) 25 inch O.S. maps. Her task was to record which fields on the Tithe map corresponded with those on the O.S. map, and make appropriate notes on the school photocopies of the later map with a view to producing overlays at a later date which would graphically display the results of our investigations. Meanwhile, using the Tithe Apportionments, another student was recording details of land use around Over. Again this would help us to display work when the survey was more advanced. Yet more information on "who owned what" was obtained from electoral registers of the period. The enumerators' returns gave little detail of the geographical location of the residents. It was hoped that this information could be discovered from electoral registers, directories and the Tithe documents.

In the study of occupations we found a need to look at the schools of Over and find out, if possible, why the number of boys in school should exceed the number of girls. In the records we looked at during this short visit — architects report of 1903 — we found that none of the schools were single sex at that date. Towards the end of the day we looked at the

history of Winsford's salt industry and of local churches. We were also able to consult a gazetteer. This enabled us to solve thirty four out of forty three of the problems we had encountered when filling in birthplace details on the retrieval slips. Some of the places listed by the enumerators, such as Wormbury in Flint, remained a mystery. For other places we assumed that the enumerators had misspelt or misheard place names. For example we assumed 'Stockholm' to be Stockham (near Frodsham) and 'Durley, Warwickshire' to be Dudley, Worcestershire.

So far the project had not developed as fully as I would have liked. Due to the problems of transcription and sorting already described, the five pupils who helped in this early attempt on this census have a less than favourable view of this sort of work. My assessment of progress included their views. On the first part of the work, the transcription, one of the girls wrote, 'The beginning of the project proved to be quite boring but as the work continued it became more interesting, finding out about the different people.' 'At first it seemed a waste of time, but I suppose it was valuable information because it showed a detailed view of a society ... if we had got further we could have learnt even more'. Thus another girl expressed her understanding of the potential value of such work. One of the boys added this: 'The project showed us the structure of the town, and how the town's life was influenced by the salt factories. With more time we may have discovered how big the influence was'. According to another boy, 'the trip to Chester archives was probably the highlight of the project'. The conclusions of these pupils were much the same as my own at this stage. I strongly endorse the remark that 'the counting of sheets ... could have been done by computer'. I now felt that this aspect of the work should not be undertaken by so few children, or perhaps not by school-children at all, because of the tedium of it. Work of this nature using computers has been described by Beverley LaBbett, and I had read his account in **Teaching History**.⁴ A most valid comment he has since made is that the statistical work for which he had used a computer was probably of more value to a school Computer Studies course than a History course. I agree that the work of the history pupils, and here I mean particularly pupils such as those who helped me, begins where I ended in the 'season' described above. The use of derived data from a computer storage bank for the analysis of the structure of a community is what I would now aim to achieve. Another warning I found in **Teaching History** seems relevant: "... it is a little depressing to be left with the impression that only with a large team of collaborators, plenty of money for photo-copying documents, preferably a computer, and certainly a commitment to many years of tedious work, can a genuinely useful community study be attempted."⁵

On the face of it, perhaps my first year's work seemed to have less to show for it than I would have hoped. However, I personally learned a great deal (not only about the techniques of census analysis, but also about Over in 1851), and rather than feeling that the activity was not feasible, I resolved to find a computer. The project continues with the help of a Computer Studies teacher and one of the microprocessors that the school simply did not possess when I began the work. If I were to advise others beginning such work I would suggest that a smaller census be analysed

or perhaps a street survey could be undertaken. Otherwise, be patient, choose your assistants well, search for computer time, and be prepared for a good deal of work.⁶

APPENDIX

Table of occupational groupings with examples

- Group
- 1A AGRICULTURAL SELF-EMPLOYED OR MANAGERS: farmer, farmer's son, farm bailiff, market gardener.
 - 1B AGRICULTURAL WORKERS: stable man, farm servant, farm labourer.
 - 2 SHOPKEEPERS AND TRADERS: baker, confectioner, grocer, cattle-dealer, potato-merchant, draper, hatter, innkeeper, brewer, publican, carrier, carter, hawker, higgler, huckster, ironmonger.
 - 3 SKILLED CRAFTSMEN, NON-INDUSTRIAL: brazier, nail-maker, blacksmith, brick-layer, brickmaker, carpenter, cabinet-maker, painter, sawyer, tailor, dressmaker, clogger, saddler, cordwainer, boat-builder, coach-maker, printer, cooper.
 - 4 MANUFACTURERS, INDUSTRIALISTS, WHOLESALERS, MANAGERS OF LARGE ENTERPRISES: shipbuilders, coalowner, timber-merchant.
 - 5 ALL THOSE EMPLOYED IN THE MAJOR NON-AGRICULTURAL INDUSTRY: salt-boiler, salt-agent, pansmith, salt-labourer.
 - 6A UPPER PROFESSIONAL: accountant, banker, lawyer, clergyman, doctor, judge, army or navy officer.
 - 6B LOWER PROFESSIONAL: auctioneer, Inland Revenue officer, musician, artist, school-teacher, vet.
 - 7A CLERICAL: clerk, secretary.
 - 7B SUPERVISORY WORKERS: workhouse-master, postmistress, superintendent constable.
 - 8A GENERAL DOMESTIC SERVANT: cook, coachman, butler, gardener, footman, house-keeper, general servant.
 - 8B LOWER SERVANTS: charwoman, laundress, mangle-woman, washerwoman.
 - 9 PRIVATE INCOME RECIPIENTS: fund-holder, interest on money, gentleman, proprietor of houses, annuitant.
 - 10 SEMI-SKILLED AND SERVICE WORKERS: cabman, sexton, sailor, postman, ostler, midwife, soldier, policeman.
 - 11 LABOURERS AND UNSKILLED WORKERS: labourers except those in group 1B and group 5, errand girl.
 - C CHILDREN fourteen and under with no occupation.
 - S CHILDREN described as scholars.
 - AS SCHOLARS over fourteen years old.
 - H HOUSEWIVES
 - NO NO OCCUPATION (over fourteen years old).
 - P PAUPERS: tramp, poor man, widow, parish relief.
 - R RETIRED PERSONS: superannuated, pensioners.
 - V VISITORS.

NOTES

1. Schools Council History Project 13-16, **What Is history**, published by Holmes McDougall, 1976.
2. John Slater, 'Why history?', **Trends In Education**, Spring 1978, p. 4.
3. Extra-mural Department, University of Durham. **Billingham, Port Clarence and Haver-ton Hill in 1851**, 1975.
4. B. D. C. Labbett, 'An approach to writing local history: The role of the computer within the project', **Teaching History**, No. 21 (1978), pp. 24-6.
5. Alan Metters, reviewing **Reconstructing Historical Communities**, in **Teaching History**, No. 23 (1979), p. 33.
6. This article is based upon a report of mine in **Handbook for Cheshire History Teachers' Conference**, 1979. Since then the project has passed on to another member of staff. He is supervising a pupil who hopes to produce more detailed analysis with the help of the Computer Studies teacher and an Apple microprocessor. I have moved on to a head of department post and intend to begin a new study.