

# AN ORSETT CENSUS ENUMERATOR

## Barbara Woollings

Barbara Woollings is a retired nurse who has recently completed the Open University Course DA301 Family and Community and the Certificate Course in Local History Studies at the University of Essex.

### Introduction

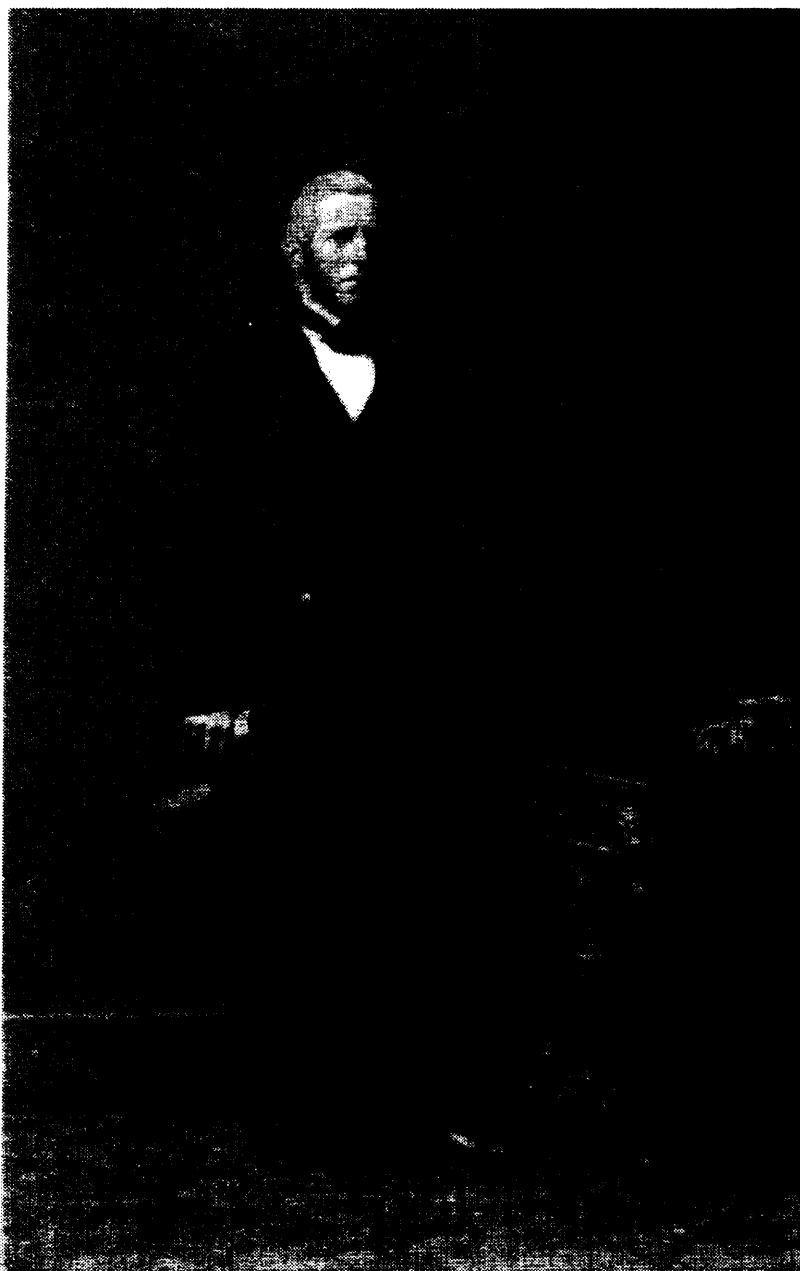
Given the wide use of Victorian census enumerators' books (CEBs), it is surprising that so little is known about the background and ability of the enumerators who compiled them. For the most part they are anonymous persons with difficult handwriting and strange spelling. One such enumerator was the current author's grandfather, William Woollings of Orsett, Essex, who compiled the censuses of 1851, 1861 and 1871 for one of the enumeration districts in the parish in which he lived. This article examines his qualifications for the task of census enumerator and attempts to find if his knowledge of and social standing in the local community affected the way in which he completed the census returns. Secondly, by comparing the three censuses that he compiled an overall assessment is made of the accuracy of his returns in the light of the difficulties that he experienced, and the improvements that were made over time.

### William Woollings's Personal Background

William was born in Orsett in 1819 and was baptised in the parish church of St Giles and All Saints, where he would later become churchwarden. His parents, James and Jane Woollings, lived in the mill house by the smock mill which James owned. James also owned some farmland and rented a further portion from the Baker family, the major landowners of the parish.<sup>1</sup> As the eldest living son, William was later to inherit all this from his father.<sup>2</sup>

In his adult life William's business and farming career appear to have prospered. By 1861 he was, according to the census, employing seven men, two millers, two boys and three women. As well as being a farmer and miller, he also acted as agent for The British Empire Mutual Life Assurance.<sup>3</sup> In politics he voted in 1857 and 1859 for Richard Baker, the liberal candidate who also happened to be principal landowner of Orsett, to whom he was also tenant. He carried out a full and active life, being a Trustee for two local charities, a Manager of the National School, a Guardian of the Orsett Union for thirty years and a churchwarden for twenty five.<sup>4</sup> In the last years of his life he was an ardent campaigner for the provision of a fever hospital, following an outbreak of smallpox. On this occasion his enthusiasm must have got the better of good judgement, as a large tent was ordered from Denmark which, not surprisingly, proved useless as a preventative measure. His obituary in The Essex Times described him as an 'affectionate husband and father, an upright, shrewd, intelligent and well-read man. A good master to all his servants and labourers'.<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 1 William Woollings: farmer, miller and census enumerator**



### **William Woollings as enumerator**

William appears to have had all the requirements listed for the selection of a census enumerator. In 1851 the instruction given to Registrars stated that enumerators should be 'persons of intelligence and activity, who could read and write well, with some knowledge of arithmetic, be between 18 and 65 years, temperate, orderly and respectable, likely to conduct themselves with strict propriety and deserve the good will of his district'.<sup>6</sup> It is impossible to tell if William volunteered his services as enumerator or if he was asked, but it seems possible that he knew both the Registrar for Orsett Registration District in 1851, Dr Corbet, and the Superintendent Registrar, in 1861 and 1871, George Biddell, as he lived close to the former while the latter was the agent for the Orsett Estate. In many respects William appears to have been typical of the

picture of the rural" enumerator painted by Arkell: in the 91 enumeration districts examined for Cornwall in 1851, 42 per cent were like William, farmers or sons of farmers, and two thirds, also like William, lived in the districts for which they were responsible. Likewise, three quarters were married and heads of their own households, and 53 per cent aged between 30 and 39.<sup>7</sup>

Orsett was described in 1848 as a 'large and pleasant village comprising 1390 population and 4136 acres of land'.<sup>8</sup> It was the largest of a group of agricultural parishes located in central south Essex, some five miles north of Tilbury on the River Thames. It was the administrative centre for the area with the Union House for eighteen parishes being sited there. William Woollings's enumeration district was described as that part of the parish lying to the south of the main road, running east west from Horndon on the Hill to Stifford.

When first appointed in 1851 William was no doubt supplied with a set of household schedules, an enumeration book, a memorandum book and a list of instructions by the Registrar, as required.<sup>9</sup> Enumerators were also required to spend time familiarising themselves with their enumeration district.<sup>10</sup> This would not have bothered William as he already knew the area first hand. However, he probably did share the same experience noted by an enumerator for the 1891 census in persuading each householder to accept and fill in a schedule. In a previous issue of LPS it was reported that one census enumerator in 1891 found that deaths had occurred in his enumeration district between handing out the schedules and collecting them again.<sup>11</sup> There is no evidence that this occurred in Orsett as there were no burials over the census periods, but in 1851 schedule number 53 was given by William to a traveller in 'a portable house' which had moved on before the collection date of 31 March.

His local standing would also have placed William in good stead in relation to another problem encountered by enumerators: that of suspicion of officialdom.<sup>12</sup> Most of the population of Orsett would have known their enumerator both by sight and by reputation. Since he was a parish official they may have needed considerable reassurance that the completion of the forms would not result in increased payments or extra duties, but clearly one visit must have been easier for him than others; as a Guardian of the Union House in the district, there at least he should have had prompt attention from the master. In some respects William's detailed knowledge of the enumeration district may have proved critical given that in terms of size, increasing from 976 in 1851 to 1083 in 1871 (Table 1), his enumeration districts were larger than the average.<sup>13</sup>

### **The accuracy of Woollings's returns**

Despite his work as agent for the British Empire Mutual Life Assurance, arithmetic seemed to prove difficult for William. There are numerous crossings out in the schedule accumulation page, apparently by his own pen, and he failed to add up the number of houses correctly. It is difficult to check the accuracy of items of information pertaining to individuals, such as rank and profession, but he does seem to have used the official terminology yet does not always distinguish, for example, between baker and master baker. Not surprisingly the 1851 census appears to have proved the most difficult for

**Table 1 Numbers of schedules and size of population in Orsett (southside enumeration district), 1851- 1871.**

	1851	1861	1871
Schedules	166+2	187	203
Inhabited houses	166	184	201
Uninhabited houses	6	5	0
Population			
Male	513	527	554
Female	463	474	529
Total	976	1001	1083

William. He forgot to give a schedule number to his own household and that of the Registrar, although they are included. He also re-wrote four schedules at the top of one page and then crossed them out when he found that he had included them several pages earlier. There was a definite improvement in later censuses, and he appears to have used a better pen as his writing is easier to read, although still blotchy. Despite this improvement, he failed in 1871 to record the number of schedules that were completed on behalf of the householders unable to do so, the first time enumerators were asked to provide this information.<sup>14</sup>

Matching information across censuses it is possible to determine a number of other enumeration errors due to discrepancies in the recording over time. For example, James Wade apparently aged only three years between two censuses. Equally, both Samuel Sanders a shopkeeper and John Dalliday an agricultural labourer recorded their ages as 42 in 1861 and 62 years in 1871.<sup>15</sup> As Drake states 'the inability to recall one's precise age was common throughout the nineteenth century'.<sup>16</sup> The same could also be argued about the consistency of recalling their place of birth. In one census Eliza Sanders was born in London and in the next in Orsett, while Eliza Dalladay thought she was born in Orsett for the 1861 census and in Grays for the following. Yet certain errors must have been those of the enumerator. Take, for example, schedule 25 in 1871. Sarah Major was recorded as the head of the household and married in the condition column, but as widow under rank and profession. As her husband Thomas was buried on 19 October 1867, she clearly was a widow. Another example of enumerator error can be seen in 1861. It seems unlikely that Jonathan Ward an agricultural labourer and his wife Eliza would have two daughters aged fifteen and three both called Susan. The younger one was certainly baptised Louisa on 30 August 1857.

Spelling in the last century was for many very flexible, and as such it is hard to state clearly that the enumerator was at fault over what today are seen as misspellings. As an Essex man himself, he should perhaps have known that Leer Britton should have been Layer Breton in Essex. Yet, although a local man, he probably can not have been expected to have known the precise spelling of all the surnames in the district, especially given the mobility of the rural populations in the nineteenth century. Mispronunciation and poor literacy were

both common. As a result we can see that a certain brickmaker was recorded as Henry Hayward in 1861 and Haywood ten years later. Another example is Knott an agricultural labourer in 1861, who appeared as Robert Knopp in the 1871 census and was registered as Robert Knock at the time of his death in 1874.<sup>17</sup> Examples can also be found where information was clearly withheld. Take the case of Samuel Newcome who in the Post Office Directory for Essex in 1866 is recorded as a farmer and landowner. The 1851 census shows him at Croft Hall with 500 acres, employing 25 men. His wife and sons, however, have no forenames given, only their initials. The 1861 schedule has all the information, but after Samuel's death, the 1871 records his widow as head of household with initials only, and the birthplace 'Not Known' even though it was recorded as Rainham (Essex) in previous censuses. Both William and for that matter the Registrar, must have known the full details of this family but omitted the information. A similar problem arises with schedule 70 in the 1871 census. Richard Fine aged 71 and his wife Caroline 65 years, a hawkers' family, are recorded with their daughter Caroline, unmarried aged 20 years. Also in the household are James aged four and Ann two years old, said to be son and daughter of the head of household. Given the ages of these individuals, this seems impossible. Could these have been the illegitimate children of the daughter Caroline? If so did William know this and try, for whatever reason to conceal the true set of relationships, or did he just fail to notice the improbable age difference?

## Conclusion

From the scanty information available about other enumerators in the nineteenth century William Woollings would appear to have been an average rural census recorder. He seems to have delivered his books to the Registrar with the minimum of delay and although he had problems with totalling the numbers of houses and population figures, he followed quite closely instructions given for the presentation of the census enumerators' books. He was said to be an educated man but his spelling was certainly inconsistent with regard to place names, leaving more to the imagination than accuracy. Surname changes also plagued William, as much as they do the family historian today. After his initial exposure to census-taking in 1851 the next two were much better presented and it seems that he must have learnt from experience. Although there are number of errors in the three census records, it is perhaps too easy for the present day recorder to see them in the light of the current age of regular information gathering and recording, as well as the ability to contrast, retrospectively, one census with the details of another. Finally, in evaluating the census process and its accuracy we must not forget the need to take account not only the enumerator himself, but also remember that in many respects the information collected is only as good as that given to him by the householders that he was enumerating.

## NOTES

1. Tithe Award, 1836, Essex Record Office, D/CT 264.4.
2. D. Mills and C. Pearce, **People and places in the Victorian Census**, Historical Geography Research Series, 23 (1989).
3. **Kelly's Directory for Essex**, (1851 and 1859).
4. **Orsett Parish Magazine**, June 1889.
5. **The Essex Times**, 1889.
6. E. Higgs, **Making Sense of the Census. The Manuscript Returns for England and Wales 1801-1901**, (London, HMSO, 1989)
7. T. Arkell, 'Identifying the census enumerators - Cornwall in 1851', **Local Population Studies**, 53 (1994), 70-5.
8. **White's Directory for Essex**, (Sheffield, 1848).
9. Higgs, **Making Sense of the Census**, 13.
10. C. Charlton, "'Bad in Hand, and with a provision of papers for an emergency" - An impression of the 1891 census from the pages of some contemporary newspapers', **Local Population Studies**, 47 (1991), 82.
11. M. Turner, 'A census enumerator's experience (by one of them) from: "The Eccles Journal", Friday, April 10th, 1891', **Local Population Studies**, 27 (1981), 80.
12. &I Charlton, 'Bad in Hand', 83
13. Arkell, 'Identifying the census enumerators', 70
14. 'Enumeration practice in 1871', letter to **Local Population Studies**, 26 (1981), 63
15. The former age seems more likely to be correct as Samuel was baptised on October 1, 1818 and John on April 27 of the following year. Both listed in the Baptismal Register of Orsett Parish Church.
16. M. Drake, 'The census', in E.A. Wrigley, (ed.), **Nineteenth Century Society. Essays in the Use of Quantitative Methods for the Study of Social Data**, (Cambridge, 1972), 7, 46. See also A. Perkyns, 'Age checkability and accuracy in the censuses of six Kentish parishes 1851-81', **Local Population Studies**, 50 (1993), 19-38.
17. General Registry Office, St Catherine's House, Register of Deaths. Henry Hayward died aged 87 (Sept. quarter, 1887, Orsett 4a 181); Robert Knock died aged 51 (Dec. quarter, 1874, Orsett 4a 121).