

## Taking Leave of One's Census

It is rumoured that the 2011 census you are currently completing may well be the last. In these cash-strapped times our government cannot afford the legion of collectors and statisticians who support it. Having said that, if we can afford it today, what is this saying about the projected state of the economy ten years hence ?

Should this prove to be the case, then I pity the historians and genealogists of circa 2122, who will not have the most complete social survey of its time to rely on.

To me the census is like walking down a street at night; I can't help but look into any house where they have left the curtains open. Every ten years the curtains of every house are left open, and we have the opportunity of looking inside. Who's living there ? How are they related ? What do they do for a living ?

The census has informed government social and economic policy for more than 200 years. The first was issued and collected in 1801 and, apart from 1941, when (for obvious reasons) it was impossible to organize, the UK census has taken place every decade. The first four censuses were purely statistical; only from 1841 have the names, ages, profession and place of birth of all UK citizens been compiled.

I, for one, have found it irreplaceable. When, almost ten years ago now, I was working as historical consultant on the Birmingham Back to Backs, much of the decision-making was based on what the censuses turned up. Without it, the people who today inhabit Court 15 on the corner of Inge Street and Hurst Street, could not have come to life. The three families - Levy, Oldfield and Mitchell - whose lives and homes are reconstructed in the three back houses of the court, can only be there because the census revealed them.

At that point I had access to all the censuses up to 1901. What happened to the people of Court 15 after the period covered by my research ? With the census on my mind (and on our hall table), I was prompted to delve into the recently released 1911 census.

Much has changed in those ten years, not least in how we access the census information, and the fact that we now pay for it. Vouchers in hand (purchased in Birmingham Central Library) I navigated back and forth, forward and backwards, spent my money and collected my data.

If you have not accessed the 1911 census on-line, let me tell you that there is an immediate financial calculation to be made. For 10 credits one can download a transcript of the census entry for one house. But can you trust the transcriber ? Downloading the original hand-written document costs 30 credits.

There's a good reason for going for the more expensive option. 1911 was the first time that households filled out their own census form; prior to that an enumerator had done the job for them.

Filling out forms has never been easy. Mr Evans, who was running a fancy goods shop at 65 Hurst Street in 1911, accidentally declared on his form that one of his daughters was a schoolboy. Mr Edelstein, who lived with his family at 52 Inge Street, made five mistakes on his form.

If Simon Edelstein swore as he scratched out his mistakes, he may well have done so in Yiddish or even in Russian. He and his wife, Esther, were born in Russia, more than 50 years earlier, and were driven westwards by the pogroms. Now happily settled in Birmingham, Simon was drawing his pension from the army, whilst his daughter, his step-son and wife, ran a tailor's shop. Tailoring and immigration are strands that run through the whole history of Court 15.

Only one of the three back houses in the court are listed in 1911, but the story that house tells is extraordinary enough. Sometime in the late 1890s Sarah Wynn moved into No. 1 House. Sarah was a widow, with six children in tow, two sons and four daughters. Given that there were only two bedrooms, it must have been a squeeze.

Early on (as evidenced by the 1901 census) Mrs Wynn took in laundry to make ends meet, but as her children got older, they too could bring wages into the house. By 1911 one was working in a pen factory, another as a laquerer, and two making window fittings.

What is exceptional is that, 20 years later, the whole family were still there. The electoral register for 1931 still lists Mrs Wynn as living in the court with five of her six children. Only the youngest son - William - had moved away.

Constance Wynn was the third youngest of the children, and in 1911 was working as a "copper sash chain-maker" at the age of fifteen.

In 1967, when the houses in Court 15 were finally closed and the last two inhabitants moved out, Constance Wynn was one of them. Constance must have lived out all but a couple of her seventy-plus years living in the same back-to-back house.

The constantly moving history of Birmingham sometimes conceals tales of remarkable continuity. But we do need the census to track it.