

Index to the 1851 Census Return for Dover

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CENSUSES OF THE POPULATION have been taken in the United Kingdom every ten years since 1801 (with the exception of the Second World War year 1941). Originally the purpose was to assess the numbers of fighting males available during the Napoleonic Wars and also to obtain accurate figures of the size of the population to be fed and defended in the threat of invasion. In peacetime other considerations and requirements came to apply.

After the period 1801-1831 when only numerical and sex figures were collected, it came about that in 1841 names, addresses, occupations, ages and whether or not people were born in their county of residence were compiled.

The 1851 census was a first, in that apart from recording all the extra information taken in 1841, it then recorded the actual place where everyone declared themselves to have been born. Although unappreciated at the time of course, and it must be admitted unintended for that purpose, it now serves as a vital tool for all family history researchers and students of social history.

The schedules of census returns are released for public scrutiny only 100 years after the information was first collected. Those for the years 1841-1891 are available to enquirers at the Public Record Office, the original folios now all converted to microfilm or microfiche. Many of these are also located at the places to which they apply. Dover Library Local Section holds such records as fall within its ambit.

For those interested in genealogy, local and social history surname indexes of these census returns, especially those of 1851 where birthplace was given for the first time, are an invaluable asset. It was for this reason that I, as an expatriate Dovorian, and one who helped to produce other records of Dover people, decided to compile at my own initiative and expense a surname, first name and birthplace index of all those listed in the 1851 Dover census. This is shortly to be made generally available through the auspices of the Kent Family History Society, although the completed project has already been deposited in microfiche at Dover Library and Museum.

Thanks to the hard work of Ruth Nicol and Kathleen Hollingsbee, such indexes for East Kent are already in place for most of the parishes all around Dover (with the exception for the moment of Deal, Walmer and Sandwich). Once these have been achieved, genealogy in this area, aided by all the other indexes of people, trades, etc. that already exist, will be really well served.

It is true that partial transcripts of the Dover 1851 census returns have been made. They are: a 2% national sample taken by Cambridge University (brief extracts from Dover Castle and Heights Barracks); the Dover Mariners' Index by Ruth Nicol (covering 1941-1891); and a list of Kent-born Sussex "Strays" plus twenty-five German musicians staying at hotels in the Pier District by Philip Hudsmith of Canada. However these are but the tiniest

selection of the whole. As far as my Dover index is concerned, I have produced it in seven parts, 1-5 consisting of the constituent parishes of the borough. That is:

Part 1 -
Guston-in-Dover (East Cliff) pop. 771

Charlton pop. 2,513

Part 2 -

Extra-Parochial- (Dover Castle and East Cliff) pop. 862

Part 3 - Hougham pop. 2,639

Part 4 - Buckland pop. 1,893

Part 5 - St. James pop. 3,699

Part 6 - St. Mary pop. 19,116

Part 7 - Overall surname index to parts 1-6, Street Index, Maps, Post Office Directory, Enumeration Details.

The population of the borough of Dover in 1851 was therefore well over 20,000 persons. The total number of different surnames was 3,587 of which the top ten were Smith (227), Clark[E] (222), Marsh (172), Jones (137), Wood (128), Baker (121), Taylor (119), Williams (110), Beer (101), Johnson (101).

The overall impression gained however from this fascinating snapshot glimpse of Dover nearly 150 years ago is the extent to which the fortunes of our historic town have been almost totally reversed. Take for example the gracious marine residences on the sea front occupied by mainly retired, titled or holidaying gentlefolk, many of them of military or foreign background. Little hint now survives of the former prosperity thanks to the demise of the old social order, and the ravages of time and a war that destroyed so much of the fabric of the town, both human and material. In 1851 it was a thriving community drawn from every corner of these islands and abroad that was as diverse and unique for a provincial town as almost anywhere outside London. It might be said that although the people did not have all the modern sophistications we enjoy today, everyone except the old or infirm, appeared to have a job of sorts and the impression was that the quality of their lives in the context of their time was that much the richer than ours. With the

feature of the town being the major cross-Channel port, a military garrison, a market town as well as a watering place of some fashion, Dover could well have rivalled a resort like Brighton. It is sobering to see how much has been lost.

In transcribing the census I had to read through the handwriting, some immaculate but occasionally virtually illegible, of the twenty-seven enumerators (whose occupations included those of parish clerk, tax collector, schoolmaster, beer seller, confectioner and builder, among others) from 682 folios of manuscript. The average number of persons enumerated by each enumerator was 828. My process of doing this involved reading from each folio, line by line and frame by frame from the microfilm copy, writing down the requisite information on delineated pro-formas and in due course sorting all the information by computer into alphabetical order, giving a final total of 22,293 lines. A laborious and time-consuming enterprise which has taken four years to achieve fruition, undertaken around a full-time job.

The major difficulties in the operation were basically that of bad handwriting and poor quality of either the original folios or film copies. Some names proved very difficult, if not impossible, to decipher. Also it was clear that quite a few people could either not write their own names down or could not spell them correctly. My particular favourites are the landlady of the "Bell" in St. James's Street, Mrs. Susannah Handsumbodie, and a Polish commercial agent named Sochaszewski whose spelling completely defeated the poor enumerator.

There is much more I could add but space forbids. This project is at last complete. I cannot say that I and my advisors have got all the difficult or illegible names right but the results have been arrived at to the best of our ability. It has been a most rewarding and fulfilling experience to associate my name with the original twenty-seven enumerators, without whose diligent travails this wonderful human extract from Dover's glorious past would never have been possible.