

THE 1939 REGISTER

On 1 December 2015, Myko Clelland of Findmypast delivered two presentations to MLFHS members about the 1939 Register and how to use and interpret the results on the Findmypast web site. The following notes are taken from that presentation.

Registration is Introduced

On 5 September 1939, just two days after war had been declared, the National Registration Act received royal assent. On the 29th of the same month, some 65,000 enumerators collected completed registration forms from every household throughout the UK. This was a logistical exercise of impressive dimensions.

The Registration Act required every person, whether adult or child and who was not serving in the armed forces (who were registered separately), to register their details. Upon registration, each person was issued with an identity card and, perhaps of greater importance (at least to them), a ration book. While it is always possible that some people may have evaded registration, the need to register in order to get a ration book makes this very unlikely and the records may be considered, for all practical purposes, to be complete.

The Registers

The information collected was limited to surname, first name date of birth, marital status, occupation and address. It was also recorded if the individual was serving in organisations such as the ARP or in a reserved occupation. Details of birthplace were not collected. It is believed that this was to avoid the persecution of minorities in the event of an invasion (though is, of course, of great regret to family historians). The forms collected by the enumerators were transcribed into registers with one line per individual and entries for each household kept together. The registers are therefore not dissimilar to census enumeration books. The final register series consisted of 7,000 volumes, each containing details of about 2,000 residences. In all 1.2 million pages record details of around 41 million individuals.

The registration system continued well beyond the end of the war. Individuals were still required to register and to carry identity cards up to 1952. However, the registers achieved a much more permanent status in 1948 when they were used as the basis for registration of the population into the newly established National Health Service. An individual's registration number became their NHS number. The registers were updated manually until 1991 when they were replaced by a computerised system.

Why are the Registers Important?

The next national census to be released will be that for 1921, which under the 100 year closure requirement will be opened to the public on 1 January 2022. However, the census returns for 1931 were completely destroyed in a fire at the warehouse in which they had been stored and there was no census in 1941, partly because of the war and partly because much of the information had already been collected under National Registration. Consequently, the next census will be that for 1951, which should be released on 1 January 2052. There will therefore be a census gap of 30 years facing future family historians. The 1939 Registers therefore represent an important census substitute in the middle of this void.

Digitisation

Findmypast have secured the rights to publish the National Registration registers online. This has been a major undertaking and has involved the scanning and transcription (in the UK) of the 1.2 million pages of the registers, a task which has been undertaken at the rate of around 35,000 pages per week. Batch checking has been applied to the transcripts and the accuracy of the data is claimed to be as good as 98.5% of legible details. It should be noted that for a variety of reasons some details are not legible, for example obscured by an ink blot!

Record Closure

A complication arises when it comes to accessing personal information of this nature. Quite simply, since registration took place only 76 years ago, some of the people who appear in the registers will still be alive today and a 100 year closure would be usual for such a record. Consequently, not all of the records can be opened to public view. Only records for individuals who are not known (or assumed to be) dead can be treated as 'open'. All other records must be treated as 'closed'.

Many individual records are opened simply because the person is assumed to be dead based upon their age, calculated from their date of birth, would be more than 100 years and one day. This is imperfect, since there are many centenarians (in 2012 there were 13,350 people ages 100 or over in the

UK), but seems to be regarded as acceptable. Many other individuals are known to be dead because their individual register entry is annotated with the date of their death.

Nevertheless, there are many records for individuals who are undoubtedly deceased but who do not meet either of the above conditions. Many of these individuals will have died after 1991, when the records were computerised and annotation of the registers discontinued., other records will not have been annotated with the date of death by clerical oversight.

This is being addressed in two ways. Firstly, Findmypast are attempting to reconcile the registers with other sources for deaths, such as civil registration records. Where death can be proved from these sources, the record will be opened automatically. The other way in which records may be opened is by user request. If a user advises Findmypast of a person whose record is closed but who they can show, by submitting a scanned copy of that person's death certificate, to be deceased, then the record will likewise be opened.

Even if death cannot be established by either of these methods, the record will be opened in due course once the calculated age exceeds one year and one day. This is reviewed on a weekly basis and so the database of open records will be continuously expanding, even if it may not be until 2039 that the last records might be opened. This progressive opening of records is innovative and might suggest an alternative way of presenting census data before the end of the blanket 100 year closure.

Accessing the Records

The registers can be accessed via the findmypast.co.uk web site. No subscription is needed and searching the indexes is free, but access to the full transcripts and images of the registers is only possible by purchasing credits to be used on a pay-to-view basis, regardless of whether the user has a Findmypast subscription. The cost is £6.95 to open a single household record (including all the individuals in the household) but with discounted prices for bundles covering 5 and 15 households. These charges are justified by Findmypast as necessary to cover the large sum which they have invested in processing the source material.

The register may be searched either by personal name (with optional filters for date of birth, occupation, gender, marital status and address) or by street address, a route which can be particularly useful if you are dealing with a common name but know where the people were living in September 1939.

The additional filters can be invaluable, particularly date of birth. An example which Myko offered relates to the ubiquitous John SMITH for which name there are 24,797 entries. If the date of birth is known this can be dramatically reduced. In Myko's example we have a John SMITH who was born on 2 November 1864. With this specific birthdate, there is just a single match. Even if there were more matches than this, the addition of a location or occupation might still enable a specific individual to be identified.

Myko gave a specific caution about occupations. These can be very specific and could lead to entries being accidentally filtered out. For example the specific occupation 'Coal Hower' appears as an occupation 89,859 times but the more general 'Coal' no fewer than 316,477. If the person had been registered as some other variety of colliery operative such as the general 'Coal Miner' he would not be found. As with many other indexes, the 'less-is-more' principle applies.

Searches produce a list of 'matches' with a limited amount of information about each matching register entry. This consists of first and last names, year of birth and the borough and county where the person was registered. Alongside each result is a 'Preview' button which leads to a listing of the same limited information plus this information for another individual in the household (assuming there is more than one in the household). The summary will also say how many other individuals are in the household and how many more individuals there are in the household whose records are still closed. This information can help to increase confidence that you have the correct household.

To access the full information from the register and having paid for sufficient credits, simply click the 'Unlock this Household' button. This will display the scanned page of the register on which the household appears. Where entries for individuals are still closed, the relevant lines will be blanked out.

In addition to conventional households, there are also returns for institutions such as hospitals, prisons and hotels. In these returns, the position of the individual in the institution (officer, visitor, servant, patient, inmate) is indicated by an abbreviation (O, V, S, P, I).

Geolocation

Another innovative feature of the site is that each household is geo-located onto a contemporary map of the place where they were living. Alternative overlays allow the maps to be exchanged for one dated circa 1880 and for one from the present day, so it is possible to gain some information about the development of the area in which the household lived.

Other UK Records

The Findmypast records relate only to England and Wales. There are separate records for Scotland and Northern Ireland and the Channel Islands and Isle of Man (although the last of these appears to have been temporarily 'mislaidd'). There are no immediate plans to publish these registers. There are no registers for the Irish Republic, which was neutral during the war and which did not implement a similar system. As has been noted earlier, members of the armed forces were registered separately and these records too are currently unavailable.

Using the Information

As with all information, you can use the details as a key to unlock other sources. Knowing the address may allow you to find a rate book, which names the householder or an electoral register, which will name all those resident and over the age of 21. This may give a clue to the identities of some of those whose records are still closed. If the family has remained in the same place for a long time, it may be worth checking the address in the 1911 census. Street directories may also be helpful.

Other Resources

A number of other resources are available on the site to help paint in something of the background to the times. These include over 1,000 photographs from the Trinity Mirror archive and a selection of contemporary newspaper articles.

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