Ireland’s first population census was in 1821

How to access early population census returns in your Irish genealogy research

The first full population census of Ireland was taken in 1821 and set a trend for a series of ten-yearly censuses that continued until 1911. This page deals only with the censuses taken in 1821, 1831, 1841 and 1851. If you want information about later censuses in Ireland, see the Where Next? section at the foot of the page.

The first four census of Ireland were arranged by county, barony, civil parish and townland.

The 1821 Irish census

Who was recorded: Every member of the household was included together with their name, age, occupation and relationship to the head of household.

What was recorded: The acreage held by the head of household and the number of storeys the dwelling had.

What has survived: Some fragments of this population census for small parts of counties Armagh, Cavan, Fermanagh, Galway, Meath and Offaly (then called King’s County) are available at the National Archives in Dublin (see Resources below).

The 1831 census

Who was recorded: Every member of the household was included together with their name, age, occupation, religion and relationship to the head of household.

What was recorded: The acreage held by the head of household.

What has survived: Most of the returns (or copies made in 1834) survive for Co. Derry. These are available at the National Archives in Dublin, at PRONI in Belfast and the Genealogical Centre in Derry (see Resources below).
The 1841 census

Who was recorded: Every member of the household was included in the 1841 Irish census, together with their name, age, sex, relationship to the head of household, occupation, literacy, birthplace and marital status (including date of marriage). This population census also recorded members of the family who were not at home that night – including those who had died since 1831.

What was recorded: A grading system was applied to the standard of the home. There were four categories. Mud huts without windows were the lowest.

What has survived: The only original returns to survive are those for parts of Killeshandra, Co.Cavan. These are in the National Archives in Dublin. There are also a number of transcripts of the originals, mostly for locations in the south of Cos. Kilkenny and Monaghan, but also for a few isolated households in Cos. Cork, Fermanagh and Waterford. All are available at the National Archives in Dublin (see Resources below).

What the statistics showed: A total island population of 8,175,124, of which only 15% lived in towns.

The 1851 census

Who was recorded: Every member of the household was included, together with their name, age, sex, relationship to the head of household, occupation, literacy, birthplace and marital status (including date of marriage). Like the 1841 census of Ireland, absent and deceased members of the family had to be accounted for.

What was recorded: Landholding acreage and a grading system for the standard of houses.

What has survived: Most of the surviving fragments are for Co. Antrim and the single townland of Clonee, Co. Fermanagh. These are available at PRONI in Belfast and at the National Archives in Dublin (see Resources below). In addition, PRONI holds some population census returns for parts of what is now Northern Ireland. The National Archives in Dublin holds extracts for some parts of Co. Monaghan and lists of heads of households for Dublin City and one ward in Belfast. The Genealogical Office (see Resources below) holds extracts of this population census for some Co. Kilkenny parishes.

What the statistics showed: A total island population in the aftermath of the Irish potato famine of 6,552,385 – a fall of 1,622,739 in ten years.

The Irish census of 1851 recorded a total of 3,190,630 men and 3,361,755 women. Of the men, 20% were farmers (290,000 with over 15 acres of land; 192,000 of 5-15 acres) while 46% were labourers or herdsmen. Shopkeepers accounted for 3% while there were slightly more (3.3%) employed as cobbiers or tailors, and more again (3.9%) were weavers.
Of the women, just under 20,000 (2%) were farmers, 15% were labourers or herdsmen. A similar number to men were shopkeepers, and just under 10% were seamstresses. The biggest groups were the 230,802 domestic servants (24%) and spinners and weavers (15.6%). These figures clearly show the size of the Irish linen and cotton industries in Ireland at this mid-point of the 19th century. (Find out more about the work involved in transforming the flax plant into Irish linen.)

**A labourer's 1851 household return**

Click on the thumbnail to view a genuine 1851 census return for a labourer's family in Ballinderry, Co. Antrim.

As you can see, Robin and Margaret Hull have four children, the youngest of whom, 12-year-old Harry, is working as a servant in Scotland. The elder boy, William, aged 14, is a linen weaver while his two older sisters, Debby and Jane, are servants. Although the parents claim to be literate, they don't seem to have entirely understood all the specified criterion, eg ages and year of marriage.

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**Resources**

For more details about the surviving fragments and transcriptions for these four Irish censuses, contact:

- National Archives of Ireland in Dublin
- Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI)
- Genealogical Office/Office of the Chief Herald

**Where next**

Almost nothing remains from the 1861, 1871, 1881 and 1891 Irish censuses. The 1901 census of Ireland survived intact. Find out what it contains.

The 1911 Irish census records can be searched free; extra questions were posed that hold great value to genealogists.

Irish family history research often requires an imaginative approach. Some of the least obvious resources can provide great results. FindMyPast Ireland has an interesting collection of resources that is being added to practically every month. It's worth looking at.