

Question 1 – User Group

This response is made on behalf of the Executive Committee of the Society of Genealogists, the leading national learned society concerned with family history and genealogy and their associated social science disciplines. It is the largest society of its kind in the UK, with some 15,000 members. The Society campaigns for the integrity and preservation of records relevant to current and future research and optimum access to such records. Members of the Society are all researching family history, mostly as amateur hobbyists, though a significant number are professional researchers. Hence the Society's main, but by no means exclusive, concern is for access to historic records on behalf of genealogists who are looking for information about families and individual ancestors. It is not insignificant that within the Society's archives can be the correspondence with the Home Office reflecting the Society's success in 1912 in making the 1841 and 1851 censuses available for public inspection.

Question 2 – Over all view

Our overall view of the 1891 Census online service is that it is good. It could be better.

Question 3 – Meeting Needs of:

A particular group

B other groups

You ask for a yes or no answer to this question. As my preferred answer would be "mostly" then I am afraid I would have to answer no

A – The site concentrates its activities to serve the needs of a genealogists looking for one individual. So having found someone in the index they would look at one perhaps one or two images and not spend very much. This need is largely met. However many genealogists look at lots of entries – perhaps as a ONE NAME study and as members of the Guild of One Name Studies. Their needs were not at all well met. The index doesn't easily allow a large number of entries to be analysed unless one has certain computer skills to get round the "front end" of the data presented on the screen. Those in the know have developed various programmes to look at the indexes to group entries on the same page etc. I don't see that they should have had to do this. SEE comments below on the search functionality.

B – The needs of academics, local historians or demographers that are not looking at information by name but by place, occupations etc have not yet been fully met. I understand there have been negotiations to look to their needs in the future but it has taken too long thus far.

Question 4 – Benefits of Social Inclusion

Yes I think having the index on line has made the census available to far more people than would previously have been possible – especially those who would find it difficult to get to the National Archives and overseas family historians. However I am aware of certain older persons who despite best endeavours to train them are still nervous of computers and hence feel they cannot cope with the online searching. Remember many genealogists are in the older age bracket. They are of course in the minority and the numbers using the Internet are ever increasing. Over 75 percent of our members use the Internet.

Question 5 - free and chargeable facilities

Yes I am satisfied. I think making the index free of charge is a good thing and the cost of an image is reasonable if you don't have to view too many at once. However one is sometimes forced to view several images to counter doubts about the quality of the index and transcriptions.

Question 6 – quality of transcription

This clearly is where the project falls down. I have been shown entries where the quality control has clearly not been satisfactory – and which leaves me to question what the PRO meant by double keying. This was never made very clear to me. So I must judge the transcription as poor. It could have been much better. This was pointed out during the consultation process but not, in my view, adequately addressed.

I appreciate the concerns about the integrity of the original information and as far as possible one should always transcribe what is written. In creating a working finding aid such as an index some sensible editing of either the text of the index should have been done to ensure information could be found. This is particularly the case with the entering of place names. The enumerators spelt “Gloucestershire” over 10 different ways and hence one can't search for all entries in the county “Gloucestershire”. Surely this could have been corrected by a use of a simple thesaurus. The policy of not amending at least some of original entries was poorly conceived.

There were lots of mechanical means of avoiding problems that could have been done before the system was launched. Running checks for

people with ages over 100 perhaps or looking at the number of times “Ditto” was used as a surname. This was done, but only after the launch and after criticism in the genealogical press.

The perceived poor quality of the transcription does mean that I, and others members, cannot always feel confident that we haven't missed anything. It can be expensive to check the image of each entry just in case the transcription is wrong.

It strikes me that the problems in the transcription have not been brought about by the transcribers themselves, as they largely have followed their instructions. I have no major concerns with the work having been done by prisoners or overseas. Rather the problem lay in a lack of editorial and quality control of their output. Hence double entry has not corrected problems as one would have thought. Local knowledge, for example of place names, could have been deployed to check what the transcribers had written.

Question 7 – Error Correction

I suspect that a large number of errors that are spoken about have not been reported using the formal correction process. I, for example, have not corrected the entry of my grandfather that includes a minor transcription error. I suspect others are as lazy as I. Reporting one or two errors is relatively easy and so I would have said this facility is fair. Those who have looked at lots of entries such as the “One Namers” would have found it a chore repeatedly filling in the on line form and it took a little while for the PRO to announce they would accept corrections on paper as well as electronically. Hence it is clear that there is massive under reporting of errors.

Interestingly I have not yet seen any comparison with the error rates in similar genealogical finding aids such as the LDS 1881 census or the International Genealogical Index. Both of these do indeed have errors within them and good family historians should know not to rely on them – but they do. However these were brought about by voluntary effort where as the PRO's project with QinetiQ was supposed to be professional and one had greater expectations.

Question 8 – Views on the search service

The Search facilities are good – but they could be better. The index search results should show second forenames where they exist. It should be easier to search on addresses than it is. This facility has only just been introduced. It is a shame that some of the data was not standardised

during data entry. This is especially the case with place names. A certain amount of editorial thought should have been allowed. It is manifestly ridiculous to transcribe the enumerator's error "Warishire" and not enter "Warwickshire". Apparently it was decided that wild card searching could not be introduced on the initial and second letters of the surname. I am told this is possible and am sorry that decision was made. The nature of Victorian handwriting is such that the most common transcription errors will occur with the first letter of a surname. Viewing the entry relating an individual living in an institution can be a problem, as the returns themselves do not include the institutions' name. Hence one can spend a lot of money just in working out what this institution is as one has to view each page back to the beginning of the entries or pay again to view the fully transcribed entry.

The scanned images are very good. We have occasions when the image does not download properly and I seem to have problems printing occasionally but generally the system works quite well in the Society's library.

The website help facilities and background information are good. As you can see my main interest is with the index itself. I am not qualified to comment on the functionality for anything other than PCs and Internet Explorer.

Question 9 – Issues raised by members since re-launch of site in November

Overwhelmingly the issues reported to me concern the quality of the transcript. All problems stem from that. Generally the system of payment vouchers works very well and is popular. It is an idea that has been taken up by other on line services. Very few people, it seems to me, use credit cards. I suspect this gives the perception of security although I am sure the credit card payment system is equally secure. I have had no reports that the site has been unavailable for any length of time since November 2002 and it strikes me that the site now works well. Naturally we are getting used to it.

Question 10 – Access to other censuses

Four years ago, when I first joined the Advisory Group the concept of a pay per view system was sold to me on the grounds that it would provide funds to allow indexes of earlier censuses to be produced. Thus far we have not seen any move to produce a similar finding aid on the National Archives' website for censuses before 1901. It seems the new licensing

agreements are the way the NA seems to be following to make the censuses available. This has led to the publication of un-indexed images on CD-ROMs and indexed images on an expensive subscription based service through Ancestry.com. I would like to see indexes for other censuses comparable to what is available for 1901 published for the National Archives. That means a free index or a very cheap index.

As part of the pilot scheme QinetiQ produced an index to the 1891 census of Norfolk. This was briefly on line but has been withdrawn. Why is this not available?

The 1911 census is due to be released in 2012. The Society of Genealogists does not believe that the National Archives' imposed closure for 100 year has any legal basis. Putting that argument to one side we recommend that the census be published in digital form with a fully functioning working index. We fully commend the National Archives' vision for trying to do this in 2002 and, despite the problems, appreciate that this was still a very bold idea and an attempt well worth making. We trust it will be repeated.

One is tempted to look across at the Scottish system that launched successfully. This was because it has far fewer entries on the census and the index was not free of charge and hence deterred people from making cursory searches when it was first launched. This is a fully pay per view system. Scotland interprets its 100 year rule differently and didn't launch the digital images of the census all at once. It had a very soft launch of its index.

It is easy to criticise with hindsight. But I should point out that the advisory group did warn about some of these issues before hand. As a member of the advisory committee I have been criticised for not being tough enough on the PRO as it was then. However whenever the group raised issues of quality or volume we were given assurances that these would be dealt with. Unfortunately the advice given was not always heeded. There is always a balance to be made between resources and desired outcomes. The confidential nature of the commercial relationship between QinetiQ and the PRO meant the advisory group was not in a position to question some of the ways these problems were likely to be addressed. The advisory group was established to represent the wishes of the user. In hindsight it should have included independent technical advisors as well.

The 1901 census project taught us very important lessons for the future.

It showed there is a terrific interest in using the census and this will no doubt be repeated in 1911.

If the National Archives insists on launching everything on one day there will be similar problems of demand.

The three-year build up to the launch of the index was widely followed in the genealogical community and picked up on by the press. The potential interest was vastly underestimated – despite similar problems having occurred with the websites of LDS Familysearch site and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. I suspect the PRO and QinetiQ didn't really understand the size or speed of communications within this community.

Although there was supposedly no major publicity drive using the national media undertaken by the PRO there were many articles and presentations made which were picked up upon.

The transcription of the census used to provide the index must be of much better quality.

The search structure and nature of the index must be better.

More credence should be given to the views of an advisory body and that body should have a broader scope to raise technical matters as well as issues of content.

The issue remains whether the problems incurred at the launch of the 1901 census in 2002 could have been avoided and whether the contractors did their jobs correctly. It seems to me the site was significantly redesigned between January-August 2002 and so one concurs that the job wasn't properly undertaken before hand. It is however working reasonably well now.

One wonders whether one company had the skills in producing firstly the transcribed data for the index and secondly a functioning site that could cope with the demand. This must be looked at in the future.