



Devon Family History Society
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BICKLEIGH (TIVERTON) CENSUS

1801

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Family historians are skilled at using the census returns from 1841 to 1901 for their research, but many people do not realise that there are some surviving earlier censuses which, although providing less information, can often be just as useful.

A census bill proposing an annual census of the population was introduced in Parliament in 1753. It was opposed on the grounds that it would be costly and might lead to new taxation but although it was passed in the House of Commons, the session came to an end before the bill could be put before a committee of the whole house and so it lapsed. Despite this early enthusiasm, the first Census Act was not passed until 1800, leading to the taking of the first British census on 10th March 1801. Returns were compiled locally by the overseers of the poor in each parish of the numbers of males and females in the parish, their occupations classified under broad headings, and the numbers of inhabited and uninhabited houses. The returns were sent to the Home Office in London, population statistics were compiled from them and then they were destroyed. However, some parishes made a copy of the return and kept it. Often, population figures taken from the census were written up inside the covers of parish registers; sometimes the census enumerator made notes on each household while compiling the figures for the returns and these notes have survived among parish records. The incumbent of each parish also had to complete a return on the number of baptisms, marriages and burials in his parish, taken from the parish registers, and these were sent first to the bishop of the diocese and then to the Privy Council.

Bickleigh

When the first census was taken in 1801, these notes were made by the census enumerator in Bickleigh, near Tiverton. He wrote down the names of the men in the parish first, classifying them by the three types of occupation specified for the census: agriculture, trades and crafts, and other, meaning the clergy and gentry. After this he noted male children and then women and female children. He did not note down ages because that was not required for the census return. The inhabitants of the parish are not grouped by household at all, but the names of the householders are noted in a separate list because the enumerator had to record the number of inhabited houses. Not all of the

names of the men listed by occupation appear in this list of householders, so many of them must have been adult sons still living at home or unmarried men living at their place of work. The titles Mr or Mrs used in the inhabited houses list implies that these people were gentry or yeomen farmers and of a higher social status than the others. Apart from the few included in this list as householders, women do not have much importance for the enumerator. The women and girls come last in one group after the three groups of men and the group of boys, and it is difficult to distinguish which are the adults and which the children in the list of 134 females. A few women are marked 'senior' to indicate that they are the elder of two females of the same name, but apart from that, there is no indication of their age or occupation.

Despite the frustrations caused by the lay-out of this census, it is useful to have a complete list of all the inhabitants of Bickleigh at such an early date. There is no other record from this time which names everyone in the parish, regardless of social status or religious affiliation.