



Devon Family History Society
Joint Project Publication with
Devon Record Office



DODDISCOMBSLEIGH CENSUS

1811

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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.

Doddiscombsleigh

This census for Doddiscombsleigh was taken by the enumerator in 1811. He wrote down the names of the inhabitants of the parish by household, beginning with the rector, Mr Thomas Hole. The names are not divided into males and females, but the totals for each are written in the margins. Ages are not given, nor relationships to the head of the household because neither was required for the census return. However, the enumerator has included place names, to specify where in the parish each family lived. It also means that it is possible to follow the enumerator's route around the parish. He started at the rectory and then visited all the families to the north of the village, before going to the houses in the village itself. Finally he visited all the

houses to the south of the village and finished at Spanish Lake close to the rectory where he started. All the entries are written in a little note book made from several pieces of paper folded in half and stitched along the fold. The heading on the first page and the rector's name are written in the same hand, while the rest of the book is written by someone else, so it appears that the Rev. Hole designed the lay-out of the book but instructed a second person to fill it in. Population figures for this census and the later one of 1821 have been entered at the back of the book.

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