



Devon Family History Society  
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## **SIDBURY 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 10<sup>th</sup> 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.

### **Sidbury**

The census for this parish is unusual in that it was taken in 1829 and so does not tie in with any of the national censuses. It was compiled between August and November 1829 with later revisions in May 1830 and undated annotations made during the 1830s. The census was written in a small leather-bound notebook, fastened with a metal clasp. A draft version was first written in the book in pencil and then later written up in ink. To avoid a duplication of names, the pencil draft is not covered by this index. The names are arranged by family, in alphabetical order of surname. Servants are not entered with the

household they served, but as individuals, by surname. All the members of the family are listed, the head first and then his, or her, children. A capital 'D' is written in the margin next to the families of dissenters (who attended Sidbury Independent Chapel). The abode of the family is given next, but this is often quite vague, being just a farm name or 'Sidbury'. Next is a column for ages, followed by the trade of the head of the household and then the last column 'State' meaning married, widowed, bachelor or spinster. The ages of the members of the family are usually given as a full year although there are some ½ years, and the age of babies is given in weeks or months. Although the census was taken over a period of three to four months, the ages are calculated from about 1<sup>st</sup> November. Children born in the few months after this date were added to the census in May 1830. The final column for 'State' is the one which has the most annotations. There are later notes to say 'died', or 'married again', or, more useful still, 'gone to America'. These notes are not dated, but give a clue as to what happened to an individual or a family.

Neither the vicar of Sidbury, Rev. Henry Fellowes, nor his curate, who were both living in Sidbury in 1829, are included in the census. In fact, the handwriting in the book is very likely that of the curate, Thomas Hutton Vyvyan. Thomas was ordained deacon in Exeter in June 1829 when he was 24 and Sidbury was his first curacy. He was ordained priest in the following year and remained at Sidbury until his appointment as perpetual curate of St Mary, Penzance, in 1832. This means that the survey of the parish was begun within a couple of months of his arrival, perhaps to help him with his new pastoral duties. The notebook was left in the parish when Thomas moved back to Cornwall and someone else used it and made additions to it until about 1839. It has survived among the parish records which were kept in the church.

This census of Sidbury is particularly useful because the early registers for the parish were destroyed in a fire in the vicarage in 1850. While the bishop's transcripts fill in most of the gap left by the missing registers, the census can help to confirm family relationships and identify those who moved away from the parish.