



Devon Family History Society
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TOPSHAM LABOURING CENSUS

1841

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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.

This census for Topsham covers 'a portion of the labouring population' only and was drawn up in February 1841 by Henry Troake at the request of Francis Davy, the churchwarden. In fact, it seems to have been an attempt to keep track of those who were likely to require poor relief since it includes each person's place of settlement, so that if they did need relief, it would be easy enough to find out which parish was responsible for them. The names are set out in alphabetical order of surname, with the head of the household first, followed, in the case of a married man, by his wife's name, then columns for their ages and their abode, usually the street in Topsham where they lived. Next the occupation of the head is given in the case of a man, but if the head is a woman, her occupation is 'widow' rather than the work she did to earn a living. The next columns are for the number of children, including unmarried adult children, with their names and ages. Then there is a narrow column headed 'Relief' with later pencil notes of the amount of money paid out, and finally a column headed 'Remarks' which is used for notes such as 'Cripple' and 'Idiot'. Paupers are included if they are chargeable to Topsham parish but living elsewhere. For example, Mary, Joseph and Harriet Wills are deserted children living in Broadclyst and Mary Selway is a lunatic living in 'Bethlehem Hospital'.

Although the census includes only a percentage of Topsham people, it is useful in that it gives more information than the official 1841 census taken a month later. The ages quoted are accurate instead of rounded down and the relationship of family members to the head is given. The place of settlement can give a clue as to place of birth, which is not included at all in the 1841 census. One small drawback to the Topsham census is that it cannot be assumed that all the children listed are living at their parents' address. A comparison with entries in the 1841 census shows that often teenage, and older, children are living away from home. Also, not all those described as 'ag labs' in the 1841 census were thought to be 'a portion of the labouring

population' by Henry Troake and so they are not included in his survey. When a family is included in the survey however, it is an indication that members may have been in receipt of poor relief and that a search through overseers of the poor records could produce further information about them.