

	Show Notes – Bonus Episode	THE	
	Counting down to the 1921 Census	NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	



ON THE RECORD

Counting down to the 1921 Census

THE	
NATIONAL	
ARCHIVES	

In the aftermath of war and pandemic, approximately 8.5 million householders in England, Wales, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man completed the 1921 census. In this episode, we're exploring the enormous digitisation project undertaken by Findmypast and asking our family history specialists what to expect when we get to see the census.

The 1921 census will be available on [Findmypast](https://www.findmypast.co.uk) in early 2022. If you're interested in learning more about the history of the census and how it can be used for research visit our dedicated [census portal](https://www.findmypast.co.uk/census-portal).

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	Show Notes – Bonus Episode Counting down to the 1921 Census	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

Transcript:

[Intro – clips taken from the episode set to music]

Olivia Gecseg: This is On the Record at The National Archives: uncovering the past through stories of everyday people. I'm Olivia Gecseg.

Paul Dryburgh: And I'm Paul Dryburgh.

Olivia and I are both historians at The National Archives in Kew, West London, where we research, look after, and help our audiences better understand the Archives' collections of historical government and public records.

In each of our episodes, we typically focus on two or three individuals from the past...but in this episode, we're looking at a set of documents that include nearly every person alive in England and Wales in 1921– the rich, the poor, the famous, the enlisted, the incarcerated, the elderly, and the newborn...all 38 million of them.

Olivia: Although "looking" may not be the right verb here...because none of us has actually seen these records. In fact, they've been closed to the public and securely stored for just about one hundred years by the Office for National Statistics.

This episode is all about the upcoming 2022 release of the full 1921 census household returns.

Paul: A regular census has been taken in England and Wales almost every decade since 1801. For the first few, the government was focused on statistics and didn't record any names or details of households. The 1841 census was the first to make a record of individuals.

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	Show Notes – Bonus Episode Counting down to the 1921 Census	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

Since 1801, the government has released summary data and statistics as soon as they were ready after the census, while individual responses and personal data are kept private and secure for 100 years.

Olivia: In early 2022, every single response from the 1921 census will finally be open to the public and our researchers here at The National Archives. But as you might imagine, 38 million census schedules and related documentation is a lot of paper to sort through to find a single name.

So, digitisation is critical to making these census records accessible and searchable. That's why for the 1921 census, we're once again partnering with Findmypast. For the last few years, Findmypast's huge team of conservators and digitisation experts have been working in a secure location to turn this massive set of records into searchable, linked data that you can explore through their website and online here at The National Archives.

Paul: We'll chat to one of their genealogy experts at the end of this episode to find out more about that process, but first, we'll hear from two of our census experts here at The National Archives. Like the rest of us, Jessamy and Audrey still haven't seen any of the sealed 1921 records, but they can tell us more about the historical context of this important census, the challenges and scandals surrounding its implementation, and what they expect the new 1921 data and records will tell us about life in England and Wales for everyday people one hundred years ago.

Jessamy Carlson: So my name is Jessamy Carlson. I am the Family and Local History Engagement Lead at The National Archives, and the purpose of my job is really to work with all sorts of different people with different types of archives. So whatever the motivation for their potentially wanting to research something, my job is to find new and interesting ways of intriguing and inspiring people to come and work with the archives.

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	Show Notes – Bonus Episode Counting down to the 1921 Census	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

Paul: Amazing, I would love that job myself. So, Jessamy, I'd like to start with a personal question if I can. What drew you to the census and why do you personally think it's important to research this frankly massive set of records?

Jessamy: It is a vast collection of records, that's definitely true. So the census was one of the first sets of records that I actually worked with. I was a slightly unusual child, and at the age of 10, I undertook my first research project, which was into a family who lived in the town I grew up in. There was an interesting grave in the churchyard; I wanted to know why grown-up children were buried with their parents, I thought that was a bit strange. So my mum helped me by setting me going on the parish registers and then moving on to the census.

So I've always had an interest in family history, it's where my roots are, and it's always been something that I've done. And the census is such a valuable resource because although it's a snapshot of a place and a moment in time, it's a really useful one. It's every 10 years. The information within it is consistent, it develops over the course of its lifespan. So the census in 1841 does look quite different from the census in 1911, but the core of information – that information about names, about places, rough ages – that's consistent throughout time, and it's a really useful source for checking people over a period of time. And of course, it's a social leveller, the census. Everyone does the census, whether you're in prison, whether you're on a boat, whether you're the Queen, it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter where you live; the census applies to everyone. So it's a really useful source regardless of who are and where you're from for pinning people down.

And of course, censuses don't just happen in the UK. They happen all over the world, so you can map people through their lives as they move around the country or the world, so it's just a really useful resource, generally. I've talked there particularly about how you might use it for personal research, but of course, the scale of this kind of data means it can be used for longitudinal studies. So academics particularly can undertake research which looks through that data as a whole over the course of time.

People who are cleverer than me can use computer algorithms to work through that massive data, to undertake that data work, and see what that tells us about changes in society, whether that's shifts because people are moving around following employment, or whether it's changes in life

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	Show Notes – Bonus Episode Counting down to the 1921 Census	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

expectancy, the number of children in families over time, all sorts of really interesting questions you can ask using this mass of data.

Paul: Ok so, every decade's census is a wealth of information for historians, but 1921, of course, is the first after the Great War, the First World War. Can you talk to me about the changes in Britain this census would have been capturing?

Jessamy: Of course. So the First World War is obviously a really key one, we've had five years of war between 1914 and 1919. By 1919 most people had been demobilized people who'd been serving away in the forces mostly are home, but the First World War actually carries on until 1923 on some fronts. So there are still some who are away at this point in time, but then they'll be captured within army census forms, hopefully. And that's been a huge shift change for an awful lot of people, there was a tremendous loss of life. There was a tremendous impact in terms of injury in the aftermath, or illness in the aftermath of the First World War. But it's not the only thing that's happened since the previous census. The Representation of the People Act - most men and some women have now got the right to vote so that's been a shift change.

And there's been a kind of response to this emancipation of women in other fields. So in 1919, there was an act called the Sex Disqualifications Removal Act, which made it illegal to prohibit women entering the professions purely on the basis that they were women. So we start to see the first female lawyers in the 1921 census, barristers and solicitors. We start to see the early female architects, veterinary science is now open to women. We're starting to see women moving into professional jobs, that's a really exciting aspect of the 1921 census. Then you've got this huge flu pandemic, which affects society across the world at this point in time. So potentially you have families who've been impacted not just by war, but by illness in this time.

The other thing that's quite interesting is that school age has changed since 1911. So in 1918, the school leaving age grew to 14. So there's a shift in children working, and that's something that was really highlighted in the 1911 census. Halifax I think was the worst area in the country for children under the age of 15 working, it would be really interesting to see whether that's carried across,

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	Show Notes – Bonus Episode Counting down to the 1921 Census	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

whether you still have as many children working in those types of industries that tended to employ children.

So the 1921 census finds us in a world where women are entering the professions, where people have lost members of their family due to illness, whether that's the pandemic, or perhaps that's malaria, say, from war service. Where there's been injury perhaps in war service, perhaps the breadwinner for the household has had a life-changing injury and life has changed as a result of that for the whole family.

Paul: Excellent. There were a number of changes made to the standard census question from 1911 to 1921. So could you tell us the kind of things that changes and the reasons why the changes were made?

Jessamy: Yeah, so there's a change in terms of age, people are asked in 1921 to declare their age in years and months, so that's the first. The details of employment have expanded so people are asked to give the nature of their employment against a coded list of occupations. They are asked where they are employed, whether they are employed at home, whether they are employed in a place and asked to give that address. And they are asked to give the nature of the employment.

That's slightly skewed by the fact that the census in 1921 was slightly delayed. Originally it should have been taken in April; it's actually taken in June. And what that means is that some people have gone away on holiday. The schools are out in some parts of the country and obviously school age isn't quite as extensive as it is today, but people are beginning to go on holidays. And that was quite an area of concern for the Registrar General and the team at HQ, they were worried about what impact holiday taking might have on the data they got.

Paul: I'm particularly please by that delay you've mentioned because my grandma, my mum's mum, is born in April 1921.

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	Show Notes – Bonus Episode Counting down to the 1921 Census	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

Jessamy: Ah, brilliant!

Paul: So I'm hoping she's going to appear.

Jessamy: Oh, brilliant. She should, fingers crossed. It'll be interesting to see where she is

Paul: So could you tell us what else changed and why it changed, what reason it changed for?

Jessamy: In the marital status, adults are asked to specify whether they are married, single, widowed, or divorced. And this is the first time that divorce is mentioned, and that's a direct reflection on the shift in society after the First World War. Divorce becomes much easier to access in the aftermath of the First World War, and as a result, it's been included in that list of column options for adults.

For children in that same column, they are asked to declare whether both the parents are still alive, whether both their parents are dead, or whether their mother or their father has died. So that's new and a direct reflection of the society in which they're living in 1921. You've had massive upheaval in the previous decade. It's interesting and useful for government to know the extent to which family life has been disrupted in that very profound way by the loss of one or both parents for children.

Paul: Ok well moving on, what does the enterprise of census-taking look like? Who was collecting the information, how'd they record it, what technology if any did they use to process it? That kind of thing. What picture are we looking at for taking the census in 1921?

Jessamy: Right. So in terms of how the census happened, it's quite a prolonged process. So the Registrar General's team make their preparations. That includes discussions within government, about what information in addition to the routine questions, such as name, address, and age, that the government are interested in learning more about. So the Registrar General and the

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	Show Notes – Bonus Episode Counting down to the 1921 Census	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

associated team spend a couple of years preparing for this to happen, and once everything is agreed, the schedules are approved and printed.

There are a variety of enumerator logistics to be arranged. So enumerators need to be recruited much as they are these days. Different scale, but people are needed to make this process happen, so the relevant groups and levels of enumerators are brought together, training where necessary is undertaken, that sort of activity. And then the census schedules are delivered to individual places, be that a household, be that an institution, be that a vessel. Then comes census night, the actual filling in of the census. And then once the filling in has been done, the gaps start to appear. So there's then a process of chasing up the gaps. Are those legitimate gaps? Are there genuinely not people where people were thought to be, or is there an issue? And then those issues are investigated and resolved.

And once as complete a process as possible has been undertaken, and the Registrar General is satisfied that the census has been delivered to the highest possible standard it can be, that data is then computed. And once it has been computed, it is analysed and then published. And then it starts all over again for the next one!

In terms of how the data was collected. Not a great deal has changed in comparison to previous censuses. So I eluded earlier to those codes that they tested with 1911 and the expansion of that way of coding the data enabled them to use punch cards to process that data. And as a result, we have computers for the 1921 census. But the difference is that those computers are 16 and 17-year-old girls who have been recruited through the employment exchange for the purposes of taking these punch cards and operating them. These young women are brought through the employment exchanges to the Registrar General's team and they compute the data.

There are some photographs available of what these machines looked like, there were three types of machines in all, and there are images available that you can look at for those. Indeed, they were so proud of them that they included photographs of them in the household information about the

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	Show Notes – Bonus Episode Counting down to the 1921 Census	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

1921 census, so they were clearly taking great glee in this technological advance. And then that's been the basis on which data processing for the census has been built ever since.

Paul: Brilliant. So the census is obviously a big national moment, a big national effort, how long does it take from the start of the process to the end where actually all the enumerated copies are gathered together and the government kind of knows 'well we've completed it now'?

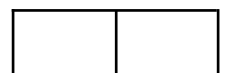
Jessamy: Years is the answer. So preparations begin three or four years before the census is even taken. And then in the aftermath, the data processing for the census is sped up slightly for 1921 because it's computed; that makes it quicker. And so we see the first census reports, the early data in 1923, so two years later, 18 months later, and then the final reports – which include a 400-page whopper across the entire country: England, Wales, the Channel Islands, and the Isle of Man – that comes out in 1927. Alongside it is a county by county report for every pre-1974 county in England and Wales, and also the Channel Islands, and the Isle of Man; those 60 or so documents also come out in 1927 and 1928.

So they're just about finishing the whole thing eight years later. So it's the best part of the decade, and then as soon as they finished the 1921, they will have been gearing up for the 1931 census.

[Musical transition]

Paul: For even more insight into the information we'll be able to discover in the 1921 Census, we spoke to a specialist here at The National Archives who has been digging through census data for over 30 years.

Audrey Collins: My name is Audrey Collins, and I am a National Archives Family History Specialist, which means I work with the records that are useful for tracing family history, and I help interpret them and make them available to people who want to use them for their research.



	Show Notes – Bonus Episode Counting down to the 1921 Census	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

Olivia: Ok Audrey, let's start with a fun question....the 1921 census managed to generate a bit of a scandal, didn't it? Why don't you tell us that story?

Audrey: Oh yes. I'll try to give you the short version because it's quite a story! It all started because the census had to be postponed because of industrial unrest in parts of the country. And they made the decision at the last possible minute because the logistics and the expense of postponing the census are obviously considerable. And then they decided that, to defray some of all this extra cost that it would be okay, just this once, to accept advertising on the addendum slips that were going out to every household.

And there were some discussions about this, and they thought, yes, it's got to be suitable advertising. So, no patent medicines and the like, and eventually they found a very suitable candidate; an advertising agent approached them, said he had a client who was re-launching a national newspaper, and this would be absolutely ideal, a mail drop to every household.

So, terms were agreed and the addendum slip was printed, and it was sent out. The newspaper in question was called the Sunday Illustrated, and the proprietor was a man called Horatio Bottomley. And if you look him up, you'll find him under a list of great political scandals of the 20th Century. He was an MP as well as a newspaper proprietor. Unfortunately, he was an extremely corrupt MP. But before all of the scandal regarding him blew up, as soon as his addendum slips went out, there were protests.

First of all, some people just objected to seeing advertising on what they still considered was a government communication. And then, a number of people, particularly in religious groups, objected because it was advertising a newspaper that was published on the Sabbath. And worse still the newspaper also promoted gambling. So, it was a very, very sinful thing to do.

But the census went ahead anyway, and it went ahead on the new revised date. Unfortunately, it was later in 1921 that Horatio Bottomley's world started crashing around him. And although he

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	Show Notes – Bonus Episode Counting down to the 1921 Census	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

wasn't actually convicted and jailed until 1922, it was one of the year's big news stories. That's the outline of it. There's a small sideline that the legal toing, and froing, and discussions with the advertising agency and with Bottomley actually went on for a very long time after the census and it didn't finally get wound up until 1928. But that's a whole other story, I might tell some other time.

Olivia: [Laughs] That's a brilliant story to set the scene, thank you. So, Audrey, beyond the fundamental statistics like how many people lived in each town or the average age of the population for example, what can the census tell us about everyday people in Britain 100 years ago?

Audrey: Oh, an awful lot. The great thing about getting the individual household schedules, and the information about individuals, is that you can see information at a much lower level. The census reports and the statistics are absolutely brilliant, and you can get an awful lot out of them. And people have been doing that for the last 90 something years, because they were published soon after the census. But when you see individuals, you can see how individuals and families looked. You can see how they interacted with each other. You can see them in their context. So you can really look at much smaller units than the statistics will tell you about. You can look at families, individuals, streets, communities, small villages, and towns. And you can get an awful lot from the individual information.

And you don't have to just be interested in a particular person or a family. It's brilliant for local historians, who want to look at their own particular area, or people who are interested in occupations, or any other aspect. There's so much that could be mined from the details when we get them that we couldn't get just from the statistical returns.

Olivia: Ok. That's great. Thank you. So Jessamy already filled us in on the changes made to the census schedule, the list of questions, in 1921. How will these changes affect what types of information we can glean from the data?

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	Show Notes – Bonus Episode Counting down to the 1921 Census	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

Audrey: The really big change was between 1901 and 1911, and 1911 was the first time when we've got household schedules, and it was the first time that machines were used for all the number crunching and tabulation, which meant that there could be a lot more questions. And it turned out one of the questions in particular in 1911 was quite widely misunderstood, we know people were confused about filling it in. And that was the fertility in marriage question. It was very useful and interesting, but the statistics from it, can't be regarded as completely reliable, because people misunderstood the question.

Now, it remains to be seen which questions in 1921 people might misunderstand. So, that's for us to discover, I'm looking forward to doing that. But that fertility in marriage question was replaced by another one, on orphanhood. And I think this is particularly relevant because of this being the first census after the First World War. This question was for anyone 16 and under as to whether they had both parents alive, both parents dead, or whether their mother was alive or their father was alive.

And that's going to be really, really interesting, because in any census before that, you might have a man, and his wife, and some children. And everyone in a census household was described according to their relationship to the head of the household. Now, in a lot of cases, you couldn't possibly tell whether a man's wife was the mother of all of his children, or any of them. So, that's going to be a piece of information we've never been able to get from the census alone. We might have been able to piece it together using other information, but this is the first time we'll actually be able to see just from the standalone census return, that this was a widower, who had remarried.

I know from experience from earlier census years, that even when a widow remarries, and there are her children and his children...sometimes, the wife's children will have their older surname, but very often they will have adopted the stepfather's surname. So, that's something else, that even if they've all got the same surname, we'll be able to get that sort of detail. So, that's what I'm really looking forward to.

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	Show Notes – Bonus Episode Counting down to the 1921 Census	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

And the other main change is to do with details of employment. 1911 asked for everyone's actual occupation and also the industry that they worked in, which was a really useful addition. Because if you were a bookkeeper, you might be a book keeper in a boot factory. And that made the classification that much more sophisticated.

The other thing in 1911 is, for the first time people were asked about...well people who were in public service were asked for details of their employer. And this is great because we know pretty much who worked at the then Public Record Office, and the General Register Office. This is great. But a lot of people, again, slightly misunderstood this question and put down their employer's name anyway, even if it was the boot factory, or Harrods, or a coal mine. And I suppose this information in 1911, wouldn't be statistically useful. But in 1921, everyone was asked for their place of employment. And I can see some possibilities of misunderstanding that one. But that's going to be really, really useful because, for the first time, you will have, for most people at least who were in work, their home address and their workplace. So, I can see lots of prospects for playing around with Google Maps, and plotting length of journeys to work. I think a lot of people will be interested in that because you can tie it in with the expansion of railways. I mean, where I live, I'm right on the extreme end of the Metropolitan Line on the London Underground, although I'm 30 miles from the centre of London. But the expansion of suburban railways, and improvements in public transport, generally, that had an effect on people's journeys to work. So, that will be something that would be well worth exploring. But you can only do that from the actual returns. You can't do it from the stats alone.

Olivia: Hmm that's really interesting. It shows there's that extra detail coming from the original record.

Audrey: Oh, yes. And not just for people who are interested in a member of their family, which is fine. I would be a traitor to my job title if I didn't say that was really important! But there are so many other things you can do with this extra information, even if you're not interested in any particular individual.

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	Show Notes – Bonus Episode Counting down to the 1921 Census	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

Olivia Gecseg: Are there any particular occupations you are curious about for this particular census release?

Audrey: Well, one of the things will be occupations generally, to see what occupations women were in. Although one of the things that will still be quite tricky without a lot of other evidence is, while we can see what women were doing in 1921 that they hadn't been doing in 1911, it's going to be much harder to pick apart the things that women might've been doing during the war, and now weren't doing anymore. There are ways of getting some of that information. That's going to be quite challenging. But then, who doesn't like a challenge. It's certainly one of the things that I will be looking for.

And one particular occupation—and this is in relation especially to women—is that a lot of women who'd been in domestic service, and a lot still were. But with all the different opportunities that women had had, domestic service was becoming less and less attractive. It had been for quite some time. So, it will be interesting to see the patterns of domestic service and to see how many people were still kept servants, or whether there were more people working as servants, but as daily but not living in servants. Again, lots of possibilities there.

Olivia: Audrey, when we were planning this episode, you mentioned a few personal research projects you've done already using the 1911 census data. So do you think you'll be able to extend your work on those projects using the 1921 data?

Audrey: Oh yes, very much so. I mean my particular pet project—and I've alluded to that—is some work I did on Chesham, which is where I live...right on the end of the Metropolitan Line. And I did what a lot of people were doing - and we know this, because people coming into reading rooms, were researching the names on their local war memorial, particularly during the centenary of the First World War. And I thought, 'well, that would be an interesting thing to do', and it seemed like a good idea at the time. I know I could go one better, and I can try and research all of the men who served—not just the ones who were killed – and where possible, some of the women and people

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	Show Notes – Bonus Episode Counting down to the 1921 Census	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

who did home front duties. And I've got a database which has now got about 1800 names on it. And there are about 180 names on the war memorial. So, you know, a 10:1 ratio is probably about right.

So, I know an awful lot about the people of Chesham round about the period of the First World War, and obviously, the 1911 census was something I used a great deal. And one of the things that struck me very much, was that how many people changed their address between 1911 and the attestation form that they filled in when they joined the army in 1914, '15, '16, and so forth. It's easy to lose sight of the fact that people in the past, they could move addresses much more often than we might think. Partly because people were more likely to rent, but mainly they didn't have as much stuff! And I found lots and lots of people who didn't move very far, but they moved within the same community, the same few streets.

I've known this from my own family history research as well, which is somewhere completely different. But certainly, in towns, it's not at all unusual. So, I've got people who've got one address in 1911, they're somewhere else on the attestation form, and then possibly somewhere else altogether in the absent voters list for 1918. So, it will be very interesting to try and track some of those changes in 1921.

And one of the other things, of course, is all these men who came back, I want to see how many of them went back to the jobs that they had before. Some of them will have done. But some of them won't. Some of them won't have been physically able to resume work in our local industries...boot factories, which I've mentioned earlier. Because my house is actually built for supervisors who worked in the boot factory. So, I'm very excited to see my house, because it was built in 1919. So, I'll get its first appearance in the census.

But there's so much local history that you can tease out of that. And Chesham is interesting, not just because it's where I live, I've got no other connection with it, I just happen to live here. But it's a town that, although it's grown and expanded a lot in the last 100 years, it's grown by incomers

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	Show Notes – Bonus Episode Counting down to the 1921 Census	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

like me arriving, or by expansion. But pretty much all of the streets that were there in 1911 are still there. We lost relatively little, compared to some other places, to slum clearance, and bypasses and things. So, it's very, very recognisably the same town, and a lot of the surnames on the war memorial, they're also on the high street shops and I'm sure would be in the local telephone directory if I had such a thing these days.

So, I'm very excited as a local historian, rather than a family historian because none of my family are going to be in this. They were all still in Scotland. So, my interest is entirely professional, and I've always got a couple of other little projects going on. But the Chesham men at war and women at war, that's my particular pet project. So, that's the first thing I'll be diving into when I get to see the 1921 census.

Oliva Gecseg: I'm sure a lot of our listeners will definitely understand your enthusiasm. So, finally, I just wanted to ask you since you've got such a wealth of experience working with census records, is there anything you would like to tell us about the census that you haven't already mentioned?

Audrey: How many days have you got for the answer? Yes. I've been looking at the census, first of all, just as a hobbyist family historian and then, as a freelance researcher and now it's my job...but I'd say, I'd been looking at the census pretty much constantly for over 30 years, and I am still finding new things in it, things of interest to me. And I often say, it's a bit like peering in through people's windows, to see what they're up to. You only get to do it once every 10 years. So, you have to work out what was going on in the middle. But it's incredibly revealing, and you can use it for so many things. Yes, your family, but you can see what a whole street was like, and what a town or a settlement was like. And sometimes how it changed because of something really major that happened. The railway arriving in a town could completely change it, the way of life there, and affect people's work.

There's so much that you can get from it. You can get the stats, or you can home in and really nosy into the details of people's lives. And of course, house histories, although there are some health

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	Show Notes – Bonus Episode Counting down to the 1921 Census	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

warnings with house histories, because you can't always guarantee that the pile of bricks and mortar, is the right one. You have to be quite careful with census addresses but provided you know the pitfalls, it's an incredibly rich source for house histories, and for all kinds of histories, especially if you combine it with other sets of records, depending on the period and the subject you're interested in. There really is something for everyone, and everyone, in theory, should be in it. Unless they were...my final excuse when somebody's tried everything, they absolutely can't find someone in the census, is that they were probably hiding in a cellar because they thought it was the rent man. And nobody can prove I'm wrong!

Olivia: [Laughs] That is wonderful. Yeah, I think it's really nice to think about how the census records match up with records in local archives, and that's where you can start to match things up with maps and street plans.

Audrey: Oh yes, maps. Yes.

Olivia: [Laughs]. So Audrey, do you think this will be enough data to keep you busy until the release of the 1931 census?

Audrey: Well, that's a very interesting question, because if you have the misfortune to be English or Welsh, or having English and Welsh ancestors, there is no 1931 census to look forward to. It all went up in flames during the Second World War. So, unfortunately, you are all going to have to wait until 1951, if you're young enough, and you live that long, for the next census for England and Wales.

But those of us who have the good fortune to be Scottish, we have got a 1931 census to look forward to. So, if spared, I look forward to seeing my father in that, although my mother was very careless, and didn't get born until '32. But I'm still playing around with the information and data from the 1841, '51, et cetera, et cetera, censuses. I think I can safely say that the stuff that I can

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	Show Notes – Bonus Episode Counting down to the 1921 Census	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

pull out of 1921, when I start looking at other sources, at other censuses with it will safely keep me occupied, indefinitely.

Olivia: [Laughs] Wonderful.

[Musical Transition]

Paul: So how does one go about digitising a set of records as vast as the 1921 census? To find the answer to this question, we called up one of the genealogists at Findmypast, a company which has partnered with The National Archives to ensure that anyone who wants to do their own census investigations can do so from anywhere in the world, whether you are a long-time researcher like Jessamy and Audrey or just starting to ask questions about your own family or local history.

Myko Clelland: My name is Myko Clelland. I'm a genealogist at Findmypast. We're the company working with The National Archives to digitise and publish the 1921 Census online, so that anyone in the world, at the touch of a button, can access this fantastic historical resource.

Olivia: So, Myko, can you give us a sense of the kind of work that goes into digitising this set of records

Myko: The 1921 census is an absolutely huge collection of documents. It consists of over 28,000 bound volumes of original household returns with around 38 million individuals inside of it. And that takes up 1.6 linear kilometres of shelving. And that's around about eight and a half million questionnaires inside. That gives you all the detail about what life was like for those individuals filled in by the householder and in the writing of that household themselves. We digitised almost 2,000 volumes of plans of division, they are 32-page booklets that record how registrars would divide up the whole country and then collect these completed schedules.

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	Show Notes – Bonus Episode Counting down to the 1921 Census	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

It takes up around about 1.4 petabytes of storage. I didn't say terabytes –petabytes - for all of these digitised images in TIF format. So that's more than 20 million of them, all in colour, 25% more than on the 1911 Census that came before it.

Paul: Just to give you an idea of how much data that all is, a petabyte is a million gigabytes. A petabyte of MP3s would be a 2000 year-long music playlist. So when Myko says the digitised 1921 Census takes up 1.4 petabytes of storage...it's a lot.

Myko: Findmypast have been working behind closed doors with hundreds of individuals, right the way through the pandemic, bringing all of this expertise to bear, to transform these original documents from those paper source to fully transcribed, fully searchable colour documents that can be accessed wherever you are in the world, any time of the day or night. It's a part of history that's now been preserved for the rest of history.

Olivia: Oh that's really wonderful. Thanks so much. And how does this compare to what was done for the 1911 census?

Myko: In short, the 1911 census was at the time the largest undertaking for digitisation in British history. It was a bit of a landmark moment. The 1921 census is that again, but it's even bigger. The 1911 census had a little over 36 million names. And as you can imagine, the population of England and Wales increases over time from 1911 to 1921, even despite the First World War. So we're looking at 38 million people this time around, with greater detail about their lives as well than before. But in terms of the process itself, turning paper into something digital, things are remarkably similar. To digitise any national collection is a massive undertaking, and Findmypast are responsible for bringing this 1911 census to the public in exactly the same way, which was the last census undertaken before 1921.

We've got the same privacy concerns that surrounded the previous census, but this one was taken after the 1920 Census Act. So that gives us some very strict rules on security and privacy of these documents themselves and the information that's inside, as well as the guarantee of at least a

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	Show Notes – Bonus Episode Counting down to the 1921 Census	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

century before we can reveal all these things to the public. And we've got that same intense process of assessment, conservation, scanning, indexing, and publishing that sees those hundreds of people working on this at the same time. And so many separate moving parts that have to be project managed and lined up to have everything completing at exactly the right time.

Olivia: Can you walk us through the process of digitisation now? So as a reminder to our audience, we're talking about a 100 year old piece of paper being made into a searchable online record.

Myko: So when we're running at full capacity, there are more than 30 staff members on-site in the conservation scanning studio alone. They're handling all of these documents, these very fragile physical documents, and they've been in secure storage for a century, without being touched at all. And that comes with a few new and interesting problems. Every single one of those 28,000 volumes has to be handled by a very specially trained conservation technician. They run through a host of all of these different, incredibly delicate tasks. This includes removing old pins and anything else that might cause damage to the paper, correcting all of these folds that might cover the texts that we need for a transcription, gently teasing apart any pages that might have been stuck together, restoring all the torn pages, checking for any damage, repairing it. It takes such a level of skill and patience that these people really are very, very, specialist.

And once every page is examined, it's cleaned, it's repaired. It's only then that they're passed to the scanning team and they make an image of every single page, as well as any attachments that come with it, the front cover, the back cover of all of these volumes. And then after that, every single image is quality checked to make sure that it's perfect, and then it gets stored on a secure server. From that server, trained and security-cleared transcription teams work and index every single detail they can. Every single element of someone's life, the way they saw the world, it's put into a database and it's mapped to that image that it came from. When this is all complete, it goes to the data team, who upload the whole thing to our website, create a clean, smooth experience, letting you log in from anywhere you are in the world, see it all with no effort at all, and it's the collective work of all of these people.

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	Show Notes – Bonus Episode Counting down to the 1921 Census	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

The simplicity of getting these results is fantastic. And it's a massively exciting thing to be able to get your hands on it. But the amount of effort behind the scenes in creating something like this is so hard to get your head around when it's all hidden under the hood, so to speak. These projects are absolutely mind-blowing when you think of that scale of what's been undertaken and how many people have contributed to bringing something like this to Findmypast and to the public in general.

Olivia: That's great, thank you. It's a really nice mirror with the process of gathering the census data in its initial stage as well. Once the digitised census is available to the public, what kind of searches will they be able to do using Findmypast?

Myko: Archival records are absolutely invaluable for so many kinds of research, social history, local history, family history, and a lot of people will be familiar with that process of ordering paper documents. They're then delivered to a reading room. You read them page by page. That's what we've done for centuries. It works, but digitisation really opens a door to a whole new world. Every transcribed element in the 1921 census is now going to be searchable. You can search for any part of a name. You can look for an individual. You can narrow down with years of birth, place of birth, anything you can think of, but you can use any of the things that we've indexed to get to records you might want to look at. Perhaps you don't have any names of interest, but you want to see all the people that worked as ironworkers or the population of the town of Ludlow in Shropshire.

Maybe you want to see the people who lived on a street in 1921, or even who lived in your house. You want to learn who stood where you stood, or maybe who might have made that dent above the fireplace when they tried to move a piano. All of these things don't need a name, they just need part of a story, or even just a piece of information. Imagine the leap forward we can take when we can explore the population of a whole country and directly compare in the same level of detail, before and after, something so transformative as something like the First World War, we can see the changes they brought to society, the class system, the lives of those are affected. There's no 1931 census available for England and Wales. It was destroyed in World War II. There's no 1941 census because of the war itself.

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	Show Notes – Bonus Episode Counting down to the 1921 Census	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

So this is the last chance to see a picture of the nation in detail and look into the households of the people that made the nation, all the way until the release of the 1951 census in 2052. And the great thing here too, when you put something like this on a website like Findmypast, we can connect it to all of the other records that relate to the same individuals. And it starts to tell the whole story. You can link these individual documents together from different archives around the world. You can get that unprecedented detail and you can discover who these people were, in a way that was really unheard of up until now.

Olivia: Are there other collections on Findmypast that you might immediately think of when you think of the 1921 census and how that might connect up?

Myko: When we think of 1921, the earliest and the first thing that would come to mind would be the records of those who served in the First World War. We've got a huge collection of service records that detail everything you can think about these people, their next of kin, their addresses, the battles they fought in, their disciplinary records, their medical histories. All of that is really, really interesting, especially when we look at how their lives might have changed between the 1911 census and 1921 census. There are also electoral registers that come from the British Library. These records are almost another way of telling who lived in a different house, who lived in a property, and maybe telling the story between the censuses as well.

And we see the first women that can vote nationally, all these different parts of history coming to life that tell that story of everyone involved. We've also got a massive collection of local and national newspapers, and those newspapers tell you absolutely everything you can imagine, from winning a village fete for having the largest carrot or perhaps getting attacked by a donkey on a dark road. If you can imagine it, it's there. And these are the stories that make history and family history come to life. And it all starts with getting the names, the dates, the places from something that is the backbone of this kind of thing, like the 1921 census.

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	Show Notes – Bonus Episode Counting down to the 1921 Census	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

Olivia: So that leads really well into the last question I have for you which is in order to inspire our listeners to do their own census investigations, do you have any good stories of people discovering interesting things about their community or their family from the 1911 census?

Myko: We've seen people looking for their ancestors, of course, finding people they remember from when they were young and even sometimes new family members that they didn't even know existed. We've seen people look inside houses, they reminisce about familiar days to see who live there and what their lives were like. I remember in one instance, I did a talk somewhere in Yorkshire and there was a lady who remembered from being very small, an old house at the end of the street, which always had overgrown ivy and a very expensive car, but they never saw anyone come or go for that house. And in the last census, they looked up and they found out that it was the town doctor who was always on night calls. And so that's why they never saw them. And that's why they had that big, expensive car. And they solved that mystery that's been them for almost a century. They were in their nineties at the time.

And we've seen regimental associations tell the story of lives left behind by men who never came home from the Somme. We've seen local history groups that build a picture of how a street has changed over a century. All of that is there again in the census too - it's ready to be discovered. These records are a snapshot of time. They show a frozen point in history, told in the words of the people who were there. And the census has everything that comes with it. People who are only minutes old with their names not even decided, people adding their pets, considering them to be as much a member of the household as their children, teddy bears, people who died on the night of the census and were discovered the following day, heroes who made bold political stands on the census entries with statements about the government that they slid in for posterity, people who are enumerated while serving time in prison.

I really could go on and on. If you can do it today, you can bet they did it then. With any collection like this, the only limit to what you can find is really what you can think of to look for and the discoveries you can make are practically endless. If you've got any interest in family history, local history, social history, any part of history in general, then the place to be it's a 1921 census.

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	Show Notes – Bonus Episode Counting down to the 1921 Census	THE	
		NATIONAL	
		ARCHIVES	

[Musical transition]

Paul: Thanks for listening to On the Record, a production of The National Archives at Kew.

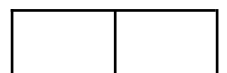
To find out more about The National Archives, follow the link from the episode description in your podcast listening app or visit nationalarchives.gov.uk.

If you're interested in learning more about the history of the census and how it can be used for research, visit nationalarchives.gov.uk/census. That's nationalarchives.gov.uk/census. And to hear more about the digitisation of the 1921 census, look out for a guest blog by Myko's colleague at Findmypast Mary Mckee, which will be available at that same URL, nationalarchives.gov.uk/census.

Olivia: Listeners, we need your help to make this podcast better! We need to know a bit more about you and what themes you're interested in. You can share this information with us by visiting smartsurvey.co.uk/s/ontherecord. We'll include that link in the episode description and on our website. You can also share your feedback or suggestions for future series by emailing us at OnTheRecord@nationalarchives.gov.uk

Paul: Thank you to all the experts who contributed to this episode. This episode was written, edited, and produced by Hannah Hethmon for Better Lemon Creative Audio.

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