

Places of Worship in the National Census of 1851

The only comprehensive census of places of worship undertaken in this country was made during the course of the 1851 National Census of Population. It was remarkable and useful because of its thorough cover of the subject and the detailed way in which the results were made public.

An earlier attempt to obtain information on places of worship was made when in 1810 the House of Lords

Ordered,—That an humble Address be presented to His Majesty, that He will be graciously pleased to direct the Archbishops and Bishops of each Diocese to report to His Majesty what Place or Places of Divine Worship, according to the Church of England, there is or are within every Parish which appears to contain a Population of 1,000 Persons or upwards; what Number of Persons they are capable of containing; and also, what other Place or Places of Divine Worship there is or are in every such Parish.¹

The original returns as sent in by each parish priest are held in Lambeth Palace Library. From these were made abstracts which were printed for the House of Lords: *Returns of the Archbishops and Bishops of what places...*² Some dioceses delivered their information too late for this, notably York, and these were printed separately.

The effectiveness of the enquiry was limited by the exclusion of small parishes, by the slight information requested on the 'other' places, and by the fact, at least so far as Quakers were concerned, that some meeting houses were not reported.

The Act of Parliament which authorised the population census in 1851 said nothing of such an enlargement of scope, although it did instruct the registrars to "take Account of all such further Particulars as... they may be required to enquire into..."³ The request for these further Particulars is set out in the letter from the Registrar General, George Graham, which prefaced the official report:

To Lord Palmerston, Her Majesties Secretary of State for the Home Department, Census Office, 10th December 1853.

My Lord,

When the Census of Great Britain was taken, in 1851, I received

instructions from Her Majesties Government to endeavour to procure information as to the existing accomodation for Public Religious Worship.

Every exertion has been made to obtain accurate Returns upon which reliance may be placed, and the duty of arranging these Returns in a tabular form, accompanied by explanatory remarks, has been confided by me chiefly to Horace Mann...

Horace Mann's report *Religious Worship in England and Wales* was published in 1854.⁴ It ran to over 150 pages, and included many tables which analysed and compared the towns and sects of England and Wales in considerable detail. Returns were obtained from Scotland as well, although these were not included in the *Report*. The whole machinery of the population census, with the same enumerators and registrars, was used to gain knowledge of the accommodation and attendances not only of the Church of England but of all Christian denominations and of the Jewish congregations. In only one essential point this part of the census differed from that of population: at the insistence of the House of Lords answers to questions on places of worship were to be voluntary, not compulsory. Apparently Friends co-operated with the Registrar General rather better than did the established church.

Early in the nineteenth century it had been seen that the movement of people from country areas into the new manufacturing towns had not been matched by much increase in accommodation for the Church of England, although some dissenting bodies had more readily grasped the opportunity which this situation offered. Looking at the dates and kinds of meeting houses built by Friends at this time there is little to suggest that they were among those bodies. Rather did Friends develop their activities in the inner cities in the latter part of the nineteenth century through the influences of the new evangelism and of adult education. The Church Building Commission, set up by Parliament in 1818, used public funds to remedy the shortage of churches, and when the Commission's work ceased in 1856 about 600 new churches had been built with its help. The 1851 census was evidently used to enquire whether an acceptable provision for public worship had then been achieved. In what follows I shall look at the Quaker returns alone without much reference to Mr Mann's comparisons.

The survey was carried out through Meeting for Sufferings:

A communication having been read from Horace Mann of the General Register Office requesting the dimensions of our Meeting Houses and

the numbers attending there. The subject is referred to the attention of the following Friends, viz. Samuel Sturge, George Stacey, James Bowden (Recording clerk), Samuel Fox and Joseph B. Braithwaite.⁵

At its next meeting in January 1851 Sufferings minuted its approval of the 'essay of a minute' brought in by these Friends, part of which read

This application has claimed our deliberate consideration and as we desire not to obstruct any measure of the Government which does not interfere with the rights of conscience, this meeting invites the co-operation of the respective Monthly Meetings in carrying out the object of the application, so far as respects the Meeting Houses of our Society. A form, intended especially for our body, accompanied with instructions for making the return, has been prepared, copies of which are directed to be forwarded to the several Monthly Meetings. The Friends who may be appointed by the Monthly Meetings for this purpose are requested to make their returns in duplicate, on the form in question, to James Bowden, 86 Houndsditch, London, within 10 days after the day for which the said return is desired.⁶

Accordingly, this minute was read in Monthly Meeting at Lancaster that March, and

...this meeting therefore appoints the following Friends to carry out the said return ... and produce a copy of the return at our next Meeting, viz (two Friends from each).⁷

At their next meeting report was made that '... the committee appointed at our last... have attended thereto',⁸ and the results were summarised in the minute book with one considerable error in transcription, by no means the only one to appear in the course of the census. The May Meeting for Sufferings minuted the conclusion of their part of the work, with a brief national summary, and ended 'James Bowden is requested to forward to the government office one each of the said accounts'.⁹ Lancaster's actions represent a fairly thorough approach, as it is noted that neither Strickland nor Sedbergh Monthly Meetings make any reference at all to the matter in their minutes, although between them they had to make seven returns. At Kendal M M, with only one active meeting at that time the Monthly Meeting clerk, 'Saml. Marshall is appointed to afford the information required by the Registrar General with reference to the census, and to sign the document'.¹⁰

The second copy of the returns is preserved in a bound volume in Friends House Library and is prefaced by a two-page summary.¹¹ The order in which the returns are bound is by Quarterly Meetings, with some irregularities. The summary, whilst similarly by Quarterly Meetings, is arranged with greater accuracy but with the meetings in a different order: it does not serve as an index. In addition to giving the names of the meetings it sets out the attendance at each one in two columns, headed 'morning' and 'afternoon'. The latter in fact includes the few evening meetings. The summary was printed in Bishopsgate near to Devonshire House and it was presumably produced by Friends and was not an official census document.

In order to see whether the census was complete, the individual returns may be compared with the summary pages bound up with them, and with the *Book of Meetings* for the years 1851 and 1852. Discrepancies occur between all of these. In the case of Stebbing (Essex Quarterly Meeting) the second copy of the return has been lost but an entry appears in the summary. Four meetings are represented by a return but do not show in the summary:

Olney (Bucks & Northants), Felstead (Essex), Brailes (Warwicks Leicester & Staffs), Garsdale (Westmorland).

All these are in the Books of Meetings. Two meetings which sent in returns however, do not appear in either Book of Meetings:

Queenswood (Dorset & Hants), Torquay (Devon).

These are minor drawbacks compared with the number and nature of meetings which were apparently omitted from the census entirely, thirteen in number, and all appearing in the Book of Meetings:

Wallingford (Berks & Oxon), Warborough (Bucks & Northants), Gosport, Guernsey & Jersey (Dorset & Hants), Stow & Tewksbury (Glos & Wilts), Trawden (Lancs), Wainfleet (Lincs), Gracechurch Street (London), Radway (Warwicks Leics & Staffs), Huby & Reeth (Yorks).

The Channel Island meetings may have been outside the scope of the Registrar General's instructions, and excluded on that

account. Several meetings were undoubtedly in the gradual process of starting or more usually of closing. A few occasional meetings may not have met on the last Sunday in the month, though some of these were included and gave as requested their average figures for attendance. The meetings at Trawden, Tewksbury and particularly Gracechurch Street were not in these straits however, and their omission does make a difference to the value of the census as a whole.

The Registrar General sought much information which would show the location of the meeting, whether or not it met in a meeting house, the latter's age, floor area and seating capacity on floor and gallery, and the number of worshippers present at the various meetings held on that particular day, Sunday 31 March 1851. Location was identified in civil services tradition by parish, county and registrar's district, which occasionally gave Friends the necessity of adding their own customary name of their meeting. Two questions were asked to establish the status of the building in which Friends met: whether a separate and entire building, and whether used exclusively as a place of worship. Although these questions do not yield a very clear picture, all but about 22, or six per cent of the 348 meetings for which we have returns, gathered in their own meeting house. The date of the meeting house was asked for, but only back to the year 1800. This was sufficient to distinguish those which might have been built or re-built in response to the demand which occasioned the census, but did not prevent some Friends from attempting to impart more distant historical information.

The space within the building will be discussed later; the same question also how many people it was capable of seating. Although in that period and before, it was expected that people would willingly be packed in a good deal more closely than now (for example when Race Street meeting house Philadelphia was built in 1856 only sixteen inches of bench was allowed per person) the figures given are often optimistic and occasionally in error. At least one meeting worked out its answer at five square feet of the total floor space per person; this was very likely the best way of assessing the number. William Alexander, writing in 1820, suggested four and a half square feet for comfortable accommodation, and rather less in the galleries.¹² Today we think ourselves quite closely seated if each of us has six square feet.

The final question asked the estimated attendance on census day at the morning, afternoon and evening meetings. Very few

figures were in fact rounded estimates and one Friend reported '3 or 4' present. The question seems to have aroused a sensitive and exaggerated response among the membership. Several meetings excused their answer with notes on illness, or inclement weather, or a funeral nearby. For the census as a whole, attendance on census Sunday was said to be below normal because it coincided with a period of unusually severe weather and of widespread illness. This makes the conclusions on Quaker attendance even more difficult to understand.¹³ It must be the case that many Friends and attenders made a particular point of attending on that day, out of a sense of loyalty to the meeting. Regrettably we do not have an accurate knowledge of the number of Friends in 1851 to compare these figures of attendance. The first Tabular Statement of membership was for 1861, the next for 1868. Over the whole of London Yearly Meeting these two show an average annual increase of 14 Friends over the intervening years and a rather greater increase in attenders, thus it suggests that membership in 1851 was not markedly different from 1861, and if anything a little smaller. In 1861 there were just over 17,000 Friends and 'habitual attenders', and the total number who attended morning meeting on Census Sunday ten years before was shown as 13,361. While attitudes to attendance at meeting may have changed over the last century or so an attendance of about 75 per cent still seems a remarkable achievement and one that can have had little bearing on the customary habits of Friends of the time. After all, a Friend travelling in the Ministry in Herefordshire in 1850 remarked with evident pleasure on a meeting he attended at Ross, 'at which one-fourth of all the members of the general meeting must have been present'.¹⁴ On three occasions since 1851 Yearly Meeting has taken a census of attendance at meeting, in 1904, 1909 and 1914 when the attendance on four Sundays in October was averaged out. For each of these years it showed that about 30 per cent of members and attenders were at morning meeting, to compare with the 75 per cent on that special day in 1851.¹⁵ Nevertheless only once, mentioning a public meeting, did the Friend who filled in the census return make any comment on unusually high attendance. Otherwise he only remarked when it did not come up to expectation.

The pattern of afternoon and evening meetings, and attendance at them, was set out clearly showing that all but three of the 348 met in the morning; about 200 held a second meeting in the afternoon and about 20 in the evening; at this period none met

three times in the day. The frequency of the second meeting varied greatly between Quarterly Meetings, from Suffolk where all seven meetings were held twice, to only two of the 14 in Westmorland. Such information is not unique to the census and considering the omissions in the returns it may be more fully seen in the *Book of Meetings*, as may the mid-week meetings which were altogether outside the scope of the census.

The one census question which permits an objective and numerical comparison with known facts, and which is neither asked nor answered elsewhere in Friends' records, concerns the 'Space available for Public Worship'. Sufficiently accurate surveys exist for 210 out of the 326 meeting houses included in the census, that is about two thirds.¹⁶ These have been compared, as carefully as may be, with the information given in the returns. This was generally given in square feet, though in 62 instances actual measurements were given as well or instead of the area. From this comparison it is possible to throw some light on the ways in which the question was understood.

Considerable variety is found in the degree of precision thought appropriate for the census, from those who expressed their answer down to the last few square inches to others who found a hundred square feet near enough. Despite our present wish for detailed and accurate information the latter were in fact doing just what was asked of them, as instructions for completing the return noted 'that complete accuracy of mensuration is not essential, and that a near approximation to it is all that is desired'. These well-rounded approximations appear in about seven per cent of the returns, which must be set aside before detailed comparisons can be made with the surveys. Naturally enough a few meetings were defeated by the mathematics and about 20 entries show more or less obvious errors. At Carlisle for instance one of two equal chambers was correctly measured and doubled, and then in error re-doubled. At two small and adjacent meetings in the Pennines Friends did not help themselves by measuring in yards as well as feet and inches, and then resolved the problems of arithmetic by adding instead of multiplying.

This last pair illustrate one of the few apparent exceptions to the arrangements made typically by Lancaster Monthly Meeting where one or two Friends were appointed to deal with each separate meeting house. Here the same Friends made the return for both, as the meeting used the two buildings alternately. It is clear that the appointed Friend was expected to be at the meeting

house on that day to count, to measure and to sign the return even if (as did occur two or three times) he was the only person present. Nowhere does it appear that a Monthly Meeting discussed how the details of the work should be carried out, or that it laid down any guidance for those it appointed to carry out the work. Thus we find the different ways of expressing the floor area and its accuracy, and thus we find differences in interpretation of the words of the census: how much of a meeting house was in fact *available for Public Worship*. It is clear that Friends asked themselves two questions in a typical traditional meeting house: whether to include the whole building both sides of the shutters, and whether to exclude the ministers' stand. The loft or public gallery figured separately on the return; there was little ambiguity and only a few were omitted presumably because they were unsafe or had been unused for years. However since it was referred to by the ambiguous word 'gallery' the column was occasionally used instead for information on the ministers' gallery, or stand.

On considering the first question, it is usually fairly clear whether the whole floor area was entered, meeting rooms, lobby and staircase together. The instructions were that any 'space should be included which being divided off by moveable shutters, is occasionally made use of for the purpose of Divine worship, but no distinct room exclusively or chiefly used for Meetings for Discipline'. Meeting houses outside London seldom had this distinct room, but in a few instances the second chamber behind the shutters was nevertheless excluded, and rather more frequently an intervening lobby, also with shutters, was left out. In a few instances Friends are known to have leased out part of a meeting house they no longer needed, in others the meeting may simply have retreated into one chamber and totally neglected the other. Very seldom does it appear that the space occupied by the staircase to the loft was excluded from the calculations, though perhaps it was the least suitable place for worship. In about 15 per cent of the returns relating to useful surveys (spread fairly evenly over the country) some or all of the spaces beyond the meeting room were excluded.

The matter of whether to exclude the ministers' stand again shows a random distribution, suggesting again that it was a personal rather than an agreed decision.¹⁷ Since the floor area occupied by the stand is a good deal smaller, usually a strip four or five feet wide across the end of the building, it is more difficult to determine this point and much depends on the accuracy of the

original returns and of the survey. Clearly the question was considered, for in about ten instances separate measurements were given for the stand and the problem was left to Mr Mann to resolve. A careful comparison of the measured plans with the returns suggest that the ministers' stand was left out of the stated floor area in another 40 or so cases, on the basis that the stand could not correctly be considered as part of the space available for public worship as it was for the exclusive use of elders and recorded ministers.

It would be interesting to speculate on how this figure relates to the year in which the census was taken. During the mid-nineteenth century the status of the traditional ministers' stand was in decline. Although nearly equal numbers of meeting houses were built in each half of the century, less than half as many were fitted with stands in the second half from 1851 to 1900 as were during the first 50 years. These last often had a platform for loose chairs and a table more suited to a speaker than a minister.

To summarise these numerical conclusions, it may be said that something like 15 per cent of the census returns for meeting houses are in error or are too roundly-figured to be of use. Of those for which we have measured plans about 15 per cent leave out at least one whole room and up to 25 per cent leave out the ministers' stand. The clearest conclusion to be drawn from this is that the figures do not necessarily say what we expect them to say: to pick out the area given for a particular meeting house certainly does not mean that we would find just that many square feet between its remaining walls. As E. Harold Marsh wrote in the report to Yearly Meeting of the 1914 Census of Attendance 'In considering the returns of this Census, the Committee has been impressed with the many anomalies that are brought to light, and it is easy to exaggerate the value and significance of the record'.¹⁸

When reading through these census returns some of the changes which have occurred since they were prepared 130 years ago are brought to life. The altered status of meetings in larger cities for instance, is illustrated by the figures for attendance. At Mount Street Manchester 453 worshippers sat down on that Sunday morning and 202 in the afternoon where now four dozen may be the usual number, while meetings which were not thought of in 1851 now encircle the city centre meeting house. The effect of a Friends School upon the life of a meeting is equally well shown. Taking the school which moved from Croydon out to

Saffron Walden in 1879; the attendance at Croydon dropped from 230 in 1851 to 118 in 1905, while in the same period numbers at Saffron Walden rose from 50 to 158, and continued to rise for some years as the school increased.

Thus the census presents us with a 'still' picture, mildly distorted, of several physical and numerical aspects of the Society of Friends as it was in 1851, which we can value for itself and for the view it gives of things we have seldom asked ourselves.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

- ¹ Fulham Papers, Randolph, 1810.
- ² Ordered to be printed 5 April 1811.
- ³ 13 and 14 Victoria Cap. 53.
- ⁴ *Religious Worship in England and Wales. Abridged from the official report made by Horace Mann...* London, 1854.
- ⁵ Meeting for Sufferings, minute 11 of 6.12.1850.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, minute 4 of 3.1.1851.
- ⁷ Lancaster Monthly Meetings, 12.3.1851.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.4.1851.
- ⁹ Meeting for Sufferings, minute 18 of 13.5.1851.
- ¹⁰ Kendal Monthly Meeting, 30.3.1851.
- ¹¹ Manuscript Volume 227.
- ¹² W. Alexander: *Observations on the Construction and Fitting up of Meeting Houses*, York, 1820, 60.
- ¹³ A. Everitt: *Pattern of Rural Dissent*, Leicester, 1972.
- ¹⁴ *Memoir of Thomas Pumphrey*, ed. J. Ford, 1864, 199.
- ¹⁵ For membership and attendance figures in these years see *Yearly Meeting Proceedings* for the year following.
- ¹⁶ I am indebted to several Friends and fellow architects for these measured surveys, and in particular to H. Godwin Arnold and the late Hubert Lidbetter who between them have supplied me with about one third of the plans used in the preparation of this paper. The surveys are of meeting houses evenly distributed over the country, except for Cheshire and south-west Lancashire which are not well represented.
- ¹⁷ If there is any detectable geographical tendency, it is for southern England and the extreme north-west to show the greatest proportion of errors and to exclude the greatest proportion of ministers' stands.
- ¹⁸ *Yearly Meeting Proceedings*, 1915. 226.