

## 1851 Ecclesiastical Census

Joe Saunders

The only census of attendance at religious worship ever taken in England and Wales was on Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> March 1851. This was the same date as the full census for the entire population. The returns for this religious census were collected and examined by a local census officer. They survive today as a fascinating insight into religious observation in the middle of the nineteenth century.

The 'Ecclesiastical Census' returns provide detailed information, by parish, on the place of worship for each religious denomination. The returns record the sittings available, the number of people attending any services during that day and the estimated attendances and average numbers during the previous twelve months. The returns also record the number of children attending Sunday School and often the foundation date of a particular meeting or place of worship as well as any endowments.

The census tells us a great deal. Many small groups met outside of official buildings such as in cottages, barns, and workshops. It is clear from the returns that well over half of the population did not attend any form of religious service on the day the census was taken. In some industrial cities, this proportion was reduced to as little as one in ten. Around half of those who did attend a religious service attended a nonconformist meeting. In some areas, such as Yorkshire's West Riding, the proportion of nonconformists was much higher.

Despite its usefulness to the researcher, there are downsides to the census. Problems of interpretation and limitations on what information was recorded is apparent. There is no indication of how many people attended more than one service during that day, so we cannot determine the number of people attending each congregation or religious attendance overall. Often, people attended multiple times during the day, even visiting different denominations. Some Anglican vicars refused to participate in the census on the grounds that they believed the state had no right to enquire into such matters. However, these issues do not detract from the usefulness of the census in establishing the relative strength of different religious denominations. It is generally accepted that these returns were made conscientiously and that in general, they are fairly accurate.

**Census of Great Britain, 1851.** 573-2-2-6 39  
(13 and 14 Victoria, Cap. 53.)

**A RETURN**

of the several Particulars to be inquired into respecting the undermentioned CHURCH or CHAPEL in England, Scotland, and the Episcopal Church there, and also from Roman Catholic Priests, and from the Ministers of every other Religious Denomination throughout Great Britain, with respect to their Places of Worship.

(The Names given to the several Churches and Chapels, and the Names of the Ministers, shall be inserted in the Column headed "NAME and DESCRIPTION of CHURCH or CHAPEL.")

<b>NAME and DESCRIPTION of CHURCH or CHAPEL.</b>			
<i>Great Musgrave Church, an ancient Parish Church</i>			
<b>WHERE SITUATED.</b>	Parish, Ecclesiastical Division or District, Township or Place <i>Great Musgrave</i>	Superintendent Registrar's District <i>East Ward Union</i>	County and Diocese <i>County of Westmorland, Diocese of Carlisle</i>
<b>WHEN CONSECRATED OR LICENSED</b>	Under what Circumstances CONSECRATED or LICENSED		
	<i>Consecrated August 25th 1846, in lieu of an old one.</i>		
<b>In the case of a CHURCH or CHAPEL CONSECRATED or LICENSED since the 1st January, 1800; state HOW OR BY WHOM ERRECTED COST: how Defrayed</b>			
<b>HOW OR BY WHOM ERRECTED</b>		<b>COST: how Defrayed</b>	
		By Parliamentary Grant .....	
		Parochial Rate .....	
		Private Benefaction, or Subscription, or from other Sources .....	
		Total Cost .....	
<b>HOW ENDOWED</b>		<b>SPACE AVAILABLE FOR PUBLIC WORSHIP</b>	
£	£	Free Sittings .....	
<i>32</i>	Few Bents .....	<i>37</i>	
<i>116</i>	Fees .....	Other Sittings .....	
<i>50</i>	Dues .....	<i>120</i>	
Permanent Endowment .....		Total Sittings .....	
<i>68</i>		<i>157</i>	
<b>Estimated Number of Persons attending Divine Service on Sunday, March 30, 1851.</b>		<b>AVERAGE NUMBER OF ATTENDANTS during 12 Months next preceding March 30, 1851. (See Instruction VII.)</b>	
General Congregation	Morning	Afternoon	Evening
}	<i>37</i>	<i>+</i>	<i>in winter</i>
	<i>8</i>	<i>+</i>	<i>50</i>
Sunday Scholars			
			<i>50</i>
Total ..	<i>45</i>		<i>6.8</i>
<b>REMARKS</b>			

I certify the foregoing to be a true and correct Return to the best of my belief.

Witness my hand this *10th* day of *March* 1851.

IX. (Signature) *Joseph Chapelhow*

(Official Character) *Rector* of the above named

(Address by Post) *Brough* *Westmorland*

PUBLIC RECORD OFFICE  
 HO 129/573

Entry for Great Musgrave parish church, Westmorland, *Ecclesiastical Census Returns* [TNA HO 129/573/39, 1851]. Image copyright of The National Archives. Not to be reproduced without permission.

The returns are held by The National Archives under the reference HO 129. Some have been printed. In recent years these excellent records have been made available online. The returns can be searched and downloaded: [Home Office: Ecclesiastical Census Returns](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/).

**References and Resources:**

Information for this post was taken from the excellent David Hey (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Local and Family History* (1996), 142-3.

For examples of printed versions of the returns see; Kate Tiller (ed), *Church and Chapel in Oxfordshire, 1851: The Return of the Census of Religious Worship* (1987), R.W. Ambler, (ed), 'Lincolnshire Returns of the Census of Religious Worship, 1851', *Lincoln Record Society*, 54 (1975)

Alan Everitt, *The Pattern of Rural Dissent: The Nineteenth Century* (1972)

D.M. Thompson, 'The Religious Census of 1851' in R. Lawton (ed), *The Census and Social Structure: An Interpretative Guide to Nineteenth-Century Censuses for England and Wales* (1978)