

# Mind your language – the 1911 census in Wales

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*Getting our hands on the 1911 census a couple of years early was a major event for family historians. The curtain was raised on another scene in our ancestors' lives, more facts unearthed, more questions asked... but, for some, it has brought with it a few linguistic conundrums.*

The 1911 census introduced a series of firsts. For the first time we can see the actual forms as completed by our ancestors and we're given the length of time a couple had been married, how many children they had had and how many of those children had died. All wonderful new pieces of information for the genealogist to use in pursuit of the full picture.

But it also introduced another first – one that really does bring us a step closer to many of our Welsh ancestors' lives. A good number of people completed the forms in Welsh – their mother tongue and, for many, their only language.

## **Social attitudes and a changing society**

Up until the late nineteenth century, Welsh was not regarded as a 'suitable' language for use in official circles – a result of a clause in the 1536 Act of Union which in time helped undermine the use of Welsh amongst the upper classes and shaped attitudes towards the language for centuries to come. However, by the second half of the nineteenth century there appeared to be a gradual recognition of Welsh culture in the mainstream and a rise of Welsh national consciousness – a trend facilitated by nonconformity, democratic movements and developments in education.

On the surface, therefore, printing a proportion of the census forms in Welsh could be seen as a reflection of those changing attitudes. But, there's more to it than meets the eye. We know that 13% of forms were printed – and completed – in Welsh. However, actual census statistics tell us that just under half of Wales' population – nearly a million people – were Welsh speakers at that time<sup>1</sup> and, if you look close enough, you'll see that many apparently monoglot Welsh speakers

completed an English form. So, why weren't there enough Welsh forms to go round?

If you spend enough time searching the 1911 census, you'll soon discover a pattern: Welsh forms appear more numerous the further west and more rural the area. English forms on the other hand tend to be the norm in most towns, even in the western half of the country. For example, you'll find in towns like Lampeter, Caernarfon or burgeoning tourist towns like Betws-y-Coed, that most households were given English forms, despite the large majority of those towns' populations clearly being native Welsh speakers.

English forms are also the norm, not surprisingly, in places that were perceived to be primarily English-speaking areas or where a fair number of non-Welsh speakers lived – for example localities closer to England and in towns near the ports. The South Wales coal mining Valleys however is a particularly interesting case: the area had attracted a large immigrant population from other parts of the UK and beyond, but it was traditionally a Welsh-speaking area and had also up until 1911 attracted hundreds of Welsh speakers from mid, west and north Wales, but even so you will be hard-pushed to come across Welsh forms there.

The fact that your ancestors completed an English form, even though they could speak Welsh, is not necessarily a reflection of *their* attitude towards the language or their ability to read or write it. It is more probably a reflection of enumerators' attitudes and, simply, that there were not enough Welsh forms to go round. The authorities recognised the fact that many, in particular the older generation, living in rural parts of the west would only be able to write in Welsh and so, in reality, providing a certain number of Welsh forms was a practicality that allowed for the facilitation of the census project across the whole of Wales and was not necessarily a reflection of the authorities' linguistic broad-mindedness.

We can also reasonably say that in areas where native Welsh speakers were expected to be able to speak English fairly fluently they would be expected to complete the forms in English. And so, for that reason, only 13% of forms were printed in Welsh (which roughly reflected the percentage of the population or

households that the authorities expected could only speak Welsh<sup>2</sup>). Far from the provision of choice therefore that Welsh speakers enjoy today when they deal with the public sector in Wales!

### **Transcript trauma and eccentric spellings**

As a rule of thumb, therefore, if your ancestors lived in the western half of Wales, you will at some point have to tackle forms completed in Welsh. In order to help non-Welsh speakers, The National Archives have compiled a useful and (thankfully) accurate glossary of many terms you are likely to come across when researching your Welsh ancestors in the 1911 census.

However, don't presume that the transcripts on the 1911 census website are accurate. In some cases transcribed words don't even resemble Welsh at all! That, of course, makes it very difficult – at the present time at least – for you to use the online search form when you are trying to locate a certain ancestor of a certain profession (who completed his form in Welsh), living in a certain farmhouse with a Welsh name.

On top of that, many words and descriptions may not be covered in the glossary at all (for example 'rhannu llythyron' – delivering letters) and many Welsh farm and place names will be spelt differently to the way they're presented today. A good Welsh-English dictionary would be helpful, although if you have a modern dictionary to hand and you were trying to decipher some of the more apparently 'eccentric' spellings, you could well end up pretty confused...

Differences in place name spellings were often the result of an attempt to anglicise a Welsh name. You may be familiar with the examples of Carnarvon being used for Caernarfon and Aberayron for Aberaeron, but you need to bear in mind that this trend may also be seen at work at the house name level. And don't forget, just as with English for much of its history, many people still did not follow the set rules of standardised spellings.

Interestingly, religion also played a part in influencing Welsh spellings. Most schooling at the turn of the century was still mainly carried out through the

medium of English and the use of Welsh in many classrooms was still, in 1911, frowned upon (this probably added to the authorities' assumption that the majority of Welsh households should be able to complete an English language form). However, for well over a century prior to 1911, education for many in Wales went hand in hand with religion.

Long before the golden age of the chapel and, indeed, long before the introduction of state education, progressive home-grown moves were underfoot in Wales to educate the people. Sunday schools and especially Griffith Jones' circulating schools had started to teach children and adults how to read and write – in Welsh. As a result, many historians believe that even in the pre-Victorian era the Welsh 'lower classes' were among the most literate in Europe, a fact that undermines the stereotype foisted upon them during the nineteenth century as lacking in education and being "less developed than the English"<sup>3</sup>.

It was thanks to this religious-based education system and of the central role the chapel played in Welsh life at the turn of the century, that our ancestors could read and write in Welsh and that some phrases you'll come across in the census may well have an old-fashioned flavour (even for 1911!). The Welsh Bible, translated in 1588, deliberately used archaic language and its linguistic influence continued well into the twentieth century. As a result, you'll see spellings of words, such as 'athraw' (athro – teacher), that seem to have come straight from the pages of Bishop William Morgan's Bible.

Regional variations can confuse things further for the novice 1911 census-searcher. You may come across terms such as 'heolwr' (roadman – heol/hewl being a south Wales terms for road) which may not have made it onto the official translation table.

### **And finally...**

Apart from some useful Welsh language lessons, there are other important lessons to be learnt from the 1911 census. Genealogical guides which introduce us to relevant official documentary sources in the UK often subsume any references to Wales under the catch-all phrase 'England and Wales'. This

encourages us to ignore the distinctiveness of Welsh society hidden behind the birth certificate, census form or the pages of a parish register. The publication of the 1911 census brings this 'oversight' to the fore and underlines just some of the elements of Welsh social and cultural history that really need to be understood by anyone researching their family history in Wales.

A further small step back in time into the nineteenth century will also confirm that – although officialdom may have followed the English model – Wales' linguistic make-up, traditions and developments such as industrialisation (the history of which is distinct from the process in England), nonconformity and education, not only shaped our ancestors' lives but had an important bearing on historical documents from that period and how we interpret that information today. As family historians, we ignore that fact at our peril!

## Notes and sources

<sup>1</sup> Report on 1911 Census – The Welsh Language Board: downloadable PDF report: <http://www.byig-wlb.org.uk/english/publications/Pages/PublicationItem.aspx?puburl=/English/publications/Publications/638.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> This figure is probably based on the percentage of monoglot Welsh speakers recorded during the 1901 census, which was around 15%. For a summary of Welsh language census statistics, see the downloadable PDF: [www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/bicentenary/pdfs/wales.pdf](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/bicentenary/pdfs/wales.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> *The Blue Books Report – a parliamentary Commission inquiry into the state of education in Wales* (1847) – as quoted in: *On being Welsh: A Historian's Viewpoint* by Prof. R R Davies: <http://www.cymmrodorion1751.org.uk/pages/publications/beingwelsh.html>

The Welsh Language Board: <http://www.byig-wlb.org.uk/English/welshlanguage/Pages/TheHistoryofWelsh.aspx>

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