

## The Census Records

from

*Jock Tamson's bairns: a history of the records  
of the General Register Office for Scotland*

by

Cecil Sinclair

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This publication is now out-of-print. Its aim was to describe the three main series of records held by the Registrar General for Scotland in New Register House in Edinburgh and to set them in their historical context.

We are making the text from the chapters on the Old Parish Registers, statutory registers and census records available in portable document format (pdf) on this website. Each can be found in the further reading section of the relevant research guide. It is hoped that the content will be of interest to experienced genealogists and to a wide cross-section of the general public who value their personal and social heritage and wish to learn more about it.

## Contents

We have made minor amendments to the original text to take account of the release of the 1901 and 1911 census records and the merger of the General Register Office for Scotland with the National Archives of Scotland to form the National Records of Scotland on 1 April 2011.

We have also divided the chapter into the following sections:

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## 1. Early censuses

Because of a census, Christ was born in Bethlehem. This reminds us that the use of a census by governments as a means of gathering information about their subjects is of some antiquity. Long before Christ, the Babylonians did it, as did the Egyptians and the Chinese. The information collected might be agricultural or commercial, but the most likely reasons were fiscal and military. The censuses of the Roman Empire were designed to discover who was liable to be taxed and how many men would be available for the Roman army.

Many censuses, at least in their preserved form, are simply an enumeration of the inhabitants for statistical purposes, not identifying individuals. Despite that, censuses have not always been popular, subject to a dislike of government prying or simple superstition about being counted. Indeed, when in the Old Testament King David enumerated his people, God Himself was so angry that He sent a pestilence upon the Israelites, which does seem odd of God and rather unfair. But this was remembered in Christian countries and in 1753 in the House of Commons, when a Bill to introduce a British census was defeated, the fear was expressed that a numbering of the people would be followed by “some great public misfortune or epidemical distemper”.

Whatever the reason, census-taking fell out of favour for a long time after the fall of the Roman Empire and only got started again in the Western world in the 18th century. Enumerations of population took place in several European states from 1742 onwards. In the United States of America, a federal census began in 1790 to ensure an accurate distribution among the states of taxes and seats in the House of Representatives.

### 1.1 Webster’s census of 1755

The earliest gathering of statistical information in Scotland was undertaken by the Reverend Alexander Webster in 1755. He asked each parish minister to count the number of inhabitants in his parish, divided into Papists (Roman Catholics) and Protestants, and also to count the number of “fighting men”, that is men between 18 and 56 years of age. It is interesting to note that in 1755 Glasgow had a population of 23,546, of whom none were Roman Catholic. Webster’s “Census” is preserved in the National Library of Scotland and has been published.

### 1.2 Introduction of the official census

In the United Kingdom, the census was established in 1801 and has been carried out every ten years since (except 1941, because of wartime conditions). The 1801 census was prompted by public concern about the growth of the population, and the economic and social effects this might have.

From 1801 onwards, the questions asked in the census are a guide to what the government wanted to know: the size and age of the population, the houses they lived in, what work they did: a sort of national stocktaking.

From 1801 to 1831, in Scotland, the censuses were carried out by the parish schoolmasters. They had to find out:

- how many inhabited houses, houses being built and uninhabited houses there were in their parish;
- how many families were employed in agriculture, how many in trade, manufacture or handicrafts, and how many otherwise;
- and how many males and females.

Whatever information had been gathered locally, only the summary figures were returned to a central point and made available to the public. However, thanks to the enthusiasm of a few schoolmasters, a very small number of lists of inhabitants were compiled and have survived locally (though not in the custody of the Registrar General). Thus, if you have ancestors in certain parishes in Orkney in 1821, you have a 20-year advantage over almost everyone else.

### 1.3 Census dates

The census of 1841 was the first to take the form of the census as we recognise it today. Every person in the country on a specific night had to be named and described according to certain questions laid down by the act of parliament which authorised that census. There were also questions about the houses in which people were living. In the 19th century, the censuses were taken on the nights of:

- 6/7 June 1841
- 30/31 March 1851
- 7/8 April 1861
- 2/3 April 1871
- 3/4 April 1881
- 5/6 April 1891

Parishes and cities were divided into registration districts, containing up to about 200 houses. Each district was numbered and delineated in such terms as:

“So much of the Parish of Erskine as bounded by the river Clyde on the north, and the old Greenock High Road on the south, the parish of Inchinnan on the east, and the farms of East Longhaugh & West Porton on the west, including both these farms” (1841 Renfrewshire) or “Canongate Northside from 337 (head of Leith Wynd) to No 331 inclusive embracing Old Fleshmarket Close and Ramsay Court” (1871 Edinburgh).

### 1.4 Enumerators and enumeration books

Each district had an enumerator, who from 1861 was appointed by and answerable to the local registrar. In the week before the census date, the enumerator had to deliver a schedule to each household in his district and to persuade the head of the household to complete the schedule by listing the inhabitants of that household and answering truthfully the questions asked about them.

To refuse to answer or to answer a deliberate untruth was to render the householder liable to a penalty. The completed schedules were collected the day after the

census. The governor of any public or charitable institution (such as a prison, poorhouse or hospital) in which upwards of one hundred persons usually resided was appointed enumerator for that institution. The completed schedules were copied into the census enumeration books for that district, which books were then sent to the central authority, who from 1861 was the Registrar General for Scotland. The information in these books was then used to compile such statistics as the government required. The schedules were destroyed.

When you consult the census records today, what you will read are the census enumeration books from 1841 onwards. As the post of Registrar General for Scotland was not created until 1854, obviously he did not control the 1841 and 1851 censuses. These were organised by the Home Office in London working with the assistance of the Scottish sheriffs and provosts. The enumeration books of 1841 and 1851 were removed to London, where they remained until 1910, when the Registrar General for Scotland found them “deposited in cellars in Westminster” and had them moved back to Edinburgh. The date is significant. Because of the Old Age Pensions Act of 1908, people over 70 needed to prove their age to obtain their pension, and for those whose baptism was omitted from the Old Parochial Registers, a census might contain the necessary information. Thus from 1910, all the Scottish census enumeration books from 1841 were together in the care of the Registrar General, though at that time not open to the general public.

## 2. Census questions

### 2.1 1841 census

Less information is provided by the 1841 census than by its successors because fewer questions were asked. Within each place and house, what was sought was the name, surname, sex, age and occupation “of each person who abode in each house on the night of the 6th of June” and where each was born.

- Only one Christian name was allowed for each person.
- Common occupations were abbreviated, e.g. “M.S.” for a male servant, “P.L.W.” for power loom weaver.
- Birth places were vaguely expressed: “Yes” if born within the county, “No” if born elsewhere in Scotland, “E” if in England, “I” if in Ireland, “F” if a foreigner.
- Rather quirkily, for those over 15, the exact age was not given, ages being rounded down to the nearest 5 (i.e. those aged between 20 and 25 were all given as 20), presumably for statistical purposes.

Missing also from the 1841 Census, compared with later ones, are relationships. Families living together are listed together, so it is possible to work out the likely family connection.

Thus in Sugar House Lane in Greenock, Dugald McCallum, aged 40, ag[ricultural] lab[ourer], and Margaret McCallum, aged 30, with four McCallums aged below 7, the youngest unnamed at one month, are clearly one family.

But in many households there are inhabitants with various names whose connection is not apparent. In the parish of Caputh at Riemore, Ann Sim aged 40 is presumably the mother of William Sim, a 15-year-old farmer, Peter Sim aged 13 and Margaret

Sim aged 11, but who is David Gray aged 6? To find that out, one has to go to the OPR for the parish, which tells us that David is the illegitimate son of the Widow Sim (OPR337/5).

In the 1841 census, there was space for the schoolmaster of each parish to comment. This was usually just to confirm that boundaries were correct, but sometimes there are more valuable remarks, such as “The population of the parish of Carrington 1831 was 561 and the present census 1841 is 616, Increase 55, this influx arises from a Coal Work in the parish. None have emigrated from the parish for the Colonies or Foreign Countries, within the last 6 months”. The 1851 Census contains similar helpful comments from the local ministers, such as “almost every Fisherman holds a small farm” (in the Shetland parish of Mid and South Yell).

## 2.2 1851 and later censuses

The 1851 census asked fuller basic questions which were repeated in subsequent censuses. The head of each household had to supply for every person under their roof, their Christian names and surname; relation to head of family; “condition” (married, widowed or unmarried); age; rank, profession or occupation; where born; whether blind or deaf and dumb.

Each census expanded the questions asked.

- From 1861, the number of children of school age (5-15) and the number of rooms in the house with one or more windows were asked.
- From 1871 the householder was required to admit if anyone was imbecile, idiot or lunatic.
- The 1891 census enquired who spoke Gaelic.

Clearly, the more information provided, the more valuable the record becomes to researchers, and the less guesswork required.

Compare the 1841 entries with 1851 ones, such as the house in Church Lane in Lerwick, where the head was Christina Jameson, aged 35, a sailor’s widow born in North Mavine, her household consisting of her three children, James a 12-year-old scholar born in Delting and Christina aged 8 and John aged 4 both born in Lerwick, but also of Barbara Matthewson, lodger, married, aged 45, a pauper, convict’s wife, born in Unst: or the house at 104 Drysdale Street, Alloa, which contained not only the householder James Melvin, house carpenter, his wife and children but also two older unmarried brothers, John Melvin, an architect and housebuilder employing six men, and Archibald Melvin, a house carpenter, employing three men.

In the Old Parochial Registers, married women retained their maiden surname in the Scottish fashion. The censuses were ruled by English customs and therefore married women appear under their husband’s surname.

There was also a Victorian tendency to alter some Christian names which were deemed not quite proper, so that many ladies called Jane in the census were actually named Jean and some called Janet were better known as Jessie. For example, Jessie McDonald or Hutchinson (1805-1882), who lived in Braemar, was called Jess or Jessie at her marriage and the baptisms of her children, in the 1841-

61 censuses, on her death certificate and on her gravestone, but is called Janet in the 1871 and 1881 censuses.

Where persons were not actually related to the head of the family, their "relation" might be servant, lodger or visitor.

The age column in the schedule was divided into males and females, whose ages were totalled separately for statistical purposes.

### **2.3 Occupations**

The rank, profession or occupation information is of particular interest, showing which occupations were prevalent in which areas, which were increasing and which decreasing. The census reports will tell you how many innkeepers there were in Dunbartonshire, how many coal miners in Lanarkshire, how many milliners in Dumfriesshire, and so on.

Many 19th century jobs now seem quaint to us: artificial feather maker, book folder, cane chair worker, cork cutter, envelope maker, marker in a billiard room (a 12-year-old boy), scavenger, stocking knitter, tobacco spinner, venetian blind painter, washerwoman.

In the countryside, farmers and agricultural labourers still loomed large. The acreage farmed and the labourers employed by a farmer were usually expressed, such as "farmer 1300 acres employing 14 labourers". Obtaining this information occasionally troubled the enumerators. A farmer might occupy land in more than one county, in which instance his acreage and servants might be partially assigned to the wrong locality. Also, were members of a farmer's family to be included in the number of labourers employed? It was decided that wives and daughters who acted as dairymaids in addition to their ordinary domestic duties were not to be included, but sons and daughters employed as outdoor labourers were to be so.

Not everyone of course had a recognised occupation. Wives and daughters often had a blank in this column. But under "Rank, Profession or Occupation" you may find gentlewoman, annuitant, pauper, crofter's sister, tenant's niece, farmer's mother, farmer's aged and infirm widow. Some of these descriptions do suggest that woman's work was an occupation.

### **2.4 Place of birth**

If a person was born in Scotland, the parish of birth was to be stated; if in England, Wales or Ireland, the county; if abroad, the country. These birthplaces showed how mobile society was becoming. Admittedly, particularly in rural areas, many people lived their lives in the parish in which they were born. For example, in 1871 the Matheson family at Tarsveg in the parish of Sleat, five brothers and two sisters, all unmarried aged 19 to 35 had all been born in that parish.

But other families travelled widely, wherever work took them.

- Thus, in 1861, at Glenbuck in the parish of Muirkirk, John Short, age 25, a coal miner, had been born in Ireland, while his wife and three infant sons had each been born in different parishes in Lanarkshire and Ayrshire;
- and in Carrubers Close in Edinburgh, James Muirhead, age 31, horse dealer's man, had been born in Rutherglen, his wife had been born in Newburn in Fife and his children in Edinburgh, Liverpool and Glasgow.
- The origins of the members of one household might be diverse. At 6 Crawford Road in Edinburgh in 1891, Edward Muriset, the head, a teacher of French, had been born in Switzerland; his wife Marian, headmistress of a private school, came from Ireland; their young son Oliver was born in Edinburgh; their boarder, James Copland, assistant curator, Historical Department, General Register House, had been born in Kirkwall in Orkney; while the servant, Dolina MacLeod came from Duirinish in Skye.

In some parishes, one may note the influx of railway labourers from Ireland. Indeed, the population of a parish could be temporarily doubled by the presence of navvies and other railway workers. In his 1871 report, the then Registrar General was hardly politically correct when he commented "it is painful to contemplate what may be the ultimate effect of this Irish immigration on the morals and habits of the people, and on the future prospects of the Country."

## 2.5 Gaelic

In the 1891 census, the householder's schedule required everyone to say whether they spoke Gaelic only or both Gaelic and English. There had been a trial run of this subject in 1881, when there was no such question in the schedule, but the enumerators were instructed to discover who spoke Gaelic. This showed that the language was prevalent in the northern and western Highlands. In 1881, 75% of the population of Sutherland had the Gaelic, but the 1891 enquiry showed that most Gaelic speakers also spoke English, apart from those in a few parishes in the Western Isles. One can also note class and generation distinctions arising.

A typical example in 1891 is in the parish of Golspie, where at Kirkton House (27 windowed rooms) Alexa Murray, age 61, a widow and farmer, and her two servants spoke both Gaelic and English, while her three grown daughters did not speak Gaelic.

Some registrars were uncertain whether occasional use of Gaelic counted. They were told "the Registrar-General thinks the expression in question may properly be held to apply to all persons who are so familiar with the Gaelic as to be able to converse fluently in that language". Only Scottish Gaelic counted. Irish Gaelic speakers entered in schedules in Dumbarton had to be removed from the enumeration books.

## 2.6 Definition of household

One house might contain several families, which were distinguished by a mark between them in the enumeration books. Making the distinction sometimes was not easy.

Many householders let out rooms to other families or to individual lodgers. Were these tenants all part of one household or did they form separate households? It was decided that those who received board as well as bed formed part of the same household, but lodgers who found their own meals formed separate households.

The same applied to servants. Farm servants who slept in outhouses were to be included in their master's schedule, if the master fed them.

A public institution (e.g. hospital, barracks, a rescue home for fallen women) was treated as one household. But inns, hotels, lodging houses were not public institutions, and in them there could be several heads of households.

- In 1861, the registrar for Carlisle was concerned "whether a person travelling from place to place, and who may occupy part of a bed for perhaps only one night is ... to be regarded as a separate occupier."
- In 1891, the registrar for Arbroath "ranked some dozen Navvies huts containing each some 30 beds as houses not considering each lodger as a family which in this case would be misleading. We must just hold the keeper of the hut responsible for the number of inmates most of them are illiterate and they cannot be altogether trusted for filling the schedule correctly."

Defining what constituted a house also caused difficulties. The Scottish system of flats as separate feudal properties meant that Scottish houses did not all have an entrance from the street. Subdivided flats added to the problem. The 1881 Census finally defined a house in Scotland as "(1) every dwelling with distinct outside entrance from a street, court, lane, road, etc, or (2) with a door opening directly into a common stair, but any such dwelling, if subdivided and occupied by different families, is reckoned as only a single house."

Houses had to be dwelling houses. Buildings such as churches and warehouses and others not intended as dwelling houses were ignored in most censuses. However, in 1851 and only in 1851, it was decided to collect statistics of:

- the accommodation afforded by various churches and other places of public worship and of the number of people attending public worship on Sunday March 30<sup>th</sup>;
- also of the existing educational establishments and the number of scholars under instruction.

Enumerators had to issue different schedules to churches and schools (not the householder's one). These returns show the diversity of churches, mostly protestant, and the variety of types of schools, the great majority parish schools or supported by the Church of Scotland or the Free Church. Sabbath and evening schools were counted, as were literary and scientific institutions in each parish, such as in the

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county of Clackmannan the Alloa Phrenological Society and the Tillicoultry Mechanics Library. There were many subscription libraries in Scotland.

On a census night, not all persons might be sleeping in a building. Therefore at the end of each enumerator's book were entered those who had slept in barns, sheds, caravans, tents etc, in mines or pits or in the open air. The police were directed to assist the enumerators in tracing any such.

Thus in 1861 in the parish of Newlands, Thomas Chisholm, age 40, a farmer of 135 acres, was "Out of doors with sheep" at a fair; and in the parish of Muirkirk a family was "found in a travelling caravan, containing wild animals". These travellers were no exotic foreigners but a Scottish family, headed by William Turnbull, showman, born in St Ninians, his wife born in Alloa, his unmarried brother and three children, born in St Ninians, Musselburgh and England.

Those who were aboard vessels had also to be counted. Vessels in rivers or inland waters were the responsibility of the enumerators. But vessels in ports were attended by the customs officers. Before the census date, the Registrar General wrote to the foreign consuls at the ports, requesting their assistance, as the crews and passengers of all vessels had to take part, not just British ones.

In 1891 the Norwegian vice-consul at Peterhead had a sad problem when all but one of the crew of a Norwegian vessel perished on the coast of Crimond on the night of the census. The survivor appears in the return for the parish of Crimond where he passed the remainder of the night after his rescue.

## **2.7 Rooms with one or more windows**

The question about the number of rooms with windows obviously showed the relative prosperity within a parish and of individual families.

In the parish of Sleat in 1871, most households were lucky to have two windows, but the house at Isleornsay of Daniel Fraser, a general merchant employing two men, had no less than fourteen windows. Daniel was doing well. His household also included a governess to educate his children.

In the poorer areas of the cities, many households had only one window.

In studying the census records, we have to remember that what they show is a snapshot at a particular point in time. The same questions asked a day or a week or a month or a year later would produce different answers. On the chosen day (a Sunday), the majority of people would be in their own homes, but some would not. Those whose professions took them away from home, such as fishermen or commercial travellers, might be recorded in quite another parish from their own. Some people now went on holiday, say to Cumbrae for the sea bathing. People might be visiting relatives.

In 1841 in Newton Stewart in the parish of Penninghame, we find a household consisting of Margaret Gordon, age 30, and three young children. But we happen to know that Margaret had a husband and two other young children and therefore we have to search further in that parish census.

The husband was not in the parish that day, but one child was in the household of James Vernon, age 55, shoemaker, and the other in the household of James Vernon, age 31, also shoemaker, whom we believe to be their maternal grandfather and uncle. What we do not know is whether these children were just spending the night with their relatives or were farmed out to them for an extended period.

The censuses provide many answers but sometimes offer us new unanswered questions.

## 2.8 Errors

Like any of man's creations, the censuses are liable to human error. The head of a household might, deliberately or accidentally, provide inaccurate information. An inattentive enumerator might make a slip in copying a schedule into his book. The vast majority of the details in the censuses are likely to be accurate, but no human endeavour will be one hundred per cent perfect.

Despite the threat of punishment, some people lied, whether out of vanity or perhaps disguising their origins.

In Ballachulish in 1871, an "educated lady" was caught out when she insisted that her age was 29, when the parochial register of baptisms showed that she was 44.

Looking from one census to the next, people do not always age by ten years, though in some cases the head of the household may have passed on such information in good faith, and some people may have genuinely not been certain of their year of birth.

Where there are errors or apparent errors, most were probably not intentional.

In the parish of Crathie and Braemar in 1841, 6-year-old George Hutchinson appears twice, once in his father's house in Castletown of Braemar along with his siblings, and also, described (humorously?) as an agricultural labourer, in the household of his maternal grandfather in Inverey, where he was presumably visiting. Doubtless both his father and grandfather completed their respective schedules genuinely.

The problem of course is that an error may only be recognised when compared with information from other sources.

### 3. Operation of the census

#### 3.1 Census staff

The census staff had other problems. Those employed on the census, supported by the Registrar General, complained consistently that they received inadequate remuneration. While the registrars had some discretion in the sizes of the enumerator's districts, the division into districts could involve a lot of work, especially in Glasgow with its ever increasing population and extending boundaries.

- In 1891 the Boundary Commissioners were readjusting boundaries of counties and parishes at the same time as the census was underway.
- A parish boundary might run through a farm.
- One registrar might accuse another of poaching a house from his district.
- In 1881 an enumerator in Stenscholl refused to go into houses where there was an outbreak of fever, and one in Kilmacolm was refused admission by a recluse, so completed the schedule himself.
- Some high-ranking householders could also be difficult, such as the Earl of Glasgow who in 1861 refused to say the number of windowed rooms in Hawkhead House in Paisley (perhaps he feared a return of the window tax?).
- After the census had been taken in Glasgow in 1871, some enumerators' books had to be rewritten.
- Those for the district of Glenelg in 1891 were lost, and then found. "The drawer in which the Books had been kept had no back, and they had fallen down behind the drawers." Returns from distant and inaccessible districts such as St Kilda arrived very late.

All these problems and many others assailed the busy Registrar General.

Once the enumerator's books had been brought into Edinburgh, there was more work to be done in the Registrar General's department. Two permanent officers were appointed to act as superintendents, regulating a team of temporary clerks (26 in number in 1881 and 1891) supplied by the Civil Service Commissioners. These clerks had to be aged between 16 and 40 and had been examined in arithmetic, orthography, handwriting and intelligence. Their task was to draw out from the census records the statistical information which the government required. They of course did not have the benefit of computers but in 1891 the Registrar General was permitted to purchase a new arithmometer or calculating machine to assist their work.

### 3.2 Statistical publications

As a result of this work, after each census there was issued (since 1861 by the Registrar General) a voluminous report containing analysis and statistical tables. These reports were presented to both Houses of Parliament in London and were available to the public. The numerous tables calculated by nation, county, parish and burgh every possible comparative viewpoint of population, age, occupation, birthplace, houses, etc. The information provided to the government of the state of the housing, health, education and occupations of the population was clearly of immense value. The Scotsman newspaper wrote that:

the 1871 report “of the facts collected at the late census of Scotland is worth its weight in gold to the statist, the historian, and the students of all social and sanitary matters”.

## 4. Access to the records

### 4.1 Closed census records

While the statistics were freely available, the information provided by householders in their schedules and repeated in the enumerator’s books were regarded as strictly confidential. Successive governments up to the present day were and are convinced that people would not answer the census questions if they thought anyone other than a few government officials, sworn to secrecy, would read their answers. The Registrar General regularly assured the public:

“The facts will be published in General Abstracts only, and strict care will be taken that the returns are not used for the gratification of curiosity.”

The public were assured that no information about named individuals would be passed by the Census Office to any other government department or any other authority or person. If anyone employed in taking the census disclosed information improperly, he was liable to prosecution.

Of course, enquiries were received from both official bodies and private individuals seeking access to information locked within the census returns. Most were refused though the Registrar General did have a discretion.

- School boards which wanted to find out the identities of children of school age in their district were not given that information.
- The Crown Agent was declined access when he was investigating a criminal case.
- But the Medical Officer for Glasgow was allowed access, because it was considered that the enormous size and population of that city would make people less suspicious of their details being improperly used.

As already said, after 1908, individuals were provided with age information to prove their entitlement to an old age pension. But in 1911 a man who needed to prove his age to obtain a particular job was refused, being told that if the census returns were:

“to be available to prove the age of anyone who chose to ask to have the Returns consulted, the work of the Department would be very largely increased and the Census would be used for purposes for which it was never intended.”

Yet a kindly Registrar General did check the age of a lady approaching 100 years, and in 1922 the Registrar General proposed that the returns for 1841 to 1871 be opened to the public. The Scottish Office was not keen but in 1923 was finally persuaded to allow this. However, any searches had to be done by the Register General's staff. Members of the public were not allowed direct access, except for officers of local authorities or “other specially approved applicants”.

#### **4.2 100 year rule**

The question of public access remained a difficult issue. As the 20th century progressed, demands for freedom of information and a huge growth in interest in the genealogical content of the census records faced increasing concerns about confidentiality in relation to people still alive. Access became both easier and more restricted.

- The 1923 situation remained unaltered until 1955, when the returns for 1881 and 1891 were opened and the public was allowed direct access to the census records up to 1891 in New Register House.
- Eventually in 1974 government ministers decided that in future Scottish census returns would not be made available until 100 years after the census to which they relate. This decision brought Scotland into line with English practice, on the principle that, in a matter of such public importance, policy should be uniform throughout the United Kingdom.

Thus in the year 2000 we could “gratify our curiosity” up to the year 1891.