**Census 2011: Familiar themes**

By Jill Rutter

We have just seen the further release of 2011 Census data from England and Wales. Media coverage of the census data focused on immigration and population increase, but this seems to be a case of history repeating itself. Reviewing past census reports highlights some familiar themes.

The first census took place in 1801, driven in part by Malthusian panic about population increase and concerns about military mobilization. But it was not until 1841 that a question on country-of-birth was added to the census, with respondents allowed to list England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, British colonies or ‘foreign parts’ as their place of birth.  In that year 38,628 ‘souls’ in England and Wales were born foreign parts, out of a total population of nearly 16 million. (We were described as ‘souls’ rather than people, then!)

Questions on nationality were added to the 1861 census, where British subjects born in ‘foreign parts’ were distinguished from other nationalities. In that year 101,832 people were born in ‘foreign parts’, with 36 per cent of all foreign-born people originating in German states or Austria. German born people remained the largest country-of-birth group until 1911, when they were overtaken by those born in Russia.

The two releases of data from the 2011 census have been accompanied by a great deal of media panic about levels of immigration into the UK. But it is worth looking at the commentary attached to the general report on the 1891 census.

It is, however, to the European foreigners that most interest attaches at the present time, as it is often stated that they are immigrating into this country in such numbers as to come into serious competition with our native population. Their total number, as returned, including men, women, and children, was 168,814.

Rates of immigration into England and Wales increased significantly after 1861. Between 1901 and 1911, there as a 46 per cent increase in the foreign born population, but together with those born in the British colonies, the proportion of people born outside Britain and Ireland was just 1.5 per cent of the total population in 1911 (535,018 people in England and Wales) and heavily concentrated in London and other port cities.

Census reports from the 19th century give an interesting breakdown of the occupations of the foreign-born population. In the 1881 census, the German-born population included 2,048 teachers and 2,091 commercial clerks, but also 444 sugar bakers.

In the midst of growing anti-alienism, the terminology in the 1921 census changed, with ‘alien’ used to describe the foreign-born population. However, rates of immigration into the UK declined after the First World War.

In 2001, the census just included questions about country-of-birth, and recorded just under five million people born abroad. But greater international migration in the last 10 years, and concern about it, has prompted an expansion in the number of questions on immigration, which in 2011 included questions on country-of-birth, nationality, date of arrival in the UK, intentions about remaining here, as well as ethnicity and religion.

The migration data from the Census 2011 showed that 13.3 per cent of the population of England and Wales had been born abroad. Similar to 170 years ago, most of the overseas-born population originates from European countries. Germany is still in the top five, with 273,564 people recorded in 2011. But a big difference between 1841 and 2011 is what the migration world terms ‘super-diversity’. In the past, the UK’s migrant populations comprised a small number of large groups, predominately from our close neighbours in Europe and the UK’s former colonies. Today many parts of urban Britain manifest super-diversity where many different nationalities and ethnic groups live side-by-side and also differ in relation to their length of residence in the UK, immigration status, qualifications, skills, and needs. Today’s census records people from almost every country in the world – something that could not have been foreseen in 1841.