

# The Registrars General 1836-1945



## THOMAS HENRY LISTER 1<sup>ST</sup> REGISTRAR GENERAL 1836-1842

Thomas Henry Lister was known as a romantic novelist when he was appointed Registrar General in 1836, to head the newly-formed General Register Office (GRO). Aged only 36, he was charged with the setting up of a system of Civil Registration of Births, Marriages and Deaths, from scratch. Having achieved this not inconsiderable task, he next had to organize the 1841 Census. Although a census had been taken every 10 years since 1801, this was to be on a grander scale than any of the previous ones. For the first time, every individual was to be not merely counted, but named, on one of the schedules which were distributed to every household. Lister designed the household schedules, and also special forms for institutions. Anticipating some opposition to the new style census, thought by some to be intrusive, he suggested that the enumerators in some areas might feel the need for police protection. This offer was taken in up in urban areas, including London, Manchester, Liverpool, Bristol, Rochdale and Huddersfield. A central office was needed to administer first the distribution of the forms and instructions to the enumerators, then their collection, and the extraction and tabulation of the information, which was the object of the exercise. The new General Register Office occupied part of Somerset House, but there was no space for the additional clerks needed for the census, so Lister secured temporary accommodation for this in nearby Adelphi Terrace. Sadly, he did not live to see the completion of this task, which took until 1845, since he died of tuberculosis in 1842.



Thomas Henry Lister  
1st Registrar General  
1836-1842

## GEORGE GRAHAM 2<sup>ND</sup> REGISTRAR GENERAL 1842-1880

Lister had laid the foundations for the new Registration Service and for census-taking, but it fell to George Graham to make the adjustments which gave both their essential shape for several decades to come. Lister had had very little time to organize the 1841 census, and had of necessity based it on the ancient divisions of parishes, hundreds, rapes and wapentakes, like the earlier censuses. It was clear to Graham, and William Farr, head of the Statistical Branch, that an arrangement based on the newer Registration Districts would be much more useful. This would

mean that the population data obtained in the census years could be compared with the numbers of births, marriages and deaths in each district. Accordingly, Graham obtained funds from the Treasury to employ a number of temporary clerks for two years to re-arrange the results of the 1841 census in accordance with the new Registration Districts. Some of the clerks employed on this task were re-engaged for the 1851 census, the experience gained from the arrangement of one census being a great asset in organizing the next. From now on each census could be administered by the Registrars and Superintendent Registrars in each district. A completely new arrangement of enumeration districts was required, and for this a set of accurate maps would be required. George Graham suggested in 1846 that the set of accurate and detailed maps currently being drawn up by the Tithe Commission would be ideal for this, and the cost of copying these would be far less to the GRO than commissioning its own survey. The Treasury were not easily convinced, and it was not until late in 1850 that they finally agreed. At one point they offered an alternative, and obviously inferior, set of maps, which provoked the following response from Graham

*'Nicely designed as they are and well executed as I have no doubt they will be by Mr Saunders, I cannot but consider them as merely pretty toys, when compared with the practically useful and much required maps to the formation of which under the Tithe Commissioners I have so frequently, not I hope pertinaciously and obtrusively, ventured to solicit the attention of the Lords Commissioners of H M Treasury'*

Following all the work which had been put in to the first census under his jurisdiction, George Graham was pleased to report afterwards that the cost per head of the population of taking the census was less than in 1841. He was also proud to say that no prosecutions for refusing to complete the census form were necessary in 1851.

*'I treat these cases of obstinacy as more or less connected with insanity; and being isolated cases not very frequently met with, I do not think it necessary to prosecute the recusants'*

For the 1861 census, Graham maintained that if the arrangement of the census remained the same, proper comparisons could be drawn between census years.

**BRYDGES HENNIKER**  
**3<sup>RD</sup> REGISTRAR GENERAL 1880-1900**

By the time Brydges Henniker was appointed Registrar General, the GRO's parent department was no longer the Home Office but the Local Government Board, formed in 1871. In 1891, the Board wanted permission from the Home Office to destroy the enumerators' books from 1851 and 1861, which were stored in the Victoria Tower of the Houses of Parliament. Henniker strongly disapproved of the idea, and suggested that advice be sought from experts at the Public Record Office. Thankfully, the view of Henniker and the experts prevailed. This was not the only trouble he had from the Board. In the interests of improved public health, they wanted to pass on information from the census to the Sanitary Authorities. Again Henniker objected, since the information was obtained with a promise of confidentiality, and could not be disclosed, however laudable the reasons. Again, his view prevailed. When it was taken, the 1891 census was administered from new premises in Charles Street.

**REGINALD MCLEOD**  
**4<sup>TH</sup> REGISTRAR GENERAL 1900-02**

Reginald McLeod was the first of two successive Scots-born Registrars General. He served only two years in the post, but his tenure coincided with the 1901 census. For the first time, women were employed as temporary clerks in the Census Office, which was by now based at Millbank. This was such a success that McLeod introduced some of them into the regular establishment of the GRO, considering them to be superior to the boy typists then employed. Like his predecessors, he was concerned with the need for accurate maps for drawing up the enumeration districts. In correspondence with the Treasury he pointed out that there had been literally thousands of boundary changes of Registration Districts and sub-districts, large and small, since the last census. In 1902 he moved on to become Permanent Under-Secretary for Scotland.

**WILLIAM COSPATRICK DUNBAR**  
**5<sup>TH</sup> REGISTRAR GENERAL 1902-1909**

William Cospatrick Dunbar was the first Registrar General not to preside over the actual taking of a census, but the results of the 1901 census were still being prepared during his time in office. It was also during his tenure that the early census enumeration books, saved at least in part due to the representations of Brydges Henniker, proved to be a vital resource. In 1908 the first Old Age Pensions Act was passed, and for some elderly applicants who could provide neither birth, baptismal nor marriage certificates, entries in the census returns were accepted as proof of age. At first, the General Register Office was reluctant to provide this service, contending that this was not the purpose for which the census had been taken, and that there were great practical difficulties in searching these early enumeration books. Ultimately, though, special forms were provided for applications for searches in the census. In 1909 the enumerators books for the 1841 and 1851 Scottish censuses were transferred to Edinburgh at the request of the Scottish Registrar General. As there was no such post until 1855, these earlier Scottish censuses had been organized from London. It is perhaps a measure of Dunbar's exasperation with the business of allowing searches in them that he told his Scottish counterpart

*'I advise you not to attempt to walk on such hazardous ice as these old censuses!'*

**BERNARD MALLET**  
**6<sup>TH</sup> REGISTRAR GENERAL 1909-1920**

The 1911 Census, overseen by Bernard Mallet, was the last one which required a special Census Act, since in 1920 an Act was passed which put the Census Office on a permanent footing, establishing it as a regular decennial event. 1911 was also the first census year when the information was tabulated directly from the household schedules, and not first copied into books by the enumerators. The use of tabulating machines for this purpose did not run quite as smoothly as had been hoped, and there were some delays at first. However, this was partly due to extra information on occupations which had to be coded, and partly due to the inevitable 'teething problems' when using a new system for the first time. Overall, the use of the machines was judged to have been a success, and was continued in future censuses. A more immediate problem which Sir Bernard had to deal with was the attempted boycott of the 1911 census by the Suffragettes. In the event, the boycott was not as successful as Mrs Pankhurst and her supporters had hoped, but it did attract a great deal of publicity.

**SYLVANUS PERCIVAL VIVIAN**  
**7<sup>TH</sup> REGISTRAR GENERAL 1920-1945**

Sylvanus Vivian was the longest serving Registrar General after George Graham, and his term of office saw a number of changes. The administration of census taking was also altered for 1921, Superintendent Registrars no longer being directly involved, although they were given the title of honorary 'Census Advisory Officers', and could be consulted when necessary. The 1921 census was due to have been held in April, but was postponed until June, owing to industrial unrest. The decision to postpone the census was taken only ten days before the original date of 24<sup>th</sup> April, by which time all the schedules had been printed and distributed. An amendment slip was therefore produced, showing the revised date of 19<sup>th</sup> June. To save the taxpayers' money, advertising space on the back of the amendment slip was sold. Unfortunately the advertising in question was for the 'Sunday Illustrated', and new venture of Horatio Bottomley MP, who shortly afterwards was exposed as a swindler and a cheat, went bankrupt and spent 5 years in prison for fraud. No advertising has been allowed on census material since. The enumeration itself, fortunately, went smoothly. The results of this census were of particular interest, following the social and economic upheavals of the First World War. In 1931, Sylvanus Vivian took advantage of the latest technology and made a series of broadcasts on the BBC, explaining the value of the census, and how the form should be completed. He also made several statements in the press. Exhibitions of old census returns were mounted at the Public Record Office in 1931, to coincide with the census, and in 1937 at Somerset House to mark the centenary of Civil Registration. These included 1841 and 1851 returns showing famous people such as Disraeli, Dickens, and the Royal Family. Vivian was still Registrar General during the Second World War, when, for the first time the decennial census, due in 1941, did not take place at all. Instead, Vivian oversaw the system of National Registration, and the production of National Identity Cards for the entire population. Unfortunately, the records of this 'census substitute' were destroyed, so they will not be available to the historians of future generations.