



# **Battle High Street in 1921: A comparison of a sample of data from the 1911 and 1921 censuses**

## **Introduction**

Following release of the 1921 census under the '100 year rule', members of the Research Group decided to trial a comparison of the 1911 & 1921 censuses for Battle, East Sussex in order to discover evidence of the extent to which the momentous events of the Great War, early mechanisation and expanding industrialisation affected the town and its population.

To do this, we focussed on the High Street and its Yards, due to that area's mix of commercial, industrial and residential premises lending itself to being as broad an indicator as possible for capturing social and economic change. Overall, in 1911 there were 227 people engaged in 137 trades/occupations; in 1921 there were 213 people engaged in 108 trades/occupations.

The detailed results of the research can be seen in Tables 1 and 2.

## **Hypotheses and assumptions**

We were keen to explore the extent to which historical tropes were manifest, e.g.

- That the First World War resulted in significant numbers of single parent households (this expanding on an earlier examination – Kiloh, 2014 – of the war service and casualties among residents of the town);
- That there were a greater number of single unmarried women as a result of the loss of men during the First World War
- That there were fewer men in the age group which would have fought in the First World War
- That mechanisation was affecting agricultural labour;
- That expanding industrialisation was leading to a decline in local traditional cottage industries and occupations;
- That improvements in transport following the development of the internal combustion engine led to an increase in population movement;
- That there was greater movement in population as the century progressed;
- Decline in domestic service.

## **Key findings**

### **IMPACT OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR**

We found that there was little discernible social impact on households. In 1921 single adult women (16yrs+) represented 22% of the population, compared to 21% in 1911. While there did not seem to be a great change in the numbers of single parent families, there was a noticeable reduction in the number of children in 1921 (137 under 16s in 1911; 83 in 1921), which could be accounted for by the absence of younger men during the First World War



and perhaps better availability of contraception. Of men of an age to have been eligible for war service (i.e. 1911 = 10-35 yrs; 1921 = 20-45 yrs), there were 16% in 1921, compared to 15% in 1911.

#### MECHANISATION AND THE RURAL ECONOMY\*

No evidence of an adverse impact was found. Rather there was an expansion of employment from 4% of the population in 1911 to 7% in 1921. Within this, there was a trebling of people describing themselves as an 'agricultural labourer'.

\* See TABLE 2 for trades/occupations comprising the category 'Rural Economy'.

#### INDUSTRIALISATION & COTTAGE / TRADITIONAL MANUFACTURE

There is evidence of an increase in factory working, albeit with just one industry – occupants working in non-managerial positions for Newbery's rise from just 3 in 1911 to 13 in 1921.

The gypsum mine makes its first definite appearance with 2 residents specifically identifying it as their place of work in 1921.

There were six bakers listed in 1911, as opposed to only two in 1921. Another noticeable change was that cycle makers, dealers and repairers no longer appear in 1921 – perhaps reflecting a decline in the popularity of cycling from its early century heyday.

The most significant decline in traditional manufacture is seen by dressmaking, which ends in 1921, having employed 14 persons in 1911. However, interestingly, tailoring increases from 2 in 1911 to 7 in 1921.

Traditional manufactures that remain healthy are watchmaking and blacksmithing.

We see, too, evidence of technological change in regard to horse- and motor-related trades, perhaps a reduction of as much as 50%. It is difficult to give precise numbers in respect of this change as some occupations can refer to either or both (e.g. 'coachbuilder', 'blacksmith', ) and some (e.g. 'groom', 'blacksmith') may be continuing to service a commercial need or now serving a more domestic/sporting need. We can however see some clear evidence of the growing use of mechanised transport following the development of the internal combustion engine as 1921 sees the first appearance in Battle of 'Lorry driver', 'engine driver' and 'motor car dealer', as well as four "motor mechanics" one "motor mechanic/engineer"; and "one motor mechanic and engineer help".

#### POPULATION CHANGE & MOVEMENT

The influences on population movement and retention are unclear from our restricted sample. The population declined from 491 in 1911 to 457 in 1921. However, the population profile remained consistent at the two census dates. There does not seem to have been any great movement in population into or out of the town - roughly the same proportion of people were designated as "born in Battle" in 1911 as in 1921(39% in 1911; 40% in 1921). However, only 12% were noted as living in the same place in 1921 as they had been in 1911.



## DECLINE IN DOMESTIC SERVICE

The First World War is commonly held to have heralded a social and domestic revolution born, not least, out of the suffrage movement and employment of women in factories to replace men who had gone to fight.

The population in our sample shows that Battle appears to have seen no such lasting change, 15% of our sample residents being employed in domestic service at each date. However, a closer analysis of the types of domestic service reveals a decline in the occupation of kitchen maid, ladies maid, cook and, most significantly housekeeper, which dipped from seven in 1911 to two in 1921. There is an increase in charwomen and a new category of “help”, perhaps indicative of a change from “live-in” servants to ones who worked for a few hours daily or weekly.

## Conclusions

The Times reported on November 9 2024 that in 1921 the country had 1.7 million more women than men and 730,000 children without a father as a result of losses in the First World War, something we might have expected to be evidenced in a small way in our Battle data. It must be borne in mind, however, that our data only reflects a very small proportion of the total population, both of Battle and indeed the country, so cannot claim to be definitive. It remains interesting, though, that we did not find the same impact of the First World War on families which appears to be evident nationwide. This did not mean that there was not change – there is evidence that society was changing in terms of domestic service, industrialisation and the advent of the combustion engine, both in Battle as it was in the rest of the country.

*Neil Clephane – Cameron, with research and additions by David Alderton, Neil Clephane-Cameron, Georgina Doherty and Sarah Hall*

## Summary of data - Social Profiles

See TABLE 1

## Summary of data - Economic Profiles

See TABLE 2