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The 1939 Register at Findmypast.co.uk

<http://www.findmypast.co.uk/1939register> (last accessed 28 April 2016)

Just four weeks after the 1939 declaration of war on Germany, the British state surveyed the entire population of the United Kingdom. The resulting Register, compiled according to the provisions of the National Registration Act 1939, was intended to enable a national system of identity cards. Although not officially a census, the 1939 Register was compulsory and covered 41 million individuals across the United Kingdom. On the evening of 29 September 1939, 'National Registration Day', heads of household completed the details of every individual who spent the night on their premises, 'whether as members, visitors, boarders or servants'. Collected by one of 65,000 enumerators, each registration form was transcribed into one of the Register's 7000 volumes.

In anticipation of a total war against the Nazis, the 1939 Register provided a bureaucratic foundation for the direction of human resources. Its data formed the basis for planned rationing, labour and conscription. The Register's utility even outlived war's end by providing population and patient data for the new National Health Service, remaining a 'live' document, continuously updated, until 1991. The NHS's own Information Centre (NHSIC) continued to manage the Register until it was taken over by the commercial genealogists Findmypast.co.uk in 2015. Although originally closed to the public on the grounds that this was census data covered by the 100 year rule, various Freedom of Information requests by genealogists cleared the way for limited public access on an individual or household basis. This limited release of the Register by the NHSIC was presumably made on the understanding that the data of individuals of 100 years of age or older, or recorded as deceased by the time it closed in 1991, were outside the bounds of the 100 year ruling. However, at the rate of £42, non-returnable in the case of the NHSIC not being able to locate

a record, this effectively excluded access by researchers wishing to collate Register data on a large scale.

For historians of twentieth century Britain, the early release of the 1939 Register came as a very welcome surprise, prepared as we were for the long wait for access to the 1921 census, scheduled for release in 2022. The Register functions today as a means of filling the yawning gap between the 1921 and 1951 censuses: the 1931 census was completely destroyed by an accidental fire in 1942 and the scheduled 1941 census was not undertaken due to the war. Thankfully, November 2015 saw the public release of the portion of the 1939 Register covering England and Wales, and in a form which is cost-effective for social historians. Originally the financial model employed by Findmypast for the 1939 Register was similar to that used in Scotland for census, birth, marriage and death records, operating on a pay-per-view system and aimed squarely at the amateur family historian. This system does not, however, favour the academic historian processing large quantities of data as the cost can be prohibitive. However, the Findmypast team made the welcome decision to allow, from February 2016, full access to the 1939 Register at the modest cost of an annual subscription (currently £99.50).

Beyond the website's thoughtful suggestions to 'turn your transcript into a treasured memento, or buy one of our lovely items as a gift for a loved one', there lies historically significant data rich in possibilities for enhancing or transforming our understanding of this transitional period in British history. This is particularly the case for historians of colonial immigration and settlement, such as myself, and it is this data type which forms the basis of my review. The population data collected in 1939, although not as comprehensive as previous censuses, includes the type of premises or residence such as private dwelling or commercial

boarding house, full names of individuals, their date of birth, sex, marital status, precise occupation (although not place of work) and whether a member of the forces, reserves, auxiliaries or civil defence. Unfortunately, for migration historians, unlike British national censuses dating back to 1851, the 1939 Register did not require a respondent's place of birth to be recorded. This is perhaps surprising considering the circumstances in which the Register was compiled. However, this may have been to ensure the participation of respondents classified as aliens or those who might not have been able to prove their British subject status (British Indians for example), in the era before the widespread use of passports.

Despite this, the Register's available data allows us to examine the type and composition of each household. In my examination of data for the three Ridings of Yorkshire the presence of a number of multi-occupancy dwellings inhabited by Indians - both Sikh and Muslim - was noted. Many of these men gave their occupation as a pedlar of drapery or household small wares, conforming to previous analyses of early migration by scholars such as Roger Ballard. However, the active co-operation between Sikhs and Muslims shown by the 1939 Register will add a further dimension to the historiography. Additionally, households formed by marriages between native British women and non-white, predominantly Muslim, newcomers is a significant feature displayed by the 1939 Register. My own research into the nature of non-white migration and settlement by means of marriage and birth records concentrates on data gleaned from the General Register Office. Although these data allow location of native/newcomer unions and their offspring, the 1939 register provides additional and unique glimpses into household organisation and the role of native/newcomer families as nodes on networks of migration from British India and Yemen to the imperial metropole. Although not numerically great in number, the significance of these households lies in their function as anchor points for chains or networks of migration.

The majority of these households feature a white British woman, either as the wife of the head of household or as the head of household herself. Sometimes commercial boarding houses, particularly in Hull, they catered mostly to Indian or Arab seafarers or ex-seafarers. This phenomenon was repeated inland in cities such as Sheffield and Leeds. The register also shows other mixed households containing a mixed couple of white native and Muslim newcomer who provided lodgings for another Muslim migrant, possibly a kinsman of the husband. Even inland, among the migrant boiler-firers, steelworkers and labourers, a number of men appear as merchant seafarers, possibly indicating their intention to move away from the sea to sojourning, non-maritime employment and, perhaps, settlement. Also of significance is the number of households containing occupants with Muslim names who are headed by couples with traditionally English names. Although a number of these are middle-class households accommodating Muslim students studying at Yorkshire universities, there are a proportion where the shared manual employment type of the head of household and the Muslim lodger indicate that they may have been workmates. This pattern of mixing across lines of ethnicity within working-class neighbourhoods is repeated wherever Muslim names appear. These phenomena are also reflected in the settlement patterns of Muslim migrants within the three Ridings of Yorkshire. The zoning of migrant populations was not yet apparent, although small clusters of households with Muslim and Sikh occupants occur in Leeds. Sheffield's population appears to have remained more dispersed throughout the city, although Sheffield's Manor estate, a pioneering and large-scale municipal social housing project, long regarded as a bastion of the white working-class, housed a number of working-class Muslim migrants, their native-British families and, often, Muslim lodgers. Additionally, the data provided by the 1939 Register show the continuing presence in the Sheffield area of

native/newcomer couples who married as early as 1919. Still together in 1939 they are testament to the enduring character of many of these unions.

Technically, there are a number of problems which the researcher may encounter whilst using the 1939 Register. These lie mainly in the quite frequent errors made in transcription from the physical volumes of the Register to the digital database. These range from simple keying errors to what sometimes appear to be a level of carelessness in transcribing perhaps unfamiliar or archaic names and occupations. Within the Yorkshire area investigated for this review, a number of census districts had also been incorrectly recorded. Nevertheless, these errors can be corrected online at subscriber level and the digital record will, by interaction with its many users, become a much truer and more accurate record of the actual 1939 Register. Considering the significance of the data and not wishing to appear churlish, it is important to stress that these are fairly minor and, hopefully, short lived errors.

In conclusion the release of the 1939 Register by Findmypast has been a hugely positive experience, rich in new data. Indeed, for historians of non-white migration to Britain from its colonies, the release of the 1939 Register is a significant moment, especially considering there are no household-level census data available for study after 1911. The company are to be congratulated for facilitating the early public release of this data and for their ongoing commitment to update the Register, opening closed entries as they pass the 100 year mark.

David Holland

University of Sheffield

Dholland1@sheffield.ac.uk