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Coverage

United Kingdom

Theme

Commerce, Energy and
Industry

From carriages and carts to computers and aerospace

In 1907 the first Boy Scout camp was held, meters appeared in London cabs, and the first ever census of Britain's production industries was launched.

The Census of Production, and its successor the Annual Business Inquiry, which is run by the Office for National Statistics, has tracked the huge changes to industry and society over the past 100 years as service industries have grown and manufacturing has declined.

More than 7 million people were employed in production in 1907 – compared with 3 million today. The biggest employers were iron and steel making, engineering and shipbuilding with 1.4 million wage earners, followed by textile trades, with 1.2million.

No fewer than 25 per cent of these jobs were held by women workers - higher than the 23 per cent of workforce jobs in production currently filled by women. Many of these women were quite young – in 1907, 25 per cent of female wage earners were under 18, compared with only 12 per cent of male wage earners.

Younger workers were more prominent in certain industries than others – over 23 per cent of wage earners in both paper, printing and stationery and in textile trades were aged under 18, compared with just 2 per cent of wage earners in public utilities.

One of the concerns of the 1907 census was absenteeism among staff – a worry that led to the introduction of licensing hours during the First World War due to fears that ammunition workers were spending too much time in pubs. The 1907 census found that the number of people at work on Mondays was on average only 94.8 per cent of those on Wednesdays. Absences were higher among the under-16s.

Some of today's key industries did not exist in 1907. Employment in the manufacture of electronic computers was not measured until 1963, when it was 10,400; it peaked at 67,500 in 1993 and stood at 22,000 in 2004. Aerospace was not included in the 1907 Census of Production, but by 1924 it employed 12,700 people, compared with 101,000 in 2004.

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Other industries have declined in importance. The 1907 census showed 837,000 people employed in deep coal-mining, accounting for just under a quarter of Britain's total industrial production, peaking at 1.2 million in 1924. By 2002 the number had plunged to 8,000 and coal mining today accounts for less than 1 per cent of total production. Likewise, employment in motorcycle and bicycle manufacture rose during the late 1940s and early 1950s to a peak of 44,500 in 1954. Nowadays the industry employs only a couple of thousand people.

Some of the industries covered in early Censuses of Production now sound very old-fashioned:

- incandescent mantles, used in gas lamps;
- jute for sacking, now largely replaced by plastic;
- oil and tallow, including whale oil;
- carriages, carts and wagons - in 1907 this category encompassed early motor vehicles; and
- starch and polishes.

The way the information is compiled and published has changed greatly as technology has advanced. It is not clear whether machinery was available to help tabulate the 1907 results, but by 1924 punch cards and a Burroughs tabulator were being used (in 1930 it was estimated that adding up all the cards would take six weeks). A fully computerised system was introduced for the 1963 census. Optical character recognition was first used to scan information from questionnaires in 1993, and the first electronic publication of the results was in 1994, on CD-ROM.

There were concerns over government intrusion even in 1907: some MPs complained about "prying into the secrets of trade and commerce". So highly regarded was the need for confidentiality that people working on the Census of Production were required to make a declaration of confidentiality before a magistrate.

The initial purpose of the Census of Production was to provide information on domestic production for setting import and export tariffs. As a by-product of the first Census, many additional analyses could be performed, and it was also used to help compile the first National Accounts. After the Second World War, monitoring the health of the recovering economy became important, and Census of Production information was used to develop tax policy for businesses. All of these activities continue today.



The Census of Production is now part of the Annual Business Inquiry - a large postal survey covering 77,000 businesses in 2005.

“Researching the history of the Census of Production showed that many of the issues we are concerned with today – compliance cost, sampling and efficiency – were also of concern to our predecessors and demonstrated how our vision for survey integration has its origin in past developments”, says Stephen Penneck, ONS Director of Surveys and Administrative Sources.

“ONS is very grateful for all the efforts that businesses have made in the last hundred years to supply accurate information. They have played a vital part in our task of measuring the economy accurately.”

BACKGROUND NOTES

1. A detailed article on the history of the Census of Production is available on the National Statistics website at:
http://www.statistics.gov.uk/about/methodology_by_theme/downloads/CoP100yearsInTheUK.pdf.
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