Historical birth registration information (England and Wales)

The following information provides a summary of the historical birth registration information that has been required under various Acts of Parliament. Further information on birth registration statistics can be found at www.statistics.gov.uk.

Official registration of births in England and Wales began on 1 July 1837. The **Births and Deaths Registration Act 1836** established the General Register Office and provided for the appointment of a Registrar General, who in turn appointed local Superintendent Registrars and Registrars.

The Act required the local Registrar of Births to be informed by the parents of all births occurring within his district within 42 days. The parents were required to supply information on the following items:

- the child’s date and place of birth (or, in the case of a child born outside marriage the name of the mother);
- the rank or profession of the father;
- the name and residence of the informant.

It was from this information that birth statistics were obtained. An obligation was placed on the Registrar General to supply information on birth registrations returns to the Secretary of State. Unfortunately the Act of 1836 omitted to impose any penalty for failure by the parent to register a birth, an omission which was rectified only by the **Births and Deaths Registration Act of 1874** which made such failure punishable by a fine of £2.00. No doubt the majority of births were notified to the Registrar either by the parents or by the local clergy, but there was some opposition to registration in different localities, and registrations between 1837 and 1874 must, therefore, be regarded as incomplete.

Stillbirths were made registrable by the **Births and Deaths Act 1926** but otherwise the situation relating to registration remained unchanged until 1938.

Under the provisions of the Population (Statistics) Act 1938, informants were required to furnish additional information, to be used for statistical purposes only, at registration of the birth. The information required related to the mother of the child whose birth was being registered; they were:

- age of the mother at the time of the birth;
- date of her marriage;
- number of previous children by present husband and the number of children at present living;
number of children by any previous husband, as well as the number of children at present living.

The Population (Statistics) Act 1960 added to the schedule of information required and amended the earlier list; the details required on registration of a birth (including a stillbirth) were:

- in all cases the age of the mother;
- where the name of any person is to be entered in the register of births as father of the child, the age of that person; except where the birth is of a child born outside marriage;
- the date of the parents’ marriage;
- whether the mother had been married before her marriage to the father of the child;
- the number of children of the mother by her present husband and by any former husband and how many of them were born alive or were stillborn.

The questions relating to father’s and mother’s place of birth were introduced on 1 April 1969 by the Registration of Birth’s Deaths and Marriages Regulations 1968.

The Births and Deaths Registration Act 1953 defined a stillbirth as ‘a child which has issued forth from its mother after the twenty-eighth week of pregnancy and which did not at any time after being completely expelled from its mother breathe or show other signs of life’. This definition was used up to 30 September 1992.

On 1 October 1992 the Stillbirth (Definition) Act 1992 came into force, altering the above definition of a stillbirth to 24 or more weeks completed gestation. Figures for the stillbirths from 1993 are thus not fully comparable with those for previous years. Because this change of definition occurred three-quarters of the way into 1992, most statistics on stillbirth data in 1992 are on the basis of the old definition.