

Facts are stubborn, but statistics are more pliable.
Mark Twain

In April 1852, Charles Dickens published an article called 'Drooping Buds', which appeared in his magazine 'Household Works'.

Its subject is child mortality, and in the article he works hard to make the facts and statistics meaningful to the reader. He starts by using statistics to drive home the high loss of life. For every one hundred children born, only sixty five remain after eight years.

"Of this great city of London – which, until a few weeks ago, contained no hospital wherein to treat and study the diseases of children – more than a third of the population perishes in infancy and childhood. Twenty-four in a hundred die, during the first two years of life, and during the next eight years, eleven die out of the remaining seventy six."

"Think of it again. Of all the coffins that are made in London, one in every three is made for a small child: a child that has not yet two figures to its age."

Charles Dickens also spoke out against an over-reliance on statistics. It is no surprise that Dickens was so vehemently opposed to this science; countless English legislators relied upon it to generate the data which they could then use to delay the costly social reforms that Dickens advocated in his literature.

15 years before Dickens published his article the General Register Office for England and Wales was established on 1 July 1837 at Somerset House. It was given responsibility for the administration of civil registration, for the analysis and publication of statistics on births and deaths, and for the conduct of the population census in England and Wales. The modern era for statistics started when the Central Statistical Office (CSO) was established on 27 January 1941 to meet Prime Minister Winston Churchill's requirement for the central co-ordination of official statistics in order to service the war effort. And in April 1996, the Central Statistical Office (established in 1941) and the Office for Population Censuses and Surveys (established in 1970) were merged to form the new Office for National Statistics (ONS) as an Executive Agency.

The 2011 edition is the 147th to be published, the first edition being published in 1854 as the 'Statistical Abstract of the United Kingdom' and then changed to the 'Annual Abstract of Statistics' in 1948.

It is collated and published by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), which is the executive office of the UK Statistics Authority, a non-ministerial department which reports directly to Parliament and distributed through Dandy Booksellers Ltd, and costs £55.

“Annual Abstract of Statistics contains statistics on the UK's economy, industry, society and demography presented in easy to read tables and backed up with explanatory notes and definitions. It covers, among others, the following areas: Area, Parliamentary elections, Defence, Population and vital statistics, Education, Labour market, Expenditure and wealth, Health, Crime and justice, Lifestyles, Environment, Housing, Transport and communications, Government finance, Agriculture, fisheries and food, Production, Banking and insurance, Service industry.” Dandy Booksellers

The 2011 edition runs to 534 pages and starts with a useful 'Units of measurement' table and then an introduction which briefly talks about 'identification codes', 'definitions and classifications', 'symbols and conventions used' and then in more detail gives an outline of the 'Standard Industrial Classification'. There is also information about the ONS web site and the main contact point for feedback and enquiries.

The volume is then arranged into 24 chapters each dealing with a main topic area (listed in the Dandy Booksellers blurb above), and each chapter includes background and explanatory notes which are used in conjunction with the main data tables. At the bottom of each table the original source of the data is given, and these sources cover a wide spectrum of bodies from the devolved National Assemblies to the UK Film Council.

Some of the definitions and trends are very interesting for example, in Chapter 4 'Labour Market', “a discouraged worker” is defined as “A sub-group of the economically inactive population who said although they would like a job their main reason for not seeking work was because they believed there were no jobs available”

In Chapter 24, 'Agriculture', table 24.6 'Estimated household food consumption', the weekly consumption of eggs has stayed at 2 grammes per person since 1997!

The 'Annual Abstract of Statistics' is a major source of official statistical data on the UK and the centerpiece of any libraries' statistics collection but will budget restrictions and the fact that the data is freely available online stop authorities and other buyers paying £55 for a hardcopy? I personally hope not but that's another can of worms!

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