

Family History – How to get started

Ask the family

It's a good idea to start by talking to your immediate family. Ask your parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents and other living relatives for copies of their birth certificates and for anything they remember about older relatives. There may be information in old family bibles or old photographs.

Books

There are a number of books which can help you get started. Two which are readily available in bookshops or in local libraries are Kathleen B Cory, *Tracing Your Scottish Ancestry* (Edinburgh, 1996) and Rosemary Bigwood, *Tracing Scottish Ancestors* (Edinburgh, revised edition 2001). There are also a number of useful websites which will give you a basic introduction to tracing your family in Scotland. One place to start is www.scan.org.uk the Scottish Archives Network.

National primary sources

The main public sources which you should then look at are the registers of births, marriages and deaths and the census records. You can access the digital versions of these through any local Registrar for a small fee. They are also available on a pay-per-view website at www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk

You should start with the most recent births, deaths and marriages and work backwards from these registrations. Birth registrations will show you the names of the parents and the date of their marriage. The marriage registration of the parents will show their date of birth and the names of their parents as well as other useful information. Each registration of birth or marriage will allow you to trace back another generation. Death registrations will show you the name of any spouse and the name of the person who registered the death and their relationship to the deceased person, as well as other useful information.

Statutory registration or civil registration was introduced in Scotland in 1855. So you should be able to trace your family in Scotland back to about 1855. There are some exceptions, for example, if you are adopted or if one of your ancestors was born to an unmarried woman who did not declare the father's name on the certificate, or if someone unexpectedly died outside Scotland. These events can make tracing your family more complicated.

Before 1855, registration of births, marriages and deaths was not compulsory. However, the majority of Scots were members of the Church of Scotland and so their baptisms, (not births) proclamation of banns of marriage (but not necessarily marriages) and burials are usually recorded in the church registers. Almost all of these prior to 1855 have been collected by the Registrar General of Scotland and are held in Edinburgh. These registers are known as the Old Parish Registers or OPRs. You can access this information in a local Registrar's Office, for a small fee. Alternatively you can visit Edinburgh and search the computer records there for a daily fee or use the pay-per-view website www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk .

Microfilm copies of the Old Parish Registers can be purchased and are usually available in local libraries or archives.

Census returns are also useful. A Census was taken every 10 years in Scotland from 1841 and the returns are available from 1841 to 1901. Census information after 1901 is closed because the personal information is protected for 100 years, so the 1911 census will become available in January 2012. Census records are also held by the Registrar General for Scotland and can be accessed via the local Registrar's Office for a small fee, or on the pay-per-view website www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk or by visiting Edinburgh in person and paying the daily charge.

Local primary sources

Once you have searched all these sources you may then be able to search more local records. Allow plenty of time – most of these records are not indexed and it will take time to find the information you want.

Newspapers Most local archives or libraries will hold copies of the local newspapers, either in original or in microfilm, You can also see microfilms in the National Library of Scotland and the British Library.

Valuation Rolls, 1855 – 1988. These show the names of owners and tenants of houses. These are listed by address as Valuation Rolls were compiled for property tax purposes (“the Rates”) and so if you do not know roughly where an ancestor lived you will need plenty of time to search through the volumes. Once you have found an ancestor, you can then check each year to see when they moved house. Note that there are often gaps in these records.

Church records. Although most pre-1855 registers of baptisms, proclamations and burials are held by the Registrar General for Scotland, you may find one or two older registers still held in a local archives and you will find registers which are dated after 1855. You may also find Communion Rolls or other equivalent membership registers which can help you identify which church ancestors belonged to. There are also minutes of the Kirk Session, the Board of Managers or other congregational bodies which can tell you more about what the congregation was doing, although they may not mention your ancestors by name.

Cemetery records Most local archives will hold burial registers for the local cemeteries. However, these often only date back to the late nineteenth century when local authorities began to look after cemeteries. Earlier registers of churchyards may not exist, and if they do they are more often found in the General Register Office for Scotland than in local archives.

Other records: Archives will hold lots of other records which can help family history researchers find out more about their ancestors or about the places they lived in, the work they did and the social and economic context of their lives. Once you have the basic information about when and where your ancestors were born, married and died, ask the archives staff what else you can explore.

Hiring genealogists

If you cannot undertake the research yourself, there are a number of professional genealogists who can do the work for you for a fee. The Association of Scottish Genealogists and Record Agents (ASGRA) has many experienced and competent researchers and can be contacted through the website: www.asgra.co.uk

You may also consider joining a family history society. You will find other enthusiasts in the family history societies and they can help you with your own research. Some societies undertake research for members who live too far away to do their own research. Central Scotland Family History Society covers the Falkirk area and can be contacted through their website www.csfhs.org.uk or you can find out the details of other family history societies by contacting the Scottish Association of Family History Societies. www.safhs.org.uk



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