

Scottish Research

Civil and Parish Records

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Researching the civil registrations of births, marriages and deaths is often the first thing that family historians do when they learn they have ancestry in Scotland, especially since these and the Church of Scotland records are available online.

Civil and Parish Records

While certain church events can also show up in the parish records—marriage records being the most obvious—these two record groups are separate and usually housed in separate offices and may have different information.

- Civil Records – begin in 1855
 - Births
 - Marriages
 - Deaths
- Parish Records – may exist into the 17th Century
 - Baptisms
 - Marriages
 - Burials
 - Other Records

Guides

While usually not filled with names of our ancestors, they assist family historians in gaining a better idea of where the records are and help us understand some of the idiosyncrasies of these and other records. Some of these resources are mentioned in the bibliography.

Civil Records

The statutory recording of births, marriages and deaths was begun on 1 January 1855. This was a logical progression given that Scotland is part of the United Kingdom and England and Wales had begun the civil recording of these records themselves in 1837.

With the new legal directive, Scotland created 1,027 registration districts to handle the documenting of the births, marriages and deaths of the Scottish people. By 1994 the number of registration districts had been reduced to just 360. Like some of the towns in which they were created, registration districts may straddle county lines.

The Local Government (Scotland) Act of 1889 was passed in an effort to eliminate these cross-county registration districts by creating all-inclusive county boundary changes in 1892/93. The new counties

were called Administrative Counties while the old versions of the counties were called Historic Counties.

Tip: There are a number of websites and finding aids that assist family historians in identifying the correct registration district.

Birth Records

The law required that the birth was registered within 21 days of the birth. If not, there was a financial penalty. Includes:

- Name of the child
- Where and when born
- Information on the father and mother:
 - Name and occupation of the father
 - Name, as well as maiden surname, of mother
 - Where and when married
- Informants signature and qualification for reporting the birth (usually one of the parents)
- Where and when registered

From 1855 to 1918, illegitimate births were identified as such on the actual registers. Such entries may have a notation to the left of the entry that indicates where to find the Register of Corrected entries (which seek to identify the father of the child). Like other countries, the child could become legitimate if the parents should marry each other and if they had that right at the time the baby was conceived as in neither of the couple had been married and thus having an affair. A law in 1919 made it illegal to make a distinction in the registers with the word *illegitimate*.

Marriage Records

There are few surprises in the information found in the civil registration of marriages:

- Includes when, where, and how married
- Name, age, occupation, and marital status of the groom
- Name, age, occupation, and marital status of the bride
- Regular residence of the groom and bride
- Name and occupation of the fathers of the groom and bride
- Name and maiden surname of the mothers of the groom and bride
- Identifies if the parents are deceased
- Whether the marriage was regular or irregular
 - Regular – the reading of the banns and married by a minister
 - Irregular – the declaration of the bride and groom before witnesses
- Date the marriage was recorded and name of the registrar.
- Sometimes the register used abbreviations in the right-hand of the record, using a *B* (Burgh – urban) or an *L* (Landward – rural) to indicate where the parties of the marriage resided

Regular marriages show the mentioning of the proclamation of the banns and the minister, and the witnesses are mentioned in a column to the right of the parents. The irregular marriages indicate the names of the witnesses to whom the declaration was viewed. While the country would have preferred that everyone's marriage was by banns, they understood that such a requirement might give couples the idea to simply "not marry."

Tip: Banns are read at the parish for three consecutive Sundays.

Irregular marriages, those in which the couple simply declare themselves in front of two witnesses, usually finds the names of the witnesses to the left of the names of the groom and bride, followed by their addresses. Proof of the marriage supplied to the sheriff or sheriff substitute of the town would allow the sheriff to issue a warrant which then required the marriage to be recorded in in the civil marriage register.

Death Records

The earliest of the death registers contained the most information including:

- When the doctor last saw the deceased alive
- The place of burial
- Name of the undertaker

Later records lack such detail. In 1861 they did however reinstate the inclusion of the spouse's name on the record which had been eliminated in 1856.

Parish Records

Like other countries that are part of the United Kingdom, there is a national religion and a recognized state church. With few exceptions over the years, the Church of Scotland has been Presbyterian in its teachings and beliefs.

Some parish registers are available digitally through ScotlandsPeople: Church of Scotland and Roman Catholic Church. There are, however, many nonconformist religions practiced in Scotland:

- Society of Friends (Quakers)
- Methodist
- Episcopal
- United Free Church
- Congregational
- Unitarian
- Free Church

Church of Scotland

With a couple of exceptions in the 1600s when it was Episcopal, the Church of Scotland has been Presbyterian. The Old Parish Registers (OPRs) cover from the early years to 1854, at which time Civil

Registration began. There are an estimated 900 parishes across Scotland, though only approximately 3,500 registers survive.

Tip: Recusant refers to any couple who did not get married in a church by banns.

There are 33 counties in Scotland and within those counties can be found more than 900 parishes.

Tip: Just records may not be online.

Baptisms

Baptisms generally list only the date the child was baptized, not the birth. Baptisms were generally done weeks or even months after the birth of the child. It is important to remember that the Old Parish Records generally only include those of the Presbyterian faith.

Whether researching in church or civil records, it is important to understand where the parish is and to have an approximate idea to know more about the surrounding towns.

Marriages

Usually, the record of the proclamation of banns of the wedding that takes place after the reading of the banns at three consecutive Sunday services. It may be recorded in two counties (one each for the groom and bride). If you find more than one entry, be sure to investigate both entries, as one may have more information. Some of the ministers took upon themselves to write down additional information.

Burials

Burial records are often those with the least information. If it is a child, you get the age of the child at the time of death. They generally include only the name of the deceased and the date of internment.

Other Records

One of the most useful records in the Church of Scotland are the Kirk Session records. Among these records may contain communications about trying to return a communicant to the church. They should certainly be consulted for any family that was in the state church. They may also include “neglected entries” of baptisms, marriages, and deaths between 31 December 1800 and 1 January 1855 which had not been entered into the old parish registers.

Roman Catholic

The National Records of Scotland has an impressive collection of Roman Catholic pre-1855 records that were photocopied. These records went to the parish priest, the Diocese, and the Archdiocese. Their pre-1855 records have also been made available on ScotlandsPeople.

Episcopal Church

The Episcopal Church served as the identified and established Church of Scotland between 1603-38 and later in the 1600s. Their original records are generally housed with the priest or diocese. A survey of the known Episcopal Churches was conducted and is available on the National Register of Archives for Scotland,

Other Nonconformist Religions

Records of non-conformist religions including Baptist, Congregational, Methodist, Quaker, and Unitarian can be found at the National Record of Scotland. They also exist in archives in the areas where the individual church existed. They tend to have restrictions as to who can access them and do require a signed form from a researcher,

ScotlandsPeople

The advent of online ScotlandsPeople, funded and maintained by the government has made many valuable records available. ScotlandsPeople contains the digital image of important Scottish records from:

- National Record of Scotland
- Lyon Court
- Scottish Catholic Archives

They have a research center in Edinburgh at which you can view records from, including many contemporary records of birth, marriage and death. These cannot be downloaded but it does allow you to read and gather information from.

ScotlandsPeople is also a web site: <https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/> which offers access to many of these records as well. Simply create an account and purchase some credits to view:

- Old Parish Registers (1553-1855)
- Civil (Statutory) Registers
 - Births, Deaths, Marriages (1855-current)
 - Divorces (1984-current)
 - Register of Corrections (1855-current)
 - Civil Partnerships (2005-current)
 - Dissolutions of Civil Partnerships (2007-current)
- Registers of births, deaths, marriages outside Scotland (years vary)
- Roman Catholic records (1703-20th century)

Reminder: Legal restrictions in place to protect the living mean you can only view births more than 100 years old, marriages more than 75 years old, and deaths more than 50 years old.

Conclusion

There are many records in Scotland, especially if your ancestors were connected to the state church. Some parish records survive back to the 17th century. Civil records begin in 1855. The ministers and the registrars may have had some idiosyncrasies that had them putting additional information in the registers under their charge that could be useful to the family historian, ScotlandsPeople has the civil records, as well as the records of the Church of Scotland and Roman Catholic records.

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Scotland's People <https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/>