

Tracing Your Scottish Ancestors: Online Resources**Chris Paton**

“In my estimation, a long line of ancestry entitles no man to trample on his brother, nor does a high sounding title give its possessor a right to wound the heart, which vibrates with the finer feelings of a common humanity, merely because accident has cast his lot in an elevated station of life, which he degrades by his vices, and in doing so prostrates the gifts of Providence, and makes them the means of wounding the peace and ruining the prospects of thousands, who though below him in station are nevertheless immeasurably raised above him in talent, in virtue, and proper feeling. Whether in prince or in peasant a genuine heart elicits from me the response of a brother.”

Dr. William Henderson – “Bygone Days; or, Sketches Illustrative of the Manners and Customs of the Scottish Peasantry Seventy Years Ago” (1870).

Scottish research resources are often very different to those of the rest of the United Kingdom. Despite the Act of Union of 1707, Scotland retained its own legal and education systems, as well as its own state church, theologically constructed along entirely different lines to that of the Anglican Church established elsewhere in the British Isles. As a result there are major differences in civil registration, church records, land records, and many other types found elsewhere in the UK.

Civil registration:

This commenced in England and Wales in July 1837, but not in Scotland until January 1855. For the background to how the process was established visit

www.gla.ac.uk/departments/scottishwayofbirthanddeath. However, Scottish records are considerably more detailed, and have been made available online via the ScotlandsPeople website at www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk, but with closure periods. Full birth records over 100 years old can be viewed, marriages over 75 years and deaths over 50 years. More recent records are indexed, but must be ordered up as official extracts. Records can also be consulted at the ScotlandsPeople Centre in Edinburgh (www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/visit-us).

- All records list both parents’ names for the person born or died, or the couple being married, and included mothers’ maiden names.
- All records in 1855, the ‘golden year’, are considerably more detailed for that year only
- Birth records list date and place of marriage of parents
- Death records from 1855-1860 list place of burial
- Indexes to births & marriages from 1855-1875 are included on FamilySearch.

Subsequent changes to entries were entered in the **Register of Corrected Entries**, also available online, and which follows the standard online closure periods for access.

Irregular marriage

*The maxim itself might content ye, The marriage is made by consent
Provided its done de præsenti, And marriage is really what's meant.
Suppose that young Jocky or Jenny, Say “We two are husband and wife.”
The witnesses needn't be many, They're instantly buckled for life.*

Registration of irregular marriage 1855-1939

- Written declaration signed by 2 witnesses
- Within 3 months an application to be made to Sheriff for authority to register
- Parties & witnesses appear before Sheriff with petition
- If Sheriff satisfied at least one party resident 21 days prior to marriage, 5s fee charged and warrant issued

Censuses and other listings:

- The only site offering images to the censuses from 1841-1921 is ScotlandsPeople. Household schedules for all censuses have not survived, only the enumerators' returns.
- Incomplete transcripts for 1841-1901 are available on FindmyPast (www.findmypast.co.uk), Ancestry (www.ancestry.co.uk) and FreeCEN (www.freecen.org.uk).
- 1939 National Identity Register recorded Sept 29th 1939 (£15 per person)
<https://webarchive.nrsotland.gov.uk/20240326182621/https://www.nrsotland.gov.uk/research/guides/national-register>
- 1855-1940 Valuation Rolls on ScotlandsPeople (up to 1989 at NRS)
- Post Office Directories <https://digital.nls.uk/directories> (pre-1911) and <https://archive.org/details/nationallibraryofscotland> (up to 1940s)

Also check Hebrides People (www.hebridespeople.com) for Western Isles families.

Parish records pre-1855:

The Church of Scotland (the 'Kirk') was reformed in 1560. Some of its parish records go back to 1513, but most start in the 17th century or later.

- Church of Scotland old parish records (OPRs) are indexed on FamilySearch up to 1854 (though there are a few missing entries), images are on ScotlandsPeople.
- Burial records are poor for most places.
- Baptisms and marriages indexed pre-1855 within FamilySearch's *Scotland Births and Baptisms, 1564-1950* and *Scotland Marriages, 1561-1910* databases
- Kirk session records (church court records) are now available on ScotlandsPeople

Other Churches

- The Reformed Presbyterian Church
- The Original Secession (or First Secession) Church
- The Associate Synods (Burghers and Antiburghers, Auld Licht Burghers, New Licht Burghers, Auld Licht Antiburghers and New Licht Antiburghers)
- The Relief Church
- The United Secession Church
- The United Presbyterian Church
- The Free Church

A million Roman Catholic parish records (CPRs) are digitised and on ScotlandsPeople:

- Births and baptisms 1703-1992 Death & burials 1742-1909
- Banns & marriages 1736-1934 Other events 1742-1909

The records include material from the **Bishopric of the Forces Collection** sourced from Aldershot, England. These contain services records for all of the armed forces, not just for Scotland, and from bases all around the world. FindmyPast has twice this amount, with over two million Roman Catholic records for Scotland.

Wills and Testaments:

The Scottish probate process is called **confirmation**, and unlike England, this has always been a civil process from the early 16th century. The confirmation process was handled by **commissary courts** until the 1820s, and local **sheriff courts** since then. All confirmed documents up to 1925 are available on ScotlandsPeople.

- If a person died testate (with a will), the confirmation document is called a **testament testamentar** (the equivalent of an English ‘grant of probate’).
- If a person died intestate (without a will), the confirmation document is called a **testament dative** (the equivalent of an English ‘letter of administration’).
- Unlike in England, land could not be bequeathed in a will until 1868.
- Separate inheritance records for heritable estate – Retours, aka Services of Heirs
- From 1700-1859 retours were indexed every ten years
- Now freely available through the FamilySearch catalogue – <http://bit.ly/retours1700> – or consulted in the National Records of Scotland

Coats of Arms:

There is no such thing as a ‘family coat of arms’. A coat of arms (technically known as an ‘achievement’) belongs to one individual or corporation only. If you use someone else’s coat of arms, you are breaking the law in Scotland, and they take it seriously – you can be prosecuted in the Court of the Lord Lyon (www.courtofthelordlyon.scot), essentially for theft, with arms treated as heritable property.

The **Public Register of all Arms and Bearings** has been digitised from 1672-1923 & made available online at ScotlandsPeople – payment is separate to the main records, with each record costing £10 to download. Records prior to 1805 have little genealogical information.

Key repositories

- National Records of Scotland www.nrscotland.gov.uk
(*many records are being indexed via Scottish Indexes www.scottishindexes.com and Old Scottish www.oldscothish.com*)
- Your Scottish Archives <https://yourscottisharchives.com>
- National Register of Archives for Scotland via www.nrscotland.gov.uk
- National Library of Scotland www.nls.uk

Poor relief applications

- New Poor Law – Poor Law (Scotland) Act 1845
- Poorhouses established in parishes, or in ‘combinations’
- Administered by Parochial Boards responsible to Board of Supervision in Edinburgh
- Inspectors of the Poor to decide on poorhouse admission or outdoor relief
- Right of appeal for failed applications to a Sheriff’s Court
- Visit www.workhouses.org.uk for records locations

Where people lived:

Some key resources online to provide contemporary context to an environment:

- The Statistical Accounts of Scotland
<https://stataccscot.edina.ac.uk/static/statacc/dist/home>
- Over 250,000 Scottish and other maps are freely available for consultation on the National Library of Scotland website at <http://maps.nls.uk>.
- The ScotlandsPlaces site at www.scotlandsplaces.gov.uk, which contained records such as tax records and Ordnance Survey Name Books was discontinued in June 2025. These records have been transferred to ScotlandsPeople.
- For Gaelic originated place names, you can find out more at the Ainmean Àite na h-Alba site at www.ainmean-aite.scot.

Newspapers:

- The British Newspaper Archive www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk holds Scottish titles.
- The British Library's 19th Century Newspaper Collection (subscribing institutions) carries *Caledonian Mercury*, *Glasgow Herald*, *Aberdeen Journal* & *Dundee Courier*.

Societies:

SAFHS www.safhs.org.uk
 Scottish Genealogy Society www.scotsgenealogy.com
 Comainn eachdraidh <https://scottishgenes.blogspot.com/2023/10/comainn-eachdraidh-historical-societies.html> and <https://hebrideanconnections.com>

Chris Paton Books:

Tracing Your Scottish Family History on the Internet (Pen and Sword, 2020)

- www.pen-and-sword.co.uk/Tracing-Your-Scottish-Family-History-on-the-Internet-Paperback/p/17717

Tracing Your Scottish Ancestry Through Church and State Records (Pen and Sword, 2019)

- www.pen-and-sword.co.uk/Tracing-Your-Scottish-Ancestry-through-Church-and-State-Records-Paperback/p/16848

Researching Irish Ancestral Crisis (Pen and Sword, 2025)

- www.pen-and-sword.co.uk/Researching-Ancestral-Crisis-in-Ireland-Paperback/p/51770

Tracing Your Belfast Ancestors (Pen and Sword, 2023)

- www.pen-and-sword.co.uk/Tracing-Your-Belfast-Ancestors-Paperback/p/23194

Tracing Your Irish Ancestors Through Land Records (Pen and Sword, 2021)

- www.pen-and-sword.co.uk/Tracing-Your-Irish-Ancestors-Through-Land-Records-Paperback/p/19283

Tracing Your Irish Family History on the Internet, 2nd edition (Pen and Sword, 2019)

- www.pen-and-sword.co.uk/Tracing-Your-Irish-Family-History-on-the-Internet-Paperback/p/16483

Pharos Courses:

Pharos Teaching & Tutoring Ltd (www.pharostutors.com) 5 week long courses:

Scotland: *Scottish Research Online*, *Scotland 1750-1850: Beyond the OPRs*, and *Researching Scottish Ancestral Crisis*.

Ireland: *Progressing Your Irish Research Online*, and *Researching Irish Land Records*.

Scottish GENES Webinars (monthly) <https://scottishgenes.blogspot.com/p/webinars.html>

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www.ScotlandsGreatestStory.co.uk

Scotland's Greatest Story family history research

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