

Scotland's Old Parish Registers: How to Access, Use and Interpret

Paul Milner, 1548 Parkside Drive, Park Ridge, IL 6068

© Paul Milner, 2003-11 - Not to be copied without permission

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Your ancestors did not know anything about a “separation of church and state.” The government and the church were intimately entwined. Scotland had an official (established) church, and your ancestors were expected to belong to it. However, the religion of the official church was not static. Groups broke off from the established church, formed their own churches, and later united with other groups. Many reunited with the established church. You must know some of the history in order to find your ancestors in Scottish church records.

Time Line of Scottish Church History

- 1552 Catholic Church orders registers for baptisms and banns of marriage to be kept
- 1560 Catholicism abolished, reformation begins following teachings of Calvin
- 1584 Episcopalians gain control of church
- 1592 Presbyterians gain control of church
- 1610 Episcopalians gain control of church
- 1638 Presbyterians gain control of church
- 1645 Westminster Confession of Faith accepted as the foundation of the Presbyterian Church
- 1661 Episcopalians gain control of church
- 1681-7 The ‘Killing Time’ persecution against the Covenanters
- 1690 Presbyterians Church becomes the Established Church of Scotland. Episcopalians break away to form Episcopal Church of Scotland.
- 1707 Act of Union uniting England and Scotland

- 1712 Patronage Act returning to the land owner the right to choose a minister, with no approval from the congregation needed.
- 1715 Jacobite Rising
- 1733 Associate Presbytery formed
- 1743 Reformed Presbyterian Church formed
- 1745 Jacobite Rising
- 1761 Relief Church formed
- 1783 Stamp Act requiring 3 penny tax to record an event in the parish register
- 1793 Catholic Relief Act
- 1794 Stamp Act abolished
- 1820 Parishes required to keep registers
- 1829 Catholic emancipation, church records usually begin here
- 1843 Free Church formed
- 1847 United Presbyterian Church formed
- 1855 Civil Registration begins
- 1874 Patronage abolished

Effect of this History on Your Research

One of the major effects of this turbulent church history is that many Scottish families will at some time or another have connections with nonconformist groups. This means that all family baptisms may not occur within one church register. There may be gaps as some children were baptized elsewhere. Marriages may not be where you expect them. Nonconformist burials may not been recorded at all. The effects of the breakaways from the Established Church will vary by locality.

RECORDS OF THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND

Parish Identification Number

One of the unique characteristics of Scottish research is that every parish has its own identification number. This numbering occurred when all the registers were gathered in one place following the 1854 Civil Registration Act. You will need to know the parish number of your ancestor's parish. You can find it in several sources, including Bloxham's *Key to the Old Parochial Registers of Scotland*. The parish number is also listed along with the parish name in the Family History Library Catalog, which can be found online at <www.familysearch.org>.

Baptismal Registers

The details vary greatly. The entry might be as simple as the date of baptism, name of child, and name of father. However, the register may provide the date of baptism (sometimes including date of birth), name of the child, the name of the child's father and often the child's mother including her maiden name, occupation of the father, where the family was living, and names of witnesses.

Proclamation and Marriage Registers

In many parishes it was more common to record the proclamation of the forthcoming marriage than the marriage itself. In theory proclamations were read on three Sundays prior to the marriage, but could be waived by a fee.

What was actually recorded in the registers varied greatly. The information may include the dates of proclamations (which are often noted as one entry even if taking place on three Sundays); the date of the marriage; the name of the bride and groom; the parish of each and sometimes their places of residence; occupation of the man; occasionally the name of the bride's father, and rarely the name of the groom's father, and the name of the minister.

Occasionally you will find the names of the cautioners, usually relatives, who gave pledges at the time of the proclamation for the good behavior for the bride and groom with the pledge being redeemed at the time of the wedding, and the names of the witnesses. If the bride and groom lived in different parishes, the proclamation would be made in both. The dates in each register may not match because the proclamations may have occurred on different days. Plus, one register might record the proclamation and the other the marriage.

Burial and MortCloth Dues Registers

In many parishes burials have not been recorded until relatively modern times. Recording was difficult because in some areas the deceased was carried to his native parish. Some parishes had up to eight different burial places. In some parishes the registers may record age at death, cause of death, residence, and occupation. Occasionally very full details are included about the circumstances of the death.

For many parishes the only record is of dues paid for the rental of the mortcloth (or funeral pall). The problem is that dues were not paid by the poor, nor often by the landed family who donated the mortcloth. The cloth itself may not have been used for children under ten years of age. In some parishes privately-held mortcloths could be rented cheaper than those belonging to the parish. If one of these was rented it would not be recorded in the parish register.

What Do I Need to Know Before Searching this Record?

Get background on parish and its neighbors.

For parish boundary maps and local information use: *The Phillimore Atlas and Index of Parish Registers*; Lewis' *Topographical Dictionary of Scotland*; *Groome's Ordnance Gazetteer of Scotland*.

Read the 1791-9 and 1845 *Statistical Accounts of Scotland* for your locality at <http://edina.ac.uk/stat-acc-scot/index.shtml>. Note that the opening page states that this is a fee based search, however all users can search for a locality and then browse the pages. There is also *The Third Statistical Account of Scotland*, but this is not available online.

Check the appropriate parish at FamilySearch wiki - <https://wiki.familysearch.org>. Also check the county and parish sections at GENUKI - www.genuki.org.uk.

How Do I Know What Parish Registers Exist?

You can obtain a listing of all parish registers for the Church of Scotland in Bloxham's, *Key to the Parochial Registers of Scotland*. This book tells which baptism, marriage, and burial registers exist listing years covered, their condition, including missing records or gaps in the registers. It indicates when records of one type are interspersed with records of another type on the film. It also gives FHL microfilm numbers but of the first filming, search the catalog and order the second filming.

Turnbull's *Scottish Parochial Registers: Memoranda of the State of the Parochial Registers of Scotland, Whereby is Clearly Shown the Imperative Necessity for a National System of Regular Registration* available on microfiche gives more details, plus information about other registers.

An alternative source is *The Parishes, Registers & Registrars of Scotland*.

Indexes

All parish registers from the Church of Scotland have been indexed. However, remember the religious history, there have been numerous breakaways from the Church of Scotland, and

the registers from these churches are generally not included in the index.

Same index available in 3 formats

1. Scottish Church Records Index on CD (FHC)
2. Scottish Church Records Index on microfiche - 4 versions by county (FHC)
3. <www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk> for fee also check:
4. FamilySearch includes International Genealogical Index (IGI) extractions and British Isles Vital Records Index.

Why can't I find my ancestor in the Scottish Church Records index?

- You're looking for the wrong name.
- There are too many people with the same name.
- You are looking in the wrong place
- The event occurred between 1783 and 1794.
- Your search criteria was too narrow.
- The marriage was not recorded in the parish registers.
- Your ancestors were nonconformists.
- The event was missed when indexing or wasn't recorded at all.

Ancestor found in Index - What's next

Parish Register Computer Printouts
christenings
marriages

OPR indexes on microfiche
given name index to christenings
surname index to christenings
given name index to marriages
surname index to marriages

Original registers
births / christening
marriages / proclamations
burials / mortcloth rentals

Other Records
Monumental Inscriptions
Kirk Session Records
Probate Records (all online)

Inventories of records in the National Archives of Scotland. Most records of nonconformist churches are not available on microfilm through the Family History Library. Many of them, however, are housed at the National Archives of Scotland (NAS).

Free Church Records	CH 3
Religious Society of Friends	CH 10
Methodist Records	CH 11
Episcopal Church of Scotland	CH 12
Miscellaneous Smaller Churches	CH 13-17
Roman Catholic Records	RH 21

Some of the records from these churches are now being added to Scotlandspeople website, especially from the Roman Catholic churches. Maps showing Roman Catholic churches can be found online at ScotlandsPeople.

For Genealogical Information

1. *The Parishes, Registers & Registrars of Scotland.* Scottish Association of Family History Societies. 1993, repr. 1995.
2. *Tracing Your Scottish Ancestors: A Guide to Ancestry research in the National Archives of Scotland. The Official Guide, 5th ed.* Edinburgh: Birlinn. 2009.
3. Bigwood, Rosemary. *The Scottish Family Tree Detective: Tracing Your Ancestors in Scotland.* Manchester: Manchester University Press. 2006
4. Black, George F. *The Surnames of Scotland: Their Origin, Meaning and History.* New York: New York Public Library. 1946. 11th printing 1996.
5. Bloxham, Ben V. *Key to the Parochial Registers of Scotland from earliest times through 1854.* Provo, Utah: Stevenson's Genealogical Center, 2nd ed. repr. 1979
6. Brown, Ian F. *A Guide to Genealogical Sources in the West of Scotland.* Glasgow: Glasgow & West of Scotland Family History Society. 8 vols. 2006.
7. Cory, Kathleen. *Tracing Your Scottish Ancestry.* Baltimore, MD: Genealogical

- Publishing Co. 3rd ed. 2004
8. Groome, Francis H.(ed). *Ordnance Gazetteer of Scotland: A Survey of Scottish topography, statistical, biographical, and historical.* 6 volumes. London: William Mackenzie, 1894.
 9. Humphery-Smith, Cecil R., *The Phillimore Atlas and Index of Parish Registers.* Chichester, Sussex: Phillimore, 3rd ed. 2003
 10. Irvine, James M. *Trace Your Orkney Ancestors.* Ashted, Surrey: author. 2004
 11. Jonas, Linda and Paul Milner. *A Genealogist's Guide to Discovering Your Scottish Ancestors.* Cincinnati, OH: Betterway Books. 2002
 12. Lewis, Samuel. *Topographical Dictionary of Scotland.* 2 vols. Originally published 1846 Reprint, Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1989
 13. Steel, D. J. *National Index of Parish Registers, Volume XII: Sources for Scottish Genealogy and Family History* Chichester, England: Phillimore & Co., Ltd., 1970.
 14. Stewart, Alan. *Gathering the Clans: Tracing Scottish Ancestry on the Internet.* Chichester, England: Phillimore. 2004
 15. Turnbull, William B. *Scottish Parochial Registers: Memoranda of the State of the Parochial Registers of Scotland, Whereby is Clearly Shown the Imperative Necessity for a National System of Regular Registration.* Edinburgh: Thomas George Stevenson. 1849

For Scottish Church History

16. Brown, Callum G. *Religion and Society in Scotland since 1707.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 1997
17. Burleigh, J.H.S. *A Church History of Scotland.* London: Oxford University Press. 1960.
18. Donaldson, Gordon. *Scottish Church History.* Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press. 1985
19. Orr, Brian. *A Layman's Guide to the Scottish Reformation.* Westminster, MD: Heritage Books. 2004.