
Scottish Genealogy Research



Scotland is a world leader in providing family history information on the internet, partly because written records go back a long way. The main examples are registers of births, marriages and deaths dating back to 1553, Census records from 1841 to 1911 and wills dating back to 1500 - all available online.

The National Records of Scotland is responsible for the registers of births, marriages and deaths, and the taking of the Census. These historic records are publicly available and, since 1998, anyone can access the records through the genealogical website – [Scotland's People](https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk). Around 100 million individual records are available and records are added regularly.

1. Where do I start?

One of the first things you should do is speak to your relatives as a starting point to seek out documentary evidence. You should also gather together any old photographs, letters and other documents.

Decide what you want to achieve, and work backwards starting with someone who was alive in the early 20th century as birth, marriage, death and census information is readily available back from then. Censuses are useful as they can give a snapshot of a family at one place and time. Be persistent and don't give up if you hit a dead end. Temporarily shelve if and work on something else.

Possibly the best place to start is the official source of genealogical information for Scotland and one of the largest online sources of ancestral information with almost 80 million records to look through.

2. What resources are available online?

If you've got Scottish ancestors then you're in luck because Scotland is a world-leader in providing family history information online.

Amongst the most useful websites is ScotlandsPeople which provides online access (for a fee) to Scotland's official registers of births, marriages and deaths as well as census records from 1841 to 1911 and digitized wills and testaments from Scotland's National Archives and Scottish Catholic Archives records.

<https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk>

For births less than 100 years old, marriages less than 75 years old and deaths less than 50 years old, it is only possible to view the index entries over the internet and extracted certificates need to be ordered to view the detail on the certificates.

So if you know of an ancestor who was born, married or died in Scotland after 1553 – the date of the earliest records - you may very well be able find out about them online.

3. My ancestors emigrated from Scotland. Where can I find out more about when they emigrated and what ship they sailed on?

The Scots travelled and settled all over the world; however information on emigrants and migration is sparse in Scotland. There are sources of information available to discover more about your ancestors emigrating from Scotland, although it may depend on when your ancestors emigrated as to how much information you can find.

Initially, there was no legal requirement to record emigrants; the paperwork was all done at the port of arrival. However, official passenger lists were compiled by the Board of Trade from 1890 to 1960 – and these were all kept in the National Archives of London. They have now been made available online and can be accessed via the [Find My Past](#) website, where you will find details of every passenger who left from a UK port, including all Scottish ports, for destinations around the world between these dates.

Another useful website for information on ancestors who migrated to the USA is the Ellis Island website, which has over 20 million entries. Find My Past is a subscription website. <https://www.findmypast.com/>

The [Scottish Emigration Database](#) currently contains the records of over 21,000 passengers who embarked at Glasgow and Greenock for non-European ports between 1 January and 30 April 1923 and at other Scottish ports between 1890 and 1960.

The Highlands & Islands Emigration Society assisted almost 5,000 people to leave western Scotland for Australia between 1852 and 1857. You can find out more about their work at the [Scottish](#).

If your ancestor was caught up in the Highland Clearances, you may find them listed at the [Clearances](#).

4. What are Scottish census records and how can they help in genealogy research?

The Scottish census, taken every 10 years since 1801, can provide a fascinating snapshot of a day in the life of your ancestors. It can also provide details of anyone else who happened to be in the house at the time, including servants, lodgers and visitors.

Census records can also give you some idea of how your family lived, for example, recording how many rooms with one or more windows their house contained. Geographic mobility can be tracked through the given birthplaces and social mobility through addresses and occupations.

The returns of most use to the family historian are those from 1841 onwards. Records may only be inspected after 100 years, so the census records currently available for public scrutiny are 1841-1911. You can access census records on the [ScotlandsPeople](#) website.

The population tables and associated published statistical reports can be viewed for free at www.histpop.org

5. How do I trace my family clan?

You can use the [Ancestral Scotland's](#) clan search facility to see whether your surname is linked to one of Scotland's famous clans. This will also give you an initial idea of where your family may have come from, as many clans are associated with distinctive geographical areas of Scotland. There, you'll also find a history of the clan and the tartans relating to it.

6. Do I have a family tartan?

Almost every surname in Scotland has links to an ancient clan, and with it, the right to wear a distinctive tartan.

An official Register of Tartan is maintained by the National Records of Scotland and housed in General Register House in Edinburgh. The Register is available online providing detailed information about the hundreds of different patterns and their history. Anyone can create their own tartan and, as long as it is unique and complies with the standards laid down, it too will be placed on the Register.

Go to the [Tartan Register](#) website to research or design your own tartan.

7. Where can I find out about occupations and where my ancestor worked?

Discovering what your ancestors did for a living can provide a fascinating insight into their lives. In the middle ages, most Scots would have worked the land or fished the sea. However, the industrial revolution changed the nature of the workplace forever.

You might find the names of occupations in census records or other family records such as birth, marriage or death certificates. You can find out some common occupations and suggested sources of additional information at the [Ancestral Scotland](#) website.

You can also get information on occupations at the [ScotlandsPeople](#) website, and statistical information from the census can be viewed at www.histpop.org

8. Why can't you get a Scottish birth or death certificate prior to 1855?

Civil registration (birth, marriage and death certificates) did not begin in Scotland until 1855. For the 300 years before that, records of births and baptisms, banns and marriages and deaths and burials were kept by the Church of Scotland - these are known as the Old Parochial Registers or Old Parish Registers (OPRs).

Parish ministers or session clerks usually assumed responsibility for maintaining the registers, but since there was no standard format employed, record keeping varied enormously from parish to parish and also from year to year. You can search the surviving 3,500 volumes of OPRs on [ScotlandsPeople](#).

9. How far back can I get with my Scottish family tree?

That depends how much time and resource you have, as well as on many factors such as the survival of records and mobility and social status of the family.

Theoretically, those using the ScotlandsPeople archives can get back to the 1500s. If you know your ancestors lived and died in Scotland, you should easily get as far back as the mid-1800s. Records before 1855 are less reliable so there is no guarantee you will find ancestors before this date.

You might want to consider joining a family history society who can prove invaluable in your research. Most societies publish newsletters, and indexes of memorial inscriptions. Many also have well stocked libraries. Find out more at the [Scottish Association of Family Histories](#).

10. I'd like to come to Scotland to see it for myself and do some further research. Where should I start?

Don't just learn about your Scottish heritage, live it! Try on the kilt of your clan, touch the walls of your family home, explore the fields and farms your ancestors once worked in and see the very documents that chronicled their lives.

If you already live in Scotland or you get the chance to visit, why not make a trip to the ScotlandsPeople Centre in Edinburgh in person. Although there's a lot you can do online, you can get access to even more records at the Centre itself, including images of birth, marriage and death records right up to almost the present day. If you're a complete beginner, you can also book an assisted search with a ScotlandsPeople staff member.

The National Library also has a number of publications dealing with early data including: the International Genealogical Index with some records going back to the Middle Ages; Old Parochial Records; monumental inscriptions; and census information, as well as copies of historical newspapers. The [National Library's website](#) has a wealth of digitized maps that can be viewed for free on line and these maps can help you decide what parts of Scotland you want to visit.

The National Records of Scotland, who run the ScotlandsPeople Centre, also have historical search rooms offering access to family, business and church records, testaments, registers of property and records of the government of Scotland. Please note that two passport size photos and proof of address are required to create a reader's ticket to allow you to enter these search rooms.

The National Records of Scotland also has family, business and church records, testaments, registers of property and records of the government of Scotland. If you're in Glasgow, the Mitchell Library has extensive family histories, voters' rolls, street directories and graduation and emigrants' lists.

Visit the [Ancestral Scotland](#) website and get all the information you need on how to walk in the footsteps of your ancestors.

Marriages in Scotland

During the 18th century it was common for couples to marry in what were deemed Irregular Marriages, which simply required them to accept each other as husband and wife in front of two witnesses. These marriages were sometimes recorded in writing but not always and such ceremonies were common throughout Britain.

However in 1754 the English Marriage Act was introduced that outlawed Irregular Marriages and ruled that all weddings should be performed in church, recorded in the Parish Records and no-one under 21 could marry without parental consent resulting in the start of the Gretna wedding boom.

"If we go back to 1754 there was an act of parliament in England that prohibited Irregular Marriages," explained Alex White, Head of Registration Branch at GROS. "As a result of that legislation it prompted couples then to come north of the border because it did not extend to Scotland.

Scotland Research websites:

Scotlands People <http://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/>

National Library of Scotland <http://www.nls.uk/>

National Records of Scotland was formed from the merger of the General Register Office for Scotland and the National Archives of Scotland in 2011, and combines all the functions of the two former organizations.

Scottish Emigration Database <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/emigration/>

Scottish Association of Family History Societies <http://www.safhs.org.uk/>

The Clearances are stories of individual people <http://www.theclearances.org/clearances/main.php>

Scottish Archive Network <http://www.scan.org.uk/>

Ancestral Scotland <https://www.visitscotland.com/see-do/research-your-ancestry/>

Scottish Ancestry — <http://www.scotland.org/features/getting-started-in-scottish-genealogy/>

Births Deaths and Marriages Exchange for Scotland ~ a free resource for Scotland genealogy and Scottish family history. <http://www.sctbdm.com/index.php>

National Records of Scotland – <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/>

UK & Ireland Genealogy — <http://www.genuki.org.uk/>

The Scottish Genealogy Society — www.scotsgenealogy.com

Pigot and Co.'s national commercial directory for the whole of Scotland and of the Isle of Man. <https://archive.org/details/pigotcosnational1837dire>

Poor Relief Records — <http://www.scan.org.uk/researchrtools/poorrelief.htm>

ScotlandsPeople: Research Tips from a Scot Descendant: <https://www.legacytree.com/blog/scotlandspeople-genealogy-research-tips>

Scots-Irish Immigration: <http://coursesite.uhcl.edu/HSH/Whitec/xhist/ScotsIrishImm.htm>

Directory of Scots Banished to the American Plantations, 1650-1775: (Other Scottish books also listed.) <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/559431584958957958/>

Scottish Naming Pattern: <http://theindepthgenealogist.com/understanding-scottish-naming-pattern/>

Scottish Settlers in North America: <http://www.queenslibrary.org/item/directory-of-scottish-settlers-in-north-america-1625-1825>

Tips for Tracing an Early Scottish Immigrant: <https://www.familytreemagazine.com/premium/now-what-early-scottish-immigrant/>

Papers of the exiled Stuart kings published online for the first time

<https://www.historyscotland.com/articles/news/papers-of-the-exiled-stuart-kings-published-online-for->

the-first-time?fbclid=IwAR1ImL_h-
WTuivyA4mjGwENnDEzH0eCFsmXg4_WXADBa241MGXHPaBjfT8g

Tracing Your Scottish Roots – Ten top tips for starting your Scottish Family History

<https://www.scotclans.com/tracing-your-scottish-ancestry/tracing-your-roots/?fbclid=IwAR1mwMvPr6061RiviRm1vUwv6FAiX11fBorx3pHx0WI9jNFwsyD1OqM-zd0>

Inventory of Published pre-1841 Population Listings

<http://www.safhs.org.uk/populationlists.asp?fbclid=IwAR29k5kU0j7NasRZP2oiFwtFoWk4uy-7hiTQcnLfrtJZrwoRs-loJBxYXJE>

Scottish Society of the Treasure Coast - <http://scottishsocietyofthetreasurecoast.com/>

Scottish High Court Records ONLINE - <http://bit.ly/2EYUhZ7>

NOSAS

You can now see the first 69 of the Lovat Estate maps on the National Library of Scotland website (NLS>Maps>Estate Maps>Inverness-shire). This follows collaboration between the Lovat Estate, NOSAS and the NLS to digitise the entire Lovat map archive, see <http://www.nosas.co.uk/lovatstatemaparchive.asp...>

. Another 350 maps by the end of the year!