

10 TOP TIPS for starting your *Scottish* family history

Dr Bruce Durie's guide to exploring your family history

*G*enealogy is one of the fastest growing leisure pursuits and, we're told, the second major search activity on the internet. Knowing your ancestors – not just their names and dates, but the social, political, economic and family context – is all part of knowing yourself.

Scotland has the best, most complete and most readily accessible records on the planet – a great deal of it online, but even more held at a number of excellent archival resources. However, it is not as simple – despite what some of the commercial companies would have you believe – as typing your name into a website to “see what comes up”. It takes structure, discipline and knowing where to look.

1. Decide what you want to achieve.

Do you want to find every ancestor in all lines? Concentrate on one line only? Research one surname? Explore a family story or legend? Start with that, and stick to it without diversions until you decide to pursue something else.

2. Start with someone who was alive around 1911.

Birth, marriage, death, census, wills & testaments, valuation rolls and more information is readily available back from that date, and it's close enough to be able to check details within living memory. If you can, collect together all the birth, marriage and death certificates in your family, as well as diaries, photographs, family bibles, letters, headstone inscriptions and so on. And don't keep in a secret – tell other members of your wider family what you're doing, and they will no doubt have valuable information and documents to send you.



3. Talk to your oldest living relatives...

...but don't necessarily believe everything they tell you! Over the years, stories get spun, expanded, changed and in many cases suppressed. But it's a starting point, from which you can seek out actual evidence.

4. Start from a census.

This is a snapshot of a family at one place and time. Work backwards from that to marriages, births and other details.

5. Work backwards?

It's a lot easier to track a line of ancestors back from the present than starting in the past and working all the lines forward. Someone born in 1700 will have perhaps 4,000 descendants - which lines will you chase?

6. Never guess and trust nothing!

The ONLY worthwhile evidence is documentary evidence. Do not trust second-hand stories, published genealogies, websites or hearsay. Many family trees on the internet are merely copies of each other - mistakes, inventions and all. Look for actual documents.

7. Names are not fixed.

Surname spellings can change from one generation to the next, and were not fixed until fairly recently. One individual can have his or her name spelled various ways - even within the same document!

Don't fret over variants - a McKay is a MacKay is a M'Kay is a McCay is a Mackey is a Makee is a Makey, and all are derived from MacHugh (Gaelic, MacAoidh). Please forget everything you have heard or read about "Mc is Scottish and Mac is Irish", or is it the other way round? It doesn't matter, because it's nonsense, and often both will be recorded as M'. There is no point researching McLaren and not MacLaren or M'Laren.

Remember too that in Scotland it's typical to call someone by a second or third forename, or by a diminutive - so the person you know as "Sandy Brown" may have been christened "John Harold Alexander Brown".

8. Think laterally.

There is birth information in marriage and death records, and don't forget wills and testaments, land transfers, court records and so on.

9. Never despair!

You are at the bottom of a very tall mountain, and sometimes it can be hard going. If you hit a log-jam, shelve it and work on another aspect, such as cousins. You'll be amazed how often that one piece of vital information comes from an unexpected direction.

10. Join a local Family History Society and a Clan/Family Society in Scotland.

Even if it isn't local to you, and especially if you're overseas, having experts in a particular locality with access to resources at the end of the phone or email can help break down brick walls. They will also have details of resources you can take to get you started.

TRACING YOUR ROOTS

Visiting or researching remotely?

There is no question that the way to get the most out of a visit is to have done a great deal of research first - then you'll know where to go, what to look for and whether you have to combine a trip to the National Records of Scotland (Edinburgh) with a journey to your ancestral homeland. And once your appetite is whetted, there's no question you'll want to visit!

Places to start

Scotland has an unparalleled set of records, in terms of coverage and accessibility online and physically. Links are given below.

Online starting places

Ancestry.com/Ancestry.co.uk, FamilySearch and the other commercial website are fine up to a point. However, they simply do not have the majority of necessary Scottish records, and in many cases just indexes of variable reliability rather than the original documents.

At ScotlandsPeople you can get indexes and actual record images, if the records have survived, and the majority have:

- Baptisms, Marriage banns and Burials (Church of Scotland) from the mid-1500s to 1854
- Some Catholic records 1703-1908
- Statutory (Civil) Births, Marriages and Deaths 1855 - 2014 - images downloadable up to (Births) 1914, (Marriages) 1939 and (Deaths) 1964
- Wills and Testaments - over 611,000 from 1513 to 1925, including Soldiers' Wills
- Censuses, every 10 years from 1841-1911
- Valuation Rolls for 1875, 1885, 1895, 1905, 1915, 1920 and 1925
- Coats of Arms registered or granted 1672-1909...and more besides.

Buy credits at £7 for 30 - in general, a search costs 1 credit and downloading a document 5 or 10 credits.

Also, ScotlandsPlaces has information, and in many cases photographs and maps, concerning places and the people who lived there. The list is growing all the time, but at present, you can access at least:

- Historical Tax Rolls
 - Ordnance Survey Name Books for each county in Scotland (mostly 1850s-1870s)
 - Official Reports, such as Land Ownership
 - Ordnance Survey maps from the mid-1800s.
 - National Monuments, including archaeological reports on historic and prehistoric sites
 - Maps and plans of counties, parishes, cities, towns, villages, farms, roads, canals, harbours, churches, school, public building, private houses, mines and quarries
- Subscribe at £15 per 3 months for unlimited searching and downloads.

The website of [*The National Records of Scotland \(NRS\)*](http://The National Records of Scotland (NRS)) at www.nrscotland.gov.uk has mainly catalogues and indexes, but it's a great place to start for legal and land records, and much more, plus a comprehensive set of Research Guides. For example, Kirk Session records may provide wonderful insights into a family, including of payments to the poor and "castigations" when there was a birth out of wedlock.

There are catalogue searches at The National



Register of Archives (NRS). The *National Register of Archives for Scotland* (NRAS) for collections of private papers and the Scottish Archive Network (SCAN) for the holdings of 52 Scottish public archives.

The *National Library of Scotland* holds an incredible array of digitised records and indexes for Family History, including:

- Historical clubs and societies
- Street Directories
- Maps
- Newspapers (great for obituaries)
- Emigration and passenger lists
- Gravestone inscriptions
- Local history information
- State Papers
- Surname histories and biographies
- Scottish traditional culture

A lot is downloadable and everything is free.

Nationally

Visit the ScotlandsPeople Centre (£15.00 per day, and advisable to book), and the Search Room (free to use) of the National Records of Scotland, both at New Register House, Princes Street, Edinburgh, EH1 3YT. Bring two passport photographs and evidence of your address (for a reader's ticket) and a pencil (pens are banned!)

Locally

Not every record is available online, and not all are held centrally in Edinburgh. There are many excellent archives, museums, local history and family history centres and other resources all over the country – just waiting for you to visit. Start at the Scottish Government's

official Ancestral website www.visitscotland.com/about/ancestry for links, addresses, contact details etc.

In particular, the Mitchell Library in Glasgow, one of the largest public reference libraries in Europe, has a dedicated Family History section (www.glasgowfamilyhistory.org.uk). Online digitised collections include a wonderful assortment of photographs featuring Glasgow's buildings, streets and people going about their daily lives (www.mitchelllibrary.org/virtualmitchell).

The new Highland Archive Centre in Inverness (www.highlandarchives.org.uk) includes a dedicated Family History Centre, covering all aspects of clan and family history and genealogy, covering the Highlands and the wider world. It links to three smaller Archive Centres in Caithness, Skye and Lochaber.

Caveats

Please bear in mind that...

- Not everything was recorded, and not everything recorded has survived. You will find gaps. Be prepared for this, and remember that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence - just because there is no record of an ancestor being born, baptised, married, etc. does not mean it didn't happen then and there.
- Surnames can change - especially in the Highlands, where it was common practice to adopt the surname of the local landowner or Clan Chief.
- Not everyone is in a Clan - the Clan was a Highlands and Borders phenomenon, and Lowland Families were never part of the

Clan structure. Bruce, for example, is not a Clan.

- Do not assume a Coat of Arms linked to your surname is yours - in Scotland, Arms are the legal property of one person at a time, inheritable, and must be registered with or granted by the Lord Lyon.
- Interested in which tartan you should wear? Visit the official Scottish Register of Tartans website
- Consider a DNA test - contact Dr. Bruce Durie (details at the end of the article)

Links

PublicProfiler

<http://gbnames.publicprofiler.org>

Where your surname was clustered in 1881. Free.

Scotland's People

www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk

The official online source of parish register, civil registration and census records for Scotland. Buy Credits.

Scotland's Places

www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk

Provides information relating to places throughout Scotland including monument records, register house plans, medical officer of health reports, land ownership etc. Some info free, some by 3-month subscription.

National Library of Scotland

www.nls.uk

NLS is an information treasure trove of Scotland's knowledge, history and culture,

with millions of books, manuscripts and maps covering every subject. Free.

National Records of Scotland

<http://catalogue.nrscotland.gov.uk/nrsonline>
ecatalogue

Formerly the National Archives for Scotland, this holds historical records created by businesses, landed estates, families, churches and other bodies. See also the National Register of Archives in Scotland (<http://catalogue.nrscotland.gov.uk/nrasregister/>) All free, but only indexes, no documents

Scottish Archive Network

www.scan.org.uk

The Scottish Archive Network aims to revolutionise access to Scotland's archives by providing a single electronic catalogue to the holdings of more than 50 Scottish archives. Free, mainly indexes, some documents.

Court of the Lord Lyon

www.lyon-court.com

The statutory body for all things heraldic (Coats of Arms etc.). The actual records are at Scotland's People, Free to search but Paid-For to view.

Scottish Register of Tartans

www.tartanregister.gov.uk

Official online database of tartan designs, established by law in 2008. Free.

The National Archives

www.nationalarchives.gov.uk

Don't forget that TNA in Kew, London, the official British archive, holds many records relating to Scottish family history, especially military records, lost online. Much is Free, some Paid-for.

AncestralScotland

www.visitscotland.com/about/ancestry

Discover your Scottish roots and start planning your ancestral journey to Scotland. Free.

Scottish Association of Family History Societies

www.saffhs.org.uk

Links to family history societies in Scotland, and similar organisations worldwide. Free.

Cyndi's List

www.cyndislist.com/uk/sct

Comprehensive portal to Scottish genealogy links. Free.



Commercial Family History sites

Ancestry

www.ancestry.co.uk or www.ancestry.com

Sites which collate both official records and other reference information, but not much on Scottish records. Subscription.

Deceased Online

www.deceasedonline.com

Access to official records for UK burials and cremations. Free to search, then Paid-For.

Family Search/IGI

www.familysearch.org

The largest genealogy organization in the world, and free to use, but of variable accuracy and light on Scottish records. Free.

Find My Past

www.findmypast.co.uk

Over 750million records. Paid-For.

Hire a professional researcher

This may cost £200 - £400 per day, but a good, experienced researcher will get you a fair distance for that amount, which may end up cheaper (and faster) than doing it yourself.

Frankly, you may need help to understand – or even read – certain older documents.

ScotClans has an arrangement with Dr. Bruce Durie BSc (Hons) PhD OMLJ FSAScot FColIT FIGRS FHEA, one of Scotland's pre-eminent genealogists, with an international reputation, and also a well-known author, broadcaster and lecturer. See www.bruce-durie.co.uk and contact him on bruce@durie.scot

For more information...

Scottish Genealogy 3rd Ed (2012)

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Authoritative, entertaining and informative, this reader friendly reference book explains how to get beyond the census search and dig deeper into the past.

Documents for Genealogy & Local History

by Bruce Durie

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Ancestral documents are often written in Latin, Old English and Old Scots. In this remarkable book, Dr Durie simplifies the challenge.

