Civil and Parish Records in Scotland

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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 Civil and Parish records are separate, usually housed in different offices, and may contain varying information.

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

Guides

While usually not filled with names of our ancestors, guidebooks assist family historians identify what records exist and where to find them, and serve to educate us about some of the idiosyncrasies in these and other records. *See the bibliography below for full references.*

Civil Records

The statutory recording of births, marriages, and deaths began on 1 January 1855. This was a logical progression given that Scotland was a member of the United Kingdom and England and Wales had begun the civil recording of these records 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 that 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 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 several websites and finding aids to assist family historians in identifying the correct registration district. See below for a list.

Birth Records

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

- 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
- Informant's 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). As in other countries, the child could become legitimate if the parents married and if they had that right at the time the baby was conceived (e.g., neither couple was already 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. They include:

- 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 occurred 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 mention the proclamation of the banns and the minister; witnesses are noted in a column to the right of the parents.

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 (no banns), usually include the names of the witnesses to the left of the names of the groom and bride, followed by their addresses. Proof of the marriage was supplied to the sheriff or sheriff substitute of the town, who would then issue a warrant requiring the marriage to be recorded in in the civil marriage register.

While the country would have preferred that everyone's marriage was by banns, they understood that such a requirement might give couples the excuse to simply "not marry."

Death Records

The earliest of the death registers contained:

- When the doctor last saw the deceased alive
- 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: the Church of Scotland and the 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's 33 counties, though only approximately 3,500 registers survive.

Tip: Recusant *refers to any group who did not get married in a church by banns.*
Tip: Not all records may 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 its surrounding towns.

Marriages

Following the proclamation of banns, the wedding would be recorded, sometimes in two parishes (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 it upon themselves to write down additional information.

Burials

Burial records often contain the least amount of information. If it is recording the death of a child, you may find 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 you may find details about trying to return a communicant to the church. These session records should be consulted for any family that was in the state church.

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 established Church of Scotland between 1603-38 and later in the 1660s. The 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 maintain a research center in Edinburgh at which you can view records, including many contemporary records of birth, marriage, and death. These cannot be downloaded, but it does allow you to read and gather the information from these more recent records.

ScotlandsPeople is also a website: https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/ which offers access to many of these records online. 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 are in place to protect the living, meaning 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. Always seek out the original (or a digital copy) as ministers and registrars may have added other information to records regarding individuals under their charge. ScotlandsPeople has the civil records (begin in 1855), as well as the records of the Church of Scotland and Roman Catholic records.

Suggested Bibliography

Books

Tracing Your Scottish Ancestors: The Official Guide, 7th ed. (Edinburgh, Scotland: Birlinn Limited, 2020)

Durie, Bruce *Scottish Genealogy*, 4th ed. (Cheltenham, England: 2017)

Paton, Chris *Tracing Your Scottish Ancestry Through Church and State Records: A Guide for Family Historians* (Barnsley, England: Pen and Sword Family History, 2019)

Websites

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

Church Register guide: https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/guides/church-registers

National Records of Scotland https://www.nrsscotland.gov.uk/

National Records of Scotland Catalog https://catalogue.nrscotland.gov.uk

Registration Districts
https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/files//research/statutory-registers/parishes-and-registration-districts-by-name.pdf

Genuki https://www.genuki.org.uk/

Old Scottish Genealogy & Family History https://www.oldscottish.com/