

Parish Registers (Scotland)

Civil Registration began in Scotland on 1st January 1855, which is good news if you are looking for evidence of your ancestors' birth, marriage or death through certificates after that date, but not good news if you are trying to track them down prior to this. That's where parish records may help you.

The Early Days

It became a requirement in 1552 for events such as baptisms, marriages and burials to be recorded in the registers for the Church of Scotland. However, this was not cheap to do and so many people chose not to do so. As a result, those early records were few and far between in many cases and so are not completely reliable.

No regulations were in place to say how the details should be recorded and so entries in the early registers are very mixed up. They were entered by either the Minister or the Session Clerk and their handwriting is not always the easiest to read!

Whilst the Church of Scotland records date from the mid-16th century, Catholic records date from the 18th century, with many of them not appearing until 1790 – and then mainly in the large towns and cities.

What is in them?

Old Church of Scotland Parish Registers

Baptisms

If it is a good record, then name of the child, whether legitimate or not, date of birth and/or date of baptism, father's name, mother's name and maiden surname, place or parish of residence, occupation of the father and names (and sometimes occupations) of witnesses will be recorded. However, the mother's maiden name might not be there, nor the sex of the child – which can make life a little difficult if it is a name that can apply to both boys and girls!

Marriages

You should find the date of the marriage, the names of bride and groom and their parish of residence. Occasionally, you will also see the occupation of the groom and sometimes the name of the bride's father, but this is not a regular occurrence.

Burials

These records are even sparser than Baptisms and Marriages. Because there was not a requirement to keep the records, many were not kept. However, in order to be buried, a mortcloth was draped over the coffin – or even the body itself if a coffin was not used. This incurred a fee and so you may just find that the only clue to finding a burial is a record of this cost. Another thing to bear in mind is that married women may be recorded under their maiden name, so not under the name you were necessarily expecting. If you are unable to find the record for a burial where you expect to find it, remember to check other locations as quite often, people were buried in the parish where their family originated, which is not always the one in which they were living.

NOTE:

You will also need to take into account that 'irregular' marriages were forms of marriage recognised by Scots Law, yet may have taken place without any official record of the event. These marriages could happen through an exchange of promises before witnesses or just through cohabitation.

Catholic Registers

Baptisms

Similar to the Church of Scotland, the records should contain the name of the child, whether legitimate or not, date of birth and/or date of baptism, father's name, mother's name and maiden surname, place or parish of residence, occupation of the father and names (and sometimes occupations) of witnesses will be recorded. The name of the priest will also appear.

Marriages

Again, many marriage records are minimal with often just the names of the bride and groom and that of the priest being recorded. However, you may be lucky and also find the details of the parish where the happy couple were living, their parish of origin and the bride's father's name.

Burials

Once more, these were not widely recorded. However, where they were, you should be able to find the person's name, date of death, date of burial, their address and age plus the name of a relative (as in widow of... or child of...)

One very important thing to remember is that many of these Catholic records were written in Latin, rather than English.

Where can they be found?

Many of the records have been lodged with the General Register Office for Scotland in Edinburgh, but some are still with the Parish Church or Kirk. A great deal of them are available to download from the Scotland's People website. You will need to register with them and purchase some credits. You will then be able to download a copy of the entry. A full explanation of their costs is available on the website.

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If you are after a second opinion of a record that you have found or are too far away to check the original registers, someone else might be able to help you. Register for FREE at <http://www.genealogy-specialists.com/> and post details of your ancestor and which record(s) that you are looking for. The members will do their utmost to find what you are looking for!

If you would like to find out more about Parish Registers, understanding what was written and the best ways of finding your elusive forebears, listed below are some products that will certainly help you along your way and all of them are available from [www.paritychest.com](http://www.paritychest.com). Just pop the reference number in the website search box to see the details.

- Family History Research Sources In Central Scotland (Booklet) Ref: CSFHS-M5
- Scotland Ancestors 2014 Edition Ref: OSG-02
- The Record Interpreter Ref: ANG-ARA 38
- A Latin Glossary Ref: FHP-128

Also, Parish Chest has a complete section dedicated to Parish Registers, which is broken down by county and country. Take a look on [www.paritychest.com](http://www.paritychest.com) to find the area in which you are searching.