

10 Sources for Researching Your Scottish Ancestors – Without Certificates!

Syllabus

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Below are just some of the record sources you can use to identify your Scots ancestors when a certificate isn't available. The official Scottish government website for family history is [ScotlandsPeople](#), where you can view civil, church, census, and other records. To get the most out of this website without breaking the bank, check out my ["Secrets of ScotlandsPeople"](#) RootsTech presentation.

- **Old Parochial Registers**, or OPRs for short, is the term normally given to pre-1855 records of births/christenings, marriages and burials. These are from the Presbyterian Church of Scotland. However they may also be available for post-1855 years, for instance at [FamilySearch](#).
- **Non-conformist records** – these are from other denominations: Baptist, Episcopal, Quaker, [Jewish](#)...the list is quite long. If you know your forebears had a particular religious affiliation, it's well worth checking to see if the [local or national archives](#) hold any records that might mention them. The National Records of Scotland hold many of these and provide [useful guides](#) to each category. Family history societies may have published transcriptions of such records which you may find in public libraries or online in digital format at websites like
 - [Internet Archive](#)
 - [HathiTrust](#)
 - [FamilySearch Digital Library](#)
- **Roman Catholic records** are available on [ScotlandsPeople](#) for both before and after 1855. They can also be accessed at [National Records of Scotland](#) and at the [Scottish Catholic Archives](#) in Edinburgh. [Catholic Heritage](#) is an online catalogue of many different types of records and resources.
- **Monumental Inscriptions** allow you access to graveyards from the comfort of home. They can be found in many public libraries. Usually (but not always – sometimes on index cards or computer) in book format, they are often produced by local family history societies and can be purchased from them. You can see a list of Scottish FH societies at the [SAFHS](#) website, and the [Scottish Genealogy Society](#) also sells MI books. [Scottish Monumental Inscriptions](#) sells PDF files of individual graveyard transcriptions which you can download. Also check the digital book websites listed above for free access to MI publications. Some counties such as [Ross-shire](#) are well represented by volunteer graveyard photographers who freely share their findings online, and the larger websites like [FindaGrave](#) and [BillionGraves](#) are becoming more and more useful for Scotland.

- **Poor Law records** are excellent substitute sources and can contain a wealth of information about your ancestor, their family, work, health, and income. I explain more about these records in my presentation [“Where Are My Poor Scots Ancestors?”](#)
- **Kirk session minutes** are the notes kept by Church of Scotland clerks of session meetings. Discipline imposed on unruly parishioners was extremely well documented, and can shed useful and interesting light on matters such as illegitimacy and anti-social behaviour. Watch my RootsTech video, [“The Riches of the Scottish Kirk Session Records”](#), to learn more.
- **Testaments** were not made exclusively by the wealthy. Fortunately, Scottish testaments have been indexed and can be searched free of charge at [ScotlandsPeople](#), and downloaded for a fee. They may also be held at the [UK National Archives](#). Inventories were also made of a deceased person’s moveable property, even if they died intestate, and these are listed alongside testaments on ScotlandsPeople.
- **Newspapers** can be a rich source of genealogical facts. Public libraries are a good place to start for local titles, and they may also have indexes to them. Online electronic collections are an excellent source. It’s also worth doing a general internet search for your own parish or county of interest as individuals or groups may have indexed local newspapers.
 - [Google News Archive](#)
 - [National Library of Scotland Digital Resources](#)
 - [British Newspaper Archive](#)
- **Directories** list individuals by trade and/or surname, depending on the publication. They usually give the business and home addresses, helpful when tracking down families in the census returns. Post Office Directories can be found at the [National Library of Scotland’s website](#) and on the [Internet Archive](#). Clerical directories include Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae, the Church of Scotland’s listings of clergy, which comes in several volumes and can also be found by searching the [Internet Archive](#).
- **Tax records** are freely available on [ScotlandsPlaces](#), largely for the 18th century, and include lists of servants and their employers, as well as those liable for tax on their carriages, watches, and dogs, among other things.
- **Estate papers** such as rentals and tacks (leases), correspondence, and other personal documents that belonged to a landowner can contain references to someone who lived on their land. Search the [SCAN](#) catalogue to identify the location of estate papers.

- **Palaeography** is an important skill to develop if you plan to search records from the mid-19th century or earlier. It encompasses not only handwriting but also historic measurements and date formats. [Scottish Handwriting.com](https://www.scottishhandwriting.com/) has tutorials and other helps for interpreting older scripts. FutureLearn partnered with the University of Glasgow offer a free [online palaeography course](#).

Recommended Reading

Durie, Bruce, *Scottish Genealogy*. The History Press, 2017.

National Records of Scotland, *Tracing Your Scottish Ancestors: The Official Guide*. 7th ed. Birlinn, 2020.

Wilkinson, Kirsty F., *Finding Your Scottish Ancestors: Techniques for Solving Genealogy Problems*. Robert Hale, 2020.

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