



FREE BEGINNER'S GUIDE

Getting Started with Scottish Family History

Scotland has some of the richest family history records in the world. Here's how to take your first confident steps towards finding your Scottish ancestors.

Six steps to get you started

- 1 Start with yourself and work backwards**
Write down what you already know: names, dates and places of birth, marriage and death. Move back **one generation at a time** – never jump to a famous namesake and work forwards.
- 2 Ask the family & search at home**
Interview older relatives while you can – record (with permission) and jot down names, dates and places as they come up, noting **who told you**. Gather certificates, family Bibles, photos, letters and memorial cards.
- 3 Statutory registers · 1855 onwards**
Civil registration began in Scotland on **1 January 1855**. Scottish certificates are wonderfully detailed: birth entries name both parents, including the **mother's maiden name**, and death entries usually name the deceased's parents too.
- 4 Census returns · 1841–1921**
Taken every ten years, the census places your family in a household with ages, occupations and birthplaces. Tip: in 1841 adult ages were usually **rounded down** to the nearest five.
- 5 Old Parish Registers · before 1855**
Church of Scotland baptisms, banns and marriages, and burials take you back further. Coverage can be patchy, so also check Catholic and other church registers and kirk session records.
- 6 Record your sources & check the facts**
Note where every piece of information came from. Confirm key facts with **more than one record** before adding a new generation – it saves heartache later.



Where to look

- ◆ **ScotlandsPeople** – the official site for Scottish records. Searching the indexes is free; viewing images uses pay-as-you-go credits.
- ◆ **FamilySearch** – free indexes to many Scottish births, baptisms and marriages.
- ◆ **FreeCEN** – free, volunteer-transcribed census returns.
- ◆ **Local archives & family history societies** – for local records, maps and expert know-how.

Scottish quirks to know

- ◆ **Maiden names matter.** Scottish women were often recorded under their maiden name throughout life – even on their death record.
- ◆ **Naming patterns.** Many families named the first son after the paternal grandfather and the first daughter after the maternal grandmother – a helpful clue, not a rule.
- ◆ **Spellings vary.** Search Mc/Mac and other variants, and allow for local pronunciation.

Your first three tasks

- ☐ Draw a simple family tree of everything you know – leave gaps blank rather than guessing.
- ☐ Book a chat with your oldest living relative and ask about names, places and family stories.
- ☐ Search the free ScotlandsPeople index for one grandparent's birth, marriage or death.



Hello, I'm Annette

I'm a Scottish genealogist and I have a postgraduate certificate in Genealogical, Palaeographic & Heraldic Studies from the University of Strathclyde. I love helping beginners uncover their Scottish family stories.

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