



Week 3: Part 2:
Old Parish Records – ‘OPR’

What are OPRs?

Old Parish Records (OPRs) are baptism, marriage bann and death (usually mortcloth rental) records created by the minister or session clerk of the Church of Scotland for that parish.

Records are available from 1553 (at the earliest!) to 1854 when civil registration of births, marriages and deaths began.

To understand the strengths and weaknesses of these records, a basic understanding of the history of the church in Scotland is required.

The Church in Scotland

- Reformation (the split with the Catholic Church in Rome), 1560
- Presbyterianism restored, 1690
- Secession Church, 1733
- Burghers/Anti-Burghers split, 1747
- Relief Church, 1761
- Free Church, 1843
- United Presbyterian Church (Secession Church and Relief Church Combined), 1847
- Most of Free Church Congregations re-amalgamated with the Church of Scotland, 1929

The Great Schism of 1843

On the 18th May 1843, around 40% of the ministers of the Established Church of Scotland walked out of the General Assembly and reconvened a few hundred yards away to form the Free Kirk of Scotland. The congregations who followed them represented around 60% of the communicants of the Established Church of Scotland

The area of dispute that led to the Disruption was that of patronage - this was a debate that had been simmering for several decades over the right of heritors (feudal landowners in the parish) and patrons to have an influence in the appointment of a minister. The Free Kirk recognised no such right for heritors. It was basically a dispute between the evangelical and conservative wings of the church.

The period from 1843 to 1854 can be a great problem for genealogists, as far from all of the new Free Kirks kept parish registers and the registers from those that did have not always survived.

In 1899 the United Presbyterian Church merged with the Free Kirk to form the United Free Church. In 1929 the great majority of the congregations of the United Free Church re-

amalgamated with the Established Church of Scotland. As a consequence some Free Kirk records came back into the Established Church records.

Non-Established Church Records

Where these survive, they can be found in a variety of places:

- Scotland's People Centre (National Records of Scotland)
- Various archives and libraries around Scotland (NRS will most often have a record of the location of records that they don't hold)
- Individual churches

Parish Structure

- Derives from the earliest days of Christianity in Scotland. Closely linked originally with the land ownership of religious institutions and orders such as monasteries, abbeys, etc.
- The parish developed into the administrative area of government closest to the daily lives of people. It existed for both ecclesiastical and civil purposes, to regulate not only religious observance and moral behaviour, but also to provide education and poor relief.

Parish Locations and Boundaries

GENUKI Church Database: Search by place name to discover which congregations worshipped close by. <http://www.genuki.org.uk/big/churchdb/index.shtml>.

Humphery-Smith, Cecil R., ed. (2002) **The Phillimore Atlas and Index of Parish Registers**, 3rd rev. ed. Phillimore and Co. Ltd. ISBN: 978-1860772399

Covers England, Scotland and Wales and shows parish boundaries and dates of the commencement of their registers.

Scottish Catholic Parish Maps at

<http://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/content/images/Catholic%20Parish%20Registers%20%20maps.pdf>

Scottish Parish Records

In 1552, a provincial council of the Roman Catholic Scottish clergy ordained that every parish should keep a register of baptisms and a register of proclamations of marriage.

In 1565, a Protestant General Assembly of the Church of Scotland instructed every minister, once they had been provided with a manse and glebe, to keep a register of persons deceased in their parish. The earliest surviving parish register of the Established Church of Scotland dates from 1553 in Errol in Perthshire

The majority of extant parish registers don't start until the late 1600s or early 1700s, with some registers not starting until the late 1700s, even early 1800s in the Western Isles.

Why Were Records Kept?

Moral control by the church of its parishioners:

- In Scotland the two important sacraments were christening and marriage

- A child with an acknowledged father could not become the responsibility of the parish

Legal reasons:

- Conclusive proof in family disputes, particularly relating to inheritance.

Scottish Parish Registers

Despite frequent enactments by both church and State, the standard of parish registers in Scotland never approached either the reliability of their keeping or their content as records in England. There was never any equivalent of the instructions in England as to the information and format of registers, thus the content varies from parish to parish depending on the Minister and/or clerk.

OPR Baptisms

In the early registers there may only be the name of the father. Sometimes even the name of the child is omitted.

Into the mid and late 1700s it becomes more common for the name of the mother to be given, along with the occupation of the father, and a place of residence. Witness names are sometimes given. Often the names of witnesses are recognisable as family members, but without a description of the relationship (uncommon) it can be difficult to know just which relation. "In the presence of the C[ongregation]" can mean in front of the entire congregation of the church or in front of several witnesses who belong to the congregation.

In the later registers it becomes more common for the date of birth to be stated.

Illegitimacy is normally clearly indicated in baptism records. These children may often have the mother's surname. Also look in Kirk Session records for records of illegitimate children as they may not have been baptized. A legitimate birth will often refer to a "lawful" son or daughter, and the wife as the spouse. An illegitimate child may be referred to as a "natural" son or daughter, and the mother will not be referred to as the spouse.

An entry might read "1716 Oct 23. Edward Dunbar in Coulllodin had ane Child begot in furnecation with Isabel McGilchrist called Janet".

Naming Patterns

Most often used pattern for given names was

- 1st son after paternal grandfather
- 2nd son after maternal grandfather
- 3rd son after father
- 1st daughter after maternal grandmother
- 2nd daughter after paternal grandmother
- 3rd daughter after mother

Strict usage is relatively uncommon from the early 1900s onwards. Before that, it was used widely, but you will find, at the one extreme, families who stick strictly to the conventions for a

number of generations, right through to families where there is no apparent usage of the convention. Frustratingly, a family might only partly use the convention and/or sometimes did and sometimes didn't.

Another commonly used naming convention in Scotland is the use, widespread only from the early 1800s onwards, of using the mother's maiden name, or one of the grandmother's maiden names as a middle name. This practice can even extend back to a maternal grandparent of the parents, especially if the person in question died a short time before the birth in question.

But be aware that a child may take a baptising minister's name as a middle name or be named after a doctor or midwife.

OPR Marriages

Before a marriage can take place in Scotland the banns must be published or proclaimed. Until 1878 this had to happen in the parish church. On 2 or 3 consecutive Sundays the intention of the couple had to be proclaimed so that any objection could be made. Only in the event of there being no objection could they then proceed to marry.

Many registers deal only with the calling of the banns, some only the marriage, some record both. At worst, the register will only be a record of the fee paid for the calling of the banns. Almost as bad are registers that only give the names of the bride and groom, together, possibly, with the fact that one or both are "of this parish".

At best, the register will give the names of both the parties, the date of the third calling of the banns, the date of the marriage, the parish of residence of the groom and bride, the occupation of the groom, and the name of the minister.

OPR Deaths

Only a small proportion of OPRs have death or mortcloth records. In those that do there is often only the name and perhaps the age of the deceased. It is not always the case that there is genealogically useful information in the records.

Mortcloths

- A mortcloth was a cloth that covered the coffin at a funeral.
- Each Kirk session kept one or more mortcloths to be hired out.
- In many parishes the record of burials is that of the hiring out of the mortcloth.
- If the Kirk's mortcloth was not used, or no mortcloth at all used, then there could be no record of the burial.
- If there was no charge for the use of the mortcloth, then again there might be no record.

OPR Survival

It is rare to find a Scottish OPR where the records survive for the complete period since the start of recording in a parish.

Most OPRs have frustrating gaps and/or changes in format that do not help the genealogist.

Why have so many OPRs not survived?

- The parish registers were the responsibility of the parish minister and Kirk session.
- They were normally compiled by the minister or the session clerk, the latter often the schoolmaster.
- Normally rough notes were kept and the actual registers written up at intervals, sometimes of months.
- And both the minister and the session clerk had other important commitments.
- There are known to have been many reasons why the records have disappeared...

OPR Disappearances

Fire

If the manse or schoolmaster's house caught fire, then any registers would probably be lost.

Water

Paper volumes often mouldered away through being kept in damp attics or cellars or out-houses.

Rodents

Volumes stored away and not consulted regularly were ideal fodder for mice.

Borrowing

Registers provided evidence in courts of law and were borrowed for that purpose, but sometimes didn't get returned from the solicitor's office.

Removed

A minister or session clerk, moving to another parish, might inadvertently or wilfully take a register with him. The family of a deceased minister might bundle up the registers with his other possessions and walk off with them.

Destroyed accidentally or deliberately

The earliest volumes of Yetholm were destroyed through spring cleaning...there's a lesson there!

In the parish of Castleton in Roxburghshire in 1649, it is claimed that soldiers of the invading English army carried away the records of the baptisms and marriages and used them to light their pipes.

1797 Militia Act

It's known that several OPRs were temporarily removed by parishioners to avoid easy identification of those available for military service.

Confusion with other records

No pro-forma volumes were issued for the purpose of parochial registers.

Such records were quite often written in with the kirk session minutes or accounts, or elsewhere. If, for whatever reason, there was no minister, so that the sacraments could not be administered, then there could be no record in the first place. Most often the minister in an adjoining parish did what he could, but this wasn't always practical or possible.

Reasons for OPR Imperfections

Money

- The Session Clerk might require a tip
- The Kirk charged for the proclamation of banns
- In 1783 a state Act put a tax of 3d on every registration (repealed in 1794)
- Some ministers saw this 1783 Act as unwarranted state interference in church affairs and refused to keep an OPR.

Dissenters and non-conformists

- Not everyone was a member of the Established Church of Scotland...
- In some parts of the country the Catholic Church had a substantial following and many people remained Episcopalian.
- All parishioners in a parish were supposed to be included in the register and some ministers made an effort to do so, others didn't.
- Some of the dissenting churches kept their own records, but survival is very patchy.
- Some non-conformists arranged for their marriages and births to be recorded in the Established Church OPR.

No Minister

- No Minister meant no regular baptisms or only by visiting ministers who may or may not have made an entry in the OPR.
- In such a case families may have gone to neighbouring parishes to have children baptised.

Irregular marriages

Before 1939 there were three forms of irregular marriage in Scotland

- Marriage by habit and repute - a couple simply set up house together and became regarded, after a period of time, as man and wife.
- When a man promised marriage to a woman, and got her pregnant.
- When a man and woman declared (before witnesses) that they were man and wife.

In all these cases, there would be no banns, and unlikely to be a record in the parish registers. That such marriages were permitted was due to a point of law that rendered such children legitimate and protected their rights of inheritance.

Unworthiness of parents

- If a child was the product of "premarital fornication", then baptism might only proceed after the parents had done public penance and expressed contrition for their sin.
- This would also happen if the father was guilty of any other offence in the eyes of the Kirk session.
- An unbaptised child was not recorded in OPRs (but you may find mention of them in Kirk session records...)

Deaths and burials outside the parish

- The death of anyone from the parish who was not buried in the parish, e.g. died at sea, might go unrecorded.
- It was quite common for the remains of those who originated from another parish to be taken back to that parish for burial.

Alcohol, carelessness, and general laxity

- The ceremonies of baptism, marriage and burial were often accompanied by strong drink, leading to the possibility for notes going missing, or wrong information given.
- The rough notes of an event might never be transcribed to the register.
- In some registers the recording of events was mixed up, not only between baptisms, marriages and burials, but also other Kirk matters.

Legibility and spelling

- Pre-1700 registers were generally written in Secretary Hand, but this can readily be learnt.
- More serious is the problem of plain bad writing.
- Faded ink.
- Bleed through, where the ink on one page has soaked through to the other side.
- Spelling of even everyday words was not consistent.

Access to OPRs

In 1855 and then in 1875 for later registers, the Church of Scotland OPRs were “ingathered” to GROS in Edinburgh, which still holds them.

Online:

Scotland’s People has images of records for download: www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk

LDS’ Church’s Family Search website at www.familysearch.org has many of the OPRs indexed and searchable from the main search engine. Also see their 2 databases ‘Scotland Births and Baptisms, 1564-1950’ (9 million+ records) and Scotland Marriages, 1561-1910’ (2 million+ records). Searchable for free at: www.familysearch.org

Gretna Green Database

The index covers entries between 1795 and 1895, with a few earlier references. In all, over 4500 entries are recorded. This database is available on Ancestry.

<http://search.ancestry.co.uk/search/db.aspx?dbid=1636>

Irregular Border and Scottish runaway marriages

Lists custodians and owners of these known existing records. Information available on National Records of Scotland website – see research guide at:

<http://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/research/guides/birth-death-and-marriage-records/irregular-border-marriage-registers>.

FreeREG

Provides free Internet searches of baptism, marriage, and burial records, which have been transcribed from parish and non-conformist registers of the U.K. Not many records available yet for Scotland, but it’s always worth having a look. www.freereg.org.uk.

Physical:

The Scotland's People Centre in Edinburgh provides access through computer. You pay only to access the Centre for the day and not per image (as when you access the system from home). They run free 2-hour taster sessions:

(<http://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/content/help/index.aspx?r=546&1322>). For more

information on visiting the Scotland's People Centre in Edinburgh, have a look at:
<http://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/research/visit-us/scotlandspeople-centre>

There are also other official centres opening up around Scotland where you can get access to the records held on Scotland's People on a daily basis. Most records can be searched at these centres. There is one in Glasgow at the Mitchell Library and one in Ayrshire at the Burns Heritage Centre, for example. For Glasgow see:

<http://www.glasgowfamilyhistory.org.uk/ExploreRecords/Pages/Civil-Registration,-Scotland.aspx>

- LDS Family History Centres – microfilm of indexes and may have image of record books.
- Local Family History Societies and Libraries – may have microfilm. See for example Glasgow and the West of Scotland FHS website, <http://www.gwsfhs.org.uk/>
- Parishes still maintain registers and it may be worthwhile to contact the local church directly. See the website Places of Worship in Scotland, <http://www.scottishchurches.org.uk/>

Nonconformist Church Records

Catholic Parish Records

Record format and content varied over time, with the responsibility for the information gathered being placed with the parish priest. Since there was no standard format proscribed, record keeping varied enormously from parish to parish and also from year to year. As a result, the information may be sparse, unreliable and difficult to read.

Approximately 700 registers have survived, the earliest dating from 1703, but most records only begin in the 30 years following the relaxation of legislation against Catholics in the 1790s.

Scotland's People has images of:

- Births & baptisms (1703-1908)
- Banns & marriages (1794-1934)
- Deaths & burials (1742-1945)
- Other events (1742-1909) – lists of communicants, seat rents, sick calls, etc.

Check the list of 'Extant Catholic Parish Registers' to find out whether records exist for your parish. If the parish wasn't founded by the date you are looking for, you may have to look at neighbouring older parishes which covered larger geographical areas.

Episcopalian Church

National Records of Scotland (NRS) at General Register House in Edinburgh has some records but many are still with the local priest or diocese.

Baptist, Congregational, Methodist, Quaker and Unitarian records are mainly in the NRS. However, the Mitchell Library in Glasgow has a large collection of these for the west of Scotland.

It's always worth contacting the headquarters of each church in Scotland to double check.

Jewish

The Scottish Jewish Archive Centre is located in Garnethill Synagogue - the oldest in Scotland (1879). See <http://www.sjac.org.uk/> .

The Historical Database of Scottish Jewry is available at the Centre and collates and cross-references some 60 lists & sources. These include cemetery records, synagogue registers, naturalisations, charity subscription lists and school admission registers. It has information on almost 16,500 individuals in Scotland up to the 1920s and more information is continually added.

Other Sources for pre-1855

The **ScotsFind Website** was an amazing source of early Scottish records but unfortunately has ceased to exist. The Internet Archive has preserved the website and its sources, though – a direct link to the ScotsFind website through the IA's 'Wayback Machine' is listed below.

Potential resources of interest include:

- Canongate_Marriage_Register.pdf
- Edinburgh Marriage Register1701-1750.pdf
- Edinburgh Marriage Register 1595 - 1700, 1751 - 1800.pdf
- Canongate Burials 1820-1851

All and much more are available at:

<http://web.archive.org/web/20070707225559/http://www.scotsfind.org/>