

The Statistical Accounts of Scotland are a fathomless source of information for social, economic and family historians and a wonderful resource for just dipping into. Together they perhaps comprise Scotland's equivalent of the Domesday Book. If you're tracing ancestors in Scotland, you need to know about them.

**CHANGING TIMES**

Scotland, like many other western countries, was being transformed in

the late 18th century; industrial and agrarian change was accelerating and often imposed without thought for the welfare of ordinary folk. One improving agricultural landlord was Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster (1754-1835), who in 1790 was MP for Caithness. He began a project to 'elucidate the natural history and political state of Scotland'. Sinclair wanted to gather a picture of the geography, history, climate, fertility, industry, resources, wildlife and customs of every part of the

country. No small task, then.

The obvious people to compile and write this material were the ministers of the Church of Scotland's 938 parishes. Sinclair wrote to each of them requesting information about their parishes using what we today would call a questionnaire. There were 166 questions and it says much for the ministers that all but 12 of them eventually co-operated. Any profits from the sale of the completed volumes went to the Society for the Sons and Daughters of the Clergy, which no doubt boosted the response rate. Where necessary, Sinclair used a team of editors for the parishes whose ministers hadn't responded.

**THE FIRST ACCOUNT**

The first Statistical Account of Scotland – now usually referred to as the Old Statistical Account (OSA) – was published between 1791 and 1799 in 21 volumes by William Creech of

**It's an account of society from a local viewpoint, not a top-down assessment by civil servants**

The first page of the account for the Parish of Lerwick, from the New Statistical Account, available to view online at <http://edina.ac.uk/stat-acc-scot>.

Edinburgh. The parish accounts were published in the order that the returns came in from the ministers, hence a somewhat arbitrary ordering in the published version.

The entries are often fascinating, and vary, according to their compilers, from the sturdily factual to the downright quirky. Throughout, however, it's an account of society from a local viewpoint, not a top-down assessment by civil servants. The ministers represented a variety of viewpoints and in many cases were gathering information on subjects about which they knew little, but they were on the spot and they knew the communities they described.

The 166 questions covered geography and topography, including climate, mineral resources and soil type; natural history; population and people; social and economic data such as wage levels and the incidence of poverty; details of ancient buildings and antiquities, and notable men (not, usually, women!) who had emerged from the parish.

The Parish of Inverness chapter cites James Fraser, formerly the minister of

neighbouring Kirkhill and 'a distinct and accurate person' stating that the peak of Meallfuarvonie rose '2 miles perpendicular' above Loch Ness – it's actually just over 2,200ft. He also observed that on its summit there was another loch, 30 fathoms long and 100 fathoms deep, with no inflow or outflow, and which always had the same water level and which never froze. This miraculous loch never existed. The Revd James Lapslie of the Parish of Campsie in Stirlingshire stated that there were 'two species of badger found among the loose rocks of the Campsie Fells, the one somewhat resembling a sow, the other a dog'. Simple facts of topography and natural history, then, sometimes wander into the realms of folklore in the OSA – a warning, perhaps, to approach other information with some caution.

The entry for Glasgow in the OSA is a lengthy one, which is useful given that many modern researchers will be seeking ancestors from this city, then on the brink of industrial take-off. We're told that in 1791 the cotton industry 'employed 15,000 looms' in the city

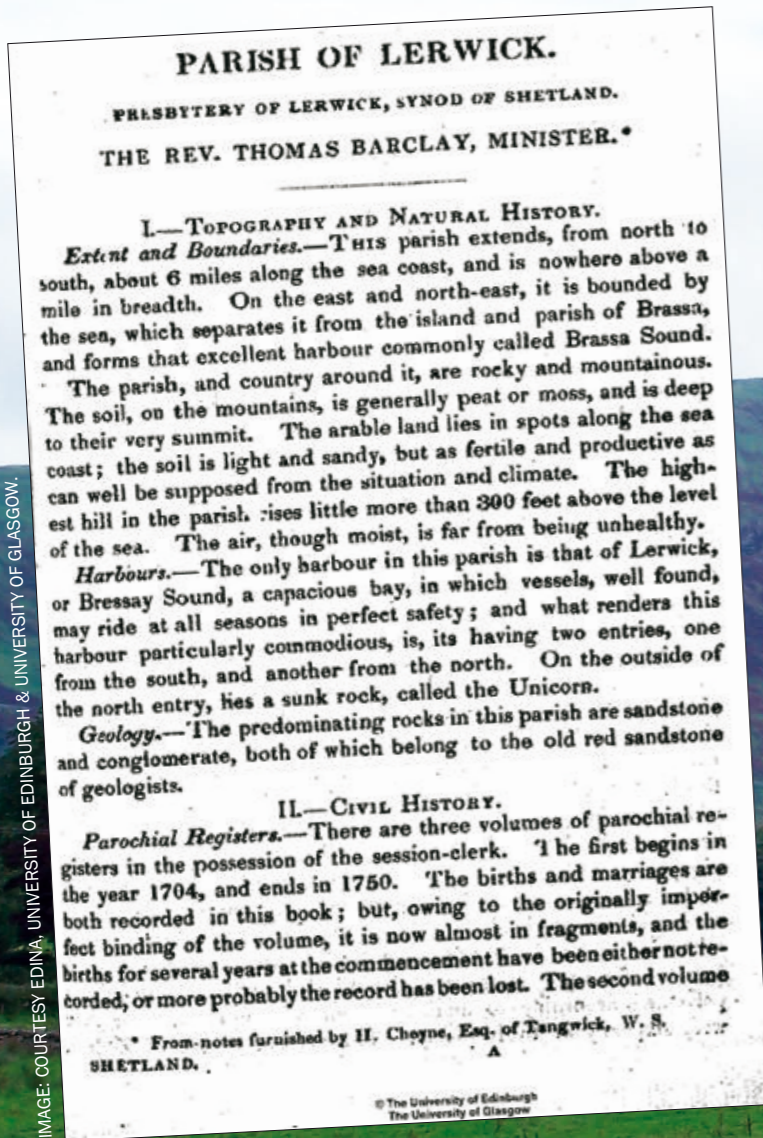
and 'each loom gave employment to nine persons at an average, including women and children' at the various stages of manufacture. Was one of your forebears among them? The people of the city were 'for the most part, industrious and... in general contented and happy in their situation'. A pinch of salt, perhaps, required. One wonders how many were actually asked.

The entry for my home town, Kirkintilloch, reveals much about the trades present there. Among the town's 1,536 inhabitants, there were 185 weavers, 11 stocking-makers, 15 smiths, four saddlers and six coopers. For two other trades the Revd Dunn gives no firm figures, stating simply that there are 'a good many taylors; and a few hairdressers'. How times change; like many small towns now, Kirkintilloch has no tailors (or saddlers or coopers) but no end of hairdressers!

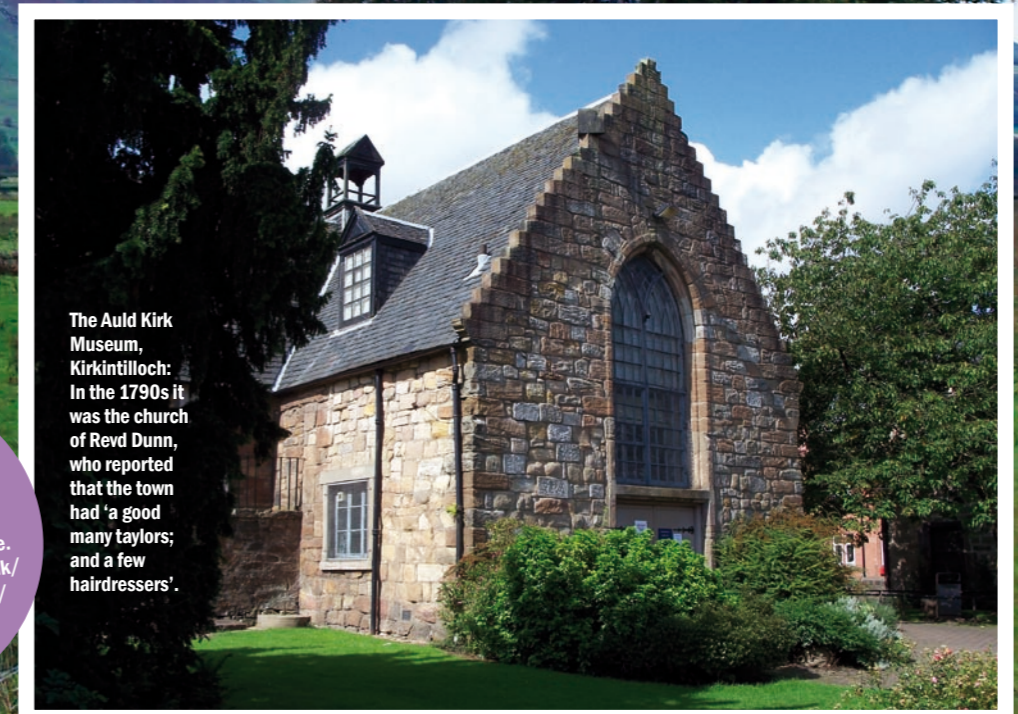
We've already heard from the Revd James Lapslie, who wrote the account for the neighbouring parish of Campsie. He was a dark figure who played a dubious role in the conviction of political radicals during the 1790s. Not

**Main image:** Campsie Fells in Stirlingshire was described in the earliest statistical account as being home to two mythical 'species of badger' – a warning to treat some of the statements with caution!

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David McVey delves into the Statistical Accounts of Scotland, essential records of life in the 18th and 19th centuries for those with Scottish forebears.



**DID YOU KNOW?**  
 You can also visit the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh in person to use all the statistical accounts (including 1951-1992) for free. More information at [www.nls.uk/family-history/local-history/index.html](http://www.nls.uk/family-history/local-history/index.html).

# The Scottish 'Domesday'

A memorial to the Duke of Sutherland, situated high above Golspie. The Duke was praised in the New Statistical Account for Golspie but no mention was made of the terrible hardship caused by the Highland Clearances.



# The Scottish 'Domesday'

surprisingly, then, his contribution is full of respectful obeisance to the local noble families, yet we also find him warning that 'it will discover the folly of the landlords, if ever they permit coals to become much dearer'. Small, opinionated quirks like these make the OSA the treasure that it is.

## UPDATED & ENHANCED

The New Statistical Account of Scotland (NSA) was proposed to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1832. Essentially, it follows the pattern of the OSA, but with a number of enhancements and improvements. Again it is organised by parish, but the contributions by the ministers are supplemented by input from other local figures such as doctors, lairds and schoolteachers. County maps were included. The results were published between 1834 and 1845 in 52 quarterly parts, with a complete 15-volume edition, grouped by counties, issued in 1845.

The Revd Robert Lee of the Parish of Campsie, like many of the NSA contributors, tried consciously to update the information given for his parish in the OSA – even confirming the extinction of the two mythical species of badger once said to be found in his local hills. His detailed listing of plant species found in the parish, along with their Latin names, show where his expertise and interests lay. He remarked, however, that his predecessor

the Revd Lapslie's role in convicting the celebrated local radical Thomas Muir resulted in 'unpleasant consequences – among others, the burning of his manse [house]'. With little insights like these, the NSA helps us re-interpret the OSA.

Sometimes what is omitted is more telling than what is included. In the entry for the Parish of Golspie, scene of some of the most notorious incidents in the Highland Clearances during the early 19th century, the Revd Alexander MacPherson made no mention of the resulting hardship, merely commenting that there had been a decline in the parish's population occasioned by agricultural improvements. He did, however, indulge in several purple passages of praise for the House of Sutherland, the sole landowners in the parish; if you are a descendant of cleared tenants, you'll find these sections difficult to swallow.

## FIND THE RECORDS

Copies of the OSA and NSA are available in many libraries in Scotland, along with a Third Statistical Account that was published between 1951 and 1992. A later re-publication of the OSA (published by E P Publishing of Wakefield in the 1970s and 1980s)



orders the material in a more logical fashion than the random original structure. Remote access to digitised versions of the OSA and NSA 1791-1845 can be obtained from the free academic website, <http://edina.ac.uk/statacc>, run by the Edina National Data Centre at Edinburgh University. You can search for parishes by name, download and print reports for free, but a subscription will give you more sophisticated searches and other benefits (check with your local college or library as they may be a subscriber). Even as a non-subscriber, you can quickly locate the portion you need using the site's search facility for parish or county – a real advantage over leafing through the OSA to find the right place.

Scotland had gone through many changes in the period between 1791 and 1845, and the two accounts provide a fascinating comparison for all types of historians. For the family historian, it's unlikely that your ancestors will be encountered by name in either edition – unless they owned most of a parish, were its ministers, or were significant industrialists.

However, if you can identify the parish in which they lived and worked in the 1790s or 1830s, you will find revealing insights into the world they lived in, the people they knew, their earnings, their housing and the local economy. In particular, if you intend to write an account of the family history you unearth, the OSA and NSA are essential background for the period – and they are provided by the people who lived and worked there at the time.

You can search parish reports for the whole of Scotland for free on the Statistical Accounts of Scotland website at <http://edina.ac.uk/stat-acc-scot>.

IMAGE: EDINA, UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH.

**LANDOWNER RECORDS**  
 TheGenealogist.co.uk has more than 300,000 Scottish Landowner Records 1872-1873. They include all people who owned one acre or more, with images of original pages showing names and addresses, acreage and gross estimated rental. Fellow subscription site FamilyRelatives.com also has the records.

**THE AUTHOR**  
 David McVey was until recently a lecturer at the University of the West of Scotland. He is now a freelance writer and speaker and enjoys hillwalking and watching his local football team, Kirkintilloch Rob Roy FC. He has had many short stories and articles published, including those with local and family history themes.