

# TEN TOP TIPS FOR STARTING YOUR SCOTTISH FAMILY HISTORY

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### 1. Decide what you want to achieve.

Do you want to find every ancestor in all lines? Concentrate on one line only? Research one surname? Explore a family story or legend? Start with that, and stick to it without diversions until you decide to pursue something else.

### 2. Start with someone who was alive around 1911 or 1901.

Birth, marriage, death, census, wills & testaments, valuation rolls and more information is readily available back from that date, and it's close enough to be able to check details within living memory.

### 3. Start from a census.

This is a snapshot of a family at one place and time. Work from that back to marriages, births and other details.

### 4. Work backwards.

It's a lot easier to track a line of ancestors than starting in the past and working all the lines forward. Someone born in 1700 will have perhaps 4,000 descendants - which lines will you chase?

### 5. Talk to your oldest living relatives...

...but don't necessarily believe everything they tell you! Over the years, stories get spun, expanded, changed and in many cases suppressed. But it's a starting point, from which you can seek out actual evidence.

### 6. Never guess and trust nothing!

The ONLY worthwhile evidence is documentary evidence. Do not trust second-hand stories, published genealogies, websites or hearsay. Many family trees on the internet (Ancestry, Geni, MyHeritage etc.) are usually copies of each other - mistakes, inventions and all. Look for actual documents.

### 7. Names are not fixed.

Surname spellings can change from one generation to the next, and were not fixed until fairly recently. Don't fret over variants – a McKay is a MacKay is a M'Kay is a McCay is a Mackey is a Makee is a Makey, and all are derived from MacHugh (Gaelic, MacAoidh). Forget everything you have heard or read about "Mc is Scottish and Mac is Irish" – it's nonsense, and often both will be recorded as M'. There is no point researching McLaren and not MacLaren or M'Laren. Remember too that in Scotland it's typical to call someone by a second or third forename, or by a diminutive - so the person you know as "Sandy Brown" may have been christened "John Harold Alexander Brown".

### 8. Think laterally.

There is birth information in marriage and death records, and don't forget wills and testaments, land transfers, court records and so on.

### 9. Never despair!

You are at the bottom of a very tall mountain, and sometimes it's hard going. If you hit a log-jam, shelve it and work on another aspect, such as cousins. You'll be amazed how often that one piece of vital information comes from an unexpected direction.

### 10. Join a local Family History Society and a Clan/Family Society in Scotland.

Even if it isn't local to you, or even if you're overseas, having experts in a particular locality with access to resources at the end of the phone or email can help break down brick walls. They will also have details of resources you can take to get you started.

## Places to start.

Scotland has an unparalleled set of records, in terms of coverage and accessibility online and physically. Links are given below.

At [www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk](http://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk) you can get (if the records have survived, and the majority have):

- Baptisms, Marriage banns and Burials (Church of Scotland) from the mid-1500s to 1854
- Some Catholic records 1703-1908
- Statutory (Civil) Births, Marriages and Deaths 1855-2012 (images downloadable up to (Births) 1912, (Marriages) 1938 and (Deaths) 1962
- Wills and Testaments - over 611,000 from 1513 to 1925
- Censuses, every 10 years from 1841-1911
- Coats of Arms registered or granted 1672-1909
- Valuation Rolls (essentially, Heads of Households) – 1885, 1895, 1905, 1915, 1920

Also, [www.scotlandsplaces.gov.uk](http://www.scotlandsplaces.gov.uk) has information, and in many cases maps and photographs, concerning places. The list is growing all the time, but at present, you can access:

### Historical Tax Rolls

- Carriage Tax, 1785-1798
  - Cart Tax, 1785-1798
  - Clock and Watch Tax, 1797-1798
  - Dog Tax, 1797-1798
  - Farm Horse Tax, 1797-1798
  - Female Servant Tax, 1785-1792
  - Hearth Tax, 1691-1695
  - Ordnance Survey Name Books for each county in Scotland
  - Official Reports
    - Land Ownership Commission Reports, 1872-1873
    - The Hay Shennan County and Parish Boundaries, 1892.
  - Ordnance Survey maps from the mid-1800s.
  - Gazetteers and Atlases
  - The National Monuments record including archaeological reports on historic and prehistoric sites
  - Maps and plans of counties, parishes, cities, towns, villages, farms, roads, canals, harbours, churches, school, public building, private houses, mines and quarries
- Horse Tax, 1785-1798
  - Inhabited House Tax, 1778-1798
  - Land Tax, 1645-1831
  - Male Servant Tax, 1777-1798
  - Shop Tax, 1785-1789
  - Window Tax, 1748-1798
  - ...with more to come

The National Library of Scotland ([www.nls.uk](http://www.nls.uk)) has an incredible array of digitised records and indexes for Family History, including:

- Historical clubs and societies
- Maps
- Emigration and passenger lists
- Local history information
- Surname histories and biographies
- Street Directories
- Newspapers
- Gravestone inscriptions
- State Papers
- Scottish traditional culture

## Locally

Not every record is available online, and not all are held centrally in Edinburgh. There are many excellent archives, museums, local history and family history centres and other resources all over the country – just waiting for you to visit. Start at the [www.ancestralscotland.com](http://www.ancestralscotland.com) website.

## Visiting or researching remotely?

There is no question that the way to get the most out of a visit is to have done a great deal of research first – then you'll know where to go, what to look for and whether you have to combine a trip to the National Records of Scotland (Edinburgh) with a journey to your ancestral homeland. And once your appetite is whetted, there's no question you'll want to visit!

## Caveats

Please bear in mind that...

1. Transcriptions and indexes are not always accurate – use wildcards, Soundex etc.
2. Surnames can change – especially in the Highlands, it was common practice to adopt the surname of the local landowner or Clan Chief.
3. Not everyone is in a Clan – the Clan was a Highlands and Borders phenomenon, and Lowland Families were never part of the Clan structure. Bruce, for example, is not a Clan.
4. Do not assume a Coat of Arms linked to your surname is yours – in Scotland, Arms are the legal property of one person at a time, heritable, and must be registered with or granted by the Lord Lyon.
5. Interested in which tartan you should wear? Visit the official Scottish Register of Tartans website
6. Consider a DNA test – FamilyTreeDNA is the best: [www.ftdna.com](http://www.ftdna.com)

## Links

Scotland's People – The official online source of parish register, civil registration and census records for Scotland. BUY CREDITS [www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk](http://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk)

Scotland's Places – Provides information relating to places throughout Scotland including monument records, register house plans, medical officer of health reports, land ownership etc. SOME INFO FREE, SOME BY 3-MONTH SUBSCRIPTION [www.scotlandsplaces.gov.uk](http://www.scotlandsplaces.gov.uk)

National Library of Scotland – an information treasure trove of Scotland's knowledge, history and culture, with millions of books, manuscripts and maps covering every subject. FREE [www.nls.uk](http://www.nls.uk)

National Records of Scotland – Formerly the National Archives for Scotland, this holds historical records created by businesses, landed estates, families, churches and other bodies. FREE, BUT HAS ONLY INDEXES, NO DOCUMENTS [www.nas.gov.uk/](http://www.nas.gov.uk/)

Court of the Lord Lyon – the statutory body for all things heraldic (Coats of Arms etc.). FREE (but actual records are at Scotland's People, PAID-FOR [www.lyon-court.com/](http://www.lyon-court.com/))

Scottish Association of Family History Societies – links to family history societies in Scotland, and similar organisations worldwide. FREE [www.safhs.org.uk/](http://www.safhs.org.uk/)

Scottish Archive Network – SCAN aims to revolutionise access to Scotland's archives by providing a single electronic catalogue to the holdings of more than 50 Scottish archives. FREE, MAINLY INDEXES, SOME DOCUMENTS [www.scan.org.uk/](http://www.scan.org.uk/)

Scottish Register of Tartans – official online database of tartan designs, established by law in 2008. FREE [www.tartanregister.gov.uk/](http://www.tartanregister.gov.uk/)

AncestralScotland – Discover your Scottish roots and start planning your ancestral journey to Scotland. FREE [www.ancestralscotland.com/](http://www.ancestralscotland.com/)

The National Archives – TNA, Kew, London, holds many records relating to Scottish family history, especially military records. MUCH FREE, SOME PAID-FOR [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/)

PublicProfiler – Where your surname was clustered in 1881 and 1998. FREE <http://gbnames.publicprofiler.org/>

## Join...

Your local Family History Society – check out SAFHS for lists at [www.safhs.org.uk/](http://www.safhs.org.uk/)

Scottish Genealogy Society – Great library, regular talks etc. [www.scotsgenealogy.com/](http://www.scotsgenealogy.com/)

## Commercial Family History sites

Deceased Online – access to official records for UK burials and cremations. FREE TO SEARCH, THEN PAID-FOR [www.deceasedonline.com/](http://www.deceasedonline.com/)

Ancestry.co.uk/Ancestry.com – collates both official records and other reference information, but not much on Scotland. Do NOT trust uploaded Family Trees. SUBSCRIPTION [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk)

Family Search (IGI) – the largest genealogy organization in the world, and free to use, but of variable accuracy, especially in Member uploads. FREE [www.familysearch.org/](http://www.familysearch.org/)

Find My Past – like the others, not many of the important Scottish records SUBSCRIPTION [www.findmypast.com/](http://www.findmypast.com/)

## FAQS

### 1. Can I join a Clan?

Clans are a Highlands and Borders phenomenon. The Lowlands has Families. Clan and Family Societies will be delighted to hear from you. Start at [www.clanchiefs.org.uk](http://www.clanchiefs.org.uk) and [www.scotclans.com](http://www.scotclans.com)

### 2. Do I have a tartan?

Very probably – some are ancient, many date from the early 1800s and many more have been designed since. Go to the official Scottish Register of Tartans – [tartanregister.gov.uk](http://tartanregister.gov.uk)

### 3. What's my coat of arms?

You only have one if it has been legally granted to you by the Lord Lyon. There is no such thing as a “family coat of arms” in Scotland. Arms are individual, heritable property and it is illegal in Scotland to use someone else's. However, you can matriculate the arms of a proven ancestor, or start from scratch. Go to [www.lyon-court.com](http://www.lyon-court.com) for more information.

### 4. Can I wear my Chief's crest?

Yes, and many do. This is usually worn within a strap-and-buckle design – as a cap badge, plaid brooch, kilt pin etc. NOTE: only someone with a legal coat of arms can wear a single eagle feather with the crest – and a Chief has three feathers.



### 5. Should I have a DNA test?

It can certainly help link you to a family, identify living relatives and illuminate your deep ancestry. Choose a company that offers STR as well as SNP testing, and has a large database for matching. The best is [www.familytree.dna.com](http://www.familytree.dna.com)

### 6. Are all Scottish records held in Scotland?

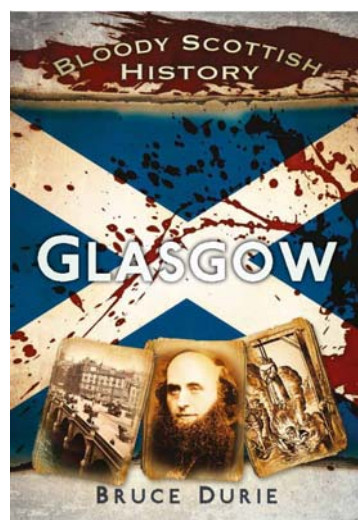
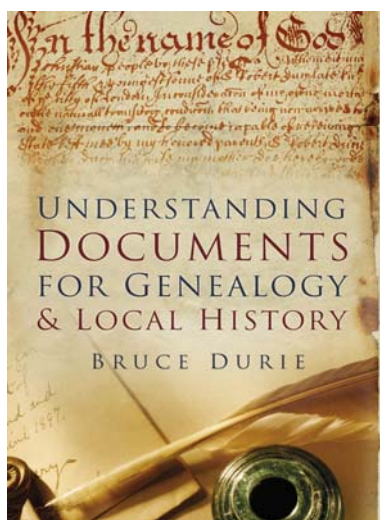
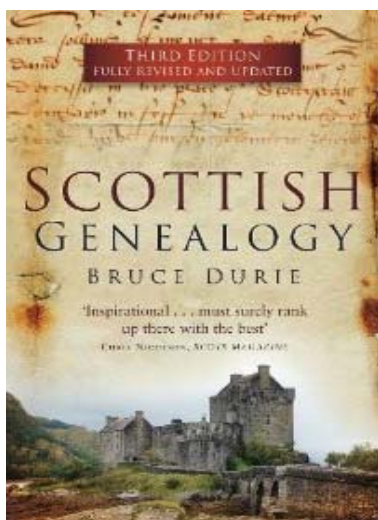
Largely. But there are British records (Army, etc.) at [www.nationalarchives.org](http://www.nationalarchives.org) – plus, many Scots will have lived in England and may have left documentary traces there.

### 7. What if I'm originally Irish?

Over the centuries there have been many migrations – both ways – between Ireland and Scotland. And don't believe the stories about “all the Irish records were destroyed” – it just isn't the case! A good place to start is [www.ancestryireland.com](http://www.ancestryireland.com)

### 8. Where can I get more information on Scottish Family History?

Start with these books:



More information at [www.bruce Durie.co.uk/books.htm](http://www.bruce Durie.co.uk/books.htm) All available in bookshops, on Amazon etc.

### 9. How long will it take me to research my family?

The rest of your life! Enjoy.

### 10. Can you do it for me?

Just ask!

*Durie*

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