The Old Parochial Registers

from

*Jock Tamson's bairns: a history of the records
of the General Register Office for Scotland*

by

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This publication is now out-of-print. Its aim was to describe the three main series of records held by the Registrar General for Scotland in New Register House in Edinburgh and to set them in their historical context.

We are making the text from the chapters on the Old Parish Registers, statutory registers and census records available in portable document format (pdf) on this website. Each can be found in the further reading section of the relevant research guide. It is hoped that the content will be of interest to experienced genealogists and to a wide cross-section of the general public who value their personal and social heritage and wish to learn more about it.

Contents

We have made minor amendments to the original text to take account of the merger of the General Register Office for Scotland with the National Archives of Scotland to form the National Records of Scotland on 1 April 2011 and a change in the law regarding marriage by habit and repute.

We have also divided the chapter into the following sections:

1.   Early Parish Registers

Birth and death are the two unavoidable events of human life. For many people, marriage comes as a significant third. Humankind usually seeks to celebrate these events, and for the Christian Church, they are the grounds of the sacraments of baptism of the new born and of marriage, and the rite of the burial of the dead.

Since written records began, the births, deaths and marriages of princes and some other great people have been recorded, but for centuries those of lesser folk were mostly unrecorded. We died to be forgotten. Admittedly, the Old Testament lists genealogies of the Jewish people of that time, and there are reports of such records being gathered in Greek and Roman times and in medieval France and Italy. But if any such records were compiled in Scotland before the mid-16th century, they have not survived. In post-medieval Europe, the first serious attempt at registration was enacted in Spain in 1497. Organised by parish, the motivation was to ensure that marriages were not within the prohibited degrees. In England, registration was begun by an Act in 1538, requiring every parson to maintain a register in which to record every wedding, christening and burial within his parish.

Both in Scotland and in England, the parish was the administrative area of government closest to daily lives of the people. Civil and ecclesiastical in character, it existed not only to regulate religious observances and moral behaviour but also to provide education and poor relief. Because of its small size and the familiarity of its presiding clergyman with its inhabitants, it provided the best location within which to keep registers of what are today sometimes known as "hatches, matches and despatches".

In Scotland, there were a series of enactments by both church and state to establish parish registers during the times of religious change in the later 16th and 17th centuries.

- 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.

Though the earliest surviving register, that of the parish of Errol, dates from 1553, the number of subsequent instructions from both church and state authorities, along with our knowledge of the registers which survive throughout the country, show that in many parts of Scotland, registration was slow to catch on.

Now, why was registration of baptisms, marriages and deaths so important? The Kirk was responsible for the moral welfare of its parishioners and by baptism and marriage ceremonies sought to have control over them. Also, a child who had a recognised father was the responsibility of that father and would not be a financial

burden on the parish. But the more important reasons were legal. The attempt to register deaths in 1565 was in order "that pupils [children] and creditors be not defrauded", in other words to ensure that the wealth of the dead person went to those entitled to it. Registration meant publicity and, it was hoped, reliability. In 1616, the Scottish Government, by an Act of the Privy Council, ordered that a register be kept in every parish of persons married, baptised or deceased, because diverse questions often arose in the law courts which depended on accurate information of the times of marriages, baptisms and decease of persons. It was fondly hoped that such a register would provide conclusive proof in family disputes, usually over inheritance.

2.   The Keeping of the Registers

Unfortunately, the keeping of these registers over the next two hundred years was not as satisfactory or reliable as the Privy Council had intended. The minister of Hawick in the 1790s admitted "There is no exact register kept of marriages, baptisms or burials" and lots of other ministers confessed that their parish registers were "imperfectly kept". While it is not always clear whether absent records have gone astray or were never compiled in the first place, it is apparent that the surviving records of the more remote parishes tend to start very late, at the end of the 18th century or even in the 19th. The Western Isles are particularly badly served. Even where the records of a parish started earlier, few of the series are in any way complete.

Assuming that they were created in the first place, why is it that so many volumes of this valuable record have not survived? It should be remembered that the parish registers were the responsibility of the parish minister and kirk session. They were compiled either by the minister or the session clerk who was usually the local schoolmaster. The register volumes and notes from which the volumes were to be compiled would be kept in the manse or the schoolmaster's house. Both men would have had other important commitments. Let us now consider probable reasons why these important records so often have disappeared.

2.1   Fire
If the manse or the schoolmaster's house caught fire, then any registers therein would probably burn too. In the days of wood or coal or peat fires and of candles there was always a fire risk. In the parish of Muthill, a register for 1704 to 1760 had to be compiled from peoples' memories or their jottings "the original Registers of that time having been burnt in the Session-Clerk's house with several things of his own". (OPR386A/1)

2.2   Water
A register of the parish of Abertarff was lost when accidentally dropped into a rapid stream, which the custodian was crossing. But a more common fate was for the paper volumes to moulder away through being kept in damp attics or cellars or out-houses.

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

2.4　Borrowing

As one of the purposes of keeping such registers was to provide evidence in courts of law, it is hardly surprising that registers were borrowed for that purpose. Unfortunately, once borrowed, there was no certainty that a register would be returned, instead hiding in a lawyer's office, whether locally or in Edinburgh.

2.5　Removed

A minister or session clerk, moving to another parish might inadvertently or wilfully take a register with him. When in 1690, the minister of Carriden was deposed for drunkenness, he allegedly took away the parochial records. Similarly, the family of a deceased minister might bundle up the registers with his other possessions and walk off with them.

2.6　Destroyed accidentally.

The earliest registers of Yetholm were reportedly "destroyed accidentally by the family of one of the former ministers of the parish." Spring cleaning has a lot to answer for!

2.7　Destroyed deliberately.

While one hopes that deliberate destruction was extremely rare, in the parish of Castleton in Roxburghshire in January 1649, soldiers of the invading English army carried away the records of baptisms and marriages and used them to light their tobacco pipes.

2.8　Confusion with other records

No pro-forma volumes were issued for the purpose of the parochial registers. Consequently, session clerks tended to record baptisms, marriages and burials in volumes also used for other purposes. Such records were commonly written in with the kirk session minutes or accounts, and might even be in the same volumes as someone's private or business accounts. In 1855 the registrar of Laggan reported that "entries of Births, Deaths and Marriages are intermixed with entries of records relating to sessional and other matters in the most hopeless state of confusion". Thus, these books might not always be recognised as parochial registers.

2.9　Recovery of OPRs

However, not all the history of these missing records is tragic. Some may be remarkably recovered.

- A register of the parish of Kirkden, 1650-1690, after having been lost for a long while, was discovered by an 18th century minister when one of the leaves was casually sent from a shop in the neighbourhood, presumably as wrapping paper.

Those which have gone astray and not been destroyed may still be found, and, even well into the 20th century, such wanderers have been traced and recovered by the Registrar General. Sometimes, they have been kept by the local minister or session clerk (usually confused with the kirk session records) or even the local registrar years after they should have been brought into the Registrar General's custody.

- A portion of the OPR for Firth and Stenness 1732-1745, in the possession of that kirk session, came to public knowledge through an article in the Scotsman.

- The register for the parish of Tomintoul 1827-1846 had been kept by the minister's family in the belief that it was a private record.

- A duplicate record of the parish of Knockando 1768-91 was found "in an old garret in Elgin".

- A Coldingham register was discovered in a desk purchased by an antique dealer.

- Some have turned up in sale-rooms as far away as London.

- Others have been revealed when sought by a claimant to an old-age pension born before 1855.

- A register for Inverkeithing 1710-1744, long thought lost, was discovered among Court of Session records.

3.   Imperfect Condition of the Registers

The imperfect condition of the Old Parochial Registers has been long known. In 1779, Arnot's *History of Edinburgh* was very rude about the keeping of the Edinburgh registers. The *Statistical Account of Scotland* published between 1791 and 1795 and the *New Statistical Account* published in 1845, both consisting of reports on each parish in the country by the parish minister, are full of comments on the unsatisfactory nature of the parish registers. (Some of these comments are quoted in this work.) In 1816, the topic was discussed by the General Assembly. In 1854, arguing for a system of compulsory registration, George Seton published his influential *Sketch of the History and Imperfect Condition of the Parochial Records of Births, Deaths and Marriages in Scotland*, demonstrating the faults of the then system.

The faults were not just in the absence of many volumes of registers. The faults were also in how the surviving registers had been kept. Little guidance had been given to the ministers and session clerks who compiled the registers and they were left to their own devices, resulting in a marked lack of consistency between and within parishes. Note also that there was no compulsion on individuals to register their family events. So now let us look at the imperfections of the surviving registers, and the causes thereof, real or alleged. But firstly, it is important to realise that generally it was not births as such that were supposed to be recorded but baptisms, not marriages but the proclamations of banns of marriage, and not deaths but burials.

3.1 Money

The session clerk might expect a tip. The Kirk charged for making proclamations of banns (the money went to the poor). Not everyone could afford to pay. Worse still, an Act of 1783 put a tax of 3d on every registration, an Act later repealed in 1794, but not before damage had been done in people avoiding registration. For many people, three pence could be better spent. In Fala and Soutra, it was complained that no accurate register was kept, "owing partly to the negligence of the recorder, and partly to the parsimony of the inhabitants, who do not chuse to pay the trifling fees of registration".

3.2 Dissenters or non-conformists

Not everyone was a member of the established Church of Scotland. In some parts of the country, the Church of Rome still had a substantial following. Similarly, even after the Church of Scotland became firmly Presbyterian, many people remained Episcopalian. But most troublesome of all was the tendency of Presbyterian believers to split off from the established church, on points of principle, and set up their own church. The most famous of these divisions was the Disruption of 1843, but that was only the latest of a long series. Though the established minister of the parish was supposed to include all parishioners in the registers, many of the dissenters refused to provide him with the necessary information, fearing contagion if they did. Some ministers entered the baptisms etc only of their own flock, some made an effort to include those of the other denominations. There is no consistency on this in the Old Parochial Registers. Fortunately, some of the dissenting churches kept their own record of baptisms, marriages and burials, though these were as irregularly kept as the official registers. Many of these records of other churches are preserved by the National Records of Scotland and may be consulted.

3.3 Irregular marriages

Before 1940, there were three forms of irregular marriage in Scotland.

> (i) Marriage by habit and repute, where a couple simply set up house together and were regarded by their families and neighbours, over a period of time, as man and wife. [This form of irregular marriage was abolished with effect from 4 May 2006].

> (ii) When a man promised marriage to a woman, then got her pregnant, that could make them legally married.

> (iii) When a man and woman declared before witnesses that they were man and wife, that was a marriage. Many dissenters who were married by their own clergyman took this path. It was the type of marriage made famous at Gretna. Obviously in all these cases, there were no banns of marriage and, therefore, except where some dissenting marriages were noted, likely to be no record in the parish registers. In the 1790s, the minister of Eccles, explaining the small number of registered marriages in his parish, remarked "that the practice of marrying in a clandestine and irregular manner still subsists upon the Borders". The point of the law allowing such marriages was to render any children legitimate, which gave them rights of inheritance.

3.4   Unworthiness of parents

If a child was a product of pre-marital fornication (a remarkably common occurrence), 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, which would obviously also occur if an infant child died before baptism.

3.5   Mortcloths

A mortcloth was a cloth which covered the coffin at a funeral. Each kirk session kept one or more mortcloths to be rented out for use at parish burials. The record of burials in many parishes is simply the record of the letting out of the mortcloth, so that if the kirk's mortcloth was not used on any occasion, no record was made of that burial. This might occur because the deceased or his family were too poor, when either no mortcloth would be used or no charge made. In Coldstream, "the poor who were buried at the public expense were not taken notice of except occasionally". No record of the burial might exist because a family had its own mortcloth and therefore did not use the parish one. Also, if a local landowner had gifted the mortcloth to the parish, that family would not be charged for the use of it, and therefore again no record.

3.6   Deaths and burials outside the parish

Those who were lost at sea were not buried in the kirkyard and consequently their deaths would usually be unrecorded. Those who died on land but away from home might be buried in a foreign parish. It was also quite common for the remains of those whose families had come from another parish to be taken for burial in that parish. In Peterculter, "The number of dead brought hither for interment, from Aberdeen and its neighbourhood, exceeds the number of persons who die within the parish". For this reason, the register of burials of the parish of Grange was kept only for four years then given up "as it appeared that the burials did not correspond at all with the deaths".

3.7   Alcohol

Arnot in 1779 accused the Edinburgh burial registrars of drunkenness, and thereby incapable of compiling the register accurately. Certainly the ceremonies of baptism, marriage and funeral were usually accompanied by a party in which strong drink was taken. It is easy to imagine the circumstances in which notes of proceedings were lost, or in which wrong information was entered in the register, or the register itself mislaid.

3.8   Carelessness

Some registers were kept in loose leaf form, which made them more vulnerable than those kept in volumes. Notes of events might not be transcribed into the register volume. There are gaps in some registers which can only be explained by a minister or session clerk failing to fulfil his duty to make entries in the register. Within a register, baptisms, marriages and other unrelated matters might be entered higgledy-piggledy (or "promiscuously" as Seton put it) regardless of date order or sense. There might even be incorrect entries (perish the thought!). Since 1855, the Registrar General has had the power to correct entries in the OPRs. Individuals have

first to petition the sheriff, complaining, for example, that a name was "John" not "James" or "Wright" not "Wight".

3.9   Legibility

The pre-1700 registers were kept in a script with letter forms unfamiliar to us, but that can be resolved by learning the letter forms, which is not difficult. More serious is the problem of plain bad writing, whatever century. Ink, perhaps watered down to save money, has faded. Ink on one side of a page has soaked through to the other, rendering both sides of the page difficult to read. "The paper is much worn and the writing in places has become faded and indistinct" described the register of baptisms and marriages for the parish of South Ronaldsay 1657-69, but can also describe many other of the older registers.

4.   Information Contained in the Registers

The weaknesses and limitations of the Old Parochial Registers have been well aired and it is sad that so much information is not included in them. Yet much information may be found in these invaluable volumes. Most of us who look in them find some ancestors, while the lucky ones of us may find many generations and their kinsfolk. So let us now consider what information is or may be contained in these registers of baptisms, proclamations of marriage, and burials.

As already said, do not expect consistency. Generally speaking, the earlier registers have the less information and the later volumes provide the more. It can be very frustrating for researchers to be presented just with names and little or no further information. There was a rather small pool of Christian names, and in many parishes an even smaller pool of surnames. Spelling, including of Christian names, surnames and place-names is not fixed as it is today. Names are spelled as the minister or session-clerk writing them chose to spell them. Thus one man in his lifetime could be called Robertson or Robson or Robison or Robeson and probably other variants. These variations were not the result of carelessness. It was just that exact spelling was not regarded as important.

4.1   Baptisms

Though the record was of baptisms, quite often the date of birth is also given. Thus, we are told that George, son of George Robertson in Grutha, South Ronaldsay, baptised on the 25 September 1831, was born on 4 September 1831, the day his parents married! (OPR29/4)

Particularly in the early registers, all we may be told is the name of the father, the name of the child and the date of baptism.

- "20 August 1654. Ane chyld baptysed to Patrick Stewart called William" (Inverness, OPR98/1).

Sometimes even the name of the child is omitted. Gradually it became more common to include the name of the mother, and it also became more usual to provide a designation for the father. Obviously the more detail, the more useful the

record becomes for family researchers. The following entries are as informative as you have a right to expect.

- 19 November 1699 "Marjorie the Lawful daughter of James Peterkin gar[de]ner & Isabel Andersone in Tanachie was baptised. Witnesses: Alexander Duncan in Moycarse & James Andersone." (Forres, OPR137/1)

- 12 July 1715 "Thomas son to James Brodie vintner in the Town and Grizel Moir his spouse was baptized. Witnesses: Thomas Boyd merchant in the Town and Thomas Moir." (Forres, OPR137/1)

- "Robert lawful son of Andrew Stirling weaver Waterside and Christian Gilchrist his wife born 13th Jany 1802 bap 11th Feby." (Kirkintilloch, OPR498/3)

Witnesses were usually men but could be women. There were commonly two but could be more. Often their names are recognisable as members of the parents' families. They were perhaps the continuation of the Roman Catholic practice of having godparents. Indeed occasionally the words "godfather" and "godmother" are used instead of "witnesses". At some baptisms, instead of witnesses, one finds the phrase "in presence of the Congregation", suggesting that where witnesses were named the baptism may have taken place in the family home.

The name of the minister who carried out the ceremony may be included. This is in most cases the parish minister, but occasionally it can be the minister of "the Secession Church" or other dissenting church.

A clear distinction was made between legitimate and illegitimate children. A legitimate child would be described as "lawful" or its mother described as "spouse" of the father. An illegitimate child would be described as such or as "natural" or the entry might read "1716 October 23. Edward Dunbar in Coullodin had ane Child begot in furnecation with Isabel McGilchrist called Janet." (Inverness, OPR98/2)

Very occasionally, a minister may add a further relevant detail such as "The mother died immediately as the child was born"; "The father being dead the child was presented by the mother"; "The child was presented by the grandfather William Couper because the father was out of the Country". (All from Stronsay in Orkney, OPR31/1)

Sometimes the baptisms of a whole family are recorded at once, regardless of dates of birth. Either this is the result of rather eccentric record-keeping or, more likely, the minister finding out that a family of children had not been baptised and encouraging the parents to remedy this unfortunate state. Not every child was baptised shortly after birth, particularly if that child had been born abroad and later was brought back to Scotland.

- In South Ronaldsay, "Alexander, son of Alexander Kennedy of Braehead, and his wife Agatha Isbister, born at Moose Lake, North America, 2nd February 1808, baptised here 26th May 1823." (OPR29/3)

4.2   Marriages

Until 1878, proclamation of banns in the parish church was an indispensable requisite of a regular marriage. The banns had to be proclaimed three times, on three successive Sundays. Occasionally all three times are recorded, more often only the date of the last proclamation is stated in the register. The date of the marriage might or might not be added: quite often there is a blank left for the date of marriage, not filled up. (This does not mean that the marriage did not take place.) Sometimes only the date of the marriage is given. Examples:

- 1716 June 15. "John Smart in Milden, and Isobel Drummie, daughter to John Drummie in Dalhasnie were contracted, and after being proclaimed several Lord's Dayes in ane orderly way, were married by the minister" on July 3. (Edzell, OPR285/2)

- 1797 September 29. "William Mackerras Lint Miller at Mills of Forres & Anna Grant daughter to John Grant at the Bridge End were contracted & after publication of the Banns were married 14th October." (Forres, OPR137/3)

- 1819 October 1. "There were booked in order to proclamation of marriage Hugh Milligan Labourer at Cardross and Anne Couper in Kilpatrick. They were married 25th October 1819 at Glasgow." (Old Kilpatrick, OPR501/3)

Note that "contracted" does not mean married, though in some instances it may mean that the banns have been proclaimed.

In these examples, the parties are fully described. In some cases, only their names may be given, presenting the researcher with the familiar problem of not knowing which Colin Campbell or Mary Macdonald that might be in a parish full of these names.

Sometimes the parties came from different parishes. That meant two separate proclamations of banns and entries in two parish registers.

- Thus in the parish of Kirkmichael in Perthshire on 1823 June 14th "Peter Sim, in Righmore, parish of Caputh, and Anne Rattray in this parish" were contracted;

- and in the parish of Caputh that year "Peter Sim, at Easter Reimore in this parish, and Anne Rattray in the parish of Kirkmichael, having been proclaimed, were married July 1." (OPR370/3 and OPR337/5)

A few ministers provided additional information. A footnote to a marriage registered in Strontian in 1833 says

- "N.B. There has been something very odd about the above parties. They fast contracted & then split: then agreed, & with much regularity married. Were not married passing 5 days when lo. the weaker vessel set sail and steered her course for her mammy." (OPR505/3/2)

4.3   Deaths and burials

There are fewer records in this category than those of baptisms and marriages. You will find three distinct types of death/burial record, often within the same parish at different eras: mortcloth records; burial records; "bills of mortality".

Mortcloths have already been explained. The mortcloth records are the accounts for the loan of the parish mortcloth or mortcloths for burials within the parish. These were often contained within the kirk session accounts intermixed with such financial entries as the amount collected in the kirk on the Sabbath or payments to the poor of the parish, though sometimes mortcloth payments would be listed separately.

Typical entries are:

- 1682 November 19 "received for ane Lend of the mortcloth to Robert Bryddies wife thirtie sh: Scots." (Falkland, OPR428/1)

- 1760 November 10 "The little plush Mortcloath to the corps of Archd McCasley son to Archd McCassley lying in Croft. 10d." (Abbey Parish, Renfrewshire, OPR559/5)

Burial records are simply a record of those who have been buried in the parish kirkyard. Again the information can be simply the name of the deceased or more full than that.

- Thus the register for Cruden tells us "1844 October 16. George Hutchison from the Gask, opposite the south grave of Alexander's tomb 1st length west stone." (OPR185/3)

- Probably the fullest entry ever occurs in the parish of Elie in 1787, where the record of the burial of Elizabeth Forrester, "relict of the deceased David Taylor in easter Town of Cultmalundy in the parish of Tippermuir, Perthshire and mother of Matthew Taylor Schoolmaster of Ely" is inordinately long. We learn the times of death and burial, the location of her grave, her state of health, about her parents, her birthplace, her children including a son who went to South Carolina and surmise about his fate, her sisters and her parents-in-law. Might it seem likely that the compiler of this register entry was her son, the schoolmaster? (OPR427/2)

Bills of mortality are simply annual lists of those who had died in the parish, giving the date of death, the name and usually the designation and sometimes the age of the deceased. In coastal parishes, these may include the names of men who died at sea, as in the parish of Stronsay,

- "John Folsetter aged about 19 years was drowned on a herring-boat that was lost off Linksness on the 10th November 1818". (OPR31/1)

- In the same parish in 1837, when Betty Stevenson was found dead on the sea-shore: "strong suspicions were entertained by the community, that she had been murdered during the night." (OPR31/2)

Causes of death are rarely but occasionally given. In the parish of Loudoun in 1851, a whole series of children died of the measles, showing that there must have been an epidemic. (OPR603/4)

5.   Transmission of the OPRs to New Register House

Though there was nothing to prevent kirk sessions continuing to compile their own records of baptisms etc, as official records the Old Parochial Registers stopped at the end of 1854. Population movements from rural parishes to the towns had weakened parish control over the urban population at the same time as demands arose for a more accurate registration system. The Act which established the Registrar General's Department and compulsory registration instructed that all registers of births, deaths and marriages for every parish prior to 1st January 1855 were to be transmitted to this new department.

- All those made prior to 1820 were to be transmitted under the direction of the sheriff to the Registrar General for preservation in New Register House.

- Those dating from 1820 were to be delivered to the registrar of the parish. These were later also sent to the General Register Office.

As few if any of the volumes conveniently ended at the close of 1819, these instructions presented problems. Volumes had to be split. If the records of births, marriages and deaths were intermixed with kirk session or other business, then copies had to be made for the interested party and the existing register brought to the Registrar General. "This copying must of necessity be an operation involving considerable difficulty, trouble and expense" wrote the first Registrar General in 1856.

But such manifold problems of splitting volumes, transcribing them and bringing in these valuable records to Edinburgh did proceed to the huge advantage of future researchers of family and social history. The latter may be further served by the occasional extra information to be found therein.

- The Dumfries register records the arrival of the Jacobite army there in 1745: "It is notable there was no sermon nor publick worship in the Churches of Dumfries on that memorable sabbath ... The young Pretender & the highland army were in possession of the town on Saturday, Sunday & Monday. Dumfries was full of tumult & confusion on the Lords day." (OPR821/2)

- In Deskford in 1740, a child was allegedly born with a wooden leg, presenting a conundrum to medical historians, who are unlikely to accept the contemporary suggestion that "the child has been got by a Chelsea pensioner with a timber hough". (OPR151/1)

- And if you want to find a 16th century cure for the common cold, you will find it in the register of baptisms for Aberdeen in 1588 (OPR168a/1): take garlic and hot milk and boil them together and drink it in the morning two or three days.