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Marriages at Gretna, 1975-2000

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This short paper presents information on the rapid growth in the number of marriages taking place at Gretna over the last twenty-five years.

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MARRIAGES AT GRETNA, 1975-2000

Summary

This short paper presents information on the rapid growth in the number of marriages taking place at Gretna over the last twenty-five years, from fewer than 100 each year in the mid-1970s to over 5,000 in 2000. It shows that while the majority of the couples come from England, as was the case between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries during Gretna's original period of fame, they are now more likely to be older. Moreover, Gretna has become a popular marriage venue for a small but increasing number of couples from outside the United Kingdom. The paper also considers the striking rise in the number of religious marriages at Gretna during the 1990s and gives some information on the denominations involved.

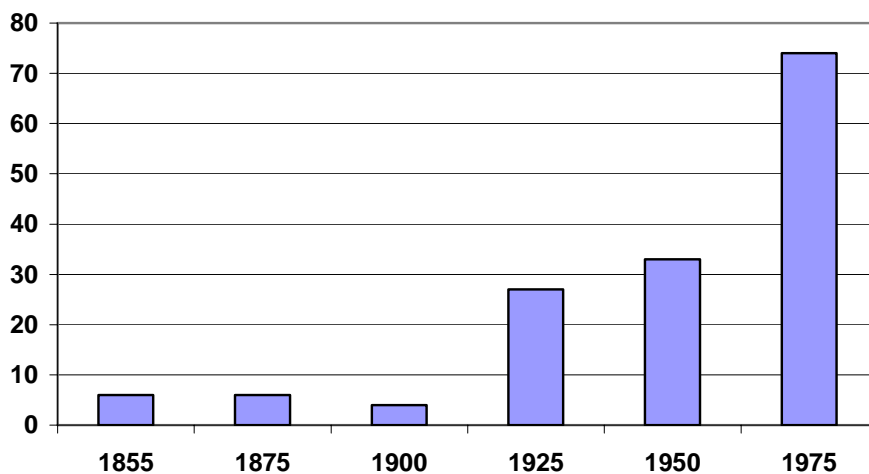
History

Gretna's popularity as a marriage venue dates back to 1754 when Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act decreed that parental consent was required if either party to a marriage in England and Wales was aged under 21. However, as this Act did not apply in Scotland, a large number of young couples travelled north to Scotland where a valid marriage could be contracted merely by a declaration before two witnesses. Gretna, being just a few miles over the border on the London to Edinburgh stagecoach route, became the most popular destination.

Any responsible person was able to conduct the marriage, but the local blacksmith often carried them out 'over the anvil'. A link with this historical practice has become very popular in recent years, with many ceremonies taking place, for example, at the Old Blacksmith's Shop.

The total number of marriages at Gretna at this time is not known, but over the following 100 years or so it was certainly several tens of thousands. The numbers dropped dramatically after 1857 when Scots Law prescribed certain conditions for 'irregular' marriages. Though such marriages were recognised until 1939, they were not included in the official marriage registers. The small numbers of marriages registered in Gretna between 1855, when civil registration was introduced, and 1975 are shown for selected years in **Figure 1**.

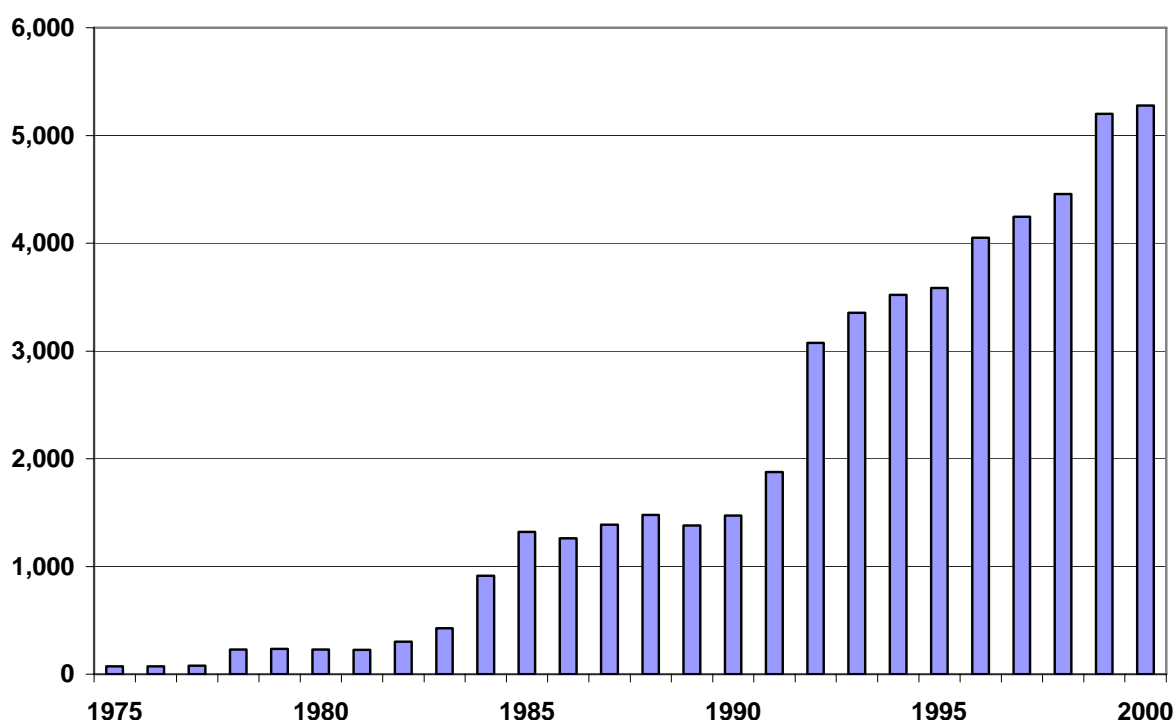
**Figure 1: Marriages registered at Gretna;
1855-1975**



Trends 1975-2000

Table 1 and **Figure 2** show the rapid growth in the number of marriages registered at Gretna over the last twenty-five years. The late 1970s saw the annual numbers increase to over 200 and over the period 1983–85 there was a further increase to over 1,000 per year. During the 1990s the annual total surged from some 1,500 to over 5,000. The sharp increase in 1991–92 was associated with greatly improved facilities in the registration office. **Table 1** also shows that Gretna now accounts for more than one in six (17.4%) of all marriages in Scotland.

Figure 2: Marriages registered at Gretna; 1975-2000



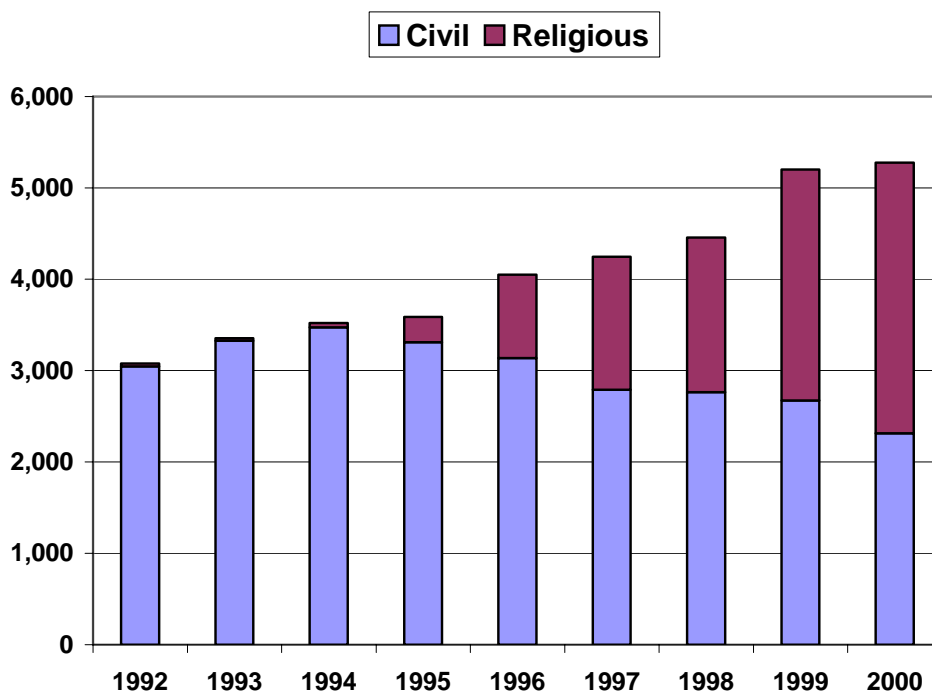
Civil and religious marriages

Up to the early 1990s the overwhelming majority of marriages at Gretna were civil marriages conducted by the local registrars. **Figure 3** shows the transformation that has taken place since then, with the total number of marriages continuing to increase steadily but the number of civil marriages falling back. The number of religious marriages increased from 28 to 2,966 between 1992 and 2000 during which year they outnumbered the 2,312 civil marriages. **Table 2** shows the religious denominations of those conducting the ceremonies over this period.

Across Scotland as a whole, the proportion of marriages that were religious marriages has risen slightly in recent years from 53.5 percent in 1996 to 60.2 per cent in 2000. This change is partly, though not entirely, due to the large increase in religious marriages at Gretna.

Other than in exceptional circumstances, civil marriage ceremonies in Scotland must take place in registration offices. However marriages solemnised by a religious celebrant may take place at any location. It is believed that this is the main reason for the increase in religious marriages at Gretna where there is a desire to hold the ceremony at a ‘traditional’ location, such as the Old Blacksmith’s Shop.

Figure 3: Civil and religious marriages at Gretna; 1992-2000

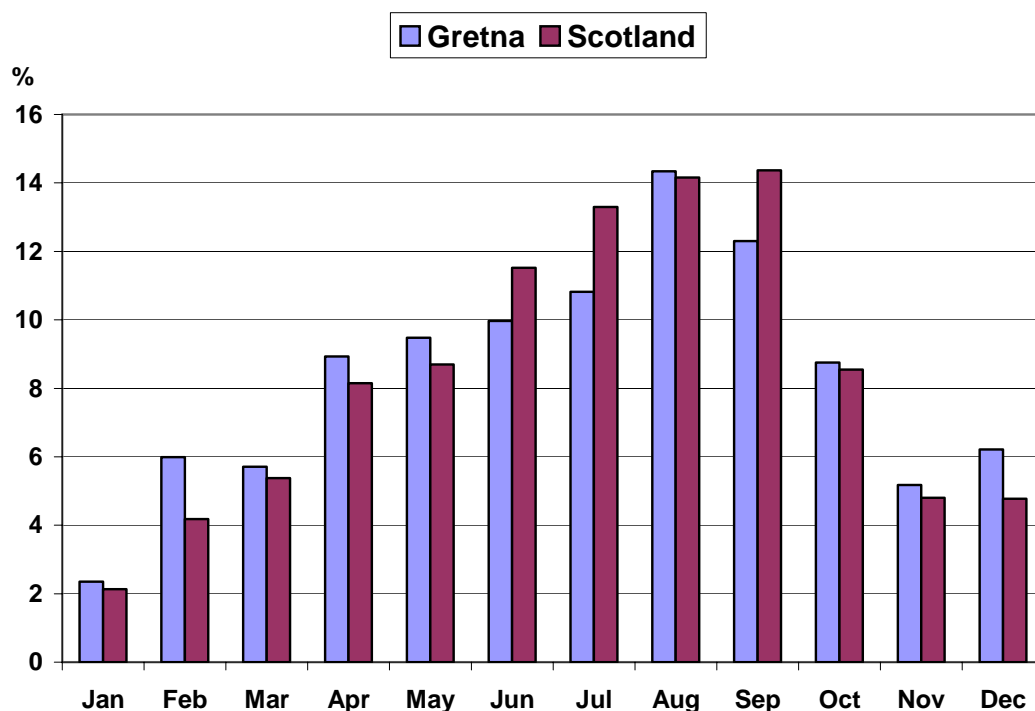


In 1995 the law in England and Wales was changed to allow civil marriages to be solemnised in approved premises outwith registration offices. A similar change is planned for Scotland. The Scottish Executive White Paper *Civil Marriages Outwith Registration Offices* was published on 21 June 2001, this includes draft legislation to make this change. Subject to the outcome of consultation, this will be considered by the Scottish Parliament during 2001-02 session.

Time of year

Figure 4 presents a monthly breakdown of marriages throughout Scotland compared with those at Gretna during 2000. As can be seen, both have a distinct summer peak. In 2000, the most popular marriage date in Gretna was St Valentine’s day, 14th February; and 29th February was the fifth most popular. For Scotland as a whole, neither date was particularly popular.

Figure 4: Percentage distribution of marriages by month, Gretna and Scotland, 2000

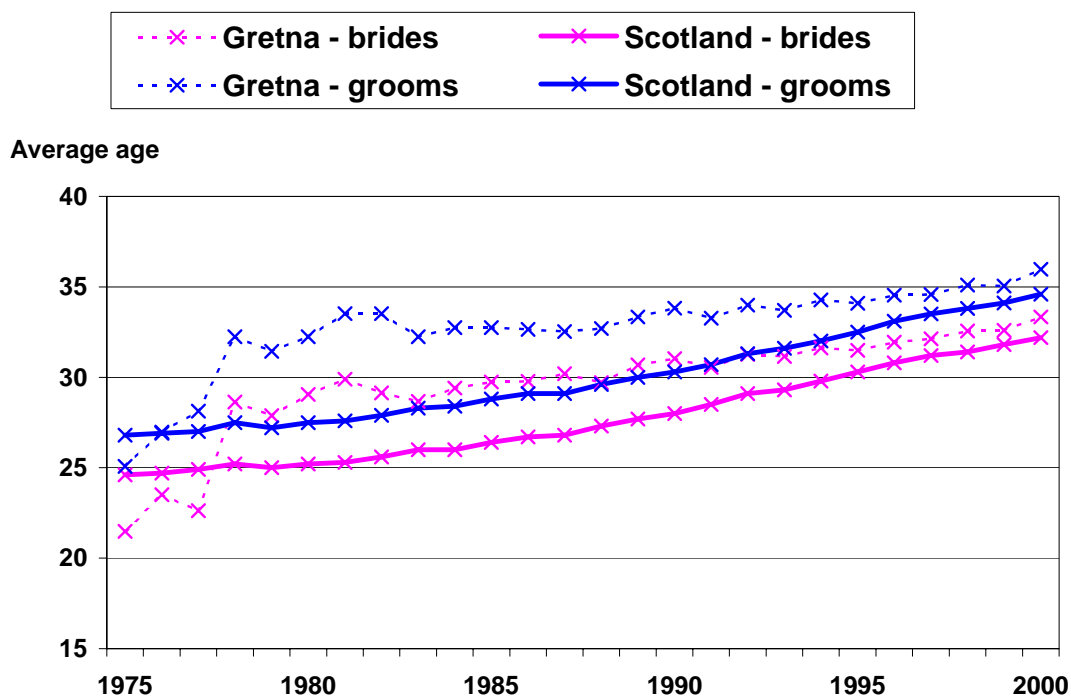


Demographic characteristics of brides and grooms

- age

Marriages at Gretna no longer conform to the 18th and 19th century pattern when at least one of the parties was usually aged under 21. In fact only 4.4 percent of Gretna marriages in 2000 involved someone aged under 21; and only 1.2 per cent involved someone aged under 18. The average ages of Gretna brides and grooms in 2000 were 33 and 36 respectively. Moreover, as can be seen from **Figure 5**, the Gretna averages have been higher than the Scottish figures for over twenty years.

**Figure 5: Average age of brides and grooms;
Gretna and Scotland; 1975-2000**



- marital status

Table 3 compares the marital status of brides and grooms at Gretna and throughout Scotland over the period 1975–2000. For Scotland, in 2000, 27 per cent of brides and 28 per cent of grooms were divorced, almost double the levels recorded in 1980. In 2000 in Gretna, 38 per cent of both brides and grooms were divorced compared with 33 per cent and 35 per cent respectively in 1980. Moreover, at least one of the parties was divorced in over half of all marriages at Gretna during this period.

- country of residence

Whilst the age and marital status characteristics of those getting married at Gretna is rather different to its earlier heyday, the country of residence of the participants is still dominated by England. **Table 4** gives further details for the 5,278 brides and grooms in 2000. Over 70 per cent of those getting married were resident in England and 14 per cent were resident in Scotland. Some 6 per cent of brides and 5 per cent of grooms were resident in countries outside the United Kingdom. **Table 4** lists the top ten such countries, the Republic of Ireland being in first place followed by the United States, Netherlands, Australia and Germany.

Elsewhere in Scotland a total of 25,089 marriages were registered in 2000. Neither bride nor groom was resident in Scotland for 3,928 of these marriages. However, at least one party was Scots born in 1,610 cases, leaving 2,318 with no obvious connection with Scotland.

Further information

For further statistical information on marriages at Gretna, and elsewhere in Scotland, please contact GROS Customer Services on 0131 314 4243.

Table 1: Marriages in Scotland and at Gretna, 1975-2000

	Scotland	Gretna	
		No.	% of Scotland
1975	39,191	74	0.2
1976	37,543	73	0.2
1977	37,288	80	0.2
1978	37,814	228	0.6
1979	37,860	235	0.6
1980	38,501	228	0.6
1981	36,237	226	0.6
1982	34,942	302	0.9
1983	34,962	426	1.2
1984	36,253	914	2.5
1985	36,385	1,319	3.6
1986	35,790	1,261	3.5
1987	35,813	1,387	3.9
1988	35,599	1,478	4.2
1989	35,326	1,380	3.9
1990	34,672	1,472	4.2
1991	33,762	1,876	5.6
1992	35,057	3,076	8.8
1993	33,366	3,353	10.0
1994	31,480	3,521	11.2
1995	30,663	3,586	11.7
1996	30,242	4,050	13.4
1997	29,611	4,246	14.3
1998	29,668	4,457	15.0
1999	29,940	5,201	17.4
2000	30,367	5,278	17.4

Table 2: Marriages at Gretna by method of celebration; 1992-2000

	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Total	3,076	3,353	3,521	3,586	4,050	4,246	4,457	5,201	5,278
Civil marriages	3,048	3,326	3,472	3,311	3,137	2,791	2,765	2,673	2,312
All religious forms	28	27	49	275	913	1,455	1,692	2,528	2,966
Baptist Union of Scotland	-	-	-	1	-	144	989	1,062	531
Church of Christ	-	-	1	32	360	527	391	557	682
Church of Scotland	16	10	14	84	89	108	142	250	897
Congregational Union of Scotland	-	-	5	124	440	621	126	13	*
United Free Church of Scotland	-	-	-	-	4	-	13	442	268
Episcopal/Anglican	3	6	15	8	3	24	24	189	248
Methodist Church of Scotland	-	-	-	1	-	2	-	1	252
United Reformed Church	-	-	-	9	8	1	-	-	73
Roman Catholic Church	9	11	13	12	7	3	5	7	6
Salvation Army	-	-	-	-	-	25	1	1	2
Other religious marriages etc.	-	-	1	4	2	-	1	6	7

* The Congregational Union of Scotland has ceased to exist as a separate body on merging with the United Reformed Church.

Table 3: Marital status of brides and grooms at Gretna, 1975-2000

	Brides			Grooms		
	Single	Divorced	Widowed	Single	Divorced	Widowed
	<i>Percentages</i>					
Gretna						
1975	88	11	1	92	8	0
1980	65	33	2	60	35	5
1985	61	37	3	57	40	3
1990	60	37	3	58	40	3
1995	61	36	2	60	38	2
2000	60	38	2	60	38	2
Scotland						
1975	86	10	4	86	11	4
1980	83	14	3	82	15	3
1985	80	17	3	78	19	3
1990	78	20	2	77	21	3
1995	73	25	2	72	25	3
2000	71	27	2	70	28	2

**Table 4: Marriages at Gretna, 2000,
country of residence of brides and grooms**

	Brides	Grooms
Total	5,278	5,278
England	3,817	3,837
Scotland	747	754
Wales	237	239
Northern Ireland	170	168
Isle of Man	7	7
Channel Islands	6	6
Eire	45	42
USA	43	36
Netherlands	37	38
Australia	36	34
Germany	35	32
France	24	19
Canada	16	15
Belgium	11	10
Switzerland	9	8
Sweden	6	4
Others	32	29