



Guide to Old Parish Registers

What are OPRs?

OPRs are the records of baptisms, marriages (including banns) and burials kept by individual parishes of the Established Church (Church of Scotland) before the introduction of civil registration in 1855.



The parish minister (or the session clerk) usually assumed responsibility for maintaining the registers but, as there was no standard format employed, record keeping varied enormously from parish to parish and from year to year.

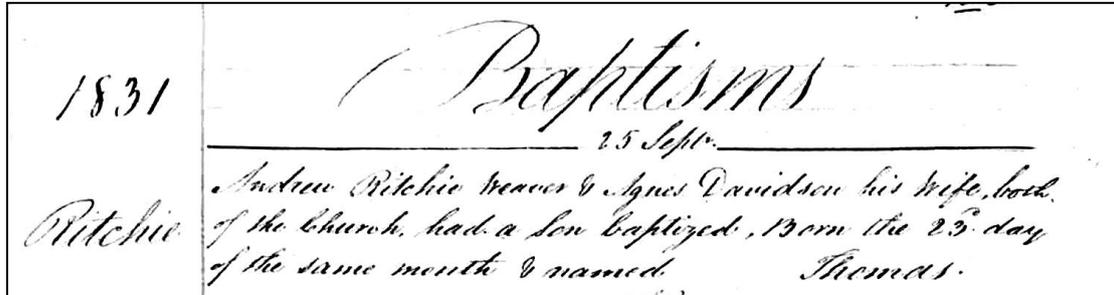
As a result the information may be sparse, unreliable and difficult to read. The oldest register dates from 1553 (baptisms and banns from Errol, Perthshire), but although parishes were required to record baptisms and marriages from 1552, many did not commence until much later. Some remote areas only have registers from the early 19th century onwards, also some registers have been lost or destroyed and the condition of the surviving 3,500 is variable. The General Register Office for Scotland holds the surviving original registers.

Registration in Church of Scotland's registers was costly and unpopular, so many people did not bother to register events at all. Rapid urbanisation during the 19th century contributed to the diminishing influence of the Church and a decrease in registration in these areas.

For the 19th century onwards, it is estimated that as few as 30% of events occurring were actually being recorded for some urban parishes.

OPR Baptisms

An entry in a baptismal register is the record by the Kirk that a child has been baptised. With high infant mortality, it is not surprising to see that babies were often baptised very soon after birth.



Example record

On the best records, **you may hope to find:**

- name of the child,
- whether legitimate or not,
- date of baptism (and/or date of birth),
- father's name,
- mother's name and maiden surname,
- place or parish of residence,
- occupation of the father,
- names (and sometimes occupations) of witnesses.

However, in some cases you may find that:



- the mother's name is not recorded at all,
- the father's name is not given (often indicating illegitimacy),
- handwriting on the record is almost impossible to read.

You can **use the information found** on an OPR baptism entry to further your search by:

- using the parents' names to help pinpoint a marriage,
- record information on witnesses (if any are given), since these can be invaluable in determining relationships,
- use the location of the baptism to track down the family through census records,
- it was quite common, in an era of high infant mortality, to name a subsequent child after a dead sibling, so check that you have the correct child's entry.

OPR Banns & Marriages

Proclamation of Banns

The proclamation of banns is the notice of a marriage, read out in the Kirk before the marriage took place. Couples or their 'cautioners' (sponsors) were often required to pay a 'caution' to prove they were seriousness about marriage. Forthcoming marriages were meant to be proclaimed on three successive Sundays, but in practice all three proclamations could be made on the same day on payment of a fee. If the bride and groom lived in different parishes, the impending marriage was proclaimed in both parishes.

Parish registers will either record the date of the proclamation of banns or the date of the marriage itself – although it is often the date of the marriage itself which is given. There is no indication given in the index as to whether the entry is a proclamation or a marriage. In rare cases, both dates will appear.

1853	<p style="text-align: center; font-size: 1.2em;"><i>Marriages</i></p> <hr/> <p><i>Pauls & Main</i> James Falls and Francis Main in this Parish having been regularly proclaimed were married on the 17th Feb by Mr Stevenson.</p>
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Example record

The amount of information recorded can be variable and most entries contain very little detail.

A more detailed record may contain:

- date of the proclamation of intended marriage,
- date of marriage,
- names of bride and groom and their parish of residence,
- occupation of the groom,
- the name of the bride's father.

However, at a minimum you may only find the names of the bride and groom along with a date.

You can **use the information** in a marriage record to further your search by:

- looking for the baptism record of the bride and groom
- using the location of the marriage to search for the bride and groom in earlier census records

OPR Burials

Of all the OPR records, those of deaths and/or burials are acknowledged to be the most sparsely kept. Since there was no requirement to record these, a great many parishes simply did not bother and of those that did, many have not survived.

<i>Name</i>	<i>Funerals in 1895</i>	<i>Disorder</i>	<i>Age</i>
<i>Vernon</i>	<i>Mary, Spouse of Alex^r Limes, Ship-builder N. Leith, died the 22nd & was buried 25th Septem^r - 6 P.M. from St. Stonies Stone</i>	<i>Lock'd Saw</i>	<i>Years 39</i>

Example record



The amount of information recorded can be variable and most entries contain very little detail.

More often than not you will find only the name of the person who has died, with a date (occasionally also a surname). This can make it extremely difficult to confirm you have the correct person when looking for earlier records.

Sometimes you will find **extra information**, including:

- the name of a relative (e.g. spouse, father)
- the place or parish of residence,
- the occupation of the person/father/spouse,
- occasionally a register will give cause of death and age at death.

Deaths/burials of married women **can be referred to** in various ways:

- by their married name (unusual in Scottish records outside the census),
- by their maiden name, (e.g. "Mary Murray, wife of Thos Low, Alyth"),
- merely as Mrs with no first name given e.g. "Mrs Easton", or as Mrs using the husband's name e.g. "Mrs William Hackney",
- simply as someone's wife e.g. "James Murray's wife"
- as a widow with no first name given e.g. "Widow Graham", or "Relict of Samuel Wilkie, surgeon"

In the case of a stillborn child or one who has not lived long, there is usually no name given at all, e.g. "a male child".

Use the information you find on an OPR burials record to further your search:

- any mention of a parent's name can help to pinpoint an earlier birth/baptism