

1. Tracing Scottish Deaths before 1855

Before the start of Statutory Registration in 1855 there was no prescribed method of recording deaths, as there was no legal requirement for anybody to be informed when a person died. Apart from the family and friends, in many cases the only people to know of a death, unless it was caused by foul play, were the minister and the grave-digger. From the point of view of the genealogist and family historian there are five main sources of information for these earlier deaths or burials, some more useful than others. These are the Mortcloth Accounts in the Kirk Session Minutes, Death or Burial entries in the Old Parish Registers, Gravedigger's notebooks, newspaper notices and obituaries, and of course, Monumental Inscriptions. The Mortcloth was used to drape the coffin, or in early times to cover the shroud if no coffin was used, and was owned by the Kirk Session. There was usually a very 'posh' one, velvet, trimmed, and only used by the wealthy. The normal one was cheaper, and was in some cases the earlier, more expensive one, which had been recycled and reworked. There was sometimes also a child's one. Mortcloth Accounts are usually found in the Kirk Session Minutes which are held in the National Archives of Scotland. They may be in the main body of the minutes, or in the accounts pages. The researcher has to be very careful when working with mortcloth entries, in some cases they are entered under the name of the deceased, and at other times under the name of the person who actually paid the bill for the mortcloth. This can usually be ascertained by careful inspection of the records, but the actual bill for the use of the mortcloth may, of course, not have been paid until some time after the death, - sometimes even up to a couple of years later. Death and Burial entries in the Old Parish Registers are patchy. Some Parishes such as Elgin and Drainie have records covering much of the late 18th and early 19th century, most parishes have occasional entries over a period of 50 years or so, whilst some such as Spynie and Cromdale have none at all. In general these only give a name, a date and sometimes a place, very few, like the mortcloth entries, give ages. A complete list of the surviving records can be found in the new edition of "The Parishes, Registers and Registrars of Scotland", published by SAFHS. Very occasionally one will come across a gravedigger's notebook. These are sometimes held in the National Archives along with the Kirk Session Minutes, some are held by the church, and some are passed on from one gravedigger to the next. It is quite interesting trying to track these down, and even in these modern times you may find that the "wee mannie" on the digger in the graveyard has a pocket-book full of useful information. Some quite interesting conversations can result from a few simple questions. Newspaper notices and obituaries tend to favour the better off, as they really did not come into general use in Scotland until after the 1855 Registration Act. Some of the better-off families, however, even as early as the 1770's would put mentions of deaths in the newspapers, and it is also possible, by reading through the "Local News" section, or its equivalent, to find other mentions of deaths. If you are seeking a particular

death you do, of course, need to have a good idea of the date, and beware, it is so easy to get sidetracked into wasting many hours reading the other articles in these old papers! Very rarely you may find personal correspondence relating to a death, such as a brief intimation written from Relugas in 1829.

And then there are Monumental Inscriptions. These will, of course, only relate to those families who had enough money to actually employ a monumental mason to inscribe and erect a tombstone. A brief comparison of death records for one Moray parish with the inscriptions recorded in the parish churchyard suggested that only about 12% of deaths resulted in the erection of a tombstone, but this will obviously vary depending on the prosperity of the parish. The one advantage of a Monumental Inscription is that it will often refer not just to an individual but in many cases to an entire family, and in some cases gives a great deal more detail than a simple death record. Many churchyards and cemeteries across Scotland have been or are in the process of being recorded and published, but out of over 3500 sites in Scotland, many of them remote and isolated, only about 25% have so far been documented. There is still a lot of work for the future.

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