



RESEARCH

Resource 4: places and people

This guide has been created by Scotland's Urban Past (SUP), a five-year community-engagement project from Historic Environment Scotland.

We support communities to record, research and celebrate the history on their doorsteps.

Through our free training and resources, people of all ages can discover and share the fascinating stories of Scotland's towns and cities.

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Places and people

In this guide you will find information about, and links to, a range of research resources in which data about places and people has been collected over time or on specific occasions. These resources are fully or partly available online and are also available in local reference libraries or archives.

Gazetteers old and new

Gazetteers are geographical encyclopaedias containing information about the topography, archaeology and history of places, including industrial sites and many other features. They are very useful sources for finding out who owned land in the past and establishing what administrative areas the land belonged to – important first steps in investigating the history of settlements and landscapes.

Francis H Groome's Ordnance Gazetteer of Scotland (1882–5) is a volume to look out for in your local studies library or archive. The [second edition](#) (1892–6) has been digitised and is available online. A modern, internet-based [Gazetteer for Scotland](#), which includes Groome's text, was created by the University of Edinburgh in 1995.

Statistical Accounts of Scotland

The Statistical Accounts of Scotland are very useful sources for researching changes to urban and rural places and landscapes. They contain detailed descriptions of every parish in Scotland during three time periods.

First Statistical Account

The First, or 'Old', Statistical Account (1791–9), was established to investigate what effect the agricultural improving movement had on Scotland. It contains many descriptions of traditional, pre-improvement farming practices, as well as descriptions of improved and experimental methods of agriculture.

Second Statistical Account

The Second, or 'New', Statistical Account (1834–45) was compiled during the Industrial Revolution when the country was experiencing a period of great economic change.

Third Statistical Account

The Third Statistical Account (1951–92) was begun shortly after the Second World War and gives an excellent account of the changes experienced in post-war rural and urban Scotland.

The Statistical Accounts are available in the local studies sections of local authority libraries and archives; the ['Old' and 'New' Statistical Accounts](#) have also been digitised and are available online (choose the non-subscribers option).

Valuation Rolls

The Lands Valuation (Scotland) Act of 1854 established Assessors' offices in each royal burgh and county in Scotland. The Assessors produced annual rolls showing which properties were liable to pay local taxation (or 'domestic rates' as they were known). The Assessors' records are useful for buildings research: they record property type, name of owner(s), name of tenants (or sometimes sub-tenants) and rateable value of the property. Until the mid twentieth century, they also usually recorded the occupation of the owners or occupiers of a building. The Valuation Rolls cover only commercial buildings from 1990 onwards.

Valuation Roll books are arranged by district, parish, town or village, and street name alphabetically and then by building number. The original books are available in archives or public libraries (it varies across Scotland); they can also be accessed via [ScotlandsPeople](#), but this requires you to sign up and pay for credit to access records.

Census returns

Census returns hold a wealth of information, including name, age, occupation, place of birth of each individual living at or visiting at each property on the census date. Census returns are arranged by street name, not alphabetically by name.

The latest census that you can currently access is from 1911. Census records are closed for 100 years under Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002.

Like Valuation Rolls, individual addresses can be found in the original census books by looking for district, parish, town or village, street name alphabetically and then building number. Index books are available to help you with this.

The original books are available in archives or public libraries (it varies across Scotland); they can also be accessed via [ScotlandsPeople](#) but this requires you to sign up and pay for credit to access records.

Post Office Directories

Post Office Directories are the earlier equivalent of the telephone directory and Yellow Pages. They were published annually from the late eighteenth century until the middle of the twentieth century; later editions also include telephone numbers.

Individuals and businesses paid to be included in their local directory, and a directory listing reflected a certain social and financial status, so the directory cannot be viewed as giving a comprehensive overview of the entire population.

The National Library of Scotland has digitised many directories dating up to and including 1912 and has made these [directories accessible online](#). However, the coverage of digitised directories is not yet comprehensive for all of Scotland, so look for the original paper editions in larger public libraries and archives, as well as the directories dating from after 1912.

Post Office Directories usually contain three distinct directory sections:

- the **general directory**, which lists private individuals and companies arranged alphabetically by surname or company name

- the **street directory**, which lists streets alphabetically and buildings by number within each street
- the **trade directory**, which lists private individuals and companies arranged alphabetically by name under trades and professions including, among many:
 - mason
 - joiner
 - plumber
 - dressmaker
 - music teacher
 - university lecturer
 - minister
 - merchant
 - warehouseman
 - writer (solicitor)

Following these three sections, most directories also contain comprehensive listings of local MPs, council officials, educational, charitable and religious institutions, military and recreational organisations and their personnel as well as local information including holidays, postal and customs charges, and maps.

Other directories to look out for include the County Directory of Scotland, published in ten editions between 1862 and 1912; later editions are more informative than earlier ones, and the Directory to Gentlemen's Seats, Villages &c, in Scotland, published in three editions between 1845 and the 1860s.

Police Commissioners Committee records

Police Commissioners were established in the early nineteenth century in urban areas across Scotland. They were responsible for both policing and maintaining streets as well as introducing and overseeing public utilities such as street cleaning, lighting, water and sanitation. Police Commissioner Committee records give details of discussions and action on poor drainage, the introduction of street lighting and gas, developing and naming new streets and sanitation in buildings. These records can be found in local archives.

Local and parish histories

Parish histories can be used to research urban and rural history. The older publications often contain anecdotal information about archaeological sites, local customs and folklore that is no longer common knowledge.

A wide range of local history pamphlets and books is available for most parts of Scotland, in the local studies section of your library, in your local archive or museum. Pamphlets can also be found online, either digitised in public or private collections or offered for sale. A broad selection of locally published pamphlets can also be found in the [Historic Environment Scotland search room](#) at John Sinclair House.

Registers of Sasine

Registers of Sasine record the transfer of land in Scotland between 1617 and 1981, when the system was replaced by a new system called Registration of Title. These are useful records for tracing the sale of land and properties, but do not generally contain information about specific settlements or rented properties (with the exception of some larger rented properties, which may be included).

The National Records of Scotland holds a complete set of registers for the whole country. Registers for individual counties are also held by local libraries and archives. There are indexes for the whole country from 1781 onwards; prior to this date, indexing is less systematic. You can carry out an online search with the [UK Land Registry Search \(UKLRS\)](#) (this is a subscription service).

Local history research and writing guides

Adams, I H 1976–7

Sources for Scottish Local History 5: Estate Plans, *Local Historian* 12

Dymond, David 1988

Writing Local History: A Practical Guide, Chichester: Phillimore

Hey, David 1996

The Oxford Companion to Local and Family History, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Hoskins, W G 1982

Fieldwork in Local History, 2nd edn, London: Faber and Faber

Moody, David 1986

Scottish Local History: An Introductory Guide, London: Batsford

Riches, Anne & Stell, Geoffrey (eds) 1992

Materials and Traditions in Scottish Building: Essays in Memory of Sonia Hackett,
Edinburgh: Scottish Vernacular Buildings Working Group, Regional and Thematic
studies 2

Riden, Philip 1983

Local History: A Handbook for Beginners, London: Batsford

Riden, Philip 1987

Record Sources for Local History, London: Batsford

Scottish Record Office 1994

*Tracing Scottish Local History: A Guide to Local History Research in the Scottish
Record Office*, Edinburgh: Mercat Press

Notes

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Scotland's Urban Past

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Scottish Charity No. SC045925



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