

The Old Parish Registers of Haddington – a look behind the scenes

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Many may be encouraged on hearing the view that family history is now quick and easy to research – but is this true? What will you get for time, energy and perhaps money spent if you indulge in the “fast food” of genealogy – or is there more to it?

It is certainly true that a great deal can now be accomplished in tracing your family history without even leaving your own computer. Through internet resources, you can find out what other research has been done on a particular surname or family and perhaps locate relatives world-wide of whom you had no knowledge. You can exchange information and find out about enumerable subjects on a huge selection of websites. There are also many indexes and transcriptions of records and a growing number of digitised records – presently statutory certificates of birth, marriage and death, census returns, testaments and kirk session records, with Old Parish Registers and sasines to come. And you have access to catalogues of holdings of records in archives and libraries round the world.

All this is wonderful – but some words of warning are necessary. A shared surname is not necessarily a proof of kinship. Just as many think that anything in print must be right, so now anything that appears online is believed to be true – alas - a vast misconception in a world where enthusiasm often outruns accuracy. Many cuckoos have made their way into ancestral nests through unquestioning acceptance of what is found online. And above all, reliance on index entries alone can be disastrous.

Statutory registers will, of course, be the first port of call – now accessible to all (and at a reasonable cost) on the *Scotlandspeople* website. (www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk) Since January 1855, it has been a statutory requirement that all births, deaths and marriage should be registered. In Scotland we are very fortunate in that these certificates provide a great deal of information and on the whole, the level of truth in providing the details for certificates is high. The decennial census returns, 1841-1901, now online, also provide a wealth of information and intimate details.

The year 1855, however, is an important dividing line - a "before and after" date for family historians - as the Old Parish Registers, which form our chief source of genealogical information before the introduction of statutory registration, are a very different kettle of fish. Even before the Reformation in 1560, the Church was issuing orders that records of marriage and birth and also of burial should be kept in all parishes and, in fact, this remained a so-called legal requirement but it was impossible to enforce it. Burial records were the least well kept. There are many gaps in all the registers or missing volumes. The loss of registers was sometimes attributed to lawyers who removed them as evidence for legal cases and forgot to return them: fire, mice, spring-cleaning by a minister's wife and water destroyed or harmed many volumes and the session clerks or ministers who kept the records were not always very competent.

The other characteristic of the parish registers is that, in fact, there was no set form of recording details and everything depended on the whim of the session clerk. In a baptism you may find just the name of the father, the date of baptism and the name of the child. On the other hand, you may be also provided with the maiden name of the child's mother, occupation of father, residence, date of child's birth and names of witnesses to the baptism. A proclamation may give just the names of the two parties concerned and the parish in which they resided or, at best, it will name the parents of the woman and very occasionally of the man, give his occupation, and list witnesses.

Haddington registers (of birth, marriage and death) all start in 1619. The birth register continues unbroken till 1854, except for one leaf destroyed in January 1646, and a blank from May 1646 to September 1650 and there were just two entries between March 1710 and January 1711. Burials were only recorded for the years 1619-1622.

From a first survey of these records, it appeared that they were well and regularly kept, though not too generous in providing detail. The baptismal entries gave the name of the child, the names of the child's parents (including the maiden name of the mother) and one bonus - the names of witnesses - which are often important in establishing clues about other members of the family. There were no details of the father's occupation or where the family lived. In 1701 there was a change in

handwriting, indicating the induction of a new session clerk but the form of entry remained the same.

The impression gained of the Haddington parish registers was that they were not very interesting. The information provided was rather basic and there were few idiosyncrasies in the registers - such as the inclusion of remarks on crops or the weather, a cure for the bite of a mad dog or attempts to find the age of the moon. There was however one interesting feature. Bound with one volume of the Haddington parish registers there was a separate additional small record of baptisms covering the years February 1713 to March 1724. This provided details of some baptisms not included in the main record but the most interesting aspect of this extra register was that the occupation of the child's father was given, as well as the residence of the family and it was immediately noticeable that a large number of entries concerned the children of soldiers. Most were dragoons in Carpenter's Regiment – a few were described as in the Royal Regiment of Greys.

It seemed that over this period of time – and possibly for longer – the register after 1724 omitted details of the father's occupation – Haddington was the home of a great many soldiers. What was happening? What effect did this have on the lives of the people who lived in Haddington? Who was Carpenter? And what was his regiment? Did the soldiers marry local girls or were they already married and followed by their wives?

Reference to *Dictionary of National Biography* showed that Lieutenant General George Carpenter was born in 1657 and died in 1732. He was a general of some renown and fought with distinction in various campaigns including in Ireland, and on the continent. By 1703 he was a colonel in the Royal Regiment of Dragoons which had several names, being also known as the King's Own Hussars or Scots Greys. Carpenter became Commander-in-Chief of the army in Scotland in 1719. The official website of the Regiment stated: "From 1715-1742 the regiment soldiered at home, engaging in nothing more exciting than anti-smuggling duty" - but in fact this did not describe fully the impact of the arrival of the army on local communities where the soldiers were stationed!

War had come close to those who lived in Haddington in 1715. Carpenter had moved north in October of that year to confront the Jacobite forces and arrived at Jedburgh, but then following the Scots back to England. After the failure of the rebellion, garrisons were established up and down Scotland, including in Edinburgh and it is clear that there were also concentrations of troops at Haddington, Duns and Kelso. The soldiers were billeted in people's houses which was not popular.

Many of the soldiers must have been English and names of those described in the parish register as dragoons bear this out – Ellingsworth, Ashton, Kniklow, Bates or Lincoln – though Scottish names were also well represented – Nicolson, Lindsay, Stevenson, Litster, Yeaman, for example. There is no way of finding out how often the detachments of men were moved but looking at the records of children born to soldiers in Haddington between 1713 and 1724 it is noticeable that there were few couples who registered more than one child over this period, which may point to frequent relocation of units.

A study of the kirk session minutes for Haddington then produced some very interesting details about life in the town at this time. The kirk session till about the second half of the nineteenth century was one of the most important authorities in local society. Its main responsibility was in overseeing the moral welfare of the parishioners and this included dealing with cases of moral indiscipline – fornication, adultery, illegitimacy, irregular marriages and breaking of the Sabbath – but the care of the poor and maintenance of the schools were also its remit. The Haddington kirk session minutes go back to 1629 and continue with few breaks till the nineteenth century. (The kirk session records can be studied in the National Archives of Scotland).

It was clear from turning the pages of the minutes in the mid 1720's that the local girls were certainly "accommodating" to the soldiery. The dragoons – an elite corps - on their grey horses and in uniforms of scarlet with long square-skirted coats, blue waistcoats and linen cravats - may have brought some glamour into the lives of the country lasses and the local boys seem to have been out of favour. The kirk session minutes record entry after entry concerned with the appearances of sinners before them and the place of repentance on Sabbaths must have been kept occupied.

8 March 1713: Mary Wood, fornicator with Richard Rylie, soldier.

21 February 1714: Agnes Belches fornicator with Thomas Horscraft, soldier (Three years later she was again summoned to answer for relapse fornication with Dinnis McFarlane, a dragoon in Carpenter's regiment).

28 February 1716: Jean Edingstoun called to answer the session on an accusation of relapse in fornication with Patrick Hepburn, a dragoon.

These are only a few of the cases cited. The session were relentless in tracking down the culprits. In 1716 Isabel Greenfield was accused of being involved in scandalous behaviour with a dragoon named Patrick Bolton. She had subsequently gone to Newcastle and entered into service there but came back home to see her mother. Her return was immediately noticed and she was summoned before the session to account for keeping such bad company, despite her mother's efforts. In a minute of the kirk session on 18 April 1727 it was reported that many in Haddington indulged in indecent and scandalous behaviour by sitting in the streets and walking in the fields on the Sabbath day. This was termed an offensive and disorderly practice.

Inevitably many of these liaisons resulted in the births of illegitimate children - a matter of considerable concern to the kirk session which was responsible for the care of the poor. If no father could be traced to contribute to the maintenance of a child, then this child might become a burden on the very limited funds of the session. The fact that so many of the putative fathers were soldiers who were not local men and therefore difficult to trace, presented a problem. By 1724 the situation had become so serious that the matter was laid before the Presbytery of Haddington. They reported back to the Kirk session -

"Complaints being brought from diverse places of the offence given by many of the soldiery, their being guilty of cursing, swearing and other immoralities, application was ordered to be made to the Commander in Chief for a due execution of the Articles of War in these matters. And it is referred to the Commission (i.e. the Assembly) to do what they can, as a remedie to this evil. And when such shall happen, it is desired that Presbyteries, Ministers and Sessions may apply to the Commanding Officer in the place thereanent."

The Haddington session then requested the commanding officer of the dragoons to order his men to appear when faced with charges before the session. The officer demurred and indicated that this was a new situation with which he was faced and he was not sure that he could do this. The session later reinforced their request by asking the commanding officer of the dragoons to appear before them in person but again there was no co-operation. Finally in 1727 the burgh magistrates who had been co-opted to add their weight to the recommendations of the Presbytery, reported that they had demanded soldiers to appear before them to answer charges but were told bluntly that the commander of dragoons in Haddington had orders from Brigadier Groaves, chief of His Majesty's forces in Scotland, not to allow soldiers under his command to attend on church judicators or to submit to any church discipline.

From the scant details given in the Haddington register, it is not clear whether the marriages concerned soldiers and local girls but there were certainly a great many irregular marriages. A regular marriage was one for which there had been publication of banns and which was performed by a minister of religion in the presence of witnesses. There were several kinds of irregular marriage, all of which were quite legal. The most common form of irregular marriage was by consent before witnesses and celebrated by someone other than the parish minister and without proclamation of banns. The church did not like these irregular marriages which often only came to light when the first child was born to a couple who were then usually summoned to appear before the session, fined and absolved.

In the Haddington kirk session minutes there are many references to such marriages, which do not appear in the parish register. Sometimes it seems that the couple settled down – Pierre Lincolne, a sergeant in Carpenter's regiment, married Janet Blaikie irregularly in 1715 and there is a record of at least one child born to them in Haddington in 1720 but in other cases, matters did not go so smoothly. Agnes Charles was sent for by a dragoon in Duns named James Johnson, who had thoughtfully provided a horse for her transport and she spent two days with him. They had what was termed a "pretended marriage" but afterwards he robbed her of her clothes and money amounting to 100 merks. In 1717, Jean Thomson confessed that she had married Richard Kendall the previous year but that he had run away from her and had taken the testificate of their marriage with him.

There were a number of entries in connection with a long-running case concerning a certain Isobel Windram who, in September 1726, was called before the Haddington kirk session to answer accusations of scandalous behaviour with some dragoons at Laurencehouse. Isobel had intended to go to Edinburgh to be married to a dragoon named William Coall but instead she met up with William and two of his fellow soldiers for a drink in Haddington. One of these dragoons suggested that there was no need to go to Edinburgh as he could perform the ceremony and had done so on earlier occasions. Isobel consented and he read out the words of the English ceremony from a prayer book. Afterwards those present said that they would not attest the marriage unless they saw them in bed. The company present all duly went upstairs, where William cast off his clothes and Isobel, more modestly, took off her gown and as the minute recounts "threw the bedsheet over her." The witnesses then put out the candle and went downstairs. Later, when standing before the session, Isobel is said to have produced letters from Coall terming himself "your loving husband" – and Isobel said she was content to have this irregular marriage regularised.

This, however, was not the end of the matter. In April of the following year William Croall was interviewed by the session about his marriage to Isobel Windram and he declared that he was drunk when he was allegedly married to her. He admitted he gave her a paper signifying that he had gone through a ceremony but he claimed that this was only to please her parents. Another soldier was brought in as a witness to support William's testimony and said that he never saw the marriage but that William was "beastly drunk and throwen into a bed." He recalled that the couple could not have been carnally guilty and that he and another soldier "had enough a-do to carry the said William home to his quarters." Frustratingly, the minutes do not record what ultimately happened to this couple.

What then is the more general relevance of this research and how does it affect our evaluation of the parish registers as a source for genealogy? The first answer is that it shows that there is more to research than looking at indexes or single entries in a register. Quick and easy answers found on a computer, giving names and dates of ancestors, cannot provide any comprehension of the quality of life in the area at the time and the effect of such events as war or other upheavals.

This foray into Haddington's sometimes seamy past has highlighted the fact that there were many births and baptisms, especially of illegitimate children, and a large number of irregular marriages which were **not** recorded in the Old Parish Registers. Looking behind the scenes revealed considerable deficiencies in the parish registers (in common with most other parish registers). In this case, clues in one section of the Haddington parish registers led to a search of the kirk session minutes and revealed the reason for a lack of entries for many marriages and births in the first half of the eighteenth century. This further research also provided a detailed picture of the on-goings in the town at the time.

When researching family history before 1855, the OPRs provide the first hunting ground but they are most valuable in serving as a springboard for further research in other records. Looking beyond the parish registers, the evidence given to the local kirk session provided a fascinating insight into the social history of the time – reporting what people said, what their background was and how they behaved. There were also indicators to movements of the population, with girls marrying soldiers and presumably many of them following their men when they were drafted elsewhere. It is clear that considering the lives of people in their time context is therefore very important. But looking at where people lived and what they did is also necessary when doing your family sleuthing as this will determine what additional records there are which might be useful and interesting. Think laterally, indulge your curiosity, follow the clues of the ancestral detective trail and you will find the results unexpected and most rewarding.