



HISTORY

Tracking the dead

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When you locate the death of an ancestor, it is the end of a life but not the end of the trail. In fact, it opens up a number of opportunities to find out more about that individual.

After 1st July, 1837, it was a legal requirement to register every death, and a certificate was subsequently issued. The information we can obtain from death certificates was detailed in the last issue.

The body would be buried (or cremated since the early twentieth century), and some record of either disposal could be available. Some funeral directors keep records that can give details of the next of kin. Initial contact must be by letter, giving as much information as possible about the individual and their passing but please be patient for a reply!

Burial in a cemetery can also generate information about the grave, and possibly identify other occupants. Superintendents of municipal cemeteries keep records of burials and of each grave, whether it is a family plot or used for parish paupers.

For parish churchyards, there will be a record of the burial in the registers, but it rarely identifies all those in an individual plot. The cemetery record can identify by name and date of burial all those in a single grave, but the parish register only records the burial date, not the plot's location. A pauper's grave could contain up to ten or twelve bodies – perhaps with no family connection between them!

At some point, a gravestone may have been erected as a memorial. These monuments vary in style, detail and design according to family, location and wealth. Sometimes other members of the extended family are commemorated thereon, even if they are not buried in that grave. In particular, gravestones in Scotland are extremely detailed.

Notice of a death is often placed in a local newspaper, and it is sometimes followed up with a report of the funeral, especially if the deceased was of great age or had been a prominent citizen of the town. Such reports may also include a picture of the deceased – giving the

opportunity to see any family resemblances – and 'In Memoriam' notices may occur in the same paper in subsequent years. Often, family mourners are listed in such notices.

Sudden deaths may have required a coroner's involvement, and he would have to keep records of the proceedings in his court. However, not all coroners' records have survived and any available records are subject to a closure period, but newspapers frequently report court proceedings.

The deceased may have written a will, in which case after their death it will become a legal record. Lists of probated wills are available as National Probate

Calendars from a district probate registry or, pre-1875, are usually held in a diocesan record office.

If there is an anomaly in the will, or perhaps no will was written, then letters of administration were usually granted. These give much less detail than a will but are very useful.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a will or grant of administration (commonly called an 'admon') could necessitate the creation of an inventory of the deceased's goods. There may even survive some record of how their estate was administered by an appointed individual. These items give an insight into the cost of living, the size of the property and an indication of how our ancestors lived in the past.

Land records and electoral records may show the change of ownership or occupation of a property owned or rented by the deceased.

Calculating the deceased's year of death from the age recorded on the death certificate or in the burial record can span a period during which a census was taken. On a census, the details of the deceased and their family may be seen, and new lines of enquiry become available.

So, a death is far from a dead end! Understanding the various records mentioned above will require you to follow this series through the coming year. My next article will hopefully explain the intricacies of the census.



The end of a life
can result in a
whole new trail
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