

Family history research — maps ...

by Andrew Matheson

The real joy of family history research is not simply in identifying your ancestors and other relatives, but finding out more about their lives. Where did they live? What were conditions like in those communities one, two or more centuries ago?

Once you link your relatives to a place, old maps are a great window into their lives. They help you understand what a place was like in the past, and help flesh out your ancestors' stories.

Where did they live?

First you have to find out where your relatives lived. Start with official records such as censuses and birth, marriage and death registration. Comprehensive censuses of Scotland and England started in 1841, but for some areas there are earlier surveys or censuses. Scottish statutory civil registration of births, deaths and marriages started in 1855, but earlier records were kept by the established Church of Scotland.

ScotlandsPeople has useful [guides](#) to what records are available and where to find them.

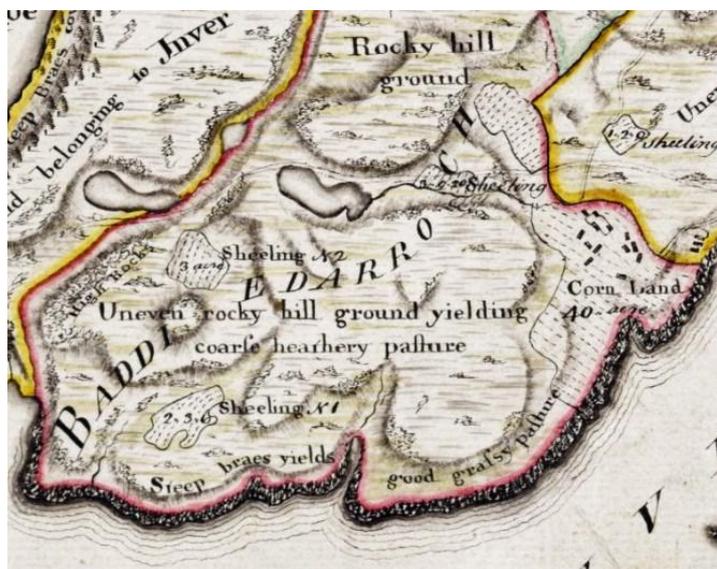
Don't overlook other documents such as letters and postcards, if you're lucky enough to have them. This can help you find distant cousins — other descendants of your ancestors — who may hold valuable information to help you with your research.

Tracing a family

My direct Matheson ancestors lived in a tiny settlement now spelled Baddidaroch, on the shores of Loch Inver in Assynt, Sutherland. Maps can help us zoom in on where they lived and where descendants of this line moved to.

When John Home published his landmark *Survey of Assynt* in 1774 Angus Matheson was probably just a few years old, and his parents (probably Hugh and possibly Katherine) were living in one of the buildings depicted on this map. It's just amazing to think that I can see where their home was nearly 250 years ago.

A separate list of inhabitants from the same year tallies just six houses at the 'town' of Baddydarroch and one at 'Little Baddydarroch' that was inhabited by Hugh Matheson, his wife, two children and a servant. The John Home map shows 13 buildings, which might include barns and stables as well as houses.



Portion of John Home's 1774 map of Assynt showing Baddidaroch on the shores of Loch Inver



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A map made nearly 20 years later, in 1793, shows Baddidarroch with only six houses, though whether the buildings shown are exact or just to depict a village we don't know. It's possible that John Home's map showed all buildings and the second map showed only houses.

By the time this second map was drawn in 1793 Angus was an adult and had married Isobel McLeod, and their son (also called Angus) was about one year old. They were living in this tiny settlement of Baddidarroch in one of the houses depicted on the 1793 map, and again it's incredible to 'see' the house they lived in.

Matheson descendants continued to live in Baddidarroch and the croft stayed in family hands until the 1960s. Several New Zealand descendants have travelled there to visit what is now croft 67 and the house generations of Mathesons lived in.



*Baddie Darroch in a 1793 map
(not oriented to the north)*

Maps, photos and family stories combine to breathe life into the story of our ancestors

We don't know how old the existing house is, but it's certainly the one shown in a photo from about 1900.

The gentleman waving his hat is called, you guessed it, Angus Matheson, who was nephew of the younger Angus mentioned above and grandson of the earlier Angus. It does get very confusing.



*The Matheson croft house at
Baddidarroch in about 1900*

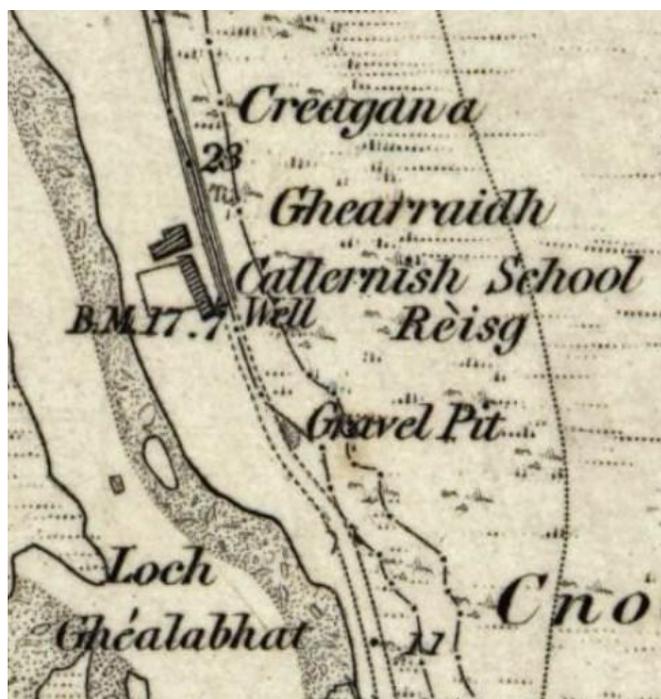


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In 1822 the younger Angus mentioned earlier — not the one in the photo but the son of Angus Matheson and Isobel McLeod — married Kathrine McLeod from the nearby settlement of Balchladich.

A few years later they moved to the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides. Angus was a teacher in the Gaelic school system, and after teaching in several places on the island the family settled at Callanish where they lived for the better part of 40 years.

A map drawn in 1853, about half way through their time there, shows the school and what is most likely to be the adjacent school teacher's house. We know from a description of Callanish written in the same year that the school and the inn were the only stone buildings with slate roofs in the village, and that otherwise it was “a small village of huts: they are built of peat sods and stone, and are thatched with straw”.



The Callanish (or Callernish; spellings vary) school and adjacent teacher's house in 1853

The school shown in the 1853 map is the very school that Angus Matheson taught in for decades. It's no longer standing, though several descendants from New Zealand have visited the site. The ruins were still visible in 1987.

Three of Angus and Kathrine's sons, including my great-grandfather Norman Matheson, moved to London in search of work and were employed in the Railway Clearing House — probably in the 1860s. I've tracked down where this organisation was located, a task made a little difficult by the fact that every street in this 1873 map now goes under a different name.

The building is still standing with its original exterior and a modernised interior. In researching this article I found a 1900 map that confirms this office's location.



Location of the Railway Clearing House in London on an 1873 map



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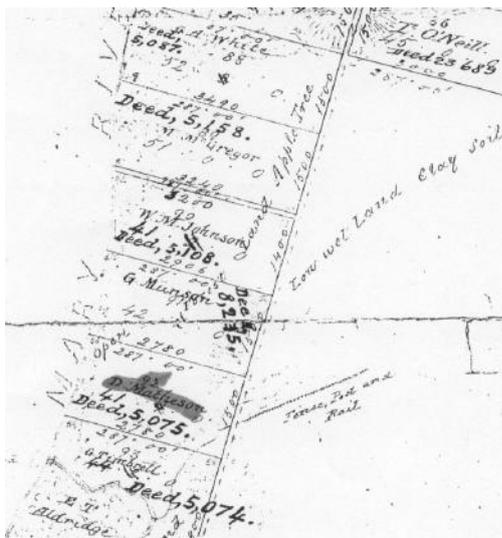
Back on the Isle of Lewis, after Norman's mother Kathrine was widowed she moved from Callanish to live with family in Keith Street in Stornoway.

By cross-checking census records with maps I have been able to locate and visit the site. This map from 1897 was made just two years after Kathrine died in the house of her daughter, son-in-law and grandchildren. The house is still standing.



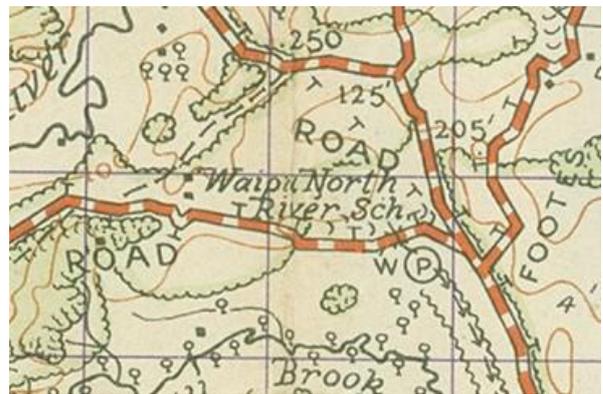
After he worked in the Railway Clearing House in London, her son Norman migrated to Australia in the 1860s where he lived for a time with his brother Donald and family on the banks of the Mary River in Queensland, near the modern town of Maryborough.

A survey (cadastral) map of the time shows us where. Again, New Zealand descendants have visited this spot.



From Australia Norman travelled to New Zealand to visit his sister at the Scottish settlement of Waipu.

His stay was longer than he originally intended, as he met and married Ann McDonald of Waipu and the couple settled in the district. Like his father Norman turned to school teaching, and his first post was at North River School. The building is no longer standing but this 1943 map shows where it was located.



Old maps allow you to follow generations of your family and see into the communities they lived in. It's like having a time-travelling drone that can hover over their homes.

If you're lucky enough to be able to go on an 'ancestry journey', do your research before departing and you'll be rewarded with visiting the very houses, schools, workplaces or churches that were central to your relatives' lives. Google Street View may well let you see in advance what the area looks like today.

Historical maps are like a time-travelling drone hovering over your relatives' homes



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Tips for finding maps

Search to find collections of old maps for the area you're interested in. The National Library of Scotland has an amazing [online map collection](#). You can search or browse, and even compare maps of different dates in a split-screen viewer. Their collection of more than 260,000 maps doesn't cover only Scotland, but also England, Wales and other countries.

The NLS site has a lot of functions that take time to learn. There are some useful guides on how to use the site, such as [here](#) and [here](#).

Many Scots settled in London, either temporarily or permanently. [The Underground Map](#) has maps of the city from the 1750s to the 1950s. You can zoom in on an area and scroll between available maps from different eras to see how the city has changed.

New Zealand is less well served with online historical maps. [MapsPast](#) overlays maps of different ages and [New Zealand Heritage Maps](#) has some South Island maps. The University of Auckland has an [online collection](#) of historical maps. None of these sites is particularly easy to use.

If you know of any other useful sites for historical maps, please share tips on our [family history forum](#) or [Facebook group](#).

Tips for using maps

- Use records such as censuses, military enrolments and birth, death and marriage records to find where your ancestors lived.
- Diaries and letters can also be very useful.
- Match your relatives' addresses to maps of the relevant time.
- Be alert for streets being renamed and houses renumbered.

