

Family history research — photos ...

by Andrew Matheson

In the last issue we looked at how historical maps are a window into *where* our ancestors lived. Historical photographs are an insight into *how* they lived — what life was like in their towns, villages or countryside, the occupations they carried out and if you're very lucky, your relatives themselves.

For Scotland the National Library of Scotland is a great place to start. Its collections hold more than 300,000 [images](#) dating back to the 1840s. Not all are digitised but there is still a wealth of material to explore. You can even see [movies](#) that capture 100 years of Scotland's history.

If your ancestors lived in Edinburgh you'll find plenty of relevant photos in [Capital Collections](#), the image library for Edinburgh museums, libraries and galleries.

When researching streets or buildings it is worth looking at [Canmore](#), the online catalogue to Scotland's archaeology, buildings and heritage.



*The south side of Edinburgh in 1929.
Photo: National Library of Scotland*

Most Scottish migrants to New Zealand came not from the Highlands but the Lowlands, including the urbanised and industrialised areas around Glasgow and Edinburgh, so photos of these areas may be most relevant to your family stories.



*A narrow close off 118 High Street, Glasgow, in 1868.
Photo: National Library of Scotland*

In the 1800s in Scotland's large cities many working people lived in crowded, diseased and unsanitary conditions, where typhoid fever, typhus and cholera were major killers. It's no wonder that a one-way trip to the other side of the world looked attractive.

This photo is part of a series by Thomas Annan, one of Scotland's most prominent 19th-century photographers. He was commissioned by the Glasgow city authorities to document the old town before the slum areas were demolished, and his work is a revealing but sympathetic portrayal of the lives of people in this area.

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Well before she married Angus Matheson in 1822, my great-great-grandmother Kathrine McLeod left the Highlands to keep house in Edinburgh for her newly-married brother Alexander McLeod and his wife Margaret, probably when he was studying to be a minister.

The extended family lived in a street called Horse Wynd, a wynd being a narrow cross street off a main thoroughfare.

This photo of Horse Wynd was taken in 1870 or 1871 as part of a series documenting the area shortly the buildings were demolished as part of a slum-clearing programme. Though taken about 55 years after Kathrine lived there, the view is probably very similar to how the area looked in her time.

There is more about Kathrine (later Catherine Matheson), including a photo, in the December 2020 [issue](#) of the newsletter.

[AmBaile](#) provides free content about Highland history and culture, including thousands of photos. Don't forget the [Hebridean Connections](#) website profiled elsewhere in this issue.



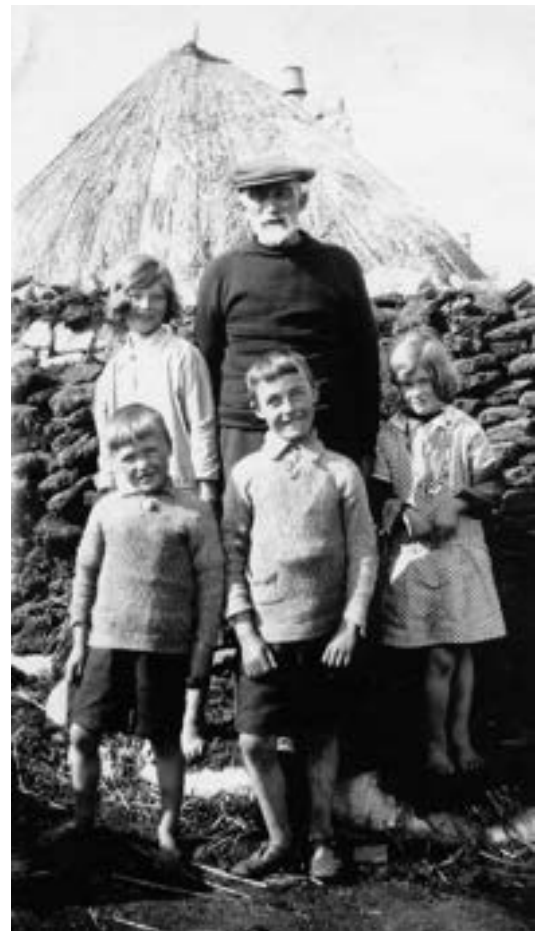
Transporting peat on the Isle of Lewis. Photo: Edinburgh Central Library via Am Bailie

Local historical societies might have useful photos. You can find Scottish ones through the [Scottish Local History Directory](#).



*Horse Wynd, Edinburgh.
Photo: Capital Connections.*

*Andrew Matheson of 15 Gravir, Pairc, Isle of Lewis
(no relation), with his grandchildren.
Photo: Pairc Historical Society*



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Commercial image libraries such as [Alamy](#) and [Getty Images](#) may be useful, but their Scottish history collections are more of historic places than old photos. [SCRAN](#) is a service of Historic Environment Scotland and has tens of thousands of images, though you're likely to have to pay to see these.

Postcards were particularly popular in the late 19th and early 20th century and are highly collectable. [Francis Frith](#) and [TuckDB](#) have good collections, and eBay is also a good source.



*Union Street in Aberdeen in 1910
Photo: Francis Frith collection*

[What was there](#) is a collaborative site where people upload their old photos that are geotagged so anyone researching a particular area can discover relevant photos.

A great feature is that you can overlay the historical photo on Google Maps street view to see what the location looks like now. There are few photos for Scotland, but you might find a gem.

Another important source of photos is your own family — close relatives and others who are researching your family. Scan and back up any photos you get hold of, and be generous in sharing them.

My great-great-great-aunt Jessie Matheson, her husband George McDonald and some of their children moved from Stornoway to Leith in the early to mid-1880s. As he was a mariner George's employment was probably the reason for moving to this port area, which is now part of greater Edinburgh.

This photo of Kirkgate in Leith was taken at about the time they moved to the mainland. It shows a scene they would have seen in their everyday life, which helps bring to life research about this part of the family.



*Kirkgate, Leith, in the 1880s
Photo: Whatwasthere*



*Jessie Matheson and George McDonald
Photo: McDonald family collection*

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And finally, you can just search or browse the web and see what turns up. You might find [colour photos](#) of Scotland from the 1890s, [private collections](#) or [archives](#). Happy hunting!

Many photographs come with conditions around reproduction and royalties. These are likely to depend on usage, for instance whether for private research or a commercial publication.

It's easy to acquire photos off the internet by using right click/save image as or by using Microsoft's [snipping tool](#), and I suspect that private (non-commercial) use of photos posted on the internet is largely tolerated. While this can be done without payment it's courteous to at least acknowledge sources.



*The Skye ferry at Kyle of Lochalsh with a precarious cargo. No bridge in those days!
Photo: National Library of Scotland*