

Why You Should Complete the 2011 Census



Photo by Reettamari
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Thirty-two year old Kirsty Wilkinson is the genealogist behind [My Ain Folk](#), a website that helps Scots trace their ancestors. We talked to her about her research, and why it's important to fill out [this year's Census](#) properly!

"I first became interested in genealogy after my grandmother died. My mum found a photo she had never seen before, and although from the age of it we thought the baby must be my grandmother, there were no names to help us identify other people in the picture.

Mum had previously done some research into the Scottish side of her family, but was restricted by living in England. I had moved to Edinburgh to study, so decided to do a little research. I quickly got hooked, and began researching other branches of my family. Eventually, I decided to turn my hobby into a profession.

I'm probably considered quite young to be a genealogist. In the past when visiting certain libraries or archives, I've felt that people were looking at me as if I'd walked into the wrong place, and I've been talked down to as if I were a schoolchild. It's not something I've experienced in recent years though.

I do think the average age of people researching their family history has come down. It's no longer just seen as a hobby for retired people and some of the most active and enthusiastic genealogists I know are in the 30s-50s age

bracket. I also know one professional genealogist who set up their business after leaving school at 18.

Traditionally, most archives and record offices have limited opening hours, e.g. Mon-Fri 9.30-4.30, which has made it difficult for working people to carry out research. What's made a huge difference is the amount of information that's now available online. Now most people can at least make a start on researching their family history from home. [Geneabloggers](#), an informal community of people who blog about genealogy, have over 1,800 blogs worldwide listed on their site and there's even a Facebook game like FarmVille which is based on researching your family.

Most archives have been slow to respond to the demand for longer opening hours, although the [ScotlandsPeople](#) Centre in Edinburgh is trialling evening and weekend opening from April this year.

I have a Postgraduate Certificate in Genealogical Studies from the University of Strathclyde and am currently working towards the Postgraduate Diploma. I am a member of the Association of Professional Genealogists (APG) and an Associate Member of the Association of Genealogists and Researcher in Archives (AGRA).

I've been running my business, My Ain Folk, since 2006. It's named after [a traditional song](#) about being away from Scotland and longing to be back with your family. A lot of my clients are descended from Scottish emigrants, so it seemed appropriate.

When I started out, I thought it would help to attract visitors to my website to have a free 'Ask the Expert' service. However, I wasn't sure I wanted to describe myself as an expert yet, so I decided to create a separate persona.

I picked Jeanie because it's a traditional Scottish name, and because it sounds similar to both Genie and Genealogy. It also comes from a family joke that in films of the 1930s-1950s

depicting a stereotypical view of Scotland, there's always a little girl called Wee Jeanie!

It's possible to trace most ordinary Scottish families back to about the 1780s or 1790s. Prior to that you need a mixture of luck, good local records, and ideally some unusual names. I have traced a few families back to the 1600s, but most of the research I do is assisting people in their own research. This may take the form of finding out about a particular individual, answering a one-off question, searching records at archives they can't access personally, or helping when people get so far and then meet a genealogical 'brick wall'.

I also get the odd unusual request. I once got an email from someone wanting help reading something written on a family tree – I was surprised when what they sent was a photograph of an actual tree with initials carved on it. Obviously there's more than one kind of family tree!

One of the major sources used for family history research are census records. The information collected has varied over time but includes name, age, marital status, relationship to head of household, occupation and place of birth. There are other records which can provide these details, such as birth, marriage and death certificates, but the main advantage of census records is that they show everyone living in a particular household on a certain day.

It's really useful to be able to tie people together like this and to have information on the relationships between people who are living together. In the past, households were often multi-generational, so you might find your grandfather recorded as a young child in the [1911 Scottish Census](#) – due to be released to the public for the first time on 5th April this year – and along with him you may find not only his parents and siblings, but perhaps a widowed grandparent and an unmarried aunt.

These households are less likely to exist today, but instead the census can provide information on unmarried couples, for whom there might be few other records, or show who was bringing up children in the case of separation or divorce.

As the census is taken every 10 years, it allows you to follow someone's life through their changing addresses, occupations and relationships. This information is useful for social and family historians, and also for house historians, who can discover the details of everyone living at a particular address, not just who owned the property.

There have been recent questions from the government about whether the census is still necessary, because there are various other ways of collecting information on the population. However, many of these sources, such as social security or health records, may be destroyed before the point where they become publicly available – either for privacy reasons, or simply due to lack of space. This means the census is likely to remain a very important source for the family historians of the future. Without it, tracing family history may become more difficult.

Having said that, conducting the census costs millions of pounds, which can hardly be justified by the needs of potential future genealogists! If it were abolished you might find genealogists campaigning for more information to be included on birth, marriage and death records, and certainly fighting for the preservation of and access to other forms of records – but actually this is something that already happens.

Although useful, census records are full of errors. Sometimes it's because the person filling in the form may have guessed at information, or because people genuinely didn't know when and where they were born. It's also pretty common to find a couple living together described as being married, when in fact they probably weren't. The only way to check the accuracy of information is to compare it with other sources,

and even then you may have unanswered questions. As a genealogist you quickly learn: don't believe everything your great-aunt Aggie tells you, don't believe everything you find on the internet, and don't believe everything you find on an official record.

I would encourage everyone filling in their form today to be as accurate as possible, but sorting out the tangled half-truths told by our ancestors is part of the fun of family history research.

At the moment genealogy still seems to be increasing in popularity and it's hard to imagine this suddenly changing, although obviously a time could come when it's all been done – if your parents have spent years researching the family history there might be nothing left for you to do!

At present the trend seems to be that as records become easier to access, people want to know more and more. They are no longer content with finding names and dates, but want to know what people's lives were like; placing their ancestors within an historical context by researching the local and social history of the time and place in which they lived.

It's hard to know whether it will be easier to trace family history in the future. In some ways our lives are much better documented than in the past, but as much of this information is in electronic format we may actually be leaving less behind us than our ancestors did.

In the past many people saved the letters they received from family members, passing some on to future generations, but today when most written communication is in the form of text or email it may not last any longer than the life of the phone or computer. And Facebook is an interesting development – who knows, perhaps all the personal information they are currently collecting about us will be sold back to our descendants tracing their ancestry in a hundred years time!"

As well as running [My Ain Folk](#), Kirsty blogs about genealogy on [The Professional Descendant](#).

You can also follow on Twitter at [@GenealogyGirl](#)