

ORKNEY GENEALOGY

During the latter part of the 19th century, when the population of Orkney was about 30,000, over 15,000 Orcadians emigrated to Canada, USA, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, as well as “doon sooth” (i.e. elsewhere in Scotland and England). Today many of the descendants of these migrants visit Orkney to retrace their ancestors’ footsteps. The journey back may be long, but the welcome will be warm and rewarding “finds” are assured.

Orkney now has a population of just 20,000, but with an economy based on farming, tourism and offshore oil, the islands are well equipped to help these visitors to discover their roots. Oil revenues funded the splendid new Orkney Library and Archive building in Kirkwall that hosts Scotland’s oldest county lending library, its first regional Archive, and a vibrant Family History Society. VisitOrkney promulgates information on the plentiful accommodation, restaurants, and transport facilities that support tourists’ interests in archaeology, bird-watching, fishing, walking, local arts and crafts, and local and family history. Orkney’s farmers are custodians to a long heritage: for centuries they have exported their produce - formerly grain, today beef - and most of the old crofts on their land, alas now falling into disrepair, retain their Norse names. Many of the local surnames are still associated with particular parishes. Visitors will quickly discover common bonds with their friendly hosts and strike a chord with their ancestors’ surroundings and way of life in an unspoilt environment that still retains many features more in common with Norway than the highlands of Scotland.

For many a visit to Orkney involves a lengthy journey, so careful preparation, planning and budgeting can make all the difference. The objective should not be just to get there, but to avoid missing opportunities that will help make the visit truly memorable.

Preparation

These days much research can be done from home, so that time in Orkney can focus on what cannot be done elsewhere. Why not join the Orkney Family History Society (see below)?

Pre-reading

Tracing Your Scottish Ancestors	Rosemary Bigwood, 2001	£ 7.99	good introduction
Trace Your Orkney Ancestors	James Irvine 2004	£ 8.50	comprehensive
The Orkney Guide Book	Charles Tait 2000	£ 8.95	the tourist’s handbook
The New History of Orkney	WPL Thomson 2001	out-of-print	authoritative background
Landranger & Explorer maps	Ordnance Survey	£5.99 & £6.99	get your bearings

Free web sites:

www.genuki.org.uk/big/sct/OK	good overview, especially parish pages
www.orkneyfhs.co.uk	OFHS site includes useful members-only pages
www.orkadian.co.uk/books	for ordering pre-reading and other books and maps
www.ancestralorkney.com	promotional site
www.visitorkney.com	for travel and accommodation links
www.scan.org	includes an index of Orkney Archive’s holdings
www.familysearch.org	“Library” page lists the address of your local Family History Centre
www.old-maps.co.uk	6”: mile Ordnance Survey maps, 1882 edition

Pay-to-view web site (NB much of this data is available free elsewhere):

www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk	indexes/ facsimilies of births, marriages, censuses & pre-1901 wills
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Planning

Spring and autumn are good times to visit, avoiding the accommodation pressures of the peak tourist season and the short daylight of the winter months. Most tourist sites are open from the beginning of April till the end of September. Although the OFHS office is open daily, it may be possible to schedule your visit to coincide with one of their monthly meetings, held on the second Thursday of each month.

No visit to Orkney can be too long, but it is all too easy to waste time once there. Three priorities need to be managed:

1. Research in Kirkwall, all at 17 Junction Road:

- **Orkney Family History Society**, open Mon -Sat 1400-1630 (Sat from 1100).
Volunteer members help visitors, including non-members, link their own research with the Society’s various data-bases and other records, and supply local knowledge.
- **Orkney Room**, open Mon - Sat 0900-1900 (Fri. -1800, Sat - 1700).
Comprehensive library of publications on Orkney, available for study but not for loan.

- **Orkney Archive**, open Mon - Sat 0900-1645 (Thurs - 1900, Sat. closed 1300-1400).

Extensive collections of local and family history records, with helpful staff.

2. Visits to the island(s), parish(es), township(s) and even croft(s) inhabited by your ancestors.
3. Visits to Orkney's premier tourist sites (not to be missed!).

An early call to the **VisitOrkney** office at 6 Broad Street, beside St.Magnus Cathedral, to obtain details of opening times, prices etc. will help planning visits around 1. and 2. above!

The length of time required for these priorities will vary for each visitor and, more importantly, are likely to evolve as fresh discoveries are made. A good strategy is Day 1 in Kirkwall and Day 2 for a first local visit, and then to "play it by ear": how subsequent time is best spent may be influenced by weather, ferry schedules, opening times, breaking the heavy concentration needed for reading old documents, and allowing flexibility to follow up unexpected "leads".

Arranging accommodation in Kirkwall itself will minimise time spent "commuting".

Budget Tips

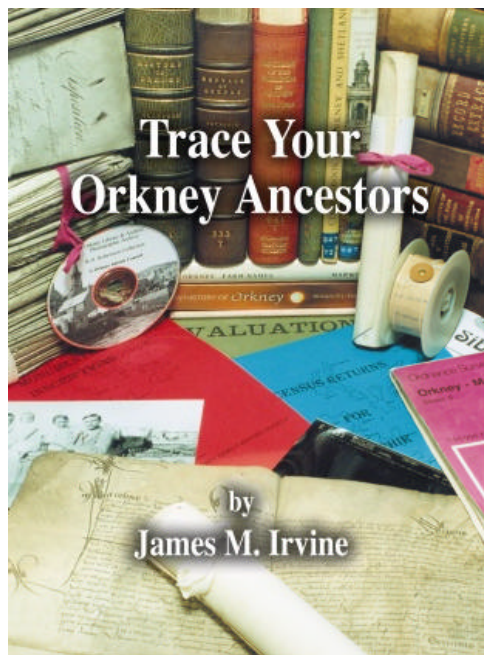
For some the cheapest way to Orkney will be an Easyjet flight from Gatwick or Luton to Inverness, and then bus and ferry. Outside the peak season it may be possible to negotiate a day-trip ticket from John o'Groats, but with a "break" in the journey in Kirkwall for a pre-agreed number of days.

VisitOrkney's website has a wide range of "bed-and-breakfast"s, but check their exact distance from Kirkwall as descriptions of rural locations can be misleading.

Car-hire and petrol in Orkney are not cheap but self-drive does offer flexibility, especially if some of your party would prefer to spend more time sightseeing than "buried in books".

44 Junction Road provides free parking, a free Street map of Kirkwall and Stromness, and free internet facilities. Photocopying is cheap at OFHS (A4 only) and the Volunteer Centre at 12 Bridge Street.

Orkney now has a good range of restaurants, but after a hearty B&B breakfast, lunch at the St.Magnus Café opposite the Cathedral and an excellent Fish 'n Chips supper from the "Harbour Fry" at 3 Bridge Street only need another £10 for the day!



Trace Your Orkney Ancestors

A Guide to Sources for
Orkadian Family and Local History

by
James M. Irvine

£8.50 + postage,

from
james.irvine@ukonline.co.uk

*I'm bowled over by sheer amount of information in your lovely book: Gregor Lamb;
the sheer ground-breaking usefulness is undeniable, fills a long felt want: Ray Fereday;
very useful for people working in Orkney history, and those researching their ancestors: WPL Thomson;
quite invaluable and just what is needed, in fact for every area of Scotland: Rosemary Bigwood;
provides Orkadian genealogists worldwide with a first-class research tool: The Scotsman*