

Explore Electric Scotland



Genealogist **Chris Paton** examines one of the best online archives for Scottish family history research

 **ElectricScotland.com**

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Scot Alastair McIntyre, pictured in Aberfeldy. Alastair is now resident in the Canadian province of Ontario

“Before the internet arrived I created one of the largest public bulletin board services in Europe. Suddenly the web then came along like the Klondike Gold Rush, and all the bulletin boards went out of business virtually overnight.”

In search of new employment, and mindful of the internet’s potential, Alastair decided to create a website which could make him an income and also fulfil his interest in history.

For many years we have been blessed with the fact that Scotland is a world leader when it comes to the provision of online genealogical material, yet one of the most useful resources for Scottish research is actually not based in the country at all. If you have never visited the American-hosted Electric Scotland website (www.electricscotland.com), then a major ancestral treat is waiting for your urgent attention – and best of all, it is completely free.

Electric Scotland was the brainchild of emigrant Scot Alastair McIntyre, now resident in the Canadian province of Ontario. Born in Glasgow in 1951, the young Alastair was within weeks whisked away overseas to Kuwait by his parents, not returning to Scotland until aged ten. With his education completed he later moved to Grangemouth, where he took an interest in computer systems.



Alastair's grandparents on his father's side showing his father as a young lad

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Here you will find tons of information on the history of Scotland, the Scots and Scots-Irish as well as people and places of Scots descent around the world. We also have lots of information on Scottish clans and families and their tartans and genealogy.

History is fun, exciting and tremendously interesting. When were chairs first used in Scotland? How did people live in Scotland over 2000 years ago? What were our popular songs? How did our missionaries tame the Head Hunters? How did our pioneers go about settling North America? Why did so many of them marry Native Indians? How did the clan system develop? Answers to all that and much more can be found on the site. We can all learn from our history and Scotland in particular has a record second to none as it was in the forefront of building the British Empire. It's people emigrated to every country in the world and left an outstanding legacy.



The home page of Electric Scotland

"I used to always get first place for history at school but I'd never really taken in much of it, so this was an opportunity to find out more." Realising that a Scottish market alone might not at that stage be able to provide him with a full-time living, he was not at first sure whether the venture would be worthwhile. "I read in a newspaper that whilst there were five million people in Scotland, there were some fifty million people of Scots descent around the world. And of course I was then reminded of my own parents living in Kuwait where they got sent *The Scots Magazine*, went to St Andrews Society dinners and Burns Suppers. And so I decided to proceed."

The result was the creation of Electric Scotland, an online portal to the history of the country which has grown rapidly over the years to become one of the foremost Scottish archival repositories on the net. Whilst the site's servers are now located in Michigan in the United States, and overseen by his friend Steve May, it is the Canadian-based Alastair who handles the uploading of digitised and transcribed materials to the site, produced by both himself and volunteers from around the world.

So exactly what can be found on the website? At the top of the home page are many links to dedicated sections of the site,



Alastair's grandmother on his mother's side with his mother centre, and her sister Linda on left and other sister Anne on right

containing a vast array of resources. The Clans & Families section contains articles, books and search guides to all aspects of Scottish clan history, whilst the Gazetteer section hosts a fully indexed and accessible digitised copy of Francis Groome's six-volume *Ordnance Gazetteer of Scotland* from 1892-1896. The Books section holds hundreds of transcribed and digitised historic volumes, including such specialised works as the *Domestic Annals of Scotland* (three volumes), *The General History of the Highlands, Highland Clans and Highland Regiments* (six volumes), the *Dictionary of Eminent Scots* and *A History of the Scotch Poor Law*, amongst many others.

As if that was not enough, the site has a complete run of the first two sets of Statistical Accounts of Scotland, in a fully keyword searchable form, which have been made available for consultation and download. In addition, just to show that the portal is as much for modern ex-pats as it is for those wishing to research history or family history, there are a range of contemporary features, such as a weekly diary submitted by Scottish MSP Linda Fabiani. Of particular pride for Alastair is the inclusion of well over 600 children's stories.

“I do get a lot of e-mails from children and one child contacted me to say how good our information was and how what he had learned on our site was going to get him a good mark for a test he was due to take. He e-mailed later to say he had got an A+!”

With so much available, Alastair advises that browsing through the individual categories alone is not necessarily the best way to use the site. “Due to all the historical books and articles we have, using our site search engine is almost mandatory. Just enter any name into the search box and it can be amazing what you'll find.”

Over half of those using Electric Scotland come from the USA and Canada, whilst a further quarter of traffic comes from the United Kingdom. Although people visit the site for many reasons, one of the most popular sections is the Clans and Families area.

“We have tons of biographies of Scots and their descendants and our clan pages are always popular. I do find many people coming to the site for different reasons not connected with clans at all but while they are here they often take a wee look at what we have and that often encourages them to visit various clan society web sites.”

Whilst the site is a valuable resource for those in Scotland researching their ancestry, Alastair is keen to stress that in many ways it is perhaps of even more use to the worldwide Scottish diaspora, an area of particular interest for him.

“What Scots did after they left Scotland is perhaps more incredible than our own history. It was mostly Scots that influenced the development of America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, and of course, a Scot is considered to be the father of modern Japan.”



Alastair visiting Elliot Lake in Northern Ontario... his “first and only canoe trip”!



Alastair's house in Ontario, flying the flag



The banner for the Aois community website

The records left by the diaspora can be an equally fascinating resource for those doing research into Scottish ancestors.

"I recently put up a book about Zorra in Canada, where most of the settlers were from Sutherland, and another book about Crommar and Canada, where the author tells us in the first two-thirds of the book about his family and friends in Scotland, and in the final third about his family and friends who emigrated to Canada."

A major new development at Electric Scotland is the new "Aois" community (www.scotchat.org). Aois, meaning "age" in Gaelic, is a forum based area for Electric Scotland users and others to get together to discuss reminiscences of Scotland, the modern world, and of course, genealogy and history related issues. Some areas now integrated into the site started off in their own right as independent forums.



The Scottish Studies Foundation at the University of Guelph has guaranteed the site's longevity

"We always had the Thistle & Whistle forum which is like a virtual pub and which is where all the old time members gather, but we have the ability to add private forums to the site.

"A good example is a new forum we have set up with the Clan Ross of Canada, where we have one public forum and two private ones, one for their paid up members and the other for their board. We also have a blog system with accompanying RSS feeds, so members can create their own blogs through us."

Alastair has already made plans with the centre for Scottish Studies at the University of Guelph for the future care of the Electric Scotland site in years to come, at the point when he may no longer be able to maintain the site himself. In the meantime, an internet giant's work is never done, and there is plenty to be getting on with.

"Quite soon we'll be doubling our bandwidth yet again and we are in the process of upgrading our servers and ensuring there is a robust backup system in place."

Electric Scotland is a wonderful resource for family historians, but also a useful place to just drop in and have some fun, whether that is by reading some entertaining stories or by competing on the online arcade game system located in the Aois forum.

"Canada's top family lawyer is currently the leader in there and she also owns St Monace Castle in the East Neuk of Fife!"

So whether you wish to beat the hoi polloi at table blackjack, or wish to find some useful material to help you totally transform your family history, Electric Scotland is just a simple click away!



Alastair's grandfather on his mother's side, taken in the garden of their house at Croftend Avenue, Glasgow with his mother on the left