Forename Variants

Variations in forenames are very common in the records. The name by which a person was born or christened, might look very different when they married or died. For example, Elizabeth might be known and/or recorded as Elisabeth, Eliza, Betty, Betsy, Beth, Bessie, Elspeth, Elsie, to name but a few. Some of the influences brought to bear on Scottish forenames are indicated below.

Abbreviations, Diminutives, Nicknames/pet names
Records are full of abbreviated forms of some forenames, e.g. William might be recorded as Will, Wm. or Willm., Charles as Chas., Margaret as Margt. or Mgt., James as Jas., Alexander as Alexr., and so on.
Also, diminutives, nicknames and pet names, if habitually in use, might be recorded instead of the proper name, e.g. Euphan/Eupham/Effy for Euphemia, Katie/Kate/Kath/Kathy for Katherine, Jamie/Jimmy/Jim for James, Maggie/Meg/Peggy for Margaret, Alec/Alex/Sandy/Eck for Alexander, Dod for George.

This is particularly prevalent in the Old Parish Register records, and probably more so in smaller parishes, where the person recording the information, usually the session clerk or the minister, would know the families in the area.

Anglicising forenames
It was very common for registrars in Gaelic-speaking areas of the Highlands and Western Isles to anglicise common Gaelic forenames, for instance recording Morag as Mary, Iain as John and Hamish as James. Gaelic-speaking families themselves, who migrated to urban areas, may also have anglicised their names.

Ambiguous names
Names that, today, we would normally associate with boys were occasionally (mainly in the North of Scotland) given to girls and vice versa, for example, Nicholas. Christian, viewed as a boy's name today, was quite a common girl's name in Scotland, and used as an alternative to Christina.

Sometimes during indexing of the Old Parish Registers, it was unclear from the name whether the child was male or female, particularly if the entry recorded "child of" instead of "son of" or "daughter of". Further confusion would arise if the name had been abbreviated and that abbreviated form could apply equally to a boy or a girl, e.g. Willm. might be William or Williamina. In such cases, a "U" for unstated was entered in the index to ensure that the wrong sex was not attributed. These "U" values are included in all Male, Female or Both Sex searches.

Many boys' names were transformed into girls' names by adding "ina", e.g. Thomasina, Georgina, Hughina, Jamesina, Williamina. These names might be abbreviated to Ina in later life. Williamina might become Mina.

Interchangeable names
Some names are completely interchangeable e.g. Agnes and Nancy, Donald and Daniel. Jane could be recorded as Jean, Jessie or Janet.

Early spellings may vary from later ones , e.g. Jannet, Jhonet, Jonat, Jonnet or Jonet instead of Janet, Margrat or Margret for Margaret, Henrie for Henry, Andro or Androw for Andrew, Alisoun, Alesoune, Alisone for Alison.

Traditional naming patterns
Scots often named children by following a simple set of rules:

1st son named after father's father
2nd son named after mother's father
3rd son named after father
1st daughter named after mother's mother
2nd daughter named after father's mother
3rd daughter named after mother

Although this was not universally applied (some families adhered strictly, others "dabbled" and still others ignored it), it can still be helpful in determining the correct entry when confronting the relative lack of information in the OPR's. It can also give rise to great confusion when eight children of the same family in a small parish name their offspring according to convention! The use of traditional naming patterns gradually declined during the 19th century.

The application of naming conventions and the general desire to ensure that a family forename perpetuated through the generations, sometimes led to duplication of forenames within a family. For example, where a family wished to adhere strictly to the traditional naming pattern, and both grandfathers bore the same forename, that name might be given to more than child. If a child died young, parents might name a later child after the dead sibling. In unfortunate cases, the name may have been used more than once.

Sometimes there appears to be no rhyme or reason to the naming: a child might be named after the minister, the midwife, the doctor, an employer, an influential personage in the community or a close friend, who might appear as a witness to the birth. Witnesses are not always given in OPR entries, but where they are, sometimes (as in Dundee) you will find their relationship to child, if any, noted, e.g. "Charles Jobson, grandfather", "Mrs Janet Speid, father's mother".

Middle names
The existence of a middle name can be extremely helpful to the family historian. Parents might use the mother or a grandmother's maiden name as a child's middle name. However, do not assume that this name will appear in all subsequent records pertaining to that child. Consider also the possibility that a person might use his/her middle name as their first name in later life and be recorded as such.

Source: http://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/content/help/index.aspx?561

Scottish Surnames and Variants

Permanent surnames began to be used in Scotland around the 12th century, but were initially mainly the preserve of the upper echelons of Scottish society. However, it gradually became necessary to distinguish ordinary people one from the other by more than just the given name and the use of Scottish surnames spread. In some Highland areas, though, fixed surnames did not become the norm until the 18th century, and in parts of the Northern Isles until the 19th century.

The influences on Scottish surnames are many and varied and often more than one has resulted in the surname that we know today. It is therefore very difficult to attribute sources for surnames with complete certainty, although there are many books on the subject of surname origins that attempt to do just that. Here are just some of the elements thought to have contributed to present day surnames:

Foreign influences on Scottish surnames
External influences have played a crucial role in the shaping of surnames in Scotland. The migration of the Scots from Ireland into the Southwest in the 5th century, nurturing the spread of Gaelic language and culture, the influence of the resident Picts, the establishment of the Britons in Strathclyde, and Anglian immigrants in Lothian and the Borders, all contributed to the melting pot of surnames that we have today.

The Norsemen, through their seasonal raiding and subsequent colonisation of the Western and Northern Isles, left behind aspects of their heritage and language that endure not least in the surnames of these areas, e.g. Gunn is originally derived from the Norse and appears in significant numbers in the North of Scotland. Scandinavian influence can be seen in other parts of Scotland too, e.g. Thorburn is an old Norse name found in the Scottish borders and around Edinburgh.

Norman influence filtered into Scotland after their invasion of England, and was actively encouraged by Scottish kings. Anglo-Norman nobles acquired grants of land around Scotland and introduced the feudal system of land tenure. For example, Robert The Bruce was a descendant of Robert de Brus who fought with William the Conqueror at the Battle of Hastings. Bissett, Boyle, Colville, Corbett, Gifford, Hay, Kinnear and Fraser are all originally Norman names, which first appeared in Scotland in the 12th century. Menzies and Graham are recognised Anglo-Norman surnames also first seen in Scotland at this time.

Continuing into more recent times, the effect of Irish immigration during the 19th century can be seen in the surnames now in use in Scotland, e.g. Daly or Dailly is an Irish name derived from O'Dalaigh and concentrations can be found in areas where Irish immigrants settled, around Glasgow and Dundee. This is borne out in the records, with very few people of that surname appearing in the OPRs, but significant numbers appearing in the Statutory registers. Names like Docherty and Gallacher, now quite common in Scotland, are also relatively recent additions.

Location-based surnames
Many of the first permanent surnames are territorial in origin, as landowners became known by the name of the lands that they held, e.g. Murray from the lands of Moray, and Ogilvie, which, according to Black, derives from the barony of Ogilvie in the parish of Glamis, Angus. Tenants might in turn assume, or be given, the name of their landlord, despite having no kinship with him.

Occupational surnames
A significant amount of surnames are derived from the occupations of their owners, Some of these are obvious, e.g. Smith, Tailor, Mason, and others might be less obvious e.g. Baxter (baker), Stewart (steward), Wardrope (keeper of the garments of a feudal household) and Webster (weaver). Cordiner, Soutar and Grassick are all derived from shoemaker, the latter being from the Gaelic for shoemaker, "greusaich".

Patronymics
Many Scottish surnames originated in patronymics, whereby a son's surname derived from the father's forename, e.g. John Donaldson's son might be Peter Johnson, whose son might be Magnus Peterson, and so on. Patronymics present something of a challenge for the family historian in that the surname changed with each successive generation.

This practice died out in Lowland Scotland after the 15th century, as patronymic surnames became permanent family names. It persisted, however, in the Highlands & Islands well into the 18th century (see Mac surnames) and in the Northern Isles until the 19th century.

The system was applied to daughters' names too, with the girl adopting the father's forename with "daughter" applied to the end of the name. The "daughter" suffix was habitually abbreviated in the records, e.g. Janet Adamsdaughter becomes Janet Adamsdaur, or Adamsdr or Adamsd. An entry from the Lerwick OPR in 1734, neatly illustrates the effect of patronymics with the birth/baptism of William Laurenceson to Laur. Erasmuson and Katharine Nicollsdr.

Mac Surnames
Mac is a prefix to surnames of Gaelic origin meaning "son". For example, Macdhomhnuill translates to Macdonald, meaning son of Donald.

You may come across the feminine version **Nc**, an abbreviation of "nighean mhic" or "daughter of Mac", attached to a woman's surname, and sometimes further abbreviated to **N'**. There are many examples in the old parish registers, particularly in the 17th and 18th centuries, e.g. Ncfarlane, Ncdonald, Ncdearmit, Ncfee, but there are only isolated examples by the early 19th century.

In earlier records, a person might be known not only by the father's name but also by the grandfather's name. As such, you may come across the use of **Vc**, meaning grandson or granddaughter, for example, in 1673 Dugall Mcdugall Vcean (Dugall, son of Dugall, grandson of Ean) married Marie Camron or NcNdonochie Vcewn .

Some Mac surnames originated in occupations, e.g. Macnab (son of the abbott), Maccosh (son of the footman), Macmaster (son of the master or cleric), Macnucator (son of the wauker or fuller of cloth), later anglicised Walker. Others derive from distinguishing features, e.g. Macilbowie (son of the yellow haired lad), Macilchrum (son of the bent one). Yet others contain vestiges of Norse influence, e.g. Maciver (son of Ivar, a Norse personal name), since the Mac prefix was not the exclusive preserve of the Gaels, being adopted in some cases by the Norsemen and by some Lowland Scots, particularly on the Highland periphery, e.g. Macgibbon, Macritchie.

Many Mac surnames are no longer in use, e.g. Macolchallum, abandoned because they were too difficult to pronounce, corrupted over the years by phonetic spelling, or anglicised.

Mac surnames were also written as Mc, Mhic, or M'. Mc/Mac surnames are indexed separately in the database, but it is very common to find the same person's surname registered as Mc in one record and Mac in another, so you should always check both. Using wildcard * will return both versions in one search, e.g. M*cdonald will retrieve both Mcdonald and Macdonald entries.

Clan-based surnames
It is a common misconception that those who bear a clan surname are automatically descended from a clan chief. The ability of a clan to defend its territory from other clans depended greatly on attracting as many followers as possible. Being a member of a large and powerful clan became a distinct advantage in the lawless Highlands and followers might adopt the clan name to curry favour with the Laird, to show solidarity, for basic protection, or because their lands were taken by a more powerful neighbour and they had little option! Yet others joined a clan on the promise of much-needed sustenance.

Conversely, not all members of a clan used the clan surname. When Clan Gregor was proscribed in 1603, many Macgregors were forced to adopt other surnames e.g. Grant, Stewart, Ramsay. When the clan was again proscribed during the 18th century, Rob Roy Macgregor adopted his mother's name Campbell. Once the ban was lifted in 1774, some reverted to the Macgregor name, but others did not.

Some clans were originally founded on feudal tenure e.g. after being awarded lands by Robert the Bruce, the Gordons acquired further territory in the North-east to become lords of Badenoch and are said to have greatly increased their "clan" following by offering a "bow' o' meal" to anyone willing to join them and adopt the name. The Menzies were originally an Anglo-Norman family who also established their clan in the Central Highlands on a feudal power base.

Effects of Emigration and Migration
Many emigrants from Scotland changed their names on arrival in their new country, as did many people from the Highlands & Islands who migrated to the Scottish lowlands in search of work. Shortening or dropping the prefix "Mc" or "Mac", or anglicising a gaelic surname, or indeed changing the surname altogether for a similar sounding English one, which would be easier to pronounce and would conceal one's origins, were quite common occurrences. Thus the gaelic surname Macdonnchaidh or Macdonachie becomes Duncanson, Macian becomes Johnson, Macdonald is anglicised to Donaldson, Macilroy becomes Milroy, and Maccowan becomes Cowan. The gaelic Mac Ghille dhuibh, or "son of the black lad", seen in the surnames Macilduy, Macildue and Macildowie, translates to Black. Gilchrist, a gaelic name meaning servant of Christ, might be anglicised to Christopher. Illiteracy might, however, engender a change of surname by default, giving rise to weird and wonderful variants, e.g. Maclachlan recorded as Mcglauflin.

To-names
To-names or T-names meaning "other names" or nicknames, were prevalent particularly in the fishing communities of North East Scotland, but were also seen in the Borders and to a lesser extent in the West Highlands.

In those areas where a relatively small number of surnames were in use, T-names were tacked on to the name to distinguish individuals with the same surname and forename. The nickname may have referred to a distinguishing feature or be the name of the fishing boat on which the person was employed. These T-names have made their way into the records. For example, amongst the numerous John Cowies of Buckie can be found fisherman John Cowie "Carrot" who married Isabella Jappie of Cullen in 1892. Was this perhaps a reference to the colour of his hair?

The T-name appears on a statutory results page in brackets in order to distinguish it from a middle name e.g. James (Rosie) Cowie, James (Bullen) Cowie, Jessie (Gyke) Murray, and may be designated in inverted commas on the image of the actual entry.

Early spellings may vary from later ones
You may find in older records that Quh and Wh are interchangeable, e.g. White might be recorded as Quhit, Quhytt, Quhyitt, Quhetit, Quheyt, Quhyte, and so on. Macwatt may be written as Macquhat. Ch or ck may be dropped from the end of a surname e.g. Tulloch is rendered as Tullo in many earlier records, Tunnock as Tunno. It is very common to find an "e" added to the end of surnames in earlier records (e.g Robertsone for Robertson, Pearsone for Pearson), or that "w" and "u" are interchangeable (e.g. Gowrlay for Gourlay or Crauford for Crawford), or a "u" being inserted to surnames ending in "on" or "son", (e.g. Cameroun for Cameron, Robertsoun or Robertsoune for Robertson). Names like Morrison may be rendered as Morison, likewise Ker for Kerr. A surname ending in "ay" may be replaced with "ie" as in Murray and Murrie. The letter "i" may be replaced with a "y" as in Kidd and Kydd.

Transcription error
This problem has existed since written records began and is by far the main cause of surname variation, creating instability in the surname pool and giving rise to completely new surnames or strange variations of existing ones, which may or may not have endured over time. Black sites the example of Macdonald, and the pronunciation of its Gaelic form Mac Dhomhnuill, which gave rise to numerous recorded variants such as M'conill, M'oneill, Makconeil.

If the person recording a surname (most often a clergyman, session clerk, court clerk, registrar or census enumerator) was unfamiliar with the accent of the informant or the spelling of a name, particularly those of gaelic origins, they might record the name incorrectly, or simply write it down as they heard it. Thus Montgomery is written as Muntgumrie, Farquharson becomes Farcharson, Chisholm becomes Chism and a Scottish registrar hearing the name O'Malley in an Irish accent might be excused for recording it as O'Mully. If the informant was illiterate, then these mistakes stood unchallenged and uncorrected. Lowland clergymen in a charge in the Highlands or the Shetland Isles sometimes took the opportunity to anglicise a name in the records.

Modern indexing of surnames presents additional opportunities for erroneous recording, where writing is difficult to decipher or faded, and documents are stained by ink spots or affected by damp or mouse damage!

Source: http://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/content/help/index.aspx?r=551&560