

The Calendar Act 1750

When I first started looking into my family history in the mid 1980's the research had to be done at local libraries and archives, ploughing through books. Much had been transcribed but the further back I went in time the more the information was still in handwritten books, mainly parish registers from the churches.

Nowadays there is so much online, things are much easier but even so there are still many transcription errors of which the family historian has to be aware of.

There is also something else that you need to be aware of. The first time I found an ancestor born in October 1683 had died in February 1683 I was a bit baffled and put it down to transcription error, but when I then found someone married in November 1700 and that they had died in January 1700, I felt there was perhaps more to this than I had at first realised.

It didn't take me long to find the Calendar Act of 1750, How you deal with it is up to personal preferences, but you cannot ignore it.

A brief explanation:

In the mid-18th century some of the countries of the world used the calendar devised by the Romans (including England) but inconveniently the majority of the remaining countries used the Gregorian calendar. Due to errors in the calculations, the two versions steadily diverged over time.

(Note in England at that time New Year Day was 25th March, hence the confusion for me with the aforementioned dates!)

To bring things into line with most of Europe (including Scotland), England moved to the Gregorian calendar in 1751/52. To accomplish this, in 1752 New Year day moved from 25th March (Lady Day) to 1st January. There was also a loss of 11 days in September 1752 to finally align with the Gregorian calendar.

The act also defined leap years as we use today, also dates for moveable feasts such as Easter, and Courts of Session, markets, fairs etc.. It also took into account payments of rents, annuities, expiration of leases

As people payed their annual taxes on New Year's Day, to avoid problems, the beginning of the tax year remained at 25th March, but because of the missing days, this was adjusted to 5th April in 1753 to avoid losing 11 days of tax revenue!

Back to family history – in general dates prior to 1752 (from January 1st to March 24th) are written, for example, February 1628/9 to use both the old and new style. The months of September, October, November and December which used to be the 7th to 10th months of the year are sometimes abbreviated to 7ber, 8ber, 9ber, 10ber so care must be taken to not mistake these for July to October.

There is quite a lot more that can be said about the calendar act, but this was meant to try and explain what the family historian needs to be aware of and why; deal with it whichever way is easiest for you, but don't ignore it.