Ewing-related Historical Data

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There will always be gaps between the answers to genealogical questions and the information available through family documents, DNA analysis, the study of the earth, and written history. We can follow DNA studies to go back further than "known" relatives (with luck one or two generations) as well as study documents and books and discover various tidbits of information. But there will probably always be gaps in our knowledge and understanding. However, I believe that we will always serendipitously stumble upon archaeological finds, an occasional written document or a book providing some deep analysis that will help mature our knowledge and perspective of our ancestors.

Over the years, I have accumulated information from the many, many documents, books and magazines I have read. I have focused on capturing information that I thought might help stimulate my sons' curiosity about their heritage, that was something which piqued my interest, or that was something that helped me understand my ancestors' lives. When I thought other people's words were well-stated descriptions of interesting, relevant topics, ideas or events, I paraphrased their words or took direct quotes. Not planning to publish this information, I did not keep track of the various sources.

As a result, I've amassed a collection of "facts." I've put them in chronological order. Other than that, however, all I can take credit for is being a curious person trying to understand my heritage by collecting and sorting out tidbits of information I've encountered in my reading.

The following is a sampling of the facts I accumulated regarding the early prehistory of the Ewings and believe can be scientifically proven beyond a reasonable doubt or through written history/documents (all good, but not necessarily directly pertinent to the Ewings). This recounting of the facts is followed by a list of the sources, in general, from which I have garnered them.

The Facts

From 400 to around 350 million years ago, as part of the super continent Pangaea, Scotland lay near the equator. Desert sands accumulated under the tropical sun, forming the Old Red Sandstone which can now be seen mainly in eastern Scotland. It offered considerable advantages to farmers from ancient through modern times. Its generally horizontal bedding produced fields with conveniently gentle gradients, but without becoming waterlogged because of its sandiness. Old Red Sandstone soils are doubly advantageous, because unlike wetter ones they warm up earlier in the spring, increasing the growing season. In Scotland there are some of the oldest rocks now visible anywhere on the surface of the planet.

There is no conclusive evidence for human colonization in Scotland before the end of the last Ice Age (ending ~8,000 BC in radiocarbon terms). The reforestation of Scotland began, and soon after there is evidence found of Mesolithic hunting and gathering communities. The earliest campsite (~7,000 BC) found was at Kinlock – this reflected a mobile lifestyle based on seasonal hunting, fishing, and gathering wild food-stuffs, and camp sites tended to be coastal or in river valleys. England was part of the Continent until as recently as 6,000 BC, when rising sea levels caused by post-Ice Age warming filled the North Sea. By 3,000 BC, the ocean was at near-modern levels. Sea levels fluctuated continually through late prehistoric and Roman times but rose significantly after 1,000 AD. In what is now Great Britain, the period of maximum warmth was between about 5,000 and 3,000 BC. During the earlier

years of this range the area was drier than during the later period: perhaps 90 percent and 110 percent of present-day precipitation averages, respectively.

During the fourth millennium BC, the way-of-life was gradually transformed into a farming economy. Cattle, sheep, goats, and pigs were bred, and barley and wheat were grown on permanent farms.

In the late third millennium the major innovation was metalwork, initially in copper and gold and soon followed by copper alloyed with tin (bronze).

A relatively warm intermission likely occurred between 1,100 and 800 BC, before the onset of a notably cooler and wetter phase in 500 BC.

A combination of climate deterioration, population pressure, and shortage of fertile farmland led to the appearance of fortifications beginning in the 9th century BC. Hilltops were fortified with timber stockades, earthen ramparts, and stone walls, within which lived communities from a few families to hundreds of people.

The Roman occupation of Scotland is heavily reliant on archaeological evidence, which is open to sometimes widely variant interpretation. (One of the inherent characteristics of archaeology is that a single new discovery can result in quite fundamental reassessment.)

It is believed that there were warmer and drier summers during the Roman occupation of Scotland, up to ~400 AD, followed by a more disturbed phase with significant glacier advancements in Scandinavia and the Alps. Most of Scotland was little affected by the Roman military presence in the 1st-to-3rd centuries AD, although Roman goods were widespread through trade, loot, or gifts.

For five centuries, Europe basked in warm, settled weather, with only the occasional bitter winter, cool summers and memorable storms, like the cold year of 1258 caused by a distant volcanic eruption that cooled the atmosphere with its fine dust. Summer after summer passed with bountiful harvests. Local food shortages were not unknown, life expectancy in rural communities was short, and the routine of back-breaking labor never ended. Nevertheless, crop failures were rare, and most years passed with good harvests and enough to eat. (A farm worker in ~1100 AD who survived childhood diseases had an average life expectancy of 24 years.)

Average summer temperatures were much warmer than their modern averages. The summer months were consistently and sufficiently warm and dry for vineyards to spread across southern and central England, as far north as Hereford and the Welsh borders. During the height of this Warm Period, the French tried to negotiate trade agreements to exclude them from the Continent.

Warm summers and mild winters allowed small communities to grow crops on marginal soils at higher altitudes than ever before – for example, on the summits of southeastern Scotland's Lammermuir Hills, ~1,050 feet above sea level. In 1300, one farm owned by Kelso Abbey in southern Scotland had over 247 acres of land under cultivation, supported 1,400 sheep and 16 shepherds' households – all at ~984 feet above sea level, well above today's limit. By the same year, thousands of farmers had settled on high ground and on marginal lands throughout England and Scotland, which placed them at risk of crop failure. Farming became considerably easier in the Scottish highlands as a result, as forests spread outward into hitherto treeless environments. England's population of ~1.4 million had risen to 5 million by 1300.

Complex interactions between the atmosphere and the ocean govern Europe's climate. Cycles of excessive cold and unusual rainfall can last a decade, a few years, or just a single season. The

pendulum of climate change rarely pauses for more than a generation. The swings are unpredictable and sudden.

In Europe at the end of the 1500s, well over 80% of the population was engaged in subsistence agriculture, by definition living barely above subsistence level, and at the complete mercy of short-term climate shifts. Four-fifths of pre-industrial European labor was devoted just to keeping itself fed. Famines were most common in about 1550-1650, because population growth outstripped food production and led to cultivation of marginal land where grain growing was more risky. Deterioration in the climate made things worse. In the 1690s about 13 percent of the people starved to death.

Climate change varied not only from year-to-year but from place-to-place. The coldest decades in northern Europe did not necessarily coincide with those in the American West. Only a few short cool cycles, like the two unusually cold decades between 1590 and 1610, appear to have been synchronous on a hemispheric and global scale.

Between 1670 and 1730, the coldest cycle of the Little Ice Age for much of the world (coldest in the last 10,000 years), temperatures plummeted and the growing season in England was about five weeks shorter than it was during the 20th century's warmest decades. The number of days each winter with snow on the ground in Britain rose to between twenty and thirty, as opposed to two to ten days through most of the twentieth century. In Scotland, the onset was marked by serious blizzards in 1670 and 1674, with heavy losses of sheep. Cold summers inhibited crop growth, and clusters of years with harvest failures brought disaster to subsistence farmers by forcing them to eat their seed corn, leaving nothing to plant for later years. The winter of 1683/84 was so cold that the ground froze to a depth of more than a meter in parts of southwestern England and belts of ice appeared along the coasts of southeastern England and northern France. Many harbors were so choked with ice that shipping halted throughout the North Sea. Between 1693 and 1700, the harvests failed in seven years out of eight in many upland areas. This may have been a greater disaster in some places than the Black Death. A factor contributing to the climatic disasters of this decade may have been the massive eruptions of Hekla in Iceland (1693) and Serua (also 1693) and Aboina (1694) in Indonesia. The effluents from these eruptions resulted in filtering of the sunlight. Only the 1690s seem to have had so many severe winter spells within a single decade as the 1430s.

The 1680s were poorer for the economy as Scotland's trading partners, notably France, erected higher tariff barriers.

Commercial farming was on the rise in the 1690s. Self-sufficient rural communities – that is, subsistence farmers – were quickly becoming irrelevant within the new agricultural economy. Inevitably, large estates dominated the landscape, swallowing up many small farmers. Thousands of subsistence farmers merely exchanged working for themselves to become tenant farmers of wage paying landlords, or they left the country for a new beginning. There was considerable population pressure due to limited land resources and crop failures, notably in 1622-23 and the 1690s. These periods of famine and death encouraged emigration; hence, the migration of the Scots-Irish to America.

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Jeff Scott Ewing is the son of Benjamin Edison Ewing Jr. -- a clan member for a number of years and BE on the Y-DNA charts. As this article shows, much of his genealogy time has been spent on collecting and organizing historical data.