

Gàidhlig

That's the name of Gaelic in its own language. What is Gaelic, who still speaks it and where, and how can you learn more of this language?

What is Gaelic?

Gaelic means 'pertaining to the Gaels', who were a Celtic group living in Ireland, Scotland and the Isle of Man. There are three types of Gaelic language: Scottish Gaelic (pronounced 'gallic' or 'gah-lic'), Irish Gaelic (pronounced 'gay-lic') and Manx Gaelic, spoken on the Isle of Man.

The map shows how Gaelic was spoken across almost all of Scotland about 1,000 years ago (light green) and most of the Highlands about 300 years ago (medium green). It is now restricted mainly to the remote Highlands, especially the Outer Hebrides (dark green).



Just to complicate things, Scotland has three languages: English, Gaelic and Scots. Scots (or Lowland Scots) isn't a Celtic language, but is related to English.

Linguists argue about whether it is a distinct language or a dialect of English, though most would consider it a separate language that is closely related to English.

Robbie Burns wrote in Scots — lines such as "we twa hae run about the braes/and pou'd the gowans fine" are in that language, not Gaelic.

Who speaks Gaelic?

Gaelic was first brought to Scotland around the 6th century AD by settlers from Ireland. The language quickly spread across the country and became the main language spoken across medieval Scotland, and thrived in Scotland for many centuries.

Scottish Gaelic and Irish Gaelic are quite distinct. Again, linguists argue about whether they are separate languages or dialects of the same language, though in political and cultural terms they are usually regarded as separate languages.

As with many languages, the use of Gaelic declined in favour of a language more widely used — in this case English. As in many other countries, both carrot and stick were at work. There was active suppression of the language, but a strong driver was also the economic and social opportunities obtained through fluency in English as Scotland became more internationally connected.

Both the English and Lowland Scots thought of Gaelic as an uncivilised language and suppressed it; for instance in 1616 the royals even banned many institutions from teaching the language.

In the mid-1700s the failure of the Jacobite revolution saw further suppression of Highland culture, including the Gaelic language.



... Gàidhlig

The number of Gaelic speakers continued to decline well into the 20th century, though as with other minority languages there are now concerted efforts to revive it. The Bòrd na Gàidhlig is the public body charged with promoting Gaelic in Scotland. The language was made an official language of Scotland in 2005.

[Here](#) is a short Youtube video about Scottish Gaelic today.

Saving Gaelic won't be an easy job, as it is regarded as definitely endangered. The most recent census (in 2011, thanks to covid) showed that only 87,000 people in Scotland had some Gaelic language skills, and of them only 32,000 people were able to understand, speak, read and write it.

That's less than 0.6% of the population. Some have questioned whether spending tens of millions of pounds per year to foster the language is warranted.

In the next article we'll look at where Gaelic was exported to as Scots migrated across the globe. Spoiler alert — New Zealand features!



*Road sign on the Isle of Lewis
Try pronouncing those place names!*

