

Digitisation of church court records News update

September 2014

Background

Between 1999 and 2003, National Records of Scotland (NRS), via the Scottish Archive Network (SCAN) project, began the digitisation of Scottish historical records on a huge scale, capturing millions of high-quality colour images from original records rather than microfilm. The project's websites (www.scan.org.uk and www.scottishdocuments.com) pioneered the provision of Internet access to digital images, most notably the testaments of Scots from 1500 to 1901. The project was supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Genealogical Society of Utah (now Family Search), which contributed volunteer digitisers and expertise in digital technology. The SCAN project ended in 2003 and its products are maintained by the NRS Online Resources Team. In 2005 the e-commerce service for ordering copies of wills and testaments was transferred to the www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk website.

The church records digitisation project

In May 2003, the NRS, under an agreement with the Church of Scotland and Family Search, began the digital capture of the records of kirk sessions, presbyteries, synods and the General Assembly (from the sixteenth century to 1901) deposited in the NRS and other Scottish archives. The digitisation project encompassed a wide range of records created by the four levels of the church courts, including minute books, act books, proclamation registers, communion rolls, seat rent books, poor relief accounts etc. It also includes the records of other presbyterian churches which later re-joined the Church of Scotland. These records constitute a major body of historical information and are used by a wide variety of professional and amateur historians. The primary purpose of the digitisation project is to preserve the records by producing a digital surrogate for public use in NRS search rooms and by carrying out conservation work on original records at risk. In March 2007 the NRS completed digitisation of the majority of surviving records of the Church of Scotland, and replaced public access to original records in the NRS search rooms with digital surrogates. Additionally, publicity relating to the digitisation project has had the effect of encouraging many session clerks and presbytery clerks who still hold records, to deposit these in an appropriate archive. Digitisation work continues on these recent deposits.

Online access

The project aims to improve access to the records, by making digital copies available in a wider variety of places in Scotland via partner archives and the presbytery clerks of the Church of Scotland. During 2007 the NRS consulted the Church of Scotland and archives which hold church records under charge and superintendence of the Keeper of the Records of Scotland, to plan the development of remote access to digital images. The project is in the second stage of a three-stage development, as outlined overleaf.

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Testing stage (November 2007 – April 2009)

The NRS tested remote access, using selected Church of Scotland presbytery clerks and local archives, which had volunteered to act as testers. This was done via a password-protected part of the Scottish Documents website.

Partner-access stage (April 2009 onwards)

From April 2009, access to the Scottish Documents website has been extended to other archives in Scotland which hold church court records under charge and superintendence. Access is via a password-protected part of the Scottish Documents website. In this way researchers have access to a wide range of presbyterian church court records in a number of locations. The service currently includes around 12,000 digital volumes.

These are available in the following archives:

- Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire Archives: Aberdeen
- Ayrshire Archives: Auchincruive, Ayr
- Ayrshire Archives: Burns Monument Centre, Kilmarnock,
- Glasgow City Archives: Glasgow
- Highland Council Archives: Archive and Registration Service, Inverness
- Highland Council Archives: Lochaber Archive Centre, Fort William
- Highland Council Archives: Caithness Archive Centre, Wick
- Orkney Library and Archive: Kirkwall
- Scottish Borders Archive and Local History Centre: Hawick
- Shetland Islands Council Archives: Lerwick
- Stirling Council Archives: Stirling

General access stage

The Keeper of the Records of Scotland may extend availability to include global Internet access via individual or corporate subscription or payment for digital copies via a complementary e-commerce service. Other classes of record may be considered for addition to either the Scottish Documents (partner) website or to the e-commerce website or both.

National Records of Scotland's release programme for records online is based around the release of indexes and images for valuation rolls for 1855, 1865, 1875 and 1925 (due for release between autumn 2014 and summer 2016), WW1 Military Appeals Tribunal records (due for release in 2015), 17th century and 18th century tax rolls (due for release in 2014 and 2015). Church court records are one of several candidates for release after the valuation roll and tax roll releases have ended.