Digitisation of church court records
News update

May 2009

Background

Between 1999 and 2003, the National Archives of Scotland (NAS), 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 NAS 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 NAS, 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 NAS and other Scottish archives. The digitisation project encompasses 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 secession churches which later rejoined 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 NAS search rooms and by carrying out conservation work on original records at risk. In March 2007 the NAS completed digitisation of the majority of surviving records of the Church of Scotland, and replaced public access to original records in the NAS 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 NAS 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 below.

Testing stage (November 2007 – April 2009)

The NAS 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.

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Partner-access stage (April 2009 – ?autumn 2010 and beyond)
Testing has shown that an image delivery system is viable, albeit with some technical problems which require further development work. From April 2009, access to the Scottish Documents website will be extended to all Church of Scotland presbytery clerks and (at the discretion of the Keeper of the Records of Scotland) to other archives in Scotland. Access will be via a password-protected part of the Scottish Documents website. In this way researchers will have access to a wide range of presbyterian church court records in a number of local archives (whereas at the moment the originals and/or digital copuies can only be seen in one or two places). By the end of April 2009 about 8,000 volumes of records were available online. By October 2009 the total number of voumes availablke is expected to be about 10,000. The remainder of the volumes (eventually more than 20,000 in total) will be added during 2010 and 2011. The NAS will continue to consult the Church of Scotland, local authority archives and other potential users of the system to plan wider access. The range of records available via Scottish Documents might be extended at some point in the future, for example to include valuation rolls, which are currently being digitised.

General access stage (?autumn 2010 onwards)
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.

NAS is working closely with the General Register Office for Scotland (GROS) on the ScotlandsPeople service, both on the Internet and in the family history centre in Edinburgh. The aim is that all NAS digitised records of family history interest will in time be made available via ScotlandsPeople. NAS will discuss with GROS the possibility of delivering digitised records, via the latter's virtual private network, to local family history centres in which archive and registration services are working together.

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