



## **Digitisation of church court records (October 2007)**

### **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](http://www.scan.org.uk) and [www.scottishdocuments.com](http://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 (GSU), which contributed volunteer digitisers and expert ise 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](http://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk) website.

### **The church records digitisation project**

In May 2003, the NAS, under an agreement with the Church of Scotland and the Genealogical Society of Utah (GSU), 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. Currently the project envisages a three-stage development, as outlined below.

### **Testing stage (November 2007 – March 2008)**

The NAS will be testing remote access, using selected Church of Scotland presbytery clerks and local archives, which have volunteered to act as testers. This will be done via a password-protected part of the Scottish Documents website. Digital images of around 2000 volumes (from about 12 presbyteries and constituent kirk sessions in the synods of Aberdeen, and Stirling and Perth) will be available to the testers.

### **Partner-access stage (April 2008 – December 2009)**

If testing shows that an image delivery system is viable, the Scottish Documents website will be made available (at the discretion of the Keeper of the Records of Scotland) to all Church of Scotland presbytery clerks, to archives which hold church records under charge and superintendence, and to NAS searchrooms (including the Scottish Family History Centre). Access will be via a password-protected part of the Scottish Documents website. During this time the remaining images and content for the site will be added, presbytery by presbytery. The NAS will continue to consult the Church of Scotland, archives who hold church records and other potential users of the system to plan wider access.

### **General access stage (? December 2009 onwards)**

If the system proves viable during the first two stages, 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.