

Kirk Session Records: a practical guide

Online access to church court records

Virtual Volumes on the ScotlandsPeople site

– <https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/virtual-volumes>

There are currently (in 2021) about 6,000 volumes of church court records available.

NRS online catalogue –

<https://catalogue.nrscotland.gov.uk/nrsonlinecatalogue/welcome.aspx>

Search using the reference CH1 (for the General Assembly), CH2 (for Church of Scotland quoad omnia and quoad sacra kirk sessions, presbyteries and synods), and CH3 (for other presbyterian churches who later joined or re-joined the Church of Scotland, for example the Free Church, Original Secession Church and United Free Church).

Francis H. Groome, *Ordnance Gazetteer of Scotland* (2nd edition, 1896) lists which presbyterian churches were in operation in each parish in the 19th century. An online version is available at: <http://gazetteerofscotland.org.uk>

Background reading on church court records

ScotlandsPeople guide –

<https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/guides/church-court-records>

NRS church records guide –

<https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/research/guides/church-records>

Anne Cameron, 'The Fate of the Old Parish Registers under the Registration Act of 1854' in *Scottish Archives*, volume 14 (2008).

Tracing Your Scottish Ancestors: the official guide, Seventh edition (2020) -

<https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/research/visit-us/shop>

Palaeography

You should be able to read church court records written between about 1720 and 1900 without much palaeographical knowledge, except for the ability to spot several older letter forms (the letter 'r' the 'long-s', and the letter 'w'). To read anything written in Scotland before about 1720 with any certainty, you will need to study at least a short beginner's course in palaeography. Having said that, kirk session records make a good source for novice palaeographers, as they are easy to understand with minimal legal jargon. For anything written before 1650 rather more palaeographical knowledge and experience is required, as the records contain more abbreviations/contractions, Scots language and secretary hand letter forms.

Scottish Handwriting website - <https://www.scottishhandwriting.com/>

Kirk session and church court examples in palaeography posers -

<https://www.scottishhandwriting.com/posers/church.asp>

Glasgow University Online course in reading early-modern handwriting, featuring kirk session records - <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/ems-palaeography>

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Glossary

Words and phrases which commonly occur in kirk session and other church court records, or in historical background on church courts.

- *ab initio*: from the beginning
- *ad finem*: to the end
- *antimeridie*: before noon (am)
- *apud*: in or at, for example, *apud Glasgow* (at Glasgow)
- *apud acta*: at the time of the proceedings
- *certification*: warning that another offence will incur punishment
- *compear*: appear before a court
- *delated/deleated*: reported to a court
- *fama*: rumour
- *nota*: note
- *pan/pand/pawn (marriage)*: money pledged by couples intending to marry
- *pius usus*: literally 'holy use', usually referring to the poor fund (money for poor relief and other purposes collected at church services and as payments for fines and for things like marriage pawns and mortcloth use)
- *postmeridie*: afternoon
- *post preces*: after prayer
- *presentibus*: present, usually preceding a list of elders present in court
- *pro secundo*: for the second time
- *pro tertio*: for the third time
- *quadrilapse*: fourth offence
- *quoad civilia parish*: civil parish (for education, poor relief, public health, registration etc)
- *quoad omnia parish*: a parish for all purposes (civil and ecclesiastical)
- *quoad sacra parish*: a parish for ecclesiastical purposes only (it would have a kirk session but not necessarily a parochial board for poor relief or a civil registrar for births, deaths and marriages)
- *sederunt*: a sitting of a church or other type of court
- *summa*: total, usually of money
- *trilapse*: third offence
- *ut supra*: as stated or cited above

Dictionaries and wordlists

The Concise Scots Dictionary (various editions)

Online Dictionaries of the Scots Language - <https://dsl.ac.uk/>

Eileen Gooder: *Latin for Local History: an introduction* (1978)