

# Accessing Scottish Archives Online

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**Abstract:** John Pelan, Director of the Scottish Council on Archives (SCA), explores some of the challenges around searching Scotland's archives online. Difficulties in accessing information, knowing what exists and where to find it, and the multiplicity of online catalogues can be confusing and frustrating for users, particularly inexperienced and amateur family historians. The article provides information about the Scottish Council on Archives (SCA) plans, working in partnership with a wide range of stakeholders, to create a new portal for accessing Scotland's archive collections including those of universities, local authorities, businesses and communities. The portal, which will be a development of the existing Scottish Archive Network resource, will allow users to search across many catalogues for both collection and item level records. The new portal will be an invaluable resource for genealogists, researchers, academics, students, historians and members of the public by providing guidance on understanding, using and accessing archives. SCA expects that the site will become a powerful advocacy tool for archives, showing not just the breadth and depth of collections across Scotland but highlighting the many ways that archives can be used inform and improve society. For genealogists, but also for everyday users of archives as well as potential new users, this portal will open new channels of research and local history.

**Keywords:** online catalogues; Scottish archives; accessibility

Archives are the documented memory of people, places, history and the nation. They tell our stories, enrich our lives, connect us with the past and give us a sense of identity. They may be used to provide evidence of our rights as individuals, organisations and communities and, through them, we can hold authorities to account. Archives can bring families and communities together by telling us who we are and where we come from.

The word 'archives' is hard to define, as it can be used in different ways, depending on context. For the purposes of this paper, archives can be defined as a collection of items which form evidence of a person or institution and are deemed to be worth long-term preservation for research or other purposes. Archives come in many forms—written, photographic, audio, visual, film and digital—influencing and improving almost every aspect of life. Their impact, economic, social and cultural, is wide-reaching. They can be used to promote mental wellbeing by building confidence, self-awareness and helping people with dementia. They attract visitors and boost the economy by supporting ancestral tourism. They underpin every aspect of education, science, health, culture, law and the historic environment. Archives inform the future by helping us to learn from the past.

However, accessing archives can often be a challenging and confusing process. It requires time, dedication and more than a basic understanding of how to find information online and track down the original source material. In Scotland, as in many other countries, there is a myriad of online catalogues to search for genealogical material. These include the National Records of Scotland's *Scotland's People* and *Scotland's Places* websites; the archives of the National Library of Scotland, Historic Environment Scotland; the National Register of Archives for Scotland; The National Archives; and Archives Hub. Users also access fee-charging sites such as Ancestry and, depending on their level of knowledge, dedicated resources such as business archives or regional catalogues maintained by local authorities

or cultural heritage trusts. Most people who use archives on a regular basis, whether for research, historical or genealogical purposes, recognise that finding what you are looking for can be frustrating as well as rewarding. The journey of discovery has many blind alleys, forks on the road and dead ends. However, persistence, experience and an enjoyment of the thrill of the archives chase can make for a thoroughly enjoyable and fulfilling pursuit.

The Scottish Archives Network website ([www.scan.org.uk](http://www.scan.org.uk)) was created by the then National Archives of Scotland in the early 2000s as a single online catalogue to the holdings of more than 50 Scottish archives, including those of universities, local authorities and businesses, mostly at collection level. One of the main achievements of SCAN was the digital capture of half a million wills and testaments recorded in Commissary Court and Sheriff Court registers between 1513 and 1901. The site was developed both to help local archives services publish their catalogues online at collection level and to provide information to users on what existed and was accessible. However, the site has not been updated for a number of years and demand for a new portal has been identified.

The Scottish Council on Archives (SCA) is currently scoping the potential for developing a new portal to access Scotland's online archive collections at both collection and item level as a major development of SCAN. Development of the new portal will involve both migrating current collection level descriptions from the records in the existing SCAN site, currently held within a CALM system, and adding new collections with descriptions from these and other archival institutions at collection and item level where possible. The ability to access item level descriptions will be a major improvement on what is currently available from the SCAN website. A key element of the project will be the facility for managers of local collections to export data into the new hub, either in batches or through complete data transfers.

As part of the scoping phase, SCA is also looking at other hubs which allow access to aggregated collections including Discovery, maintained by The National Archives (TNA), and Archives Hub. The Discovery portal holds more than 32 million descriptions of records held by TNA and more than 2500 archives across the country. Over nine million records are available for download. Discovery offers simple and advanced searching options and contains both collection and item level descriptions. Discovery, through the *Manage Your Collections* tool, also provides the facility to upload archive catalogues. The Archives Hub brings together descriptions of thousands of the UK's archive collections, representing over 330 institutions across the country.

The Scottish portal will improve the level of access to archive collections available to current and potential users and provide more opportunities for engagement both physically and virtually with archives. The new portal will provide resources for members of the public, historians, researchers and genealogists who wish to interact with and use Scotland's archives collections as well as learning tools for teachers and archivists working with schools and colleges. It will provide help and guidance for local groups holding or developing community archives as well as links to and help on accessing online archives held in and outside Scotland.

As part of the scoping phase of this new project SCA has been consulting with users of and stakeholders in online archives services. The purpose of this consultation was to assess the need, deliverability, functionality and technical options for creating a new Scottish archives portal. Key findings from the consultation included a recognition that the portal should be easy to use both by users and stakeholders and that access to item level records online is desirable but collection level descriptions, if detailed and consistent, are also valued, particularly if they let users know where a record is kept.

Current frustrations around using online archives include difficulty in finding out what archives collections are available (online and offline, the fragmentary nature of guides and resources and the lack of item level records online. Broken URL links, lack of consistency in descriptions and use of keywords are also frustrating. Participants were asked what would make the process of accessing and using online catalogue simpler, less confusing and more enjoyable. Suggestions included options for

basic and advanced searches, online tutorials, cross-referencing to other archival sources, and a mind map of resources and online catalogues from across the UK.

The consultation has revealed that, to the uninitiated, online archive catalogues are not always easy to navigate or understand. Easy-to-use search functionality must be accompanied by guidance material, help on using archives and details of external sources, online and offline. A new portal would raise awareness within and outside Scotland of the depth and range of archives available and could attract tourists to different places. It could help foster a sense of national identity, assist with funding applications and standardisation across collections and would be a useful resource for community groups.

A 'one stop shop' would be beneficial to researchers, professional and amateur, and could also become a powerful advocacy tool for archives as well as increasing the number of people accessing archives. It would also assist in overcoming barriers around geographical spread of archive services and better prepare visitors with the correct reference before visiting. The project would be an opportunity to improve the consistency of cataloguing standards and dealing with the retro conversion of catalogues. However, there is a need for improved keywords and index search terms and metadata which was often inconsistent. Also, the ability to ascribe authority names has fallen behind and this is important as it gives context to place, names, etc.

Users recognised that most material was not online and, therefore, it was important to manage expectations with the new portal. It was more important to be able to raise awareness of the collections that exist, offline and online. Collection level detail is very useful, as context is often needed to decipher items.

Online catalogues should have the ability to search without any inherent expertise. If the information/record was not accessible online the portal should give information about where it can be accessed. Searches are currently limited by the extent of indexing and selection of keywords which not always intuitive or comprehensive. Limited descriptions and limited contextual information can be very frustrating.

Other suggestions to enhance the new portal included:

- a glossary of terms e.g., historical and medical words and phrases
- a beginner's guide to palaeography
- consistency across catalogue descriptions with explanations of gaps
- user forums and facility to report broken links
- compatibility with any software or tools used by disabled users
- free access
- use of definers and exact language so there is consistency across collections
- subject searching guides
- links to Google maps
- community archives section
- multi-platform access
- Geographic Information Systems (GIS)-tagging
- user-generated content.

As well as providing a new means of accessing national and local archive collections, the portal will also become a unique resource for genealogists, researchers, academics, students, historians and members of the public by providing guidance on understanding, using and accessing archives. SCA expects that the site will become a powerful advocacy tool for archives, showing not just the breadth and depth of collections across Scotland but highlighting the many ways that archives can be used to inform and improve society. The new portal can also bring archivists and online catalogues from across the country closer together by sharing information and knowledge as well as cross-referencing and linking. SCA is also considering how community archives can be incorporated into the new portal

as part of its wider remit to assist local communities running or thinking of setting up an archive with issues such as standardisation, accessibility, copyright and preservation.

Scotland has, in recent years, experienced an upsurge in national pride and sense of a strong and unique cultural identity. There is recognition by the Scottish Government and its agencies, most notably the National Records of Scotland, that archives have a role to play not only in telling Scotland's story but also in fostering a sense of identity and shared memory. The new portal which the Scottish Council on Archives is developing with a wide range of partners has the potential to become a step change in terms of improving and widening understanding of and access to archives, many of which are not currently accessible, as well as exploiting the potential of collections to generate interest in and respect for Scotland's shared past.

For genealogists, but also for everyday users of archives as well as potential new users, this portal will open new channels of research and local history.

For more information on the project or suggestions for enhancing it please contact: John Pelan, Scottish Council on Archives at [j.pelan@scottisharchives.org.uk](mailto:j.pelan@scottisharchives.org.uk).

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