



Registers of Scotland
and the
General Register of Sasines:
1617–2017



Registers
of Scotland
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“
2017 will be a year when
we look back with pride to
what has been accomplished
by our predecessors.
”

Keeper's *Foreword*

I am so proud to be leading Registers of Scotland during our celebrations of the 400th anniversary of the sasine register. 2017 will be a year when we look back with pride to what has been accomplished by our predecessors and look forward to completing our transformation into an entirely digital, 21st century business that will continue to serve Scotland's people and economy in the centuries to come.

“Scotland was a world leader in 1617.”

Scotland was a world leader in 1617. And Scots went on to invent the modern world, be it James Watt's steam engine in 1781, Alexander Graham Bell's telephone in 1876, John Logie Baird's television in 1926, or the Roslin Institute's cloning of Dolly the sheep in 1996. Today, RoS maintains that ambition as we go digital, complete the land register, and as the natural home of registration in Scotland.

But our people are what makes RoS. I pay tribute to my many predecessors as Keeper of the Registers of Scotland and to the staff we have led over the past 400 years. And I wish those who will follow in my footsteps equal success for the future.



Sheenagh Adams
Keeper of the Registers of Scotland

Introduction

Property markets only succeed where you have certainty that the person selling is in fact the owner; otherwise none of us would part with our hard-earned money. Yet it is remarkable to reflect that 400 years ago Scotland not only grasped that basic principle but provided a legal means of delivering that confidence when it introduced the General Register of Sasines – the world’s oldest continuous publicly accessible national property register.

Those of us involved in conveyancing and registration have long recognised the simplicity and success of the sasine register. The 400th anniversary of its launch in 1617 provides us with the perfect opportunity to share with you a little of what has made the sasine register such an important part of Scotland’s legacy, and it also presents a chance to highlight the role of the Keeper of the Registers of Scotland, and our staff, who look after, not only the sasine register, but many other public registers on behalf of the Scottish people.

In this booklet, we will explain the history and influence of the sasine register; we will look at what has changed over the years and how the use of technology is reshaping how registration is carried out and how information is made available. We’ll also look at Registers of Scotland (RoS) – just who is ‘the keeper’ and what is involved in running a register?

But, most of all, we will acknowledge a great Scottish innovation – the principles of certainty and transparency of property ownership are no less relevant today than they were 400 years ago. That is no mean feat and it is reasonable to say that the authors of the sasine register delivered concepts that have stood the test of time.

We hope you find it an interesting story – it is certainly a story of which Scotland can be proud.

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“The keeper is seen as Scotland’s registrar of choice.”

Our Registers

“The oldest national land register in the world.”

Registers of ownership

In Scotland, the state was involved in keeping records of property ownership from the 12th century. By the early 17th century, the time was right for the creation of the General Register of Sasines, which we now know to be the oldest national land register in the world.

There had already been some element of registration of land ownership in Scotland for several centuries in the registers of grants issued under the various Crown seals, and transactions between private individuals might be recorded in the protocol book of the notary who oversaw the act of seisin, which symbolically marked the transfer of ownership. But one of the exciting benefits of the foundation of the sasine register was that it allowed registration of transactions between private individuals to be held in a public register.

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For this to be either necessary or possible, several factors needed to combine. First, there needed to be private ownership of land (or, rather, ownership needed to be sufficiently diverse for it not to be obvious and indisputable as to who owned any particular piece of land).

Second, there needed to be literacy, or, at least, a class of literate people who were sufficiently widespread to be able to record agreements between landowners and those with whom they were transacting. For registration in a centralised register, communication is essential – both so that information about land transactions can be delivered to the register, and so that searchers can inspect the register.

1617

When statutory registration was established in 1617, citizens had the option of recording their title deeds in either the General Register, in Edinburgh, or the Particular Register for the Shire in which the property lay. Separate Burgh Registers were legislated for in 1681 and it was this suite of registers that formed the national system of registration.

With improvements in communication, the need for local registers diminished and the benefits of searching a single source came to be realised. 1868 saw the start of the move towards a single register, and the introduction a few years later of a non-statutory searching tool – known as the ‘search sheet’ – significantly increased efficiency for those seeking information about land ownership.

By this time, however, an interesting new approach to providing certainty of ownership had been introduced in countries where there had never been an equivalent of the sasine register.

The first system of ‘registration of title’ was launched in South Australia by Sir Robert Torrens in 1858. Torrens-based systems were subsequently introduced across Australia and New Zealand, as well as being exported to parts of North America and to British colonies as far apart as Papua and Uganda. When Professor Wood, the professor of conveyancing at Edinburgh University, published his lectures in 1903, he stated in the preface that:

“I suppose that nowhere is there to be found a better system of registration of land titles by deeds [than the sasine register]. But I am clear that the time has now come when this system should give place to the more excellent plan of registration of title.”

It was not until 1981, with the implementation of the Land Registration (Scotland) Act of 1979, however, that the Land Register of Scotland started to supersede the sasine register. The land register is the product of legislation designed to introduce a modern, map-based system of registration of title that reflects the current title position rather than being a chronological record of deeds. Backed by a state guarantee of title, the new register signalled a different and pioneering relationship between the state and the citizen with regard to registration of ownership.

1858

1981

Court registers

Most people prefer to keep their financial circumstances private, but if a citizen or a business is insolvent then anyone who intends to transact with them needs to know. It was a logical step, therefore, for the holder of the property registers also to be responsible for the registers of debtors who are prohibited from transacting with their property.

Modern debtors can perhaps be thankful that an inhibition or a sequestration is merely registered in the Register of Inhibitions, making it available to be viewed by the public. In earlier centuries, debtors could be ignominiously and publicly denounced with three blasts of the horn by a messenger-at-arms – following which ‘letters of horning’, charging the debtor to pay, could be registered in the Register of Hornings, and moveable goods to the value of the debt could be seized.

“With improvements in communication, the need for local registers diminished and the benefits of searching a single register came to be realised.”

Another public register held by the keeper, the Register of Deeds in the Books of Council and Session, provides other important services for Scotland. It can be used as a place of safe-keeping for a wide range of documents, from wills to commercial leases. It also contains documents that include a clause of consent to registration for execution.

Usually, a court decree is needed before formal action can be taken by a creditor against a debtor, but registration for execution allows a creditor to use an extract of the deed as authority for diligence without going to court.

In something of a surprising and curious twist, there is no single Act of Parliament which established this register. Rather, it simply seems to have become the practice, by around the mid-15th century, that clerks of court entered other documents in the register of court decrees established as a result of the Jurisdiction of the Lords of Session Act 1457.

In the mid-16th century, two of the clerks of the Court of Session began to enter deeds into two parallel non-statutory registers administered through their respective offices. As time passed, practice gradually became more uniform until only a single register was in operation – the Register of Deeds in the Books of Council and Session.

“As time passed, practice gradually became more uniform until only a single register was in operation.”

1584

That register continues to this day, with very little restriction as to the nature of the documents that may be recorded, other than that they must be self-proving (i.e. signed and witnessed – the requirement for deeds to be sealed having been abolished in 1584) and contain a clause of consent to registration for execution where registration is sought for that purpose.

Crown registers

Affixing a seal is, however, the main purpose of another group of registers: the Register of the Great Seal (more properly, the seal to be used in place of the Great Seal); the Cachet Seal (which is not really a seal: it is a facsimile of the monarch’s signature); the Prince’s Seal; and the Quarter Seal. Constitutionally, these are arguably the most important registers held by the keeper, as they record decisions and grants of the monarch or the Prince and Steward of Scotland, such as Royal Assent to Acts of the Scottish Parliament.

Scotland’s registrar of choice

While many of our registers have their origins in history, some are much more recent. An increased emphasis on land being owned by local community bodies led to the creation of the Register of Community Interests in Land in 2004, in which community bodies can register a right of first refusal on land if it comes on the market.

New legislation set out in the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2016 will give community bodies the right to force a sale of land that is abandoned or neglected, or that could be used to promote sustainable development, this information will

2004

be recorded in a new register. Meanwhile, the 2016 Act will give the keeper the role of maintaining another new register of persons who have controlling interests in landowners and tenants.

The Crofting Register, established in 2012, marked a new direction in the role of the keeper. For the first time, crofters have a definitive, map-based register that guarantees the extent of their tenancies and the common grazings in which they have a share.

The development and operation of the register have required close working with the Crofting Commission, which makes the regulatory decisions that lead to registration and which checks applications before they are forwarded to the keeper. Regulation and registration are seen as different sides of a coin, with the two functions being undertaken by the respective specialist organisations.

Where new legislation introduces a form of registration related to land or property, it seems natural that that responsibility should be given to the keeper. And following on from the collaborative approach that the keeper developed with the Crofting Commission, she is now being asked to take on the operation of a number of registers related to housing management, for which the responsibility lies with Scottish ministers or local authorities.

The keeper is seen as Scotland’s registrar of choice – just as her predecessors have been over the four centuries since the establishment of the Register of Sasines.

2012



Image: Front cover of the 2012 Act.

Our *Buildings*

“The stories of the registers and of the repositories are closely related.”

By the mid-18th century, the need for a permanent home for the national records was widely recognised. Trustees were appointed (headed by the Lord Clerk Register) and, in 1765, a grant of £12,000 was obtained from the estates of Jacobites, forfeited after the 1745 rising, towards building a ‘proper repository’.

Architects Robert and James Adam were appointed in 1768, a plan approved in 1772 and the foundation stone was laid in 1774. The building was still incomplete and roofless in 1779, when funds ran out and it stood empty for six years, the dome being described as “the most expensive pigeon house in Europe”.

Thankfully, in 1785, a new government grant was confirmed and the finishing touches were completed in late 1787 when staff and records were moved in – 22 years after the decision to build a ‘proper repository’.

Contrast this to our latest office, St Vincent Plaza (SVP) in Glasgow, designed and built as a private speculative office development during 2013-15, selected by RoS after an extensive infrastructure strategy review commencing in 2014; lease negotiated in 2015; architectural and interior design appointment in the middle of 2016; on site by autumn of 2016; and in use by February 2017 – three years in total.

“General Register House was the first purpose-built record repository in the world.”

General Register House was the first purpose-built record repository in the world and the cornerstone of Edinburgh New Town. It was much better suited to purpose than anything that had gone before: stone-built with compartments isolated one from another to reduce fire risks; heated to reduce damp; and designed (it was said in 1800) not only to hold existing records, but those which ‘shall probably become transmissible for some centuries to come’.

1774

1785

1807

Another boast was that ‘no person sleeps in any part of the building. The whole is allotted for public purposes’. This was a point of particular concern as many of the local records were kept in private offices and even private houses, clearly unsuitable from any perspective.¹

While it was spacious enough for the time being, it was not the complete building as designed by the architects and certainly, had it been less splendid, it might have been completed ‘on time and on budget’.

The stories of the registers and of the repositories are closely related. Both reflect wider aspects of society and contemporary attitudes. Thomas Thomson (Deputy Clerk Register from 1807) penned the phrase ‘One Connected and Efficient System’ in his annual report of 1815, but he did not use it to refer to the systems for creating and preserving the records of which he had charge, but for proposals with regard to heating and cleaning the register house itself.² He thought this had been done inefficiently and ineffectively because the approach was disjointed. A ‘system’ should be integrated; a complete mechanism.



RoS is now at the cutting edge of modernity in 2017, as we relocate our Glasgow presence to the SVP building and start using its first smart working infrastructure platform.

But what is a smart working infrastructure platform? RoS is now embarking on a radical Business Transformation Programme to enable us to become a more modern and digital organisation. This will influence how we operate, and creating a smart working infrastructure is a fundamental part of supporting this transformation.

The platform is a flexible working environment to support using digital

processes and a significant investment in staff well-being. It also uses space more efficiently and allows for more collaboration and sharing between users with leading-edge IT and audio-visual (AV) technology, meaning users can connect more easily with colleagues in other locations.

There are unique design concepts in furniture, meeting rooms and booths, project and touchdown areas, and café facilities throughout. These are integrated with an ambitious IT, AV, lighting, air-conditioning and acoustic engineering solution to enable the organisation to adapt to the developing needs of digital smart working in the future.

“RoS is now embarking on a radical Business Transformation Programme to enable us to become a more modern and digital organisation.”

The platform design team also targeted the seven concepts of the WELL building standard which aims at addressing health and wellness at the centre of design for air, water, nourishment, light, fitness, comfort and mind.

SVP is situated in a fast-developing, commercial part of Glasgow City and is adjacent to a range of public and private sector stakeholders, enabling business development opportunities to be seized.

It also has a distinctive architectural presence both day and night and has enabled space to be halved compared to the previous ten years at Hanover House (also in Glasgow), which did not fit our business transformation needs.

The Glasgow platform is connected to our Meadowbank House (MBH) office in Edinburgh, where the entire sasines office moved in the 1970s at the same time as West Register House was established in Charlotte Square, Edinburgh, to provide city centre customer services.

From 2011-13, a major relocation, extension and refurbishment project at MBH consolidated RoS’s presence in Scotland’s capital city. The investment improved the building’s accessibility, created a new customer service centre and embedded environmental improvements.

1970

2013

¹ NAS SRO3/1 – Reports from the Select Committee... into the State of the Public Records of the Kingdom & House of Commons, 1800, p.395.

² NAS SRO3/10 p/6.

Image: General Register House, Edinburgh.

“
 The first
 known
 ‘register
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 established
 in Edinburgh
 Castle in
 1540-42.
 ”



MBH is recognised as the main location for RoS in Scotland and has a highly visible civic presence. Ongoing investment since 2013 has seen the accommodation and technology develop flexibly to support our digital and smart working ambitions. Innovation requirements and learning from SVP are also at the core of any future changes to ensure it remains fit for purpose.

Both MBH and SVP are connected digitally to our new private cloud data centre at Saughton House, in Edinburgh, part of the Scottish Government estate and IT infrastructure. All three locations provide the full smart working infrastructure platform, providing a digital repository for the entire population of Scotland and the world.

This may all seem a far cry from the first known ‘register house’ established in Edinburgh Castle in 1540-42, the prime location for central records since medieval times. It was never fit for purpose as there were many losses from fire, vermin, damp and the carelessness of some of the custodians. There were no digital ‘capture once use often’ processes back then.

In 1662, some of the records were moved to the Laigh Hall in Parliament House, and the great seal and other records were moved there in 1689 – again the location was not fit for purpose as they were all housed in the basement and treated with ‘inexcusable neglect’.³

2013

1540

1689

“SVP will support our digital transformation, helping us to deliver the products and services that Scotland needs from RoS.”

Nearly 100 years later, the organisation moved into the magnificent Georgian surroundings of General Register House – and another 200 years after that, on announcing the SVP relocation, Sheenagh Adams, the current Keeper of the Registers of Scotland, said:

“This is a fantastic office space that will bring us significant improvements – the space is more flexible and will reduce our carbon footprint by more than 50 per cent. SVP will support our digital transformation, helping us to deliver the products and services that Scotland needs from RoS”.



“In 1807, Thomas Thomson was appointed as the first Deputy Clerk Register.”

Our *People*

“During his 35-year term of office, Thomson laid the foundation for the modern record office.”

The first clerk

In 1807, Thomas Thomson (1768-1852) was appointed as the first Deputy Clerk Register and quickly embarked on a campaign of improving the records. During his 35-year term of office, the changes Thomson instituted in compiling the records laid the foundations for the modern record office.

Thomson regulated the standard of the books; issuing them to the clerks, he limited the number of words per page, added margins for annotations and argued for the need of abstracts for search aids. In addition to the improvements in compiling the registers, Thomson also initiated a major conservation programme; between 1807 and 1816, more than 6,500 books were rebound.

The keepers

There have been many keepers since, of whom the last three have brought us into the 21st century. Alan Ramage spent his entire 40-year career in RoS until retiring in 2003. His time as keeper saw the roll out of the land register across Scotland completed with the last counties going live in 2003.

“There have been many keepers since, of whom the last three have brought us into the 21st century.”

Alan was succeeded by Jim Meldrum, who served as keeper from 2003 to 2009. Jim has the distinction of being the only person ever to serve as both Registrar General for Scotland and Keeper of the Registers of Scotland. He introduced ARTL – automated registration of title to land – RoS’s first digital registration system, which has since processed more than 100,000

1807

1816

2009

applications. He also made the first appointment of non-executive directors to the RoS board and added the Register of Sites of Special Scientific Interest to the suite of registers under the keeper's control.

And since 2009, we have been led by Sheenagh Adams, the first female keeper. Sheenagh has successfully seen us through the implementation of the Land Registration etc. (Scotland) Act 2012, a 'once in a generation' overhaul of the statutory framework within which RoS operates, and is now leading us through an ambitious programme of digital transformation – of which more later.

Modern Apprentices

2013

RoS's Modern Apprenticeships scheme was introduced in 2013 to support the Scottish Government's Youth Employment strategy to offer young people paid employment while they gain a nationally recognised qualification.

So far, the programme has seen more than 50 young people, aged 16-to-19, take on roles in a range of departments across the business – including Registration, Customer Services, Procurement, Finance, HR and Estates.

Not only does the scheme offer young people paid training, qualifications and employment, but it sets them up for later career progression. Since joining RoS, several of our Modern Apprentices have secured promotion and/or transferred to positions in different departments where they have acquired new skills and knowledge.

Sheenagh Adams, the current Keeper of the Registers of Scotland, has described the programme as "one of our great success stories", adding: "It has been a delight to work with and nurture these brilliant young people, who have brought fresh talent and skills to the organisation and shown us just how much potential people of their age have".

“The Modern Apprenticeship scheme is one of our great success stories.”

Changing times – and attitudes

As an organisation, RoS prides itself on its commitment to eliminating discrimination and encouraging diversity amongst its workforce. The appointment of Sheenagh Adams as keeper and Janet Egdell's role as Accountable Officer shows just how far the civil service has come since the first half of the 20th century when married women were barred from joining; indeed, married women were described as a 'perfect nuisance' by the Treasury in 1947.⁴

Women now enjoy roles at every level throughout RoS. Gone are the days when women seeking promotion would undergo not an interview but an analysis of their characters by their male superiors (and they were indeed always male) to which they had no right of reply.

“Sheenagh Adams as keeper and Janet Egdell's role as Accountable Officer shows just how far the civil service has come since the first half of the 20th century.”

The Promotion Board Book of the Sasines Office from 1927 (currently on display in Meadowbank House) reveals that female candidates for promotion were described variously as 'fairly old', 'had not the education', 'hopeless', 'liable to flap' and 'still jumpy'. Indeed, with modern sensibilities, one cannot help but feel some empathy for the woman who was described as being 'of the discontented type'.

“It has been a delight to work with and nurture these brilliant young people.”

*Sheenagh Adams
Keeper of the Registers of Scotland*



⁴National Archives T 275/137.

Image: Keeper of the Registers of Scotland with some of our 2016 Modern Apprentices.

Register House Golf Club

The origins of the Office Golf Club are difficult to trace, but there is anecdotal evidence that it was in existence in the early 1870s. What is absolutely clear is that it was functioning as an organised club in 1878.

“The club takes its name from Register House at the east end of Princes Street, where the Department of the Registers of Scotland was located prior to the move to Meadowbank House in 1976.”

The most compelling evidence of this is that one of the club’s trophies, the Club Medal, was first presented to I M Reid in 1878. The medal is still played for today and the original medal is incorporated in the current trophy. Further evidence comes in the shape of the Minute Book, now preserved in the National Archives of Scotland, which has a first entry of 31 March, 1879.

In the early days, the club had outings to Leith, Musselburgh (then an Open Championship venue), Burntisland, Kinghorn and Elie, among others. Transport to the courses in Fife was by ferry from Granton to Burntisland run by the North British Railway Company and then by train. The Forth Rail Bridge didn’t open until 1890! The club reserved train coaches and there is still a reservation label in the records.

The club takes its name from Register House at the east end of Princes Street, where the Department of the Registers of Scotland was located prior to the move to Meadowbank House in 1976. It claims to be ‘the oldest, non-course owning office golf club in the world’. This claim has been tested in the press and, although the Edinburgh Electric Golf Club was started earlier, it does not have a continuous existence.

1879

1976

Football

One of the highlights of the year at RoS is the eagerly anticipated ‘Colts versus Crocks’ football match – an annual sporting encounter that has been contested by Edinburgh-based staff since the 1970s.

The Colts team consists of players aged 30 and below, while the Crocks are made up of players 31 and above, with the first ‘official’ match being played in 1986 for the Tait Shield. The trophy is named after Mrs Anne Tait, a long-standing member of RoS staff who had joined the organisation in the summer of 1947.

Mrs Tait was aware that the golf club had many trophies and the football club had none, so, upon her retirement in August 1985, she bought and donated a pair of trophies for the football club to be played for at the annual match. In a gesture typical of her thoughtful nature, Mrs Tait donated two trophies – one for the winners and one for the losers – so that none of her boys would be left disappointed.

Thereafter, Mrs Tait kept in touch with the football club and donated several more trophies, statuettes and tankards over the years. As of 2016, there have been 26 matches (five years were not contested) and the upstart Colts hold a healthy 16-10 series lead.

Mrs Tait passed away in 2016 and the keeper attended her funeral.

1970

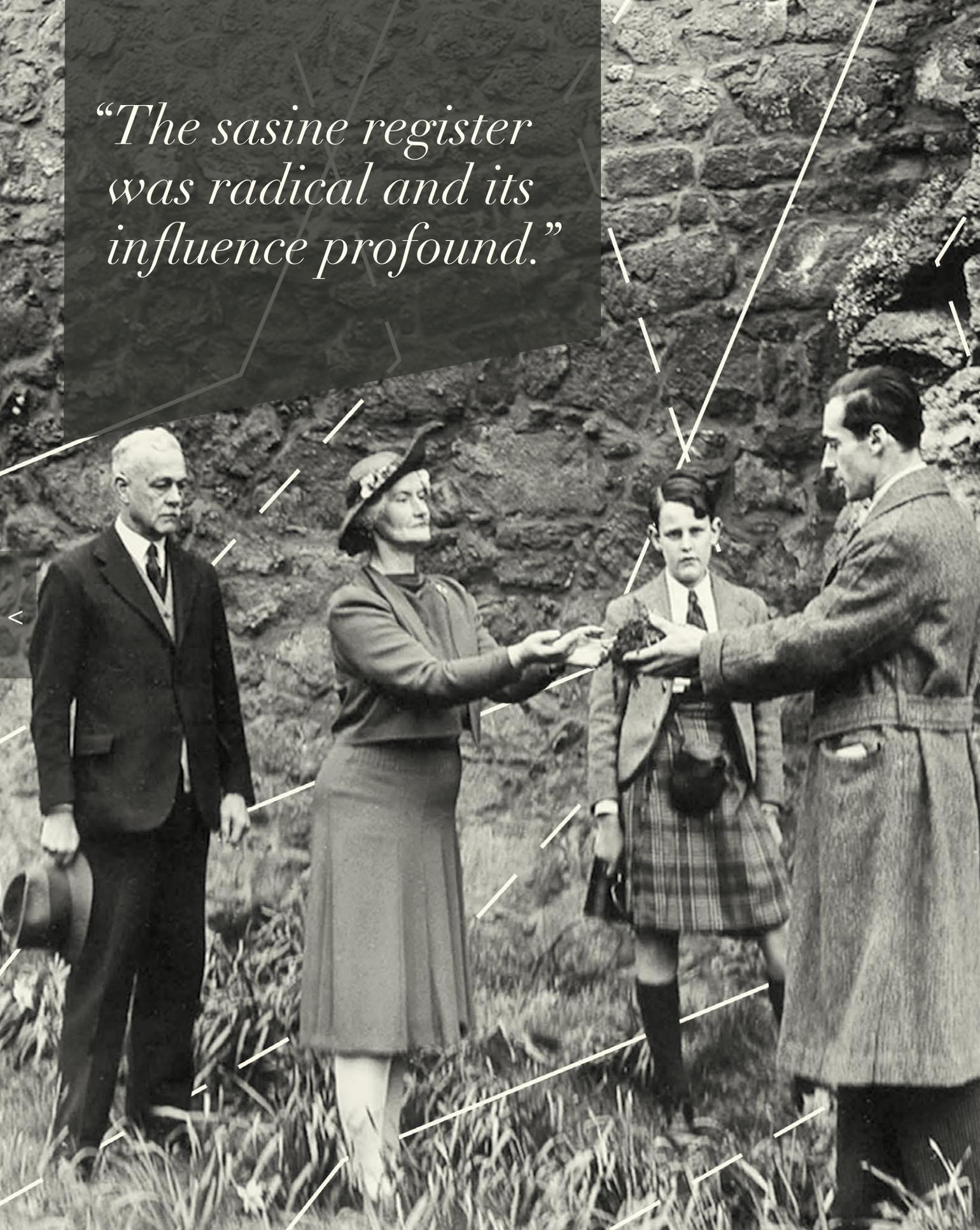
1947

2016



Image: 1986 and 2016 Colts football teams.

“The sasine register was radical and its influence profound.”



Our *Influence*: the sasine register

“Thus was the system of registration in land rights brought to perfection.”⁵

Unheralded and largely unsung outwith Scotland’s legal community, the sasine register has underpinned the advances brought about through the Scottish Enlightenment, the industrial revolution, urbanisation and the spread and growth of property ownership, and the subsequent expansion of the mortgage industry. As the first national public property register, the sasine register was radical and its influence profound.

Its longevity speaks to its consistent relevance. Witness the key ideas behind its introduction: to introduce the twin pillars of publicity and protection that provide a safe environment for property ownership and commerce to flourish.



“The sasine register also provides confidence by identifying not only ownership but the deeds that have a bearing on a particular title.”

The idea behind the sasine register is that ownership of land should not be obscured – rather, the public should be able to establish who owns Scotland. And for those considering transacting with property, the sasine register also provides confidence by identifying not only ownership but the deeds that have a bearing on a particular title.

And once a title deed – originally the ‘Instrument of Sasine’, but in time a ‘Feu Contract’ and later a ‘Feu Disposition’, and then a ‘Plain Disposition’ – was recorded, the parties’ rights in the land within the deed were made real and accorded a greater legal status.

Image: Dalrymple family presenting a clod of earth for House of the Binns, with a young Tam Dalrymple who sadly died in 2017.
⁵ W Ross, Lectures on the History and Practice of the Law of Scotland relative to Conveyancing and Legal Diligence (2nd Edn, 1822, vol ii, 214).

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The idea behind the sasine register is that ownership of land should not be obscured: rather, the public should be able to establish who owns Scotland.

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Those ideas are no less influential now than they were in 1617. We need look no further than the current debate in political circles around transparency, including the drive to complete the land register and so visibly show on a map of Scotland who owns each piece of land and to bring in a new register that shows who has the controlling interest in decisions that affect that land. Today's transparency agenda has its roots in the principles that underpin the sasine register.

The World Bank has consistently and strongly expressed the view that an effective land and property registration system is a key enabler for economic development and political stability. It is essential for inward investment, for economic growth and sustainability – and despite the many local variations in how the twin pillars are realised, property registers the world over concern themselves with the ideas behind the sasine register, namely publicity and protection.

There are less obvious, but no less important, influences that the sasine register has brought, namely the idea of a national register – a single source of truth for a country – as opposed to local registers. Part of the success of the sasine

register was linked to the demise of local burgh and particular registers. A national register provided a central, accessible record, but, more than that, it also ensured consistency of registration standards, of the information it captured and presented, and played its part in the increasing professionalism of the keeper and staff.

“There are less obvious, but no less important, influences that the sasine register has brought, namely the idea of a national register.”

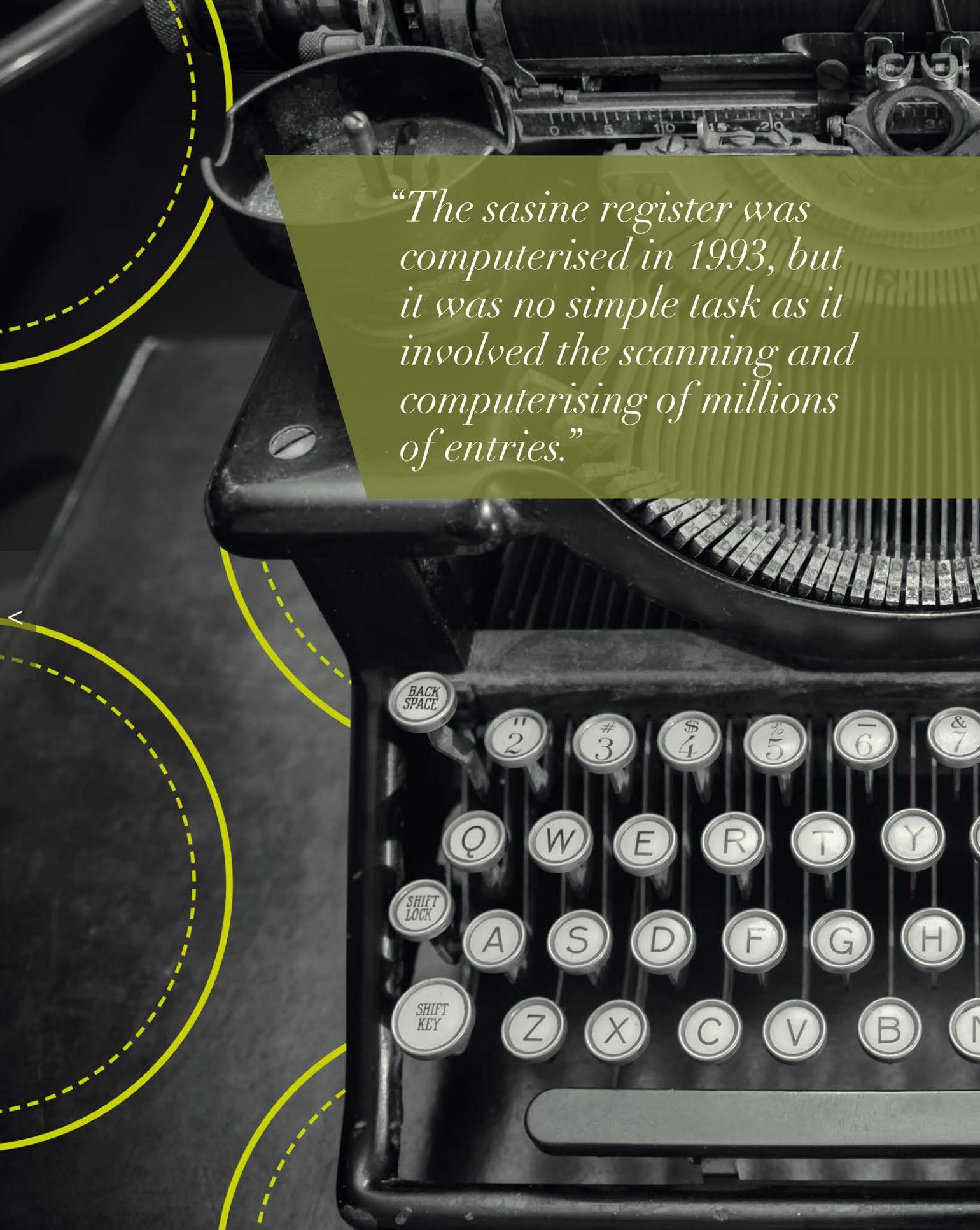
It also led to a simplification in the process of transferring land. Registration ultimately trumped the ancient ceremony of sasines where a clod of earth was passed from superior to vassal – or from buyer to seller in today's language – on the land itself to symbolise and evidence the transfer of that land. The sasine register marked an inevitable, albeit initially gradual, shift to evidencing land transfers through registered deeds as opposed to acts of symbolism.

As is often the case with the early adoption of new and influential ideas, the sasine register was in many ways too successful. By the mid-19th century, other jurisdictions – starting in South Australia with the system promoted by Sir Robert Torrens – began to introduce more legally definitive and transparent map-based registration of title systems. These systems were built around the ideas of publicity and protection that the sasine register heralded.

“While the sasine register is being superseded by the land register, it continues to support Scotland's economy to this day.”

However, Scotland did not see the need for registration of title until much later, and while the sasine register is being superseded by the land register, it continues to support Scotland's economy to this day.

There was not the same urgency or drive to adopt land registration and so the sasine register prospered through to 1981, since when it has been in a state of gradual decline. Scotland's land register has taken on the mantle of publicity and protection, which has perhaps set the sasine register on its final journey. However, its influence lives on.



“The sasine register was computerised in 1993, but it was no simple task as it involved the scanning and computerising of millions of entries.”

Our *Technology*

“RoS is in midst of a digital revolution that is transforming the way we interact with our customers.”

Innovative technologies are enabling RoS to deliver our registration and information services in ways that only a few years ago would have seemed laudable but unachievable.

Indeed, one of the biggest challenges that we and our customers now face is to ensure that the technology decisions we make today do not hold back the adoption of yet better solutions tomorrow. We are spoiled by choice. Today's pace of change contrasts starkly with the almost complete absence of change and innovation that the sasine – and other – registers experienced until late in the 20th century.

Back in 1617, the Ming dynasty was in power in China, the Spanish built the San Diego fort in Acapulco to protect their empire, and James I and VI sat on the English and Scottish thrones. In Edinburgh, Gladstone's Land was bought and redeveloped by a prosperous Edinburgh merchant, Thomas Gledstones. No doubt he was glad of the protection offered to his sumptuous new home by the new-fangled register of deeds – the sasine register.

The sasine register was based on paper; the register itself comprised paper presentment books, minute books and abridgments, and, of course, was populated by information from paper deeds (all initially handwritten). Such innovations as there were – the introduction of indices or the launch of the search sheet to provide a property history – looked to improve on those paper records. That was until the introduction of the typewriter brought typed deeds and typed registers.

Typewriters were not universally popular and although RoS started receiving typed deeds and so collated the abridgments in type from the 1890s onwards, some solicitor firms were still submitting deeds in ink up until just before the

— 1617 —

— 1890 —

Second World War. Indeed, surprising as it may seem, staff themselves still populated the presentment book and the sasine indexes in pen up until the 1990s.

That was arguably the last major technological change. For most of that period, computers did not exist and so instead of an IT section, RoS had a stationery cupboard! Even though computers began to emerge within the business during the 1970s, our registers remained resolutely paper-based. The trusty tools of an officer working in sasines were a glue pot, a brush and an old copy of the Yellow Pages.

1970

1981

That changed in 1981 – a big year for technology. Not only did it herald the first flight of the space shuttle and the word ‘internet’ being used for the first time, but RoS kept pace with the times in its own way by acquiring a mainframe computer – at roughly the size of a barn – to support the newly-launched land register.

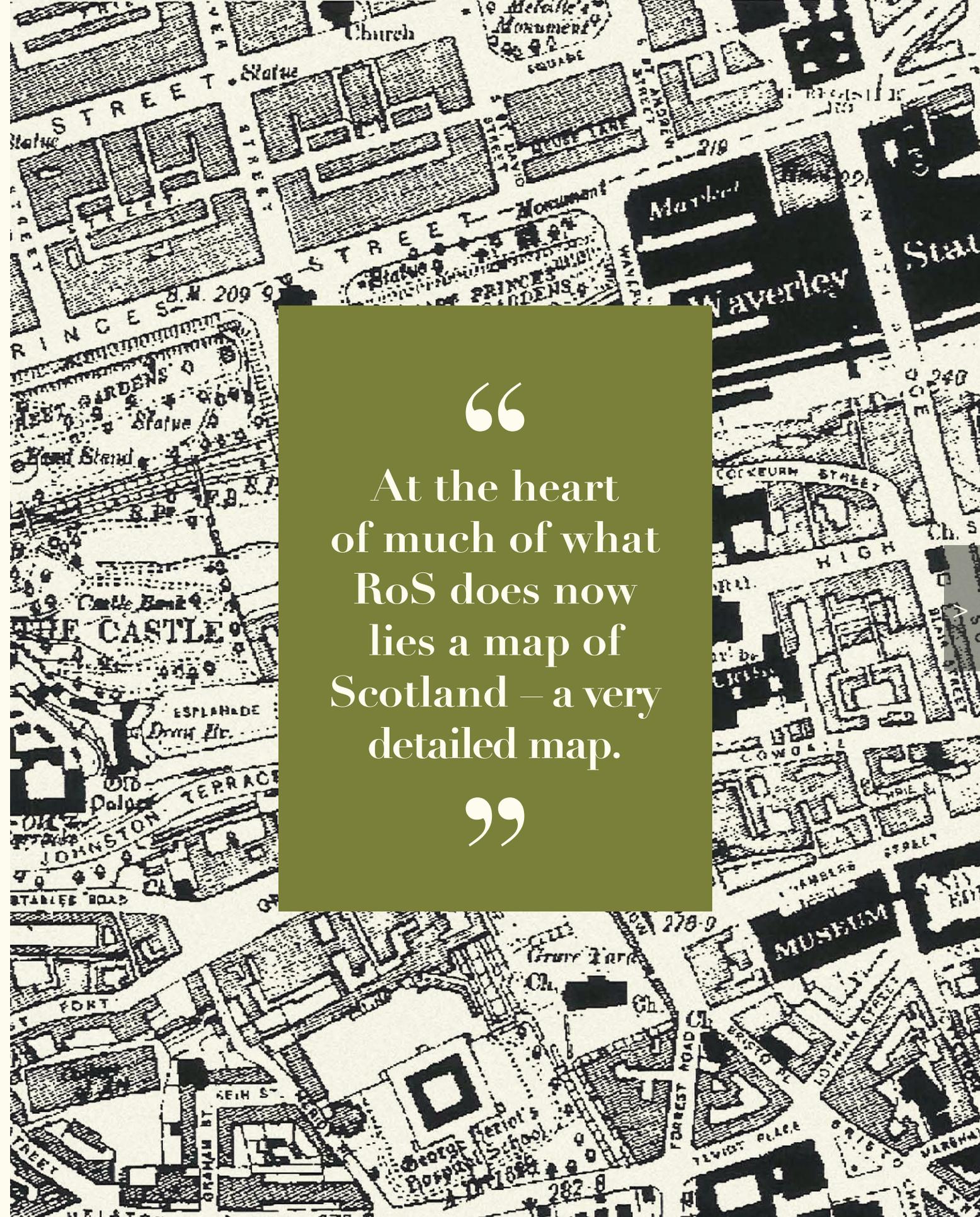
“For most of that time, computers weren’t in use and so instead of an IT section RoS had a stationery cupboard.”

The land register mainframe took up much of the east wing on the second floor of Meadowbank House. Indeed, the end wall of the wing had to be taken out so the mainframe could be moved in. Notwithstanding its size, it only dealt with the textual part of the Land Register; the map part was still held on paper. But even in that area, natural paints had been replaced with chemical dyes as a result of a shortage in the world supply of beetle-based cochineal. However, computerisation now had a toe-hold within RoS and set the scene for more and more use of technology, albeit at a relatively slow pace.

1993

A further 12 years passed before the sasine register was computerised in 1993. This was no simple task as it involved scanning and computerising millions of entries. But the hard work was essential: we were awash with paper records, searching was cumbersome, there was considerable risk of fire and there was no back-up should a paper record become defaced or lost. The next stage was to digitise the land register maps, which, up to that point, were hand-painted. The search sheet soon followed.

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”



From a customer angle, a significant technical delivery in this period was the launch of Registers Direct and the ability to access our information remotely through the internet. It was cutting-edge at the time and changed forever the way in which RoS enabled access to its information; until Registers Direct, a physical presence in Meadowbank House was required to obtain information. Registers Direct allowed information to be accessed remotely and that meant more customers could be reached.

“It was cutting-edge at the time and changed forever the way in which RoS enabled access to its information.”

Digitising services and products began with Registers Direct. Through that, the business recognised the benefits that interacting with our customers electronically could bring us and them. The first electronic registration system was next (ARTL) – it proved that registration applications need not be paper-based. It also introduced digital certificates and digital signatures as a way of providing security and legal authentication.

“Things have changed a great deal since 1617 and our business transformation programme is laying the foundations for our next 400 years.”

Things have changed a great deal since 1617 and our business transformation programme is laying the foundations for our next 400 years.

Digital technology... the next steps

RoS does not seem the kind of place that would boast an innovation centre or a user experience lab. But on the fifth floor of MBH, software engineers and user-experience experts (or “UX” as they are more typically referred to) sit working out ways to make an organisation celebrating its 400th anniversary a leader in digital innovation.

As we look back over the centuries in a celebration that coincides with the Year of History, Heritage and Archaeology, RoS is in the midst of a digital revolution that is transforming the way we interact with our customers: providing digital registration services, opening up access to land and property information through a new web-based portal and adopting technologies that provide more security, less risk and enable us to readily take on new responsibilities and functions.

At the heart of much of what RoS does now lies a map of Scotland – a very detailed map supplied by Ordnance Survey and updated continuously in line with changes on the ground. Against that map is shown properties on the land register, and, indeed, other land-based registers. And it allows one to answer the question: ‘Who owns Scotland?’

“The latest technology at RoS now does much of the mapping for us – and can do it instantly.”

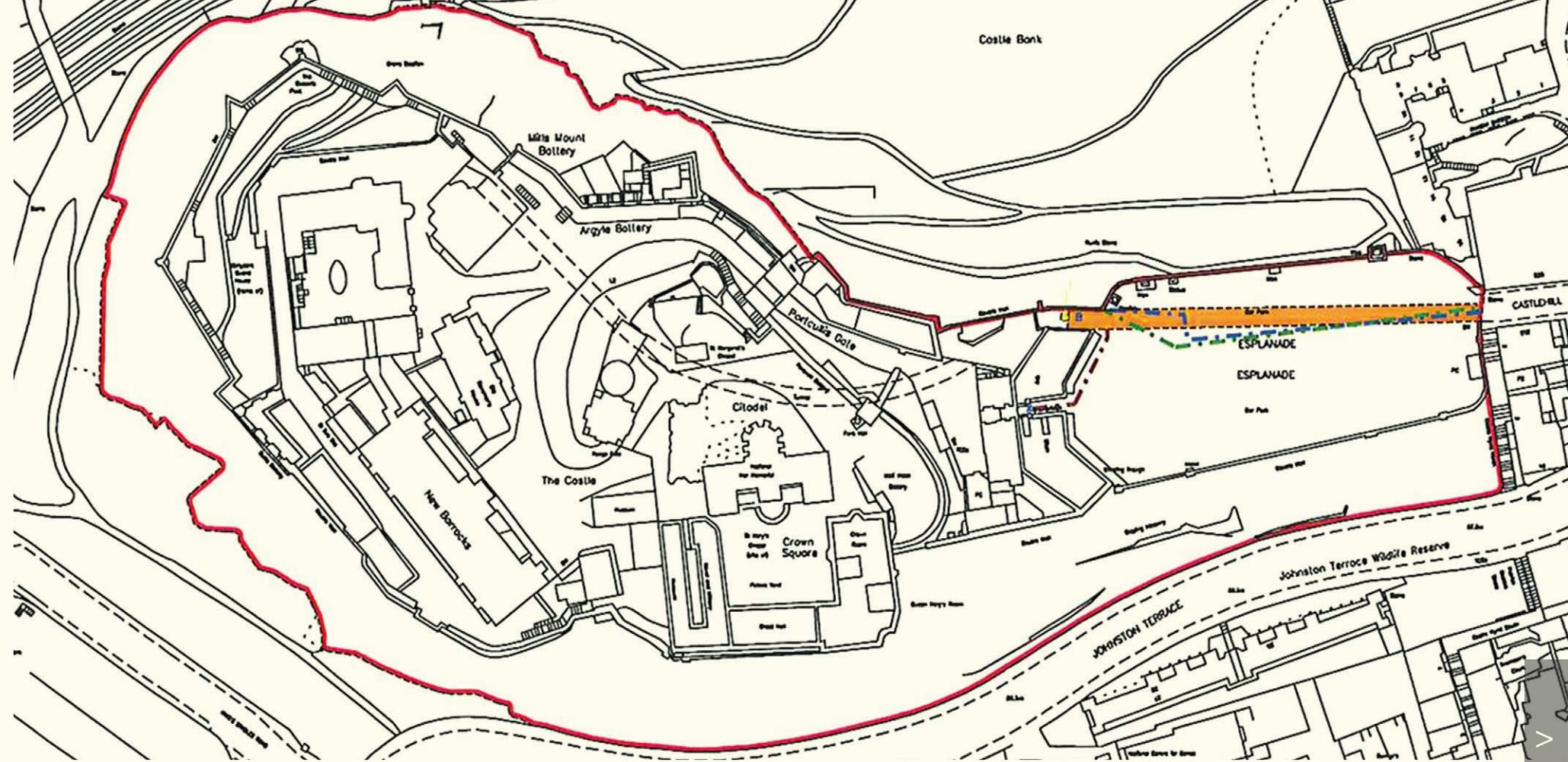
When the land register began, it was a paper map, and property boundaries were hand-painted on to it. The digital replacement for that process arrived in the mid-1990s, but was still centred on a colleague directing the mapping tools to update the now digital map of Scotland. The latest technology at RoS now does much of the mapping for us – and can do it instantly.

Remotely piloted aircraft systems are providing the data to make high-resolution maps in minutes that are more accurate than the maps created by surveyors and engineers that take days to produce. The speed at which maps are updated will continue to improve as we head towards real-time mapping that will enable us to follow the progress of a new estate or a new conservatory, brick by brick.

However, as much as RoS celebrates the strides in mapping technologies, there is an acute awareness that it is not enough. And the reason is that the land register map – despite being digital – is one dimensional. The flat earth society lives on – it is the digital equivalent of a piece of paper, but, at this point in time, it is the best of breed.

But the world is not flat and the land register should reflect that – hence our interest in 3D mapping. 3D mapping virtually removes the roofs and walls of buildings by allowing one to toggle through various floors, making it easier to find things like stairways and shared areas. So, as one advance is celebrated, work begins on the next development.

The key change common to many land registries around the world is to deliver new digital channels to allow customers to create and submit their deeds and documents for registration. RoS is no different and the range of our digital services is growing. A new Digital Discharge Service (DDS) has already been launched, and will be followed soon by digital securities and dispositions.



“The key change common to many land registries around the world is to deliver new digital channels to allow customers to create and submit their deeds and documents for registration.”

And when that change comes, it will herald the departure of processes that have been with us for centuries – the mail room will become superfluous, trolleys to wheel casebags will no longer be needed and the sight of desks piled high with deeds and plans will be a thing of the past.

As the registration side of the business becomes more and more digital, so will the way in which we provide information. The management of RoS’s data should underpin public and political discussion on land ownership and national housing policy, not just assist individual property transactions.

RoS has used the internet for some time to allow access to our registers, but technology is now enabling us to join up different registers and other data sets to present a more rounded and coherent picture of what is happening with land in Scotland. Hence the arrival in 2017 of a land and property information system for Scotland, Scotlis, which for the first time in the country’s history will allow the people of Scotland to access information held by RoS through one digital door.

Although no-one can know what RoS will look like in another 400 years – there might be robots in customer services and the mapping carried out by drones and lasers – we can be sure that the business will continue to push forward with new and innovative changes that will benefit the people of Scotland.



Our *Future*

“RoS must continue to evolve much more quickly than in the past.”

What will Scotland look like in 400 years? Will it be warmer and wetter? What registers would have value? And how will information be stored and accessed?

The more immediate future is easier to imagine. The pace of change in society continues to speed up, and is particularly apparent in the changes to the technology we use and how we use it. In response, RoS must continue to evolve – and more quickly than in the past.

“Our registers will continue to underpin economic activity and growth, making Scotland a great place to do business.”

Our registers will continue to underpin economic activity and growth, making Scotland a great place to do business. But there will be even greater demands to access the information within our various registers. There will be an expectation that the information held is available instantly via any device and in any format the customer wishes.

Several developments already underway will combine to make our information even more in demand. Interest in the latest house prices is unlikely to diminish, and RoS holds the definitive dataset. As the land register is completed, RoS will provide clarity around who owns Scotland. Through the land and property information hub, Scotlis, information will be shared through maps and links, making it accessible to a wider audience.

As new registers are added, such as three new housing registers, RoS can add to the depth of the information available. As the organisation digitises the way registrations are received, RoS can update the registers in real time and reduce our carbon footprint.

In time – and not another 400 years’ time – Registers of Scotland will have transformed from the paper-based registration business of the past, to a digital, information-rich business of the future.



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