Understanding Kirk Session Records

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Quick Facts

Kirk Session: What does it mean?

Kirk = Scots word for church
Session = From the Latin ‘sessio’ which means ‘to sit’.

We use the term session when we talk about a sitting of parliament or congress. Kirk sessions are a court which oversees the local congregation and its parish, and usually consists of elders presided over by a minister. At the district level, the court is called a presbytery.

Most historical Kirk Session Records are held by the National Records of Scotland in Edinburgh.

Kirk Session records can contain a wide variety of material, including (but are not limited to):

Births	Local Interest	Emigration
Marriages	Poor Relief	Testimonials
Deaths	Early Census	
Fornication	Population lists	

You can now search many (but not all) pre-1900 records on the government website: www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk

The unindexed Kirk Session records on ScotlandsPeople are free to search but you will need to pay to download the images.

If you are new to using Kirk Session records you may be interested in the video 'Kirk Session Records on ScotlandsPeople' by the Head of Outreach and Learning at the National Records of Scotland. This video is available at https://www.scottishindexes.com/pastconferences.aspx

Organisation

The organisation of the records is quite straightforward. The records are arranged by parish (or presbytery) then volume. Church of Scotland Kirk Session records have a reference which begins ‘CH2’, followed by a number unique to each parish.

For example, Castleton parish is given the reference ‘CH2/64’, then each volume has a number. The catalogue on the NRS website gives us quite detailed information along with covering dates. Go to http://catalogue.nrscotland.gov.uk/

Occasionally we find that the minister used the same register volume in two parishes. Check the notes in the catalogue carefully for clues. It’s also important to read these records in their context. As the records are free to browse on ScotlandsPeople you can simply page through to find out more about the record you are reading.

Access

Many (but not all) pre-1900 Kirk Session records are available to browse for free on the government website www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk.

Sadly there are only limited indexes available. We have indexed some records on our website. Our Scottish Paternity Index includes some entries from Dumfriesshire. Our pre-1855 birth, marriage and death indexes also include some entries from Kirk Session Records.

There is a free index to some Kirk Session and Presbytery minutes on the website of the Dumfries and Galloway council: https://info.dumgal.gov.uk/HistoricalIndexes/

As ScotlandsPeople does not include all Kirk Session records it’s also important to search the catalogue of the National Records of Scotland. If a record survives but is not on ScotlandsPeople we can search it for you. Please just get in touch with me.

Births, Marriages and Deaths in Kirk Session Records

Civil registration began in Scotland in 1855. Before 1855, we usually have to rely on church records to discover information about these vital events. The first place to look for pre-1855 birth, marriage and death records is the Church of Scotland Old Parish Registers, which are often referred to simply as OPRs. You can search these on the ScotlandsPeople website.

Although the OPRs are the first place to look, you will not find all of your ancestors in these records. In 1855 the pre-1820 registers of baptisms, marriages and burials (OPRs) were sent to the Registrar General. Later, the 1820-1855 OPRs were also sent to the Registrar General. More recently, the Kirk Session records were sent to the National Records of Scotland.

Although this seems straightforward, there are a few problems. There was no standard way to record births, marriages and deaths or Kirk Session minutes. A parish clerk may have kept separate registers for baptisms, marriage banns and burials or he may have put them all in the same book. In fact, in many parishes there isn't a register of deaths before 1855 and you may only find accounts containing a list of people hiring the mortcloth. It was traditional to drape the 'mortcloth' over the coffin at a funeral. Wealthy families may have had their own mortcloth but most people would pay to borrow the parish mortcloth. You can see an example of a Victorian-era mort cloth here on the Future Learn website.

Similarly proclamations of banns for marriage and baptism records may be interspersed with Kirk Session minutes. When, in 1855, the parish was asked to send in the registers of births, marriages and deaths, some of these volumes containing a mixture of parish business were sent in, but others were not and remained among the Kirk Session material.

An example of this type of register can be seen on ScotlandsPeople in the Forgan Kirk Session minutes for 1783. The reference is CH2/160/3 page 137. If you are logged into your ScotlandsPeople account just click here:
[https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/virtual-volumes/volume-images?image=137&source=way-pointing&volume=CH2/160/3&volume_info=Forgan%20kirk%20session&volume_short_desc=Minutes%20%281767-1852%29]

Illegitimacy

One of the most common reasons for consulting Kirk Session Records is because we have an illegitimate ancestor. We now need to look to Church discipline cases.

If a parishioner did something that the Kirk classified as a 'sin' and then wanted to remain part of the congregation they would have to be disciplined. What we often find is that the mother of a child wants to have her child baptised. An unmarried mother couldn't take the child to be baptised, however, without questions being asked.

Of course, not all mothers went to the Kirk and as time went by there are fewer records. There is a big drop off in records of this nature between the 1850s and 1900 and this happens more rapidly in large towns and cities.

With few indexes, we will usually need to search the Kirk Session records the old-fashioned way. Start with the parish where the child was born and begin your search a few months before the birth of the child and work forwards. Some cases can be years later so you may need to search a good section of records to find the entry.

If you have a date of baptism for the child that will speed up your search as the discipline case will often be shortly before the time of the baptism. The child is not usually named so you are looking for the name of the mother or father in the minutes.

Understanding the records

Some of the phrases which at first seem impossible to decipher are repeated in almost all cases and you soon get used to seeing them.

We often see, ‘Post-preces sederunt’ or the abbreviation ‘PPS’. That is, Post - after, preces - prayer, sederunt - sitting or meeting. Following this there will be a list of elders present and usually the minister presiding. Once you know the format these records become easier to interpret.

Help is at hand. You can link to a specific Kirk Session record on ScotlandsPeople. Simply copy the URL (the address bar at the top of your browser) and share it to the Scottish Indexes Facebook group or another group you are part of. That way people can click into the record, see what you are seeing and easily go back to the book to find clues. This also means you don’t need to worry about copyright restrictions.

You can also share the reference and people can find the entry that way. My top tip would be to share both to maximise the chances of receiving help.

Another common expression is ‘antenuptial fornication’. That is, ‘ante’ meaning before and ‘nuptial’ referring to marriage. Antenuptial fornication is fornication before marriage.

TopTip - Do the maths! Did one of your ancestors have a child less than 9 months after her wedding? If so, the elders of the Kirk Session may also have done the maths and asked some questions, it’s worth checking the Kirk Session records.

Keep Learning

The Scottish Indexes Learning Zone is a great way to learn more about Scottish records for genealogy research: https://www.scottishindexes.com/learning.aspx