FROM THE QUILL PEN TO CYBERADMINISTRATION

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Introduction

For historical reasons, the United Kingdom has separate but similar systems of civil registration in 3 different parts of the country : England and Wales; Northern Ireland; and Scotland. I am speaking today only about the Scottish system, for which I am responsible and which has made most progress towards 'cyberadministration'.

The Scottish system of civil registration has existed since 1552. For the next 300 years, records of births, deaths and marriages were kept by each parish church. But increasing religious diversity, the agricultural and industrial revolutions which increased migration and social change, and incompetence on the part of some parish clerks, highlighted shortcomings. So, in 1855, a new system was set up – the responsibility of the Registrar General, with compulsory registration of births, marriages and deaths registered by specialist officials called 'Registrars'. The system has lasted well and has remained essentially unchanged over the past 150 years.

There are 3 points about the system which I want to emphasise, because they may be different from yours. First, it records specific events: it does not create a through-life record. Second, it is a centralised system with a national index, which made it relatively easy to computerise. Third, it is a public record: if you are curious to know my age, you can consult my birth certificate.

The Quill Pen

In 1855, the earlier records (dating back to the mid 16th Century) were brought to the Registrar General's office in Edinburgh for safe keeping. The new system involved the Registrars, employed by the local authorities in about 1,000 registration districts across Scotland, keeping a separate register for births, deaths and marriages in their registration district. They made a duplicate copy and at the end of the year passed one copy to the Registrar General's office for safekeeping. The blank register books were printed centrally and the Registrars worked to strict instructions laid down by the Registrar General, to ensure uniformity across the country.

Cyberadministration

The centralised nature of our system, and the fact that indexes were a key feature, made it relatively easy for us to set up a computer system. Our first system was introduced in 1990 and was superseded by a more modern Windows-based system in 2004. The computerised system has several advantages. First, it reduces the time taken for the Registrar to register an event. Second, it allows a Registrar anywhere in Scotland to look up an event in another part of Scotland – for instance, the birth certificate of somebody who wants to get married or has just died. Third, it allows the inspectors who work for me and who are responsible for checking the accuracy of the registers, to correct errors much more quickly. Fourthly, it is very helpful indeed to family historians, particularly since we have added the records going back to the 16th Century.

These advantages are underlined by the second step we have taken towards cyberadministration: making the records themselves (as distinct from the indexes) more widely available. Originally, we did that by putting every register entry on microfilm or microfiche, and providing copies for Registrars and selling them to family history societies. More recently, however, we have taken a further step, by creating digital images of all the records. The digitised images can be viewed by Registrars, on a computer system linked to the one which they use to register new events. They can also be viewed by family historians worldwide over the internet, using a website which we have set up for that purpose. It also helps to prevent fraud by making it easier for us to share our records with other government departments, life insurance companies – and the CIEC. We have underpinned that technological change by changes in the law under which we work, to ensure that electronic records have the same probative value as the original paper record, and to give us permission to provide information to others in the way that I have described. Digitisation also helps preserve the records – the fragile paper books can be used less often, and a fire would have less catastrophic effects.

Next Steps

That is not the end of the story. I want to highlight two future plans.

First, we plan to allow members of the public who want to register a birth or death, to do so online, from their home computer – rather than going to a registration office. Initially, they will have to call at the registration office at some stage, especially to sign the registration form, and perhaps also to provide supporting documentation. But once we have a system of online authentication, which allows the citizen to prove his identity electronically, that will surely become unnecessary. We are developing that "e-registration" system in collaboration with the local authorities and representatives of the Registrars – and with the health authorities who need to provide complete information about every birth and death which has taken place, to prevent fraud. We hope to implement the new system in 2012 for birth registration and the following year for death registration.

Second, we are part of the CIEC team developing electronic exchange of information across Europe. Even Scotland, on the periphery of Europe, is an increasingly international community and it would be helpful to us, and to European residents in Scotland, if we could exchange information about births, marriages and deaths with other European countries, in the same way as we can within Scotland at the moment. The principles of the system were demonstrated at the CIEC meeting earlier this week and the aim is to complete development in 2010.

Conclusion

As I have said, Scotland is at the periphery of Europe geographically. But we like to think that we are at the forefront technologically and I hope I have shown you how we have used technology to assist Registrars, citizens who want to register an event, and family historians.