

Digitising Church Records

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One aspect of Archives 'going digital' is digitisation, the conversion of traditional records into digital or electronic form. This covers paper records such as minutes, correspondence, reports, financial records, and other similar items as well as photographs. It can also include graphic items such as movie film and slides, and audio material such as cassettes and tapes.

Thanks to advances in technology, it is now comparatively easy and economic to digitise these materials, using home equipment, and without the need to outsource the process to professionals.

When referring to digitisation of church records, the main group of documents in mind are the historic records of the church, but another important group are new ones being received at the current time, such as letters, invoices, and other similar items. These would be fewer in number because most documents now are created and circulated electronically via email and the like.

The process of digitisation can be thought of as an electronic equivalent to microfilming which is a well established process for preservation and sharing of records. (It is also possible to digitise microfilms.)

Why Digitise?

There are many reasons for digitising your records. One is to preserve them better, especially when they have already become fragile, and another is space saving. Digital records can also be shared very easily, and they can be copied, printed and displayed very readily. They can also be integrated into the church's current administration system where everything else is already digital. (This paper does not cover the archival handling of existing digital records.)

One of the best reasons for digitising is ease of locating information. This is the case with printed material which can be turned into editable and searchable electronic files through the process of "optical character recognition" (OCR). This means an end to manual searches through pages of records because it can be done instantly on the computer. OCR can be done using readily available software, and the files produced become just like those that have been created new by your computer. However, more advanced equipment may be needed where the original documents are not in good condition (eg, indistinct type, discoloured or damaged paper) or are large in size or difficult to place on a scanner because they are bound into thick volumes. Unfortunately hand-written documents cannot yet be simply OCR'd - probably many of the older records of a church fall into this category. However, they can, at least, be viewed electronically, and shared and stored with the rest of the church's electronic documents.

Factors to Consider

There are some drawbacks to digitisation to consider. First of all, on the practical level, the physical process can be damaging to the records, because it involves handling every page and probably turning the books over continuously; this is particularly critical where the records are already fragile. However, once the process is done, the original records will probably not need to be touched again.

Then, it is a big undertaking to digitise a church's entire collection of material so it needs to be planned and managed well. It needs good IT support and archival expertise to achieve a satisfactory outcome, unless the process is entirely outsourced. There is a considerable cost, both initial and on-going, to see the process through and to maintain the digital archive.

It may not be feasible or necessary to digitise all records, so decisions need to be made about which documents to include. Then once the job is done, careful consideration is needed to decide on the fate of the old records – whether to dispose them completely or to retain them in some way. The best solution is probably to place the old records in safe archival storage where they can be preserved and accessed if needed.

On the technical side, good IT advice and support is needed to deal with computer equipment that quickly becomes obsolescent, and storage media such as CD, tapes and drives, which can deteriorate as well as become outdated. Common solutions to these issues include keeping hardware and software up to date, and migrating the data at regular intervals to new media using currently available software so that the information remains accessible. It is also necessary to maintain and update electronic record management systems so that the data is readily available for use. Compared with their physical counterparts, digital records are far less tangible and those responsible for them need to be much more proactive in ensuring they are retained and managed properly, or else they will be quickly lost or become inaccessible.

In digitising records it is also necessary to pay attention to the authenticity of records - ie, making sure that they are what they are supposed to be, and to their integrity - ie, making sure that they have not been altered in any significant way, or lost any of their vital pieces of information. (It is important to note that moving a record from one format to another is likely to alter its presentation - eg, changing of fonts, margins or page size which may be crucial in some circumstances.) Quite apart from historical considerations, there can easily be serious legal implications if vital documents have not retained their authenticity or integrity.

Another factor to consider with digital records is the ease with which they can be shared and distributed in comparison with their paper originals. This may mean that privacy and confidentiality issues are raised when many copies are in circulation. (Generally, the conditions of access that apply to the original documents should also apply to their digital versions.) A further practical concern arises when different versions of the same document are involved.

However, in many situations, traditional records are already in danger of being lost because of their age, the difficulties of storage, or lack of proper care, so the digital alternative is attractive and comparatively

easy. For many churches, the digitisation of at least the most important documents is likely to be a good step forward, and one that should be undertaken without delay. However, when the decision to proceed is made, it is necessary to set up policies and practical steps to maintain the digital records for as long as they are needed in the same way that traditional paper records are currently preserved and managed.

How to Digitise?

The process of digitisation is simple in principle, especially in the case of paper documents – it merely involves scanning them to produce an “electronic picture” of the originals. A domestic A4 sized scanner will effectively copy letters and photographs and books of that or smaller size. There is a problem with the traditional larger size Minute Books which need an A3 size scanner. Anything larger than the normal commonly available domestic unit is likely to be much more expensive. An office photocopier with a scanning function which takes an A3 page is a good alternative. Another solution is to use a digital camera and convert the images (usually JPG) to other file formats suitable for documents, such as PDF.

Slides and film negatives require more specialised equipment to achieve good results due to the need for high resolution scanning, as do movie films. Audio tapes can be converted to digital with an adaptor used with a home computer.

In difficult cases, such as large documents, those bound in thick volumes, big quantities of material and fragile or specialised documents, it would be wise to seek professional and commercial assistance.

The type of file produced by the scanning process is important. It must be one that is likely to be easily readable by commonly available equipment well on into the future, such as PDF/A for documents, TIF, PNG or at least JPG for images, and MP3 for sound. A high enough resolution should be used to preserve the essential information in the original, although the higher the resolution the larger the file which means more storage space is needed.

There also needs to be adequate provision for back-up copies in secure locations. Over time, it will be necessary to migrate the files to new media using appropriate software to avoid problems of deterioration and obsolescence.

It is also important to record information about the files (metadata) with the collection; this information is necessary for proper management and access to the material.

Finally, quality control is vital, especially where the original records are to be destroyed after digitisation. Care must be taken throughout to ensure that the required records are being digitised, that their provenance is maintained, and that their full readability, authenticity and integrity are preserved.

More information

More detailed information about digitisation can be found by searching the internet (especially sites of large libraries and national or corporate Archives) and from professional consultants.