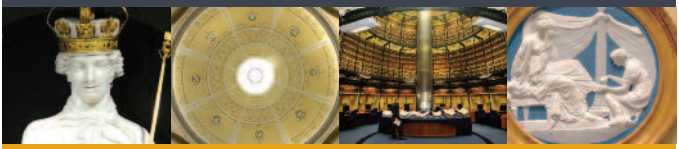
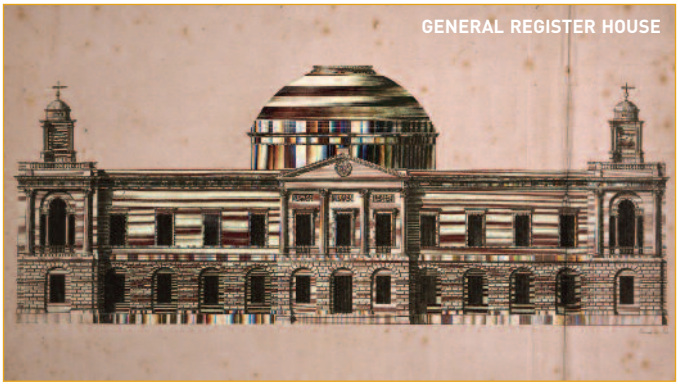
National Records of Scotland

GENERAL REGISTER HOUSE



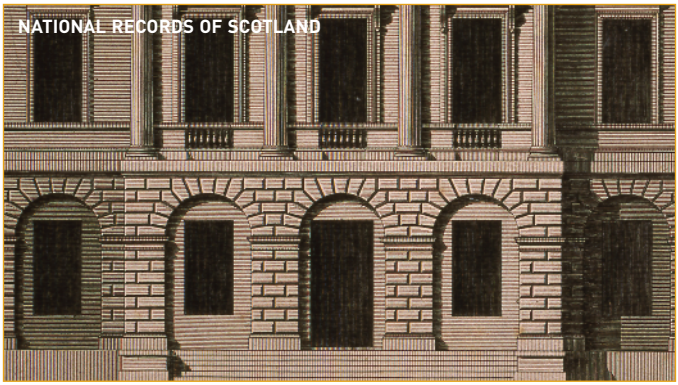
NATIONAL RECORDS OF SCOTLAND



'A PROPER REPOSITORY'

General Register House was begun in 1774 to the designs of Robert Adam (1728-1792), a Scot who was one of Britain's greatest architects. It is not only one of his finest public buildings, but also the first purpose-built public record repository in the British Isles. In fact it may be the oldest archive building in the world that is still being used for its original function.

A proper home for Scotland's public records was first proposed in 1722, after the Treaty of Union of 1707 guaranteed that the national records would remain in Scotland. However, for much of the eighteenth century Scotland's national archives were housed in unsuitable accommodation in Parliament House and other nearby buildings. Eventually, in 1765 a government grant of £12,000 was made available from the forfeited Jacobite estates for the building of 'a proper repository'. The Register House Trustees only reached agreement on a site when the City gifted the necessary land at the north end of the new North Bridge in 1769.



ADAM'S DESIGN

Largely through the influence of Lord Frederick Campbell, the Lord Clerk Register, Robert Adam and his younger brother James, were appointed architects of Register House in 1772. The Adam brothers believed that you could judge a society by the quality and grandeur of its public buildings, and this commission provided an opportunity to put their beliefs into practice. While the building's design went through several stages, the main elements of the principal façade and the centralised plan, consisting of a domed rotunda within a quadrangle, were present from the beginning. When the contract was signed in 1772 the scheme was reduced in scale, probably for financial reasons, to the front (south) range and rotunda, together with the front half of the east and west ranges. The foundation stone was laid by Campbell on the 27 June 1774.

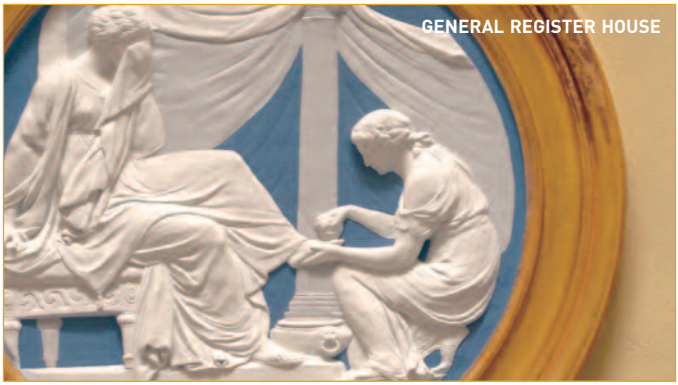
Robert directed the project from his London office, assisted by his Edinburgh-based elder brother, John, and James Salisbury, his clerk of works on site. While most of the work was undertaken by local contractors and tradesmen, tight control over the design was maintained by the detailed drawings and patterns that were supplied from London.

Work proceeded slowly, and the building's unusual weight and solid construction were blamed for the delays and rising costs. Despite extra funding of £2000 in 1778, building operations were suspended in 1779. For six years the building remained an empty shell, leading the bookseller William Creech to describe it in 1783 as 'the most magnificent pigeon-house in Europe'.

With a final grant of £15,000 bringing the total cost to £29,000, work resumed in 1785. The programme included: finishing the 'skylight' in the dome; completing the four corner towers; paving the inner courtyards and the rotunda; constructing the inside staircases; clearing away earth around the building and surrounding it with a parapet wall; completing the brick arches in rooms and passages; and finishing the ceiling of the rotunda to Adam's design. While the interior was mostly completed between 1785 and 1788, the plastering and painting of the rotunda was only finished in 1789.

Adam's design incorporates special features to counteract the traditional enemies of archives – fire and damp. As a fire-prevention measure, the building was solidly constructed of stone with brick vaults. Stone flags were used for all the floors; only the Lord Clerk Register's Room has a wooden floor. The interior was simply finished, except for the rotunda, and most of the rooms have plain tunnel vaults. While the individual offices had their own fireplaces, heating the rotunda posed a technical challenge. Adam opted for a typically Roman solution by constructing two flues in the floor to carry hot air from four furnaces which were kept constantly burning in the basement below to protect the records from damp.

Besides supplying the need for a record repository the Register House was also built as a working office to house government and legal offices concerned with the creation of records. Clerks and record officials working for the Courts, Exchequer, Chancery and Public Registers were housed on all three floors of the ranges surrounding the rotunda. Staff began moving in with the records at the end of 1787, but it did not open to the public until 1788.



THE 'ADAM DOME'

The top-lit domed rotunda is the most important room in Register House. At 50 feet in diameter and 80 feet in height, and with an area in excess of 2000 square feet, it is also Adam's highest and largest surviving room. Inspired by the Pantheon in Rome, the only source of natural light is the central oculus, 15 feet in diameter. Originally designed as a public space giving access to different areas of the building and for the storage of record volumes, it also served as a legal search room from 1923 until 2007. The rotunda was renovated in 2008 as part of the ScotlandsPeople Centre for family history research.

In 1785 Thomas Clayton junior, an Edinburgh-based plasterer who had worked for Robert Adam at Inveraray Castle, was awarded the contract for completing the plasterwork according to Adam's design. The eight medallions were chosen in London by Adam himself, at a total cost of £33 12s. and were shipped to Edinburgh in 1786. Five of them are based on antique bas reliefs depicting Roman marriage and civic ceremonies, while the remaining three appear to be contemporary designs illustrating scenes from Greek myths and legends. Their iconography is therefore unconnected with the purpose of the building. Adam's introduction of Scottish thistles into the anthemion frieze forming the first band of ceiling decoration acknowledged the building's national identity.

We know from surviving accounts for painting the rotunda ceiling that Adam's original decorative scheme comprised a stone coloured (ie off-white) background, with the decorative details picked out in white. This scheme was confirmed by investigations by Historic Scotland conservators in 2003 and 2007. They also established that the stone colour was subtly shaded rather than flat, and that the background of the medallions and the plaster ornaments around the oculus had been painted in a delicate blueish-grey shade. Stone colour was also used on the rotunda walls and throughout the most of the rest of the building. A sample is preserved in the west lobby of the rotunda.

Adam favoured such monochromatic white and stone-coloured schemes for libraries and halls, usually reserving polychromy and gilding for the drawing rooms and dining rooms of his great houses. Successive redecorations of the rotunda from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, however, gave rise to more colourful schemes, derived from what was then understood to be the Adam style, but lacking the sophistication of the original. While the present decorative scheme, completed in 2008, closely follows Adam's original concept, it also includes elements from later versions, such as the gilding, which was first introduced in 1850.

The cast-iron railing surrounding the gallery was designed by Adam, manufactured by Carron & Co. of Falkirk, and installed in 1788.

STATUE OF KING GEORGE III

The overlife-sized, standing statue of King George III in his coronation robes was commissioned in 1787 by Lord Frederick Campbell from his niece the amateur sculptor Anne Seymour Damer (1749-1828). It was originally placed in the centre of the rotunda in 1795. The gilt metal crown and sceptre are by Vulliamy of London, the royal clockmaker, who supplied the clock and wind dial for the building's turrets. The statue was conserved in 2008.

THE SCREEN WALL

Completed in 1788, the screen wall originally extended 40 feet in front of Register House and was designed as a retaining wall and facing for the landscaped terrace on which General Register House then sat. In the centre, flanked by the two sentry boxes, was a semi-circular stone staircase. While the decorated panels in artificial stone were supplied from London by William Adam & Co in 1787, the iron railings, gates, lamp standards and lamp irons were manufactured locally to Adam's designs by Carron & Co. An underground passage running along the front of the building gave access to basement coal cellars. The 'moat' was created in 1820 when the earth was removed from behind the screen wall to allow the cellars to be converted into record stores with windows to the front.

The narrowing of Leith Street following the erection of the buildings in Waterloo Place in 1818 led some to regard the screen wall as an obstacle to the free flow of traffic. In 1850, after much debate, the screen was moved back nine feet in line with the houses in Princes Street in order to accommodate the equestrian statue of the Duke of Wellington (1769-1852). The statue, by Sir John Steell, was unveiled on 18 June 1852 at a ceremony attended by military veterans. Continuing problems with traffic congestion eventually led in 1890 to the wall being moved back a further 24 feet to its present position. The semi-circular stair, which had already been modified in 1850, was squared off.

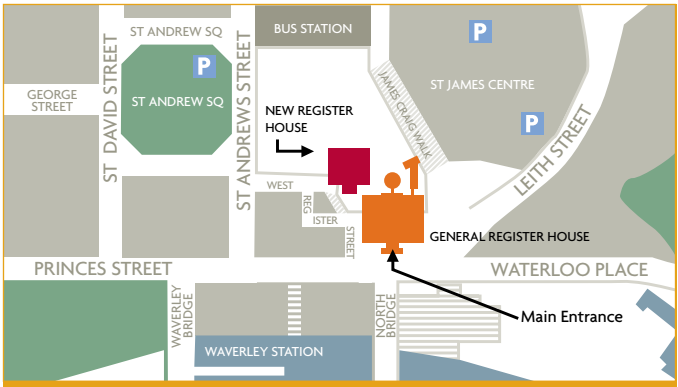
The original Adam lamps survived on the screen wall until 1953, although the style of lantern changed over the years. The lamps were replaced by modern replicas in 2008.

LATER DEVELOPMENTS

Between 1822 and 1825 the quadrangle was completed to Adam's plan but with a much simplified north front by the Edinburgh architect, Robert Reid (1774-1865). Reid inserted the imposing stair to the north of the rotunda, which leads to his enlarged central apartment for the storage and exhibition of the national records. This room opened to the public in 1847 as the Antiquarian Room, and is now the Historical Search Room, where readers may still consult the records. Immediately below is the Reid Room, now part of the family history centre.

A second rotunda, now known as the Matheson Dome, was erected for record storage at the back of Register House in 1871. It was designed by Robert Matheson (1808-1877), the architect of New Register House, and was based on the circular reading room in the British Museum. Additional accommodation was provided for the Sasine Office between 1902 and 1904, when the Robertson Wing was built in James Craig Walk. It is now part of the National Records of Scotland.

John McLintock



GRH OPENING HOURS

General Register House is open to the public,
Monday to Friday, 9am – 4.30pm,
except for certain public holidays

All correspondence and enquiries should be sent to:

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The National Records of Scotland joins together the former National Archives of Scotland (NAS) and the General Register Office for Scotland (GROS).

APS Group Scotland
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