



**Public Record Office
of Northern Ireland**

THE PUBLIC RECORD OFFICE OF NORTHERN IRELAND (PRONI)

PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

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The Setting up of PRONI

The loss of the Irish official records in the fire at the Four Courts in Dublin in 1922 set the scene. The Northern Ireland government – set up in 1922 - wanted ensure its records stayed under its control. It also was aware of the need to fill the gap created by the disastrous fire in Dublin. The Stormont Parliament established the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland – PRONI – under the Public Records Act (Northern Ireland), 1923.

The new body opened in March 1924 on the fourth floor of a former linen warehouse in central Belfast (at Murray Street).

The wide definition of ‘public records’ in the Act and provision for taking in private records meant that PRONI was undoubtedly the centre for archives in Northern Ireland. The Act even provided for the deposit of ‘Imperial’ records relating to Northern Ireland but created by bodies under the Westminster Parliament

From the beginning PRONI focussed on bringing in the private archives that would plug something of the gap in evidence created by the Four Courts’ fire. So important was this that it won backing not only from the Minister responsible for PRONI but also from the Crown’s representative in Northern Ireland (His Excellency the Governor), the Duke of Abercorn.

Bringing in private records meant going to solicitors’ firms, businesses and organisations of every type across Northern Ireland. It meant persuading private individuals and families to give their archives to PRONI. And the search extended beyond Northern Ireland: the first documents received were two estate maps of Cookstown, County Tyrone, given by a Dublin firm of solicitors. Archives and libraries outside Northern Ireland were frequently contacted so that PRONI could have copies of material.

Bringing in the records was in the hands of the first head of PRONI – known as the Deputy Keeper under the Act - Dr David Chart. He had worked in the Public Record Office of Ireland. He knew well what had been lost in the 1922 fire. He ensured that the 1923 Act provided for private records. It was through him that solicitors, business people, politicians and the landed aristocracy were persuaded to hand over their archives to PRONI.

The success of the Chart campaign meant that PRONI needed more storage space. In April 1933, the office moved to a new central Belfast location, the first floor of the new Royal Courts of Justice in Chichester Street.

A Growing Archive

The work of David Chart inspired his successors. Right through the 1950s and 1960s and beyond, including the dark years of ‘The Troubles’, PRONI brought in thousands of private archives and collections. It was a remarkable display of energy



on the part of a handful of PRONI staff and is a lasting tribute to the public spirit and generosity of the many depositors.

Success brought pressure on storage.

There was not enough space at the Royal Courts building. By the early 1960s archives were stored in various locations in Belfast - in the basement of Parliament Buildings, at the Crumlin Road Courthouse and in a building in Waring Street.

Large archives – Boards of Guardians, and business and solicitors' collections – were held at Gosford Castle, Markethill, County Armagh.

New Public Record Office Building, 1972

Archives were being stored in unsuitable conditions - public facilities were poor and using out-stores meant delays in producing documents. In 1965, the Ministry of Finance approved a new building. It was the first new record office to be built in the UK since the Public Record Office in London was erected in 1838.

The site chosen was that formerly occupied by the Stranmillis College Hall of Residence at Balmoral Avenue. It was conveniently close to The Queen's University and to the M1 motorway.

The new building opened in 1972 with a second phase of storage added soon after. There are 21 strong-rooms. Each holds over 6,000 standard archive boxes, i.e., about 6,000 linear feet or 1,829 linear metres.

Behind the scenes the new building provided air-conditioned and fireproof storage and a fully equipped conservation laboratory. The public areas were impressively improved - a reading room for 40 people, a public search room for consulting the catalogues and indexes and a large exhibition hall.

A further extension to the building in the late 1970s re-housed conservation and provided a large cleaning and sorting area and a library stack.

Records Management Introduced

Until the late 1960s the PRONI focus was strongly on private records. Then there was a significant development - the introduction of a modern records management system to the records held in government ministries. The system followed the Grigg principles as set out in the UK Report of the Committee on Departmental Records published in 1954.

The changes were practical. Disposal schedules replaced destruction lists as the emphasis moved from merely identifying what was to be destroyed to a more holistic approach. Each ministry appointed a departmental record officer directly responsible for the records within that ministry. Identifying what records should be transferred to PRONI for preservation became a two-stage and more effective review process.



To meet the demands of change, PRONI set up a Records Administration Section to implement the reviewing of files and to provide advice and guidance to government on the management of public records. By 1972 most of the pre-1948 files had been reviewed and the later records were brought within the Grigg programme.

Educational Use of Archives

The PRONI success in bringing in archives was not enough. It was rightly seen as important that the archives should be used. In 1967, a new senior post was created to promote the educational use of archives. The results were immediate and sustained: a rapidly expanding education service, involvement in teachers' courses, lectures to teachers and innovative education packs to assist secondary schools and colleges in using archives in the teaching of history. Subject areas covered by the education facsimile series included the 1798 Rebellion, the Penal Laws, Catholic Emancipation and the Great Famine.

Such was the success of the contacts with education that the Department of Education set up a scheme to grant teachers leave of absence to work in PRONI for a term or longer. Teachers had the opportunity to become familiar with the vast range of historical sources held by PRONI, to develop teaching resources and to pass on that knowledge to other teachers seeking information on archives for use in the classroom. The first group of teachers from the primary, secondary and tertiary sectors spent a term in PRONI during 1975-6. The scheme continued for seven years with secondments frequently extended to one year placements. It made a huge contribution to promoting the use of archives in education.

The 30-Year Rule

In 1976, Northern Ireland came into line with the rest of the UK and implemented 'the 30-year rule'. This meant that after 30 years public records could be released to the public though strict criteria were applied that allowed extended closures. PRONI co-ordinated and supervised a massive exercise. Some 60,000 files had to be identified and the departments then had to apply the sensitivity criteria that settled what was open or remained closed. The legacy remains as each year a sensitivity review exercise brings forward to departments the 30-year-old files that must be examined page-by-page. This is now done in support of the Freedom of Information Act.

Consolidation

The 1980s and 1990s was a period of consolidation.

The first significant steps were taken to introduce Information Technology into PRONI. The traditional typewriter gave way to the PC and word-processing. The Public Record Office Management System (PROMS) included a computerised document ordering and readers' registration system.



PRONI was at the forefront of making the most of new technology to improve service efficiency and improve public access. This was reinforced by the early creation of a web site, the first such in the Northern Ireland Civil Service. The internet presence was aimed at helping individuals – anywhere in the world – to find out about the PRONI services and facilities and to learn about the archives in advance of any visit.

Many public records - particularly those from local authorities - flooded into PRONI, which acted as a safe haven during 'The Troubles'. Many of the records were not reviewed or catalogued. That had to be tackled. A huge review exercise dealt not only with the public records but also extended to some private archives that had also been acquired without a review. Then there was a concentrated effort on sorting, cataloguing and indexing the unlisted archives.

Technology as a Driver

The use of technology is a key driver for change in archives and that is equally true for PRONI. The PRONI descriptive lists – built up over 80 and more years – have been data captured and are being quality assured. They will soon be available on-line and fully searchable. Some significant holdings had been digitised, i.e., images of the documents are available on-line to anyone with access to a PC.

Organisational Changes over the Years

There have been only three major organisational changes in the history of PRONI. Between 1924 and 1982 PRONI was part of the Ministry (later Department) of Finance. In the latter year, it was moved to the Department of the Environment (DOE) and, in 1995, became an executive agency within that department.

With the restoration of devolved government in 1999, PRONI became an agency within the new Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL). The department brought together for the first time overall responsibility for libraries, museums and archives. As part of the implementation of the Review of Public Administration, PRONI ceased to be an agency in 2006 and became a division within the core department.

Today

The drive to secure and protect the archival heritage of Northern Ireland has resulted in holding 54 kilometres of shelf-filled records covering every aspect of life in Northern Ireland, a veritable treasure store of information about our past, protected for our future. The current priority is to 'open out', to make more readily available, the vast holdings that are 'the documented community memory'.

PRONI sees itself as making a major contribution to the whole concept of Cultural Capital as championed by DCAL. That means bringing together in a novel and ever more effective way a range of skills, of assets, of quality products and services in



Order to increase the appreciation of the richness and diversity of the documented community memory. It is an enormous and exciting challenge that offers archives as never before the opportunity to touch people's lives and to prove their relevance to modern society.

The Future

PRONI is about to enter a clearly new phase in its history. The new building of 1972 is outdated and inadequate in almost every respect. The archive storage is insufficient, both public and staff need improved spaces and there is neither exhibition space nor education facilities.

In October 2006, the Minister for DCAL – Keeper of the Records under the 1923 Act – announced that the business case for a new PRONI building had been approved and the necessary funding would be available. The Minister announced that the new record office would be located at Titanic Boulevard, Titanic Quarter, Belfast. This site is close to the Odyssey, adjacent to the Gateway building and only a short distance from the city centre. The project is now well underway and the target date for opening to the public is late summer, 2010.

The move to new premises will involve a tremendous amount of behind-the-scenes work. It literally involves knowing where every box is stored as well as the content of each box – and there are some 155,000 boxes. The skills and knowledge of the staff, the benefits of new technology and the planning of a new building will together be a demonstration of Cultural Capital in action.

