

The Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) is concerned to note that inaccurate and incomplete information is being disseminated about its plans for preparing and moving the records to a new building, and the effect this will have on researchers. This note is intended to clarify the matter.

The on-site closure is due to begin in September 2010. PRONI has given twelve months forewarning in order to enable customers to plan their research programmes accordingly. Visiting groups and individuals will, therefore, know that they should not make plans to visit during the period of disruption, but that they may re-schedule to visit earlier or later. If later, then they will be visiting PRONI in its new premises with its much enhanced research facilities and improved overall service. There are well-known deficiencies in the present service, owing to the age of the building and its inadequate storage facilities. A properly-conducted move and adequate time for testing new systems in the new building will lead to a much better experience for researchers.

It is important to realise that the temporary on-site closure will last no longer than 8 months. If the necessary work is completed before that, the re-opening date will be reviewed. The estimate of up to 8 months for the move of the records from Balmoral Avenue to Titanic Quarter is a worst case scenario and is based on a pilot exercise carried out 2 years ago when 14 Km of material was re-located. The compartmentalised nature of PRONI's Balmoral Avenue stores restricts large-scale movement of people and records, and makes the removal of large amounts of material cumbersome and time-consuming. This time 40 Km of records, amounting to millions of documents, almost all of them irreplaceable, have to be moved to the new building. We are also dependent on the new building being completed and handed over on schedule. A systematic move of the records and their relocation in the new building is a major logistical task.

PRONI's first responsibility is for the preservation and security of the records. Temporary on-site closure to the public is in the best interests of the records, to get them prepared and moved methodically and safely. The successful accomplishment of this task and the subsequent updating of location data will ensure that the records can be retrieved with speed and accuracy in the new building, which will undoubtedly benefit researchers. Other UK record offices have closed for similar or longer periods

to expedite moves. Dr Chris Kitching, former secretary to the Historical Manuscripts Commission and the UK's leading expert on new archive buildings, who is also the external archival expert to PRONI's New Accommodation Project, considers PRONI's proposed on-site closure duration to be reasonable. He has given assurance that comparisons are favourable with other archives and libraries in the UK which have relocated.*

The temporary on-site Closure is also in the best interests of our public because there are considerable health and safety issues when heavy lorries are being brought onto what is a seriously restricted site. In an effort to mitigate the effects of the Closure on customers, PRONI will be providing details for the public on alternative sources for information, and working with partner organisations (for example, discussions are continuing with the Northern Ireland Library Authority) to make available as much information as possible at an off-site location. Researchers should keep checking PRONI's website www.proni.gov.uk for further information on this. Much of PRONI's day to day business will carry on as usual. Staff will continue for as long as possible to provide a limited written enquiry service. So, if customers cannot have on-site access to the records, there is the option of using a limited, paid search service for specific enquiries. To facilitate this, the most popular records will be last to move. The annual release of official Government papers under the "30 Year Rule" will also continue as normal.

Sources for genealogical research, both commercial and personal, are not restricted to PRONI. The 1911 Census, which covers all of Ireland, is now available on-line, at no charge, at www.nationalarchives.ie; the 1901 Census for Ireland will also be available before any disruption to PRONI's on-site service takes place. These are key sources for family history. Another key source, Griffith's Valuation, is also now on-line, again at no charge, at www.askaboutireland.ie.

Within PRONI, the recent launch of a number of 19th century street directories is another new and free on-line resource for family history research. Others will follow in the coming months, including the surviving fragments of three 18th century Census returns, adding to the PRONI sources already available on-line. There will, therefore, be a range of archive material for researchers to work on while they are unable to access PRONI's premises.

* Wiltshire and Swindon Archives closed to the public for 6 months to move 28,000 boxes. PRONI is moving 115,000 boxes and box equivalent.

Norfolk and Norwich Record Office, which holds a similar amount of material to PRONI, took 7 months just to move, without the amount of data-updating that PRONI needs to do.

The John Rylands Library took 8 months to move only 17.5 km of records/books. PRONI has to move 40km.

Glamorgan Record Office is estimating up to 6 months closure to move less than a sixth of what PRONI holds.