The digitisation of millions of archive records has encouraged many of us to start exploring our family trees in recent years, but there’s still so much to discover that’s offline, says WDYTYA? TV series genealogist Laura Berry.

The UK and Ireland are home to more than 2,000 archives where our ancestors’ history is preserved in mostly paper form. If you’ve only ever dipped into online records, you’re missing out on a multitude of documents that could greatly enrich the interpretation of your forebears’ lives.

The 1838 Public Record Office Act ensured the safeguarding of key government and legal papers. Ancient rolls kept at the Tower of London and Westminster Abbey were transferred to a purpose-built Public Record Office (PRO) on London’s Chancery Lane, and in 1977 a larger building opened in Kew. The National Archives (TNA), as it became known in 2003, is now the official repository of records created by the UK central government (nationalarchives.gov.uk).

Only about five per cent of government records are deemed worthy of permanent preservation, but many contain information on ‘ordinary’ individuals in the armed forces, merchant navy, civil service, or who came to the attention of the government for some other reason. Whether your ancestor was a teacher, criminal or spy there may well be a record of them, and the guides at nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research explain what’s online and what’s not. The estimated 80 million documents that have been digitised are just a fraction of the total records lining 185km of shelving.

The British Library was formed in 1973, and in addition to collecting a copy of almost every book, newspaper and map published in the UK, it acquired the India Office collections and holds rare manuscripts (bl.uk). The National Library of Wales performs a similar function, preserving Welsh cultural heritage, which extends to family and estate papers (llgc.org.uk).

The kingdom of Scotland maintained its own archive, though some material transferred to London during times of war with England was consequently lost. What survives is now held at the National Records of Scotland in Edinburgh (nationalrecordsofscotland.gov.uk), complemented by material at the National Library of Scotland (www.nls.uk).

The National Archives of Ireland similarly preserves records that survived fire damage during the Civil War in 1922 (nationalarchives.ie). It houses paperwork of the modern Irish State and non-governmental records created by solicitors, estates and prominent individuals. The National Library of Ireland, also in Dublin, holds more estate papers, maps, newspapers and manuscripts (www.nli.ie). The Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) (proni.gov.uk) was established in 1923 but some older records were transferred there from Dublin.

In England, Wales and Scotland, records of local government, businesses, estates and families are usually deposited in county archives and smaller local studies archives. We’re also lucky to have access to specialist institutions, such as the Royal College of Physicians’ Archives where WDYTYA? discovered a letter from Charles Darwin to Frank Gardner’s ancestor (rcplondon.ac.uk/archives-and-library). Here are 25 reasons why you should visit the archives.
GETTING THE MOST OUT OF YOUR VISIT

1 It’s free!

Documents aren’t just available online: they’re widely held by archives, but some are more detailed than those online. Catalogues, online or paper-based, not only let you know what’s available, but also provide an index of names, dates, towns and other details that can be searched on-site or online.

2 Expert advice

Archivists are on hand to offer one-to-one advice about the records in their care, and can often suggest places to look that you might not have considered before – great for breaking down brick walls! Staff specialising in family history, military records, the medieval period and other subjects take it in turn manning TNA’s helpdesk.

3 State-of-the-art facilities

An unprecedented number of new archives have been built in the last few years, creating inspiring workplaces. Most recently, Herefordshire Archives and Records Centre won the West Midlands RIBA award thanks to its Parish House design (www.herefordshire.gov.uk/archives). Since the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (picture) stopped a RIBA award in 2012, the south of England has also reaped the benefits of investment in infrastructure with the opening of Kent History and Library Centre, Somerset Heritage Centre and The Keep in Brighton. At the glinting golden Hive in Worcestershire, you can explore the county’s history, and for the archive using the latest technologies. It brings the county’s library service, art and history department, and Historic Record Together under one roof (www.worcestershire.gov.uk/info/20019/archives_and_research)!

4 Estate papers and manorial records

English and Welsh tithe apportionments on discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk reveal many forebears renting from large estate owners. Use discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/advanced-search to locate surviving original estate records, comprising rental rolls, leases, correspondence and manorial court rolls recording property passed from generation to generation. If your family owned a large estate, then you’re in luck – we’ve discovered Francis de la Tour’s great-grandmother’s apothecary bills for excessive doses of laudanum among the family’s Seaton Delaval estate papers at Northumberland Archives (experiencewoodhorn.com/collections).

5 Offline indexes

Not all archives have a huge online catalogue, particularly the smaller ones like Kentmg and Chelsea Local Studies Library and Archive (bricgov.uk/libraries/local-studies-and-archives), which doesn’t have one at all, yet there is an extensive card index that can be searched on-site by name and address to find deeds, newspaper cuttings, illustrations and photos.

6 Map their lives

The number of historic maps online is marginal compared to the cartographic collections accessible in local and national archives. Find out more about the British Library’s 4.5 million maps from around the world at bl.uk/subjects/maps, including fire insurance plans of town centres and hundreds of military intelligence maps.

7 Find early probate records

Before a civil probate system was introduced in 1858, a complex network of ecclesiastical courts ‘proved’ the wills of deceased people. In England, wills and inventories in archdeacons’ courts, consistory courts and peculiar courts are held at county archives, and online indexes to these holdings are not complete.

8 Parish records

An increasing number of parish registers are being digitised. However, no online collection is complete, so a visit to the county record office is vital to cement your research back past 1837. Regional family history centres run by the Mormons can also source microfilm copies of registers that aren’t online (familysearch.org/locations).

9 Learn a thing or two

Most archives – meaning both local and national – put on talks, courses and workshops aimed at helping people to improve their research techniques or knowledge of a particular area, for example, learning to read Latin or understanding old handwriting. The Society of Genealogists’ regular programme of events in London can be explored and then booked online at sog.org.uk/books-courses/events-courses.

10 The National treasure trove

The National Archives (TNA) holds documents relating to people from all four corners of the British Isles, and Ireland before 1922. For example, records of men who served with the Royal Irish Constabulary between 1816 and 1922 will be found in Kew. TNA receives documents from central government departments, which is reflected in the way the records are catalogued. Hence all papers created by the Home Office, like criminal records, are filed under references starting with ‘HO’.

Among other things, it holds the Inland Revenue’s copy of the Valuation Office’s national property survey for England and Wales, compiled following the Finance Act 1909-1910. The maps and accompanying Field Books listing owners and chief occupiers of domestic and commercial properties and land can only be searched in original format.

The entire TNA catalogue is searchable online at discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk and it’s clear which documents have been digitised and those that can only be seen at the archive.

11 Get to grips with your Irish roots

Ireland’s genealogy has come on in leaps and bounds with the recent digitisation of parish records to complement free online censuses and civil registration indexes. However, these only scratch the surface, as the National Archives of Ireland (NAI) holds many documents that have not been catalogued, let alone scanned. There is an online catalogue for some holdings at nationalarchives.ie/search-the-archives and some useful research guides at nationalarchives.ie/research/research-guides-and-articles.

Land records are enormously important for tracing Irish ancestors, and the NAI is home to ‘house books’ compiled by valuers from the 1820s up to the publication of Griffith’s Valuation. The latter, like the ‘Carnal Land Books’ were regularly updated with the names of new occupants, recording when a property passed from father to son. This latter collection is still held by the Valuation Office and can be accessed at the Irish Life Centre in Dublin (www.valof.ie/en/Archives_Genealogy_Public_Office). Since Ireland doesn’t have a state-run county archive network, some notable local authority collections are deposited at the NAI and PROI, including records created by Boards of Guardians, hospitals, courts and schools. The PROI catalogue can be searched by keyword at www.proni.gov.uk/indices/search_the_archives/catalogue.htm. Both these institutions and the National Library of Ireland hold rental records for landed estates, and the latter’s catalogue can be searched at catalogue.nli.ie.

12 Trees and tips

While much about your ancestors is provided for free online, a visit to an archive can be a great investment in your research. It’s an invaluable opportunity to view original records, and it’s clear which documents have been digitised and which can only be seen in archives.
12 Local wisdom
Regional archives retain old name indexes for census and parish records, compiled by people with local knowledge, which might just help you track down that elusive record you haven’t found online. Gloucester Family History Society’s Centre is next to Gloucester Archives and its members welcome visitors who want to learn more about the local community.

13 Retail therapy
Struggling to research ancestors online who worked in retail? Marks & Spencer branch photos and staff magazines are held in the M&S Company Archive at Leeds University (marksin.time.marksandspencer.com), while The Sainsbury Archive keeps staff records at the Museum of London Docklands (archive.museumoflondon.org.uk/SainsburyArchive). The John Lewis Partnership Heritage Centre is next to the Gloucester Archives and it holds personal diaries, photos, regimental histories and oral recordings useful for contextualising your ancestor. Visit the site or call to check by appointment.

14 Move military mountains
Great efforts have been made to digitise First World War material at nationalarchives.gov.uk/first-world-war, yet there’s still so much buried in the archives for all periods of military history. For instance, TNA has a dedicated First World War Foreign Office Index site that still needs to be searched by hand. In addition to muster rolls, pension papers and operational records at TNA, the Imperial War Museum holds personal diaries, photo albums, regimental histories and oral recordings useful for contextualising your ancestor’s experience. (imw.org.uk/research/research-facilities). The National Army Museum’s extensive collections can be searched by keyword at nam.ac.uk/collection to find films, images, maps, audio recordings and archival material. There’s a directory listing more than 130 regimental museums across the country at armymuseums.org.uk, many of which also hold archival documents.

15 Hospital records
Precious few hospital records have made it online owing to their sensitive nature, but the Hospital Records Database (nationalarchives.gov.uk/hospitalrecords) helps researchers to locate surviving registers deposited in archives. You may need to provide a copy of a death certificate to access a patient’s records, so it’s worth contacting the archive in advance of your visit.

16 Make friends
Archives are great for meeting like-minded people. There are always opportunities to volunteer to assist with indexing projects and develop new skills. Friends of The National Archives (nationalarchives.gov.uk/get-involved/friends.htm) and the National Library of Wales (llgc.org.uk/about-nlw/work-with-us/support-us/friends) provide vital support to safeguard the nation’s heritage, and enjoy perks like private exhibition viewings.

17 Find your family tree
There’s a surname index at sog.org.uk/search-records/ for pedigrees deposited in the Society of Genealogists’ Library over the last century, but the only way to establish if any of them relate to your family is to take a look at the original documents. The National Library of Wales also holds a rich collection of Welsh pedigrees.

18 It’s not all on ScotlandsPeople
There’s a huge number of documents at scotlandspeople.gov.uk, but it is just the tip of the iceberg. Church records, in particular, can really illuminate our ancestors’ lives – it was among the Presbyterian Minutes for Cupar parish that we found out about Anne Reid’s ancestor’s disgraceful behaviour. Those were held in the Special Collections Department at St Andrew’s University (st-andrews.ac.uk/library/special-collections/collections/archives) but there are many more at the National Records of Scotland in Edinburgh, as well as court, estate, testamentary and property records. The NRS provides links to research guides, its online catalogue, plus the National Register of Archives for Scotland, and Scottish Archive Network for sourcing material in regional repositories at rnscotland.gov.uk/research/catalogues-and-indexes.

19 Dive into maritime collections
There’s an abundance of maritime records within the archives to complement digitised collections on findmypast.co.uk and ancestry.co.uk.

TNA holds Seamen’s Pouches covering the Second World War period, plus apprenticeship records, witness reports filed by shipwreck survivors, and a sample of crew lists. The National Maritime Museum’s Card Library and Archive also retain crew lists, certificates of master-mariners, shipping company records and one of the largest collections of ship plans in the world.

20 Locate adoption records
This is an astonishingly difficult area of research, and so it’s essential that an archive you will hold all of the answers you can – but it can be a good place to start. A legal adoption process may involve records in England and Wales from 1927. The British Library has a microfiche edition of adoption certificates issued in England and Wales. There’s excellent guidance at adoptionsearchreunion.org.uk, as well as a database filing adoption orders and certificates by name. For example, the London Metropolitan Archives holds records of the Southwark Diocesan Council for WelCare. Details of adoption orders may be found in Petty Sessions papers at local archives, which also hold information about informal placements arranged by Boards of Guardians pre-1927.

21 Find French Huguenot roots
The Huguenot Library’s printed and manuscript collection is invaluable for substantiating Derek Jacobi’s French ancestry – huguenotsociety.org.uk/library-and-archive.html. When his distant relation applied for economic refugee status from the French Hospital, she had to prove her descent from French refugees, and her application papers, containing a wealth of genealogical information, still survive.

22 Access 60 million newspapers
Although www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk is a wonderful website, this digitisation project will see just a fraction of the British Library’s holdings make it online over the next six years. The full national collection, including many titles published in the former colonies, can be accessed in the British Library’s Newsroom in St Pancras (bl.uk/subjects/news-media).

23 Nonconformist chapel papers
Look beyond the nonconformist registers of births and marriages that are searchable on the main genealogy sites. The Anglia Library has an extensive collection of Baptist church archives and information on over 4,000 missionaries (theangus.rpc.ox.ac.uk), while the Society of Friends’ Library has an archive dedicated to the history of the Quakers (old.quaker.org.uk/library).

24 Make royal connections
Beautiful handwritten manuscripts at the College of Arms (college-of-arms.gov.uk) proved journalist Frank Gardner’s claim of descent from William the Conqueror, and similarly significant heraldic records can be sourced at the Court of the Lord Lyon in Edinburgh (lyon-court.com) and the Office of the Chief Herald at the National Library of Ireland (www.nli.ie/en/heraldry-introduction.aspx). Special permission is required for these ancient institutions, as well as the Royal Archives at Windsor Castle, comprising staff records and correspondence of the Royal Family (tinyurl.com/7m7gdc).

25 Save a valuable local service!
Unfortunately, the old adage rings true: use it, or lose it. Many archives have been forced to reduce opening hours in recent years. The Archives and Records Association (archives.org.uk) has lobbied Parliament since the financial crisis, yet the door is the best way to head off closures and cuts. In November, the association ran a third annual Explore Your Archive campaign, encouraging us all to make the most of lesser-known repositories like the Archives and Special Collections at Bangor University, home to a varied array of legal, family and estate papers from across North Wales, plus records relating to Jamaican and West Indian plantations (bangor.ac.uk/archives).

exploreyourarchive.org to find out about some of the inspirational holdings in your local archive.