

## Family trees online? They're not even on paper

by Fran Yeoman

It was supposed to be the project that would drag one of the nation's favourite hobbies into the 21st century.

More than 250 million records of births, marriages and deaths - a family history of Britain since 1837 - should have been freely available to search online by next May.

However, the multimillion-pound scheme has suffered the same curse as many Government IT projects. It is now running over a year late, according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), and "mid to late 2009" is the new best guess for when the online index will be available. Meanwhile, the traditional method of finding the information is about to get harder as the longstanding paper versions are removed from public view - a move that has infuriated historians, genealogists and amateur sleuths trying to trace their family trees. This normally mild-mannered band, swollen in recent times by the many people inspired to trace their ancestors by *Who Do You Think You Are?*, the BBC TV programme, are unhappy.

"It is grossly inadequate," said Maggie Loughran, administrator of the Federation of Family History Societies. "The whole thing is an absolute shambles. Like so many government IT projects, it has been badly managed."

In October the Family Records Centre in London will begin boxing up the huge bound volumes of indexes that for many years have been the starting point for thousands of historical hunts.

They will be sent to storage in Dorset and from then until the new Digitisation of Vital Events (Dove) online scheme takes flight, researchers who need to conduct a national search for a "vital event" before 1984 will have to rely on examining a microfiche on the upper floor of the centre. There will be even more disruption in March when the facilities are moved from their home in Islington, North London, to the National Archives in Kew, West London.

The closure of the Centre's office in Islington has been brought forward from March 2008 to November in part because the ONS, which must vacate its present site in Pimlico, needs a new building.

It is also, according to a spokesman, because of a "fall in visitor numbers" to the Islington site.

"We have done absolutely everything we reasonably can to minimise disruption during the transitional period," the spokesman said, adding that more microfiche copies and microfiche-readers would be made available at Kew.

He added that some local libraries around the country hold their own microfiche copies and that researchers could pay for online access to the index through commercial sites.

However, because of the delays with Dove and the centre's closure, the transitional phase - when there will be no free access to the national index other than on microfiche - will last at least 18 months rather than the two months originally planned.

Ms Loughran said: "I am an experienced researcher and I have trouble reading the microfiches.

"People are not going to be allowed to see the original paper source of the index, but will have to rely on a secondary source, which is incomplete, as the microfiches have not been updated with corrections and additions since they were made in the 1990s, and which are not easy to read."

The Society of Genealogists described the looming situation as "wholly unsatisfactory", and accused the ONS of breaching its statutory obligation to provide a publicly accessible index to births, marriages and deaths.

Michael Tringham, chairman of Hoopers, the probate genealogy company that traces unknown beneficiaries of wills, said: "The closure of the FRC, which has been a public facility for over 150 years, and the lack of an adequate replacement is a scandal.

"Since 1837 the indexes have been available by statute to view for free. Microfiche are wholly inadequate, and are not going to be any use to members of the public. They are not user-friendly."

"Furthermore, from November 2007, the records themselves will have to be bought online and sent to people by post as the FRC collection service will close. This will mean delays and unreliability for everyone from us to passport

applicants.

&ldquo;These documents are so important to us. They are our lifeline.&rdquo; From The Times August 28, 2007