



Association of Genealogists and Researchers in Archives

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### **AGRA PRESS RELEASE:**

**FROM:** The Association of Genealogists and Researchers in Archives (AGRA)

**DATE:** 15<sup>th</sup> February 2024

### **AGRA ISSUES A STATEMENT OF FORMAL OPPOSITION TO THE MINISTRY OF JUSTICE'S PROPOSALS TO END THE STORAGE OF ORIGINAL POST-1858 WILLS**

The Association of Genealogists and Researchers in Archives (AGRA) issued a statement to the Ministry of Justice (the MoJ) formally objecting proposals in regard to the storage and retention of original will documents. The MoJ consultation document outlined proposals to destroy these documents following digitisation.

The statement outlined the membership's collective experience of the significant risks associated with digitisation projects, including errors of omission. If the originals are destroyed, that data is lost forever. While AGRA welcomes digitisation as an alternative means of access, it is not a replacement for original documents.

There can be no dispute that the original will, with the signatures of the testator and witnesses, will be the most accurate version. However, the majority of digital images currently supplied to researchers are not images of the original will, but of the office copy of the document. These office copies do not have the original handwriting or signatures of the testator and other parties. AGRA raised the need for more clarification as to which documents are held by the MoJ, where they are held and which, if not all, of those documents are proposed for digitisation and/or destruction.

Most of all, AGRA condemned the proposed wilful destruction of potentially historically valuable documents and records. This would represent a major loss to the cultural and historical heritage of England and Wales. The proposal that original wills of notable individuals will be retained does not take into account those whom history retrospectively reclaims as such.

Wills are not merely records associated with the legal process of a person's decease. Each will is a unique and personal document, which can reveal so much more about an individual, their family, land and property and their life, than can be accounted for in pounds, shillings and pence.

AGRA regards the proposed plans to end the storage of wills as equivalent to an act of cultural vandalism and urged the MoJ to withdraw their proposals.

The statement, issued by Gill Thomas, Chair of AGRA, was undersigned by AGRA Fellows, Members and Associates.

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#### **FURTHER INFORMATION:**

We encourage everyone with an interest in this issue to respond to the consultation by 23rd February at 11.59pm (GMT), to write to your MP raising your concerns and to sign the following petition: <https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/654081b>

To respond directly to the MoJ's consultation, please email: [civil\\_justice\\_poli@justice.gov.uk](mailto:civil_justice_poli@justice.gov.uk)

For further information please contact Alexander Briggs via [press@agra.org.uk](mailto:press@agra.org.uk).

#### **NOTES TO EDITORS:**

1. On 15 December 2023, the Ministry of Justice published a consultation paper on the 'Storage and retention of original will documents'. The consultation paper can be accessed online here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/storage-and-retention-of-original-will-documents>. On the same date, the government issued a press release: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/easier-access-to-historic-wills-under-new-government-plans> and shared a video via their social media: <https://twitter.com/MoJGovUK/status/1735642204809351595>
2. The Association of Genealogists and Researchers in Archives (AGRA) is the not-for-profit body representing accredited professional genealogists conducting research in England and Wales.
3. AGRA promotes high professional standards in the field of genealogy and historical research. It also acts as a representative voice in matters relating to genealogy.
4. AGRA Membership involves assessment and interview by a Board of Assessors. The Board also regulates the acceptance of "Associates" who can join to take advantage of AGRA study days and local networking whilst working towards Member status.
5. AGRA is governed by a Council, elected by and from the Members. Members and Associates pay an annual subscription and agree to abide by AGRA's Code of Practice. The Code requires them to be honest, discreet and competent, working at all times in the client's interest, and the Association operates a formal complaints procedure to ensure this is upheld.
6. The Association was founded in 1968.
7. More information about AGRA can be found at its website at <https://www.agra.org.uk/>