



NEW SERIES REVEALED



Left to right: Lisa Faulkner presents the new series; A team of probate researchers hard at work; John Bernstein, whose father lived in the East End of London; Another case awaits

Heir Hunters goes primetime

As fast-paced genealogy TV show *Heir Hunters* moves to a new evening slot, **Matt Elton** spoke to the team to learn more about the stories from the new series

By recording the final wishes of our ancestors, wills can provide family historians with valuable insights into their lives, relationships and personalities. But what happens in the estimated 300,000 cases a year in the United Kingdom where people die intestate – that is, without leaving a will? If no legal next of kin can be found, their remaining assets are passed to Her Majesty’s Treasury – unless a dedicated

band of extreme genealogists can track down their surviving descendants first.

The work of several such teams of probate researchers, including Fraser & Fraser and Celtic Research, has been the subject of BBC One’s hugely popular daytime programme *Heir Hunters* since it first aired in 2007. The skill of the companies’ researchers in exploring the archives, often creating family trees in the space of just a few hours, means that they are able to

uncover a wealth of fascinating genealogical tales that don’t make it to our screens.

That’s all about to change, however. Flame Television, the production company behind the show, has been revisiting some of the recent cases featured on the programme to dig deeper into the historical and personal stories that they uncovered. The resulting series of ten hour-long episodes is set to start on BBC Two this autumn, and *Who Do You Think You Are?*

Incomplete Irish records

One particularly tricky case that initially stumped the *Heir Hunters* team highlighted issues that will be all too familiar to many genealogists who have tried to unravel their Irish roots. Probate researcher Bob Smith was alerted to a £300,000 estate by the solicitors of Michael Moran, who were able to provide the names of their former clients’ parents.

Tracing them back to Westport in County Mayo, the team discovered that Michael’s mother was one of nine children – meaning that they would have to trace all the possible descendants of up to eight aunts and uncles.

The challenge was made all the more difficult by the effects of Ireland’s unsettled history. Resentment to British rule during the early decades

of the 20th century led to many people refusing to register marriages with the authorities, while the Easter Uprising of 1916 resulted in the destruction of the General Post Office – and with it the majority of public records. As Lisa discovered, though, parish churches may offer vital clues. For more about tracing your Irish links, see our feature on page 34.



Michael Moran with his wife



Magazine has been behind the scenes to find out what's in store over the coming weeks.

"What we've done is taken existing *Heir Hunters* stories and expanded them," says the show's executive producer Matt Gordon. "So although the programme was previously tied very closely to the original wills and probate investigations, we're now able to explore some of the fascinating social histories in greater depth – as well as to update viewers on cases that have been solved since the episodes were originally broadcast."

Incredible stories

The expanded running time also allows the new series to go into more detail about exactly how the researchers made their discoveries. Previously responsible for providing the show's voiceover, TV presenter and actor Lisa Faulkner will be stepping in front of the camera to get hands-on with the research process.

"When they told me that the programme was moving to an evening slot, I was delighted to be offered the presenting role," she told me on a break from her hectic filming schedule. "I've been working on *Heir Hunters* for the past five series and I love the fact that the move to primetime means I get to actually meet the experts, the *Heir Hunters* team and the people who I've so often read about in scripts. What I'm learning every day is fascinating, exploring all these different areas of our forgotten past."

These connections to the wider world in which our ancestors lived represents a major part of the new series. Each episode explores a different area of social history, spanning more than 200 years and travelling as far afield as Ireland, India and Russia.

One such story delves into the Jewish East End of London in the early years of the 20th century. While researching the case of John Bernstein, the father of one of the *Heir Hunters* subjects, the team called upon experts at the

Jewish Museum London for further insights into what his life might have been like.

"While they were at the museum, the show's researchers used our displays to help build a narrative of what Jewish life in London's East End would have been like in the early 20th century, when Bernstein lived in the area," says the museum's director, Rickie Burman. "They already had census information that revealed that his father, Hyman, was originally from near the Russia-Poland border and settled in the East End to become a tailor. They also had records that showed that his sons and daughters, including John Bernstein, later became furriers and tailors – following in his footsteps.

"This story is very typical of many Jewish immigrants who came to Britain from Eastern Europe in the late-19th and early 20th centuries," Rickie continues. "It's estimated that some 150,000 Jewish immigrants found refuge in Britain in the years between 1881 and 1914."

Other instalments of the new series focus on making the most of military wills, the huge impact that the Russian revolution had across the world and the tragic stories of 19th-century families who were forced to send their children to the workhouse.

The hunt goes on

In addition to revisiting old cases, each episode will be alerting viewers about individuals who died intestate, potentially putting them in line for an unexpected windfall. "In keeping with the extended nature of the rest of the show, we'll be including twice as many appeals about unclaimed estates," says Matt.

Even if you aren't among the lucky few in line for an unexpected windfall, the experts agree that the increased prominence of shows such as *Heir Hunters* will benefit genealogists. "Programmes such as these help make people

more aware of the kinds of resources that are available to them when researching their family history, including archives, the internet and, in this instance, museums," says Rickie. "When you're researching family histories, it can also be fascinating to build a wider narrative and to find out more about an era, as well as the person in question."

Indeed, Lisa is also full of enthusiasm about the show: "I think that *Heir Hunters*' mix of family history and detective work is absolutely fascinating," she says. "I'm sure that this series will enthral viewers even more." ■

TAKE IT FURTHER

- ➔ *Heir Hunters* starts on BBC Two later this autumn – for more, visit www.bbc.co.uk/heirhunters
- ➔ For the latest TV listings, sign up for our newsletter at www.whodoyouthinkyouaremagazine.com

The hot list

Bona Vacantia is a term given to a list of ownerless property – the term literally means 'vacant goods' – that has been passed to Her Majesty's Treasury. Details of the new additions are released at one minute past midnight every Thursday morning, kicking off a frantic race to track down the beneficiaries first.

Yet despite the rivalry – and the investigators' formidable research skills – the task is made all the more difficult by the limited information that the list provides. As well as the name, the only details included are the date of death, an address and a number indicating the size of the estate, which goes some way to explaining why the government still receives an estimated £12 million in unclaimed assets every year.