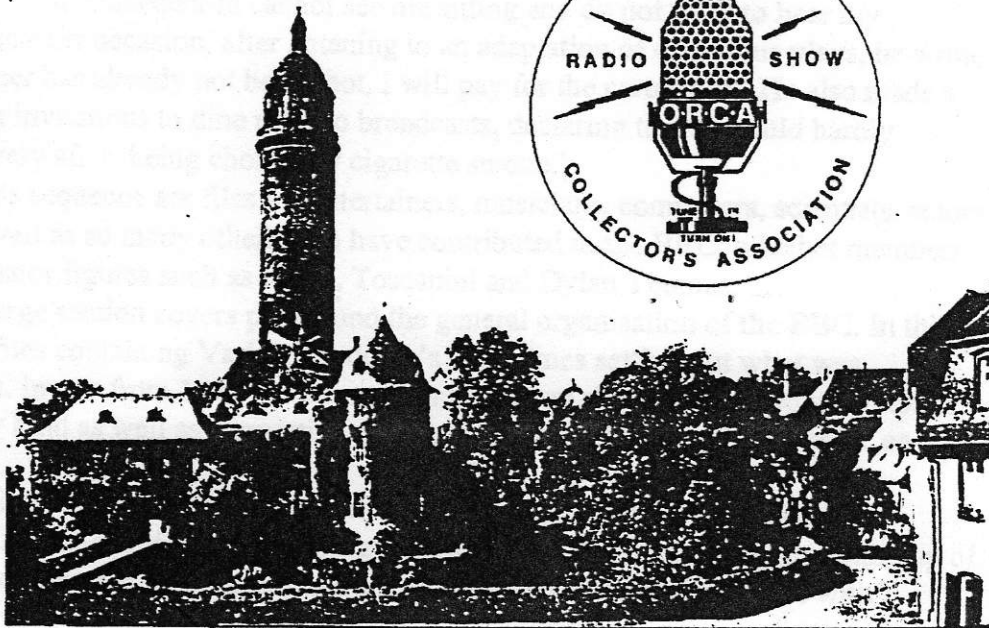


TUNE INTO YESTERDAY

THIS IS....

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following article was written exclusively for TIY by Neil Somerville of the BBC Written Archives....

THROUGH THE PAGES OF BBC HISTORY

by Neil Somerville

From the outside the BBC Written Archives Centre looks like a small bungalow. But looks are deceptive and behind the attractive white facade is a huge storage area containing the BBC's written history. It is a veritable treasure trove.

The material that the Centre holds tells of how the fledgling British Broadcasting Company began in 1922 with a staff of four and the amazing story of its development. Less than four years old, the events of the 1926 General Strike allowed the Company to demonstrate that the wireless was no novelty but had essential value and as a consequence was granted a charter. There too are accounts of the early and precarious days of television, once described as 'a machine for seeing by electricity - a telephone for the eye,' and the crucial role that the BBC played during the war as well as its history since. All is documented in the thousands of memo's, letters, scripts and newspaper cuttings carefully stored at the Centre.

One of the largest sequences of files covers the contributors to the BBC. The files contain contracts and correspondence and often form a fascinating account of the contributors' dealings with the Corporation. This includes the many pleas made by Winston Churchill to broadcast in the late 1920s, even offering to pay for the privilege, and the first approach to Margaret Thatcher, then just an election candidate, asking if she would like to broadcast together with the enthusiastic reply she sent in her own hand.

George Bernard Shaw was another frequent correspondent. He called himself 'a typical Irishman. My parents came from Yorkshire,' and took great delight in writing to the BBC on small correspondence cards. When asked if he could chair a radio debate he replied, 'Good God, NO ... the listeners-in cannot see me sitting and do not want to hear my silence,' and on another occasion, after listening to an adaptation of one of his plays, he wrote that 'if the producer has already not been shot, I will pay for the cartridges.' He also made a point of declining invitations to dine prior to broadcasts, declaring that he could hardly broadcast effectively after 'being choked by cigarette smoke.'

Also in this sequence are files for entertainers, musicians, composers, scientists, actors and actresses as well as so many others who have contributed to the BBC, whether members of the public or major figures such as Freud, Toscanini and Dylan Thomas.

Another large section covers policy and the general organisation of the BBC. In this section there are files containing Variety Producer's Guidelines setting out what was permissible or not. In one from 1948 it was noted there was an absolute ban about lavatories, immorality of any kind as well as suggestive references to fig leaves or animal habits, eg rabbits.

There too is much correspondence with various government departments and particularly the Ministry of Information during the war years. The files detail the setting up of the war reporting unit as well as statements from the Political Warfare Executive with interpretation of events and developments within certain countries.

In the television policy files there are discussions on whether the newsreader should actually appear in vision - for a long time only the radio news was re-broadcast on television -

and on how general elections should be reported. For many years the BBC had remained uneasy over election coverage and even in 1950 one producer commented, 'I take it that it would be impossible for television on that evening to ignore the election altogether.' Five years later another executive remarked that 'the BBC kept aloof from the election as if it had been occurring on another planet,' and that neutrality in programmes (which is what the BBC was so concerned to achieve) was 'carried to the length of castration.' There is much too on policy concerning party political broadcasts, although the first television party election broadcast (in 1951) overran so much the speaker was cut off and never did finish!

Another fascinating section is the audience research material and particularly the reports containing reaction to programmes. Here are accounts of the initial response to such classics as Steptoe and Son, Till Death Us Do Part, Dr Who and Dad's Army. There are also informed comments from experts in the reports and files. About Troubleshooters, a drama series concerning the oil industry, one executive from Shell commented, 'The Troubleshooters is extremely good. I am staggered how accurate they are in technical matters. Of course in real life we don't have blondes lying about on beds. We miss this facility.'

The files on the programmes themselves have large sections on radio and television light entertainment, talks programmes, features, documentaries and arrangements for outside broadcasts, including Coronations, the 1966 World Cup and the Proms. Some of the files describe how the programmes were conceived and took shape, including the thinking behind Dr Who, Blue Peter, Any Questions, Panorama and Monty Python. About the last, Graham Chapman and one of the Python team noted, 'I don't think the BBC really wanted us around the building very much - in fact we seemed to be getting worse and worse offices as we went along, and for the last series we were in a shed near the gate.'

There are also accounts of some of the mishaps that have occasionally taken place, such as the time when David Jacobs made a particularly lengthy introduction to Any Questions because the panel had not yet arrived or when Thomas Woodrooffe declared in the dying minutes of a Cup Final 'If there's a goal scored now, I'll eat my hat.' There was a goal and the presenter, good to his word, did eat his hat! Among the papers are also accounts of early technical teething troubles, for instance how some of the crowd shots at Wimbledon in 1937 made you 'feel you'd had one over the eight.' In another broadcast, microphones were hung over the middle of a boxing ring to add to the atmosphere. Unfortunately the boxers chose to stage their contest in the corners of the ring until a BBC technician politely asked the boxers in an interval, 'PLEASE try and box under the microphone!'

To supplement this material, we have a large section of press cuttings and which relate specifically to the BBC, its output and contributors. The cuttings are a valuable and unique collection and one appreciated by visiting researchers, especially as they give such an accurate flavour of the time.

The Centre also holds a huge collection of microfilm and microfiche. The bulk of these are scripts including radio and television news bulletins, current affairs programmes as well as drama and comedy. The radio talk scripts are a particularly rich source and are well indexed. Not only have most of the major figures of the last 80 years at some time broadcast - and had their words transcribed - but the scripts cover a vast range of subjects. One of the first enquiries I had when I joined the Centre was from a student asking whether the BBC had ever broadcast anything on the medicinal properties of tripe. A quick check of the radio subject index showed that Lord Hill, speaking as the radio doctor, had once spoken on the subject. In

order to get permission to use the script, the student wrote to Lord Hill and he wrote to us. He said that if he ever did broadcast on the medicinal properties of Miss would be more than welcome to a copy!

The scripts are another wonderful source for researchers. One series was called 'I Was There' and contained eye witness accounts of events such as the sinking of the Titanic, eruption of Krakatoa, Scott's last expedition. Also the news bulletins we have, a continuous sequence from 1938, down to the events of much of the last century, including the declaration of war and the assassination of Kennedy and so much more.

The Centre has also benefited from kind gifts made to the Centre by Roy Plomley's own scripts of Desert Island Discs, and we are always happy to accept further possible additions although we do have to be selective in what we accept.

One other major sequence we hold concerns the BBC's broadcasts during the war. There is correspondence with governments and broadcasting authorities about the setting up of radio stations and exchange of programme material. Also the selection of overseas scripts, including many scripts broadcast to Germany and coded messages to the French resistance. To us they are meaningless and boring, but 'La chute n'est pas verticale' and 'Les fruits sont exquis,' but to the resistance they are of great significance. Even now we get enquiries about whether a certain script was broadcast on a particular day.

The Centre certainly contains a huge amount of material and is open to anyone studying on an accredited course or who have been commissioned to write a book. Our reading room is open Wednesdays to Fridays 9.45 to 5.00 and, due to the high demand for places, we require about five weeks notice of any visit together with what the researcher would like to see.

I have worked at the Centre for over 20 years and, after all this time, I still have the privilege to do so. Not only is the Centre situated in a pleasant area - and close to the BBC Monitoring Unit - but the work is so fascinating. With enquiries about different subjects and the ability to research and consult such fascinating material, the Writer's Association is a most interesting place to work.

SIMON ROOKS, Head of BBC Sound Archives, writes exclusively

A Sound Archivist Writes...

If it seems an age since Graeme asked me to write a few lines for TIY, well, it is! The last few months have flown by and it's suddenly time to sit down and bashed it out, I hope to give TIY readers an idea of what we do and what considerations drive the way we develop.

The Sound Archive in Information and Archives

First though, I had better give you a brief idea of where I sit. I am one of several specialist archivists within Information and Archives. My colleagues include the Television Archivist, Written Archivist and more recently an New Media Archivist. An Information Manager and the developments in media asset management. We work with the Manager, Chris Wilkie who steers the whole thing in the right direction and ensure the archive content meets the needs of the users and that it is accessible. One way of measuring the usefulness of an archive is accessibility - an unused archive doesn't really have a purpose. This is a broadcasting archive!

The post of Sound Archivist has existed for just over a year. The review has characterised that time is the task of reviewing not only the archive at a higher level, *why* we do it. This means taking account of what we do by the Charter and what the Corporation expects an archive. This has resulted in the review and adoption of new Selection policies.

Building the Archive

The content of the archive is driven by several factors: programmes, re-use of extracts, programme research and opportunities for BBC Worldwide. In short it all boils down to Intake to capture radio broadcasts and associated recordings.

- Last and not least are the recovered 'lost' broadcasts another were not archived at the time.

Recovering 'lost' broadcasts

This area will no doubt be a particular interest to TIY readers in a few lines. There are two main reasons why we find 'gaps' in the earlier years the most common reason is many live programmes were not recorded and explains for example we only have five recordings from 1930. Secondly, because Archive policy has changed over the years it is wrong to always decry these missing programmes as a failure. We must consider that the perception of the value of and archive material has changed a great deal. An archive will always to some extent be selective which collected. At times a lack of resources, staff effort or other factors affected selection. That said it is difficult to justify some omissions of some programmes that by any standards should have been included. One view is that we should 'cry over split archives' and concentrate on the present whilst taking the opportunity to recover programmes from earlier years.

One example of this over the last couple of years has been our working relations with the National Sound Archive. BBC Worldwide's acquisitions in the *BBC Legends* series have sometimes come from programmes that were not archived. We have ensured that these have been accessioned to the Archive. There are also of course donations from private collectors and individuals. Quality is always an issue but good content will outweigh the technical concerns - offers are always considered on a case by case basis. One of the star acquisitions of recent months has been Morecambe and Wise's first series for radio *You're Only You* which is in excellent condition. Others have been early Gaumont editions, a 1977 play *Post Mortem* starring Kenneth Williams and an interview with Doris Day. I never know what's going to turn up

For other kinds of programmes we don't see the need to keep an initial review period (perhaps between three months and a year) for daily DJ shows where the music is from commercial CDs and where there are any guests. Sampling these programmes is sufficient. Selection of material for the acquisition of untransmitted material based on sound quality is also valuable for programme makers. For example, complete interviews with the Chancellor or the complete Chancellor's Budget Statement may partly talk over it but future users will want a clean version. Similarly, demonstrations, gunfire etc. will also be wanted in clean versions. Similarly, talking over the ambient sound. These selections especially for radio programmes and CDs which give the producer handy access to the best material on a required topic.

Coming Up...

We are in the middle of a fast changing broadcasting environment and our archive has to adapt. **Formats** change - we are seeing the decline of 78s and LPs will be digitised within three years. We are also seeing **voice recognition technology** that will make more content searchable and the need for a human cataloguer (although we will certainly still need a human cataloguer) also need to adapt to meet the needs of two of the BBC's new programmes which will be substantially archive based. Inevitably, digital programmes will never exist on a physical format but only on a digital format. We need to ensure that we have the ability to capture and archive content and to keep physical items. **Increased storage capacities** and automation mean that all broadcast programmes will be retained in digital form. Selection must also be questioned and held up for review. A major question is: how do we make sure that the content, however stored is searchable and accessible? What use is an archive that is not used?

Simon Rooks

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