

Film and videotape and the community archive.

- **Introduction**

The first public film show in Britain took place in 1896. Film quickly developed into the most important new art form and information medium of the 20th Century and is recognised, along with its successor media of videotape and digital, as being a uniquely important addition to the historical record.

Archive services have, because of the specialist nature of the material and the technologies required to deal with it, tended to concentrate their collecting on the more traditional, paper based artefacts.

The establishment of specialist public film archives, particularly in the regions and nations since the mid 1970s, means that moving image material can now be collected, cared for and made available in appropriate and accessible forms.

Moving images in all their forms (film, tape and digital) are fragile artefacts in different ways and present specialist challenges to the archivist whether they are professional or community based. But just because they present difficulties community archives should not be discouraged from pursuing the inclusion of this kind of material in their collections. What is probably most important for the community archive is that you hold something which is accessible and that appropriate arrangements are made to have the master copy properly preserved. In some cases it may be appropriate for the community archive to try to do that themselves in other cases it may be more appropriate to pass that responsibility to a specialist archive.

These notes are designed to encourage you to look for moving image materials appropriate to your collections and to help you to understand what you already have or might find and guide you through an appropriate set of processes so that you end up with original materials properly cared for, good documentation and usable and accessible copies.

What is film?

- **What film might you find in the community? – A brief historical summary of film types and how they were used**

The successful taking and projection of film, the ability to photograph and reproduce sequential still images in such a way as to induce the perception of movement for the viewer, was first achieved in 1895 and was the end result of a progression of developments in photography, optical toys and magic lantern technology. Given its

developmental genesis it is unsurprising that the same developments were independently reached by a number of different people (R.W. Paul and Birt Acres in Britain; The Lumiere Brothers in France; Edison in the USA for example).

The pioneers largely used photographic materials designed for still cameras so rolls of 35mm film adapted for their own cameras and projectors and largely limited to 50 feet lengths meant that most early film was limited to about 1 minute length and concentrated on the illustration of movement.

In the first 20 years of the century film was made almost exclusively by professionals and covered fictional and comedy subjects, topical and local and national news, travelogues and actualities.

To reduce the cost 16mm and 9.5 mm film were introduced in 1923. These gauges were quickly taken up by amateur filmmakers, though it was an expensive hobby. 16mm was also used by professional filmmakers particularly for non cinema films. 8mm film was introduced in 1928 by Kodak to counter the success of Pathe's 9.5mm gauge, though it did not really take off until the 1950s.

Though some professional films were tinted and toned in the silent era and so may have had an overall yellow, green, blue, red or purple hue, films were largely black and white until the mid 1930s when various colour systems were introduced. Stable Kodachrome, the most widely used colour system for home movies, dates from about 1938/9. Prior to that date Kodachrome colour has often faded to magenta. Through the 1930s there was an increasing use of 16mm film for educational and industrial and promotional purposes.

Film stock was very hard to come by during the 1939/45 war.

After the war the popularity of 8mm increased and from the mid 1960s standard 8mm was joined by super 8mm – a format widely used by film artists and the avant garde as well as by home movie makers.

16mm became even more widely used for different types of production from the early 1950s. Promotional and training films, informational films, independent films and amateur productions all join the home movies and reduced versions of cinema films which had been previously available.

From the late 1960s videotape formats begin to displace the smaller film gauges for home movie use.

IMPORTANT NOTE: 35mm FILM MAY BE ON HIGHLY INFLAMMABLE NITRATE STOCK WHICH IS A MAJOR FIRE RISK. NEARLY ALL 35MM MANUFACTURED PRIOR TO 1951 WILL BE NITRATE.

Information about nitrate and guidance on the handling of this material can be found here: <http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/cellulose.pdf> .

Contact your regional film archive for further advice and help - contact details can be found here: <http://filmarchives.org.uk/>

- **What you may find and what is worth keeping....developing and interpreting a policy for selection and acquisition**

Your collecting policy should extend to include moving image materials. In it you should indicate the kinds of things that you would like the collection to reflect. Remember that the history of place is as much about the history of the people in and from the place. To get an understanding of the culture of the place you might want to think about interpreting your collecting policy in a way which reflects the lives and activities of the people as well as just the pictorial illustration of the place. So, for example, a family from the community may have a collection of films which reveal images of the community but which may also include family holidays in Wales. These latter films should not be rejected out of hand as they could offer insight into the culture of the people from the place.

- **Looking for moving image records of the community**

There are many approaches to trying to find moving image records that you may wish to hold as part of a community collection. The use of local magazines, newspapers and newsletters is one approach, as is word of mouth. Whether you use these approaches or some other approach you will almost certainly encounter people who acknowledge that they have film material but will think it is only of interest to them or their close family. It is common for people to think this way but experience shows that it is much less common for film to really have no interest beyond the immediate family. Gentle persuasion to look at the material and make that decision together is perhaps the best way forward.

- **How to deal with the films you may find**

When a collection is found it is important to gather any additional information about it that you can. Ask the owner to tell you about it. Ask them if there is any paperwork for it or with it. If there is look after it carefully. Look after all the original containers too they may carry useful information.

Looking at old film is difficult and runs the risk of inflicting irreparable damage on the material itself.

The temptation to get out an old projector and try to view the films should be resisted.

So how do you decide whether something is of interest?

The best way, given the difficult nature of the material, is to enlist the help of your regional film archive (web site list above).

Before you talk to them, try to find out as much as you can about the collection.

Often there is information on the packaging if it is still in the original boxes. If the filmmaker was an enthusiast he/she will almost certainly have kept some notes of the content.

Determine what gauge the film materials are. This is important information. There are a variety of web sites that can help with this. This page is a good one.

<http://www.macearchive.org/resource-area/how-to-identify-your-films.html>

Many of the archives will help you to examine the film and reach a decision about what best to do with the films. They may offer to look after the originals in purpose built temperature and humidity controlled storage and provide copies for you to use locally (and for the owner too) – though you may have to pay something towards those copies.

They will be able to offer the best advice about how best to look after the films themselves even if you don't want to keep them in the specialist archive. It should be borne in mind that film will slowly deteriorate if it is not kept in good conditions (a combination of low temperature and low humidity).

There is advice on line for this too.

<http://www.macearchive.org/resource-area/how-to-look-after-your-films.html>

- **Videotape**

From the mid 1970s videotape recordings, introduced in the 1960s, become increasingly common.

If anything, videotape is even more endangered than film. This is partly because the tapes themselves are subject to a level of decay which does not affect film, partly because the machines required to decode them are becoming obsolete and partly because they do not seem to people to be as likely to be interesting or important as archival artefacts.

Because of these factors it is really important that the potential historical significance of videotape is recognised and measures are taken to collect and preserve the images that the tapes contain.

As with film, the copying of tape is a task requiring some specialist equipment to ensure that the best possible copy is made from the tape. Many of you will have seen how domestic copying of one VHS to another results in dramatic picture degradation. The same is true of other videotape formats some of which may be less familiar.

All the same procedures recommended for community archives dealing with film apply to videotape.

Guidance on recognising what you have and help in copying to ensure the preservation of the image can be sought from the regional film archives.

Links to further information can be found here:

<http://www.macearchive.org/resource-area/how-to-identify-your-video-tapes.html>

- **Copying and preserving the master**

It is important to remember that film/videotape is a reprographic medium that is made to be copied.

Film archives tend to avoid the archival concept of “the original” preferring to use the concept of archive master copies because in most cases the film you see projected on the screen is several photographic generations away from the original which passed through the camera and is one of a number of copies.

So whilst it is important to make sure that the film copy that one is working from is preserved because this will be the best quality picture, it is the norm to be working with copies.

At one time these copies would have been film but these days they are much more likely to be in some digital form.

Old film/tape is fragile and requires specialist and expensive equipment to make good copies. Speak to the specialist archives about copying. There are lots of people who advertise film to digital (or tape to digital) copying quite cheaply. They will not have the necessary experience or kit to ensure that precious film copies are handled without damage. They will also not give the best advice about the long term preservation of originals.

- **What format and standards to copy to?**

The rule of thumb is to copy to the highest standard appropriate to the original and to the end use.

So, for example, whilst a national archive may scan a feature film to 2K to create a DCP file for cinema exhibition it would be inappropriate to copy an 8mm home movie to the same standard.

At the same time it would be equally inappropriate to copy a home movie to DVD and not maintain an uncompressed high quality digital master copy from which to make further copies when required (as well as keeping the original film in the best possible conditions)

It is not the intention of this paper to dictate particular master digital copy standards. The standards adopted by the UK’s public moving image archives (which in turn conform to those accepted internationally) are currently under review. The best advice is always to speak to the specialist archive for the most up to date advice.

What is of consideration is to ensure that the community archive has the copies it needs to undertake what it wants to with the films that it wishes to hold.

It may be that a DVD copy is sufficient if the archive simply wishes to have material that is available for easy access.

It may be that other types of files are required if, for example, the archive has plans to edit material into a new production.

Once the film has been mastered to a good quality uncompressed digital file any format should be possible to encode from it for such use.

- **Documentation of moving images**

There are standards and rules for the cataloguing of moving image materials published by FIAF (The International Federation of Film Archives) and guidance is also being worked on by AMIA (The Association of Moving Image Archivists). These are likely to be more detailed than would be required by a community archive.

Until you manage to catalogue each item in a collection you may wish to create a general collection level description for the catalogue.

When you catalogue individual items the important elements for cataloguing fall into two types:

Title specific and copy specific.

For each title you should try to collect the following data which will apply to all copies of the material:

- **The title** – Create one if there is no title on the film and put it in [] to denote that it has been assigned by the archive
- **Date** – The date of the film. Estimate and use c. where the exact date is not known
- **Country of origin** – probably UK
- **Production Company** – in the case of a professional film note the name of the company
- **Production credits** – note all names associated with the film's production and the role they undertook. In the case of a professional film these will be noted on the film and should be taken from that. In the case of amateur film it is likely that the only information will be the name of the filmmaker
- **Synopsis** – Describe the content of the film in as much detail as your cataloguing policy indicates. The more detail you include the more useful the record will be.
- **Notes** – have a note field to capture any other remarks you may wish to make about the film. It could be the place to note something about the history of the filmmaker or it could be the place to note what it said on the original container.

For each copy you have you should collect the following data:

For film...

- **Any unique identifier** – add here any unique identifying number the archive applies to material in the collection
- **The film gauge**
- **The length in feet (or running time)**
- **Colour or black and white or both**
- **Silent or with sound**
- **What kind of sound (optical or magnetic)**
- **A description of its general condition**
- **Where the copy came from** – Make a note of the depositor/source of the material. If it's a copy of something in the collection make a note of which item it's a copy of.

- **Rights and restrictions** – Copyrights and ownership are very complicated with film. Note any information about ownership and who took the film – especially in the case of family films. Note also any restrictions or conditions placed on the film or its use by the owner/depositor. Ensure that any transaction between owner and archive is clearly written down.

As in all areas to do with moving image archiving the regional film archives are a source of advice and help in these areas.

Details of the film archive network can be found on the Film Archives UK website here:

<http://filmarchives.org.uk/>

members details are here:

<http://filmarchives.org.uk/join/members/>