Sound Archive Development and Practice: a case study

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The establishment and development of a sound archive in the setting of a war museum may seem an esoteric experience to share with traditional archivists. However, the administration of audio-visual media by archivists has long since ceased to be a novelty and today a significant proportion of the profession are confronted with such materials in their repositories. Thus the experience of a specialised sound archive — that is both recent enough to be relevant and long enough to have been fairly comprehensive — may be of general interest if seen as a case study for this field of archival work.

The evolution of the Imperial War Museum's Department of Sound Records can only be seen clearly in the context of the parent institution's role. The Museum, which was set up in 1917 and established by an Act of Parliament in 1920, exists to illustrate and record all aspects of the two world wars and other military operations involving Britain and the Commonwealth since 1914. In practice these terms of reference are interpreted quite broadly and the Museum not only concerns itself with air, sea and military operations but also with the social, political, economic, industrial and scientific aspects of war as well as its literary and artistic emanations.

The original collections of the Museum — all of which are administered by separate departments — include works of art, other kinds of exhibits, books, documents, films and photographs and these have been collected over more than half a century. The Department of Sound Records was set up in January 1972. Audio records, therefore, are by far the youngest of the Museum's reference media and the Department remains today one of only two professional sound archives based on British museums. With holdings of about five thousand recorded hours it is also the fourth largest sound archive in the United Kingdom.

When I was appointed to set up the new Department in 1972 no specific policy had been formulated for its work. The initial task, therefore, was to define a programme that would provide a relevant and acceptable framework for its activities. It might seem that the prescription of policy for a specialised institution like the Imperial War

Museum in the specialised field of sound archives would not tax the imagination or energy very greatly. It quickly became evident, however, that there were quite a few areas which could be exploited, each of which was open to development in quite a substantial way. The original policy document that was formulated for the Department now — only eight years later — makes extremely interesting reading. In the spring of 1972 I proposed that the following activities should be adopted by the embryo archive:

(1) "The acquisition of broadcast recordings from radio and television collections and by copying programmes off the air." Today the Department holds about 2,500 recorded hours of recordings from broadcasting sources, though we have yet to obtain authorisation for copying off-air. Our largest acquisitions have come from the BBC Sound Archive but we have also had substantial amounts of material from Rediffusion, Thames Television, BBC Television, the British Forces Broadcasting Service and the Radio Division of the Central Office of Information. By means of purchase and exchange, broadcast recordings from German and US sources have also been added to the collection.

(2) "The Department should establish an oral history recording programme, concentrating initially on subjects relating to the First World War period and develop this work systematically through the inter-war, Second World War and post-war periods." To date the Department has carried out fifteen separate recording projects and by so doing put more than two thousand hours of reminiscences on tape.

Apart from these two productive areas of collecting and recording there were several other activities that were recommended in 1972 which, though still desirable and possible, mostly seem as far away from realisation now as they were then. Thus:

(3) "It should acquire a comprehensive collection of relevant published recordings covering such areas as military and other service music, the popular songs and tunes of the war periods, examples of contemporary performers and all relevant spoken word publications."

(4) "It should set up a recording programme to capture where possible sounds of historical interest which are otherwise unlikely to be preserved."

(5) "It should record significant events as they are taking place; this for example, might involve field work in Northern Ireland recording not only on-the-spot reactions of the people directly affected by the troubles there, but also the characteristic noises of the environment."

(6) "It should tape discussion groups, lectures, speeches, seminars, colloquiums, parades, ceremonies and other such events that might be relevant to the Museum's terms of reference." (In the field of lecture recording the Department actually has been fairly active.)

(7) "Finally, the Department should transfer to magnetic tape the great amount of important sound material which only exists at the moment in the inconvenient form of optical and magnetic ciné film tracks.'

The practical consequence of a growing appreciation of what was desirable and what was realistic, inevitably made it necessary to establish priorities. We chose, therefore, to concentrate on two main areas of activity. The collection of broadcast material, because many existing and important recordings in the Museum's field were not generally available to the public; and secondly, the establishment of an oral history recording programme because the Department could thereby do original

work and interview people who, otherwise, would probably not be recorded at all. As a result the Department of Sound Records has become mainly an archive of spoken word recordings and the collection is made up of contemporary recordings on the one hand and retrospective interview material on the other.

This collection has been created partly by objective selection and decision taking but also, to a not inconsiderable extent, through fleeting opportunities and good fortune. The application of objective controls has been possible in two major fields of acquisition. First, in the Department's oral history recording programme and, secondly, through formal transfer and copying arrangements that we have with a few broadcasting organisations.

To take first the oral history programme, a chronologically structured series of recording projects was developed and implemented, the content and nature of which is illustrated by the following list of project titles:

- Military and Naval Aviation 1912-1920
- Life and Operations on the Western Front 1914-1918
- The Anti-War Movement 1914-1918
- War Work 1914-1918: Industrial, Agricultural, Medical and Welfare
- Life on the Lower Deck of the Royal Navy 1910-1922
- The British Army in India 1919-1939
- The British Army in Africa 1919-1939
- The British Army in the Middle East 1919-1939
- The Mechanisation of the British Army 1919-1939
- The RAF and the Development of Air Power 1919-1939
- British Involvement in the Spanish Civil War 1936-1939
- Britain and the Refugee Crisis 1933-1947
- Internment in Britain 1939-1945
- British Army Combat cameramen 1939-1945
- 20th Century British War Artists

Generally, the projects focus on subjects or groups of people that are not adequately covered by documentary and printed records and each theme selected is first developed in a project research paper. The planning approach used may be illustrated by taking the project on "War Work 1914-1918" as an example. In this project the following main areas were chosen for investigation:

Recruitment	Food
Training	Housing
The Job	Free Time
Work Place	Finance
Health	Transport
Traditions	The War
Management	Demobilization
Industrial Relations	

Each of these main subjects was elaborated in some detail, the extent of which is shown in the treatment of the section on "The Job". To

provide guidelines for the project interviewers the following areas for questioning were prescribed:

- What was the official description of your job? How did the description compare with your actual work? Outline a routine day on the job.
- Which jobs were preferred? Which disliked and why? Under what circumstances did people change jobs?
- Describe the equipment used at work. Were any adaptions necessary for war production?
- What were your wages? How did they compare with earnings in previous employment? Were men and women paid the same? What did you think of the level of pay? What were the opportunities for overtime and promotion?
- What hours did you work? Were they typical? What were the shift and holiday arrangements?
- What did you wear? How much of this was provided by the employer? Did people make changes (eg for convenience or style)? What did you think about women wearing trousers? How did other people react to them?
- Were there shortages of staff or materials? Was there sufficient technical expertise? What was done about the shortages? What were the consequences of them?
- Did any new developments arise during wartime in the job, the equipment or the product?

Although there may be changes in style or emphases according to the subject being dealt with or the group of people being interviewed, this general kind of approach is consistently used in all the projects which the Department undertakes.

In addition to the oral history material, another field wherein it is possible to apply a measure of objective selection to the recordings taken into the collection is that of broadcast recordings. In this field, arrangements have been established with several broadcasting organisations through which recordings from both current broadcasting output and also from existing media archive collections can be acquired. These arrangements are of great importance for two reasons. First, because they enable the Department to acquire contemporary sound documents which complement the retrospective interview material it records itself. Secondly, because radio and, particularly, television companies have the budgets to carry out recording activities on a scale and range that the Museum could not possibly afford to undertake itself.

The most important arrangement we have of this kind is undoubtedly with the sound archive of the BBC. Through it, we are gradually acquiring copies of recordings which the Corporation has been holding for purely broadcasting purposes over nearly half a century. In this case and with other established collections of media material, the institution's own catalogues and indexes enable the Department to select appropriate

material on the basis of its historical, cultural or social value and according to its particular qualities as a sound document. In the case of current broadcasting output the same criteria can be applied to production data which is often available in advance of broadcasting.

As a result of these arrangements, recordings have been acquired by the Department that are of both British and foreign provenance. They include war reports, commentaries, actualities, interviews and narrations which relate to most theatres of war in which Britain or the Commonwealth have been engaged. There are also contemporary recordings of speeches and broadcasts by Nazi leaders such as Hitler, Goebbels, Goering, Hess, Himmler and Ribbentrop. From American sources there are recordings, for example, of Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, MacArthur and Nimitz. Most of the important British political, military, other national figures from the 1930s and onwards are also represented in the collection of whom Lloyd George, Chamberlain, Churchill, Attlee, Alexander, Montgomery and Mountbatten are examples.

A significant element of the Department's holdings of broadcast recordings has resulted from the Museum's collaborative involvement in the production of historical television or radio programmes or radio programmes or series. Through being able to contribute material from its own collections to media productions it has been possible to negotiate large deposits of material that broadcasting organisations generate in the course of their creative work. This part of the sound archive collection includes, for example, all the interviews recorded by the BBC for its televised series 'The Great War' and 'Women at War' and by Thames Television for the series 'The Life and Times of Lord Mountbatten' and 'The World at War'.

The organisation of its holdings so as to provide convenient access for users presented quite a few novel problems during the first few years of the Department's life. The difficulty was that there were no established systems for cataloguing and indexing sound records that were sufficiently well suited to our particular needs to warrant emulation. Although features of existing retrieval systems and codes of practice were copied, the methods employed by the department are the result of a considerable design effort on the Museum's own part. The finding aids now available to the public consist of computer based, single catalogue entries for each archive item reproduced in microfiche format for in-house use. Although the system has an indexing capacity this remains to be exploited owing to financial restraints and a conventional subject card index therefore remains in use. This system (APPARAT or Archive Preservation Programme and Retrieval by Automated Techniques) is, as far as we are aware, the only computer based cataloguing system that has been developed specifically for oral history recordings and it will be the subject of a further article in a later issue of this journal. The Department also produces printed catalogues and other listings of discrete subject groups of the collection for external distribution.

It is our practice to hold three copies of every recording. There is, of course, an archive master of every item. The two duplicates are working and reference copies. The masters are recorded at 7½ i.p.s. and held on 7 inch reels of standard play tape; the working copies are on 5 inch reels of standard play tape recorded at 3¾ i.p.s.; and the public reference collection consists of C60 cassettes recorded on both tracks. Each of these three copies is, therefore, a standard thirty minute unit and the same reference numbers identify identical recordings on archive master, working copy and reference cassette formats. The cassette format has proved to be very convenient for public use. It is cheap, provides reasonably good security and minimises the supervision of visitors by archive staff. All the cassettes are detagged so that they cannot be accidentally erased and so far neither physical damage nor magnetic degradation has been significant.

In organising the public services there were two major questions which had to be considered and answered. The first was whether the archive could afford to meet exactly the requests of every individual user. For example, a teacher may want a copy tape that would involve staff in selecting and copying short extracts from a great many reels, to produce a recording specially designed to meet one particular need. The problem with such unique requests is that, even if the user can afford to pay the realistic cost of providing this kind of copy tape, the archive itself may not be able to afford the time necessary to prepare it.

Initially the decision was taken that the Department would not provide this kind of service but would supply only copies of complete reels. This arrangement made our copying service extremely economic to run. Technical staff did not generally have to spend time listening and selecting material and production was almost an entirely mechanical process in which complete reels are copied on high speed transfer equipment. However, while this seemed to meet the needs of a majority of our users there was a significant minority who could not use archive recording in an unedited form and who did not have the inclination or ability to do their own cutting. To satisfy them a copying and editing service is now provided with charges calculated to reflect the actual staff time involved for each particular job.

The second major policy decision was whether the archive could provide a lending service and, at the Imperial War Museum, we decided that it was not possible to hold a separate collection for lending purposes. The main factor which influenced this decision was the staff time necessary to select tapes, pack and post them, fix loan periods, recall material which became overdue, check recordings that were returned, levy charges on any that were damaged and so on. In the context of this archive at least, lending services are not compatible with the staff resources available and the varied and numerous other tasks which are undertaken. By comparison, a sales service is unquestionably cheaper and easier to provide.

Despite this decision there is little doubt that a lending service would greatly increase the use of the collection among potential users who are unwilling to purchase or simply cannot afford to (economic constraints I am sure greatly restrict educational use with schools increasingly having insufficient money to buy all the books they need let alone to purchase sound recordings). The fact remains though that lending services are extremely expensive to administer and they are probably most efficiently and economically organised on a national or a regional basis. Such services also probably need to include prior programming of archive recordings since the raw material which many sound collections are made up of is difficult to use in its original form for many of the most obvious and useful purposes.

The Imperial War Museum's sound archive was opened to public access on the 1st July 1977. During the first complete year of public service the Department dealt with 324 enquiries, received 168 personal visits, sold 330 printed catalogues and 420 copy tapes. The 168 visits were made by 132 people whose use of the archive falls into five main categories: 40 visitors came for 'personal interest' in various historical subjects; 35 were teachers from schools, colleges and universities who sought audio aids for teaching purposes; 36 researchers drew on the collection as source material for articles and books; 16 visitors were representatives of publishing, radio, television and film companies; and 5 users selected material for reproduction in exhibitions.

These figures, which have varied little subsequently, represent quite a satisfying achievement but they were attained only after a good deal of publicity that was organised during the first half of 1977. We assumed, however, that — once launched — our services would expand of their own volition as the collection became more widely known. It, therefore, has been rather disappointing to find there has been little growth in use since these figures were collected. The moral seems to be that, even after one hundred years of recorded sound, the use of sound archives is still something of a novelty and a lot of effort is needed on the part of sound archivists to publicise their collections and to encourage and actively stimulate their wider use. There are various ways in which this may be attempted.

The use of this sound archive has naturally been significantly influenced by the fact that it is part of a museum. About a million people come to the Imperial War Museum each year and the vast majority of these visitors are attracted by the objects which are on display. It was, therefore, a natural step for us to use recordings in exhibitions. By this application it was possible to make a contribution to the most popular aspect of the Museum's work. It also enables the Department to advertise to a great many visitors the fact that there is a sound archive in the Museum and this has resulted in a flow of users who discovered the audio collection on visits which had been made for quite different reasons.

In addition to the exhibition application, archive recordings are also used in the Museum's educational services. These services are quite

substantial. About 100,000 schoolchildren visit the Museum each year in organised school parties and a staff of professional teachers give talks to these groups. Recorded reminiscences are extremely useful in this context. Such recordings from the oral history collection are of particular value in illustrating the effect of war on the lives of ordinary people to school pupils who can more readily identify and associate with experiences of the kind that their own parents or grandparents might have shared, than with recordings of great political and military leaders of the past.

For wider educational application, however, there are problems for an archive in providing specially prepared and edited tapes, on a large scale, which are directly related to schools' teaching programmes. To meet this kind of need the Museum is collaborating with the educational publisher Longman to produce a series of audio teaching aids, initially dealing with various aspects of the history of the First World War. The first audio cassette in this series is due to be published later this year. This venture, in Britain at least, is of a somewhat experimental nature. If it proves to be a commercial success, however, the way may be opened to greater use of historical archive recordings in the classroom.

Perhaps the most obvious and in some respects most attractive way of publicising sound archive collections is by having material from them broadcast. This kind of use certainly advertises archive recordings to a very large audience. In our experience, however, it is not without attendant problems. To attract a radio producer to use material the archive itself may have to be prepared to invest a great deal of time and effort in preparing a successful programme proposal and there really is no way of measuring whether the benefits the archive will receive justify the amount of work involved. There are other factors, such as limitations of programme time and the producer's first duty to entertain, which can sometimes make an alliance between broadcasters and sound archivests problematical.

In the scale of such developments, two and a half years is too short a time in which to weigh the potential demand or the range of use which an historical sound archive may eventually find for its holdings. As the practice develops among many groups in modern industrial societies to move away from solely written sources so, I believe, the use of audio-visual archives of all kinds will grow.