

The Magical Post-Horn: A Trip to the BBC Archive Centre in Perivale

Sounding Out! Authors

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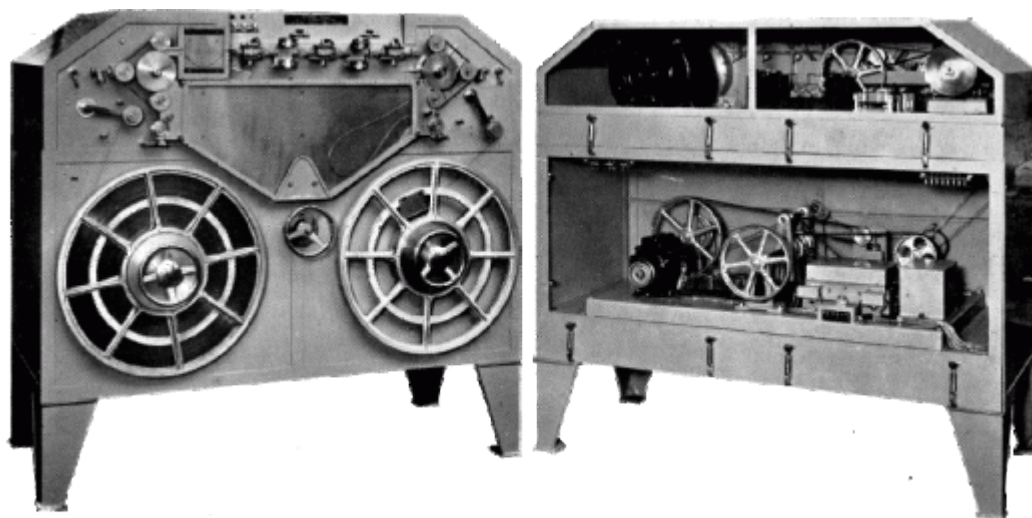
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Abstract

At the BBC Archive Centre in Perivale, London, the proverbial “weight of the past” becomes literal for researchers of sound history. Housed in a massive, unattractive hangar-like building in an industrial park to the northwest of London, the archives suit their environment, one which speaks of practical and solid shapes far more than the lyrical, dainty ivory tower. And by weight, I mean by serious, and sometimes dangerous, poundage:

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Article, Authenticities, Curation, Digital Humanities, Digital Media



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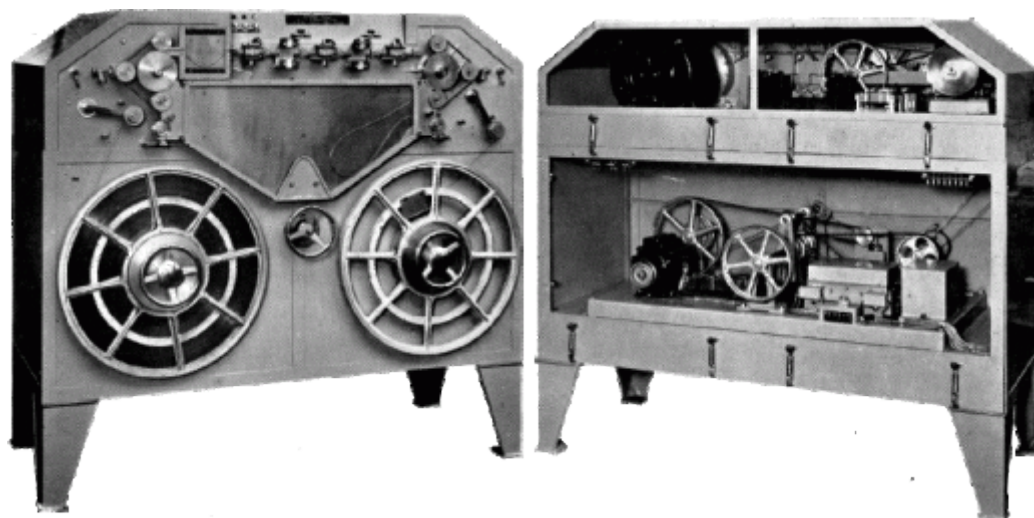
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Suddenly we heard a Tereng! tereng! teng! teng! We looked round, and now found the reason why the postilion had not been able to sound his horn: his tunes were frozen up in the horn, and came out now by thawing, plain enough, and much to the credit of the driver. —The Adventures of Baron Munchausen, 1865

At the [BBC Archive Centre in Perivale, London](#), the proverbial “weight of the past” becomes literal for researchers of sound history. Housed in a massive, unattractive hangar-like building in an industrial park to the northwest of London, the archives suit their environment, one which speaks of practical and solid shapes far more than the lyrical, dainty ivory tower. And by weight, I mean by serious, and sometimes dangerous, poundage: the very first machine created to record off of radio, invented around 1930, was a steel pedestal with bus wheel-sized reels on either side. Audio Coordinator of the BBC Archives, John Dell, explained that not only was this machine laborious to load, but it used magnetic steel tape as its recording surface, which could come free from the reels and lacerate incautious operators as it unspooled and bunched.

The weight of these objects, however, is also metaphoric. The earliest recording in my personal audio drama library, sourced off the invaluable [Archive.org](#), is a 1933 episode of *Front Page Drama*, a dramatized version of an *American Weekly* Hearst publication. The past stands monumentally huge if this type of machine, the Marconi-Stille Wire Recorder, was the apparatus that allowed those 15 minutes of 1933 to be captured and, eventually, fed into my 2015 headphones as an MP3.



I listen to much of my audio drama, whether old and crackling like *Front Page Drama*, or new and podcast-y, while commuting, usually on the London Underground. The episode of *Front Page Drama* in question I heard during a marathon session when I knew very little could or would interrupt me: on an twelve-hour transatlantic plane ride. I quite like the audio-visual play between listening to audio drama that is new to me versus the familiar but never identical sights of the commute; as [Primus Luta remarked in 2012](#), it's rare for us to engage our full attention on the aural medium.

While listening to *Front Page Drama* and episodes of *Lum and Abner* on that flight, I had to wonder how I was prioritizing my listening time. Who had recorded these episodes from the 1930s? Who had later taken the trouble to digitize them and upload them to [Archive.org](#)? Why, for

example, were these particular recordings freely available yet I couldn't find an MP3 anywhere of texts I wanted to share more widely, such as Don Haworth's *On a Summer's Day in a Garden* (1975) or Angela Carter's *Come Unto These Yellow Sands* (1978)? Both of these recordings are in the BBC back catalogue; I know, because the BBC supplied them to me—but only the basis of a visit to the archive.

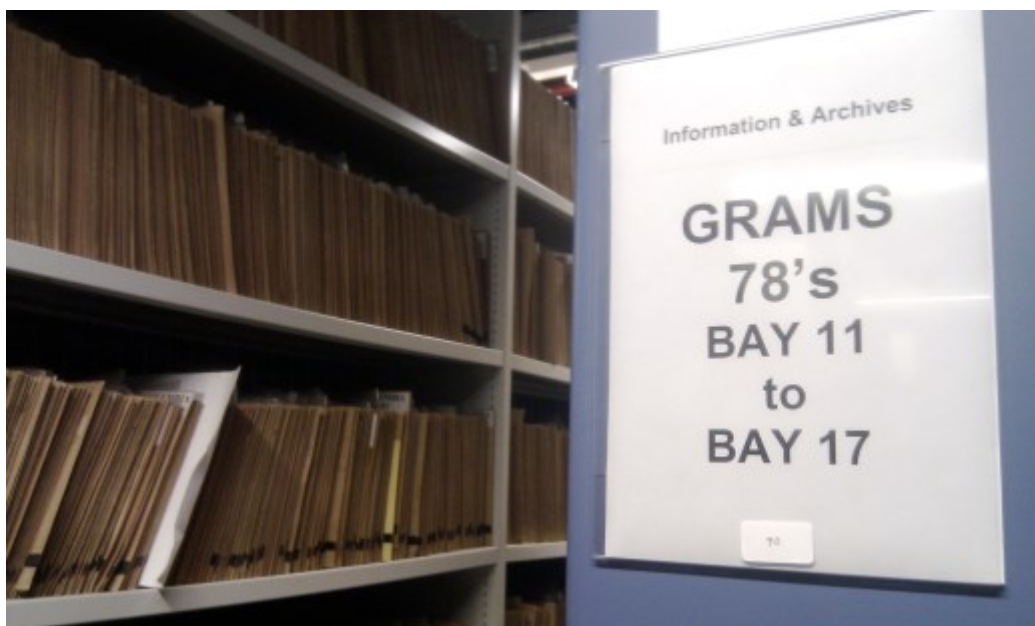
Archive.org is bountiful and accessible, the Perivale archives much more exclusive, but both seem to lack curation. The only hope for accessing things like Haworth or Carter outside the British Library's Sound and Moving Image Archives is that someday a rogue MP3 or BitTorrent will show up online. The archive does seem, in [Neil Verma's](#) words, then, "transformed before dispersing in space, plucked from the air and mineralized like fossils" (*Theater of the Mind*, 227); like [Primus Luta's](#) [weighty but playful experiment, *Schrödinger's Cassette*](#), which suspended music in concrete to be risked, or remain aurally untouched forever. This seems too often to be the impossible choice.



BBC Perivale Field Trip, Image by Flickr User Hatters! (CC BY-NC 2.0)

The BBC archive storage is eclectic and generally arranged for access by BBC staff rather than for researchers. The [BBC Written Archives at Caversham](#) are restricted to academics, and likewise, the speed of gaining access to sound files from Perivale is predicated on the amount of time BBC staff have to devote to it—naturally, the BBC's own departments have priority, such as BBC Radio 4 Extra, the archival digital radio station, whose backlog of requests for digitised material from the Perivale archive apparently covers 20 pages. The sound collections consist of commercial recordings on shellac (90 RPM records) and vinyl (78 RPMs) as well as impressively dinner-plate sized compilation transcriptions which require a special turn-table on which to play and digitize them. The BBC Sheet Music archive is in Perivale, as well, with original handwritten scores filling shelves.

The second half of the [British and Irish Sound Archives conference 2015](#) afforded a privileged glimpse of the archive storage and technical facilities housed on site. Most of my fellow attendees were archivists of one sort or another, asking detailed questions about transcription devices, fidelity, and storage. Having recently completed my PhD from Swansea University in English in radio drama, I had made countless requests to this very facility through the British Library's Sound and Moving Image request service; now I, at long last, hoped to see where my digitised sound files were coming from. However, we weren't shown any recordings made on tape cassette or CD but instead Betamax audio-only. Unseen, too, were the data banks holding all the digitised content, but what myself and my fellow archivists had mainly come to see were the tangible objects making this content possible.



78s at BBC Perivale, Image by Flickr User Hatters! [CC BY-NC 2.0](#)

In the physical copies of the *Radio Times* of the 1940s and '50s, also housed at the [British Library at St Pancras](#) (and now available, like all of the *Radio Times* up to 2009, on [BBC Genome](#)), there can be found a little asterisk in the listings for drama, which signifies that the drama was broadcast from a recording, rather than live. The later recording machines of the '30s through '50s, upon which these recordings would have been made, did not decrease appreciably in size, though perhaps in weight. "If I were to drop this," Dell told us as he carefully handled a dark blue celluloid tube, about the size and circumference of a toilet paper roll, "it would bounce. I'm not going to drop it," he added. Then the magic began: via a custom-made device, we heard a few bars of a music hall song from circa 1900. The recording was surprisingly clear. It was agonizing when Dell turned it off after only a few seconds.

There is something incredibly seductive about old recordings. In "The Recording that Never Wanted to Be Heard and Other Stories of Sonification," from [The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies](#), Jonathan Sterne and Mitchell Akiyama question the desire for "sonification" of ever-older recordings, especially when such desires manifest in the creation of a digital sound file in 2008 for

“the world’s oldest recording,” a phonoautogram from 1860, which was nevertheless never intended to be played back—the phonoautograph was intended as a device to make the aural visual (555). Radio drama writer Mike Walker really summed up the seduction of old recordings for me in his 2013 BBC Radio 4 ghost story *The Edison Cylinders*, with a character who is seduced as a scholar and as a participant in a time-traveling mystery by old recordings: a sound engineer in need of money, she agrees to digitize what seem like boring diary entries from a British imperialist, only to be intrigued by his Victorian domain beyond her rather empty modern existence. Unfortunately for her, these particular recordings are reaching beyond the grave to try to kill her.



Edison Cylinder Exposed, by Flickr User [four boros](#), [CC BY-NC 2.0](#)

Although they do reach out from the grave, most early sound recordings aren’t out to kill you. They do however, present common and vexing issues of authenticity. By this, I mean specifically the provenance of the recording—is the recording of who or what it says it is? On the first day of the conference, Dell regaled us with tales of two cylinder recordings surfacing in the mid-twentieth century, of William Gladstone giving a speech. The words of the speech were identical, but the voices were completely different. Who was the real Gladstone? How could you authenticate the voice of a dead person? Dell further deepened the mystery by telling us the tale of two boxes of wax cylinder recordings in the Perivale archive, whose provenance is torturously (and tantalizingly) unclear. We glimpsed these mysterious, yellow-cream-colored cylinders, somewhat wider and fatter than the celluloid tubes, in situ, but were they original Edison cylinders from the 1880s? The piercing desire to believe these cylinders might contain the voices

of Gladstone, the future Edward VIII, or even Henry Irving, are potentially “perils of over-optimism,” as Dell puts it.

All the archivists at this event referred to the serendipity of discovering surprises on recordings. Simon Elmes, whose official title reads “Radio Documentarist, Creative Consultant, and Former Creative Director, BBC Radio Documentaries,” made this manifest as he discussed a subject treated in his documentary from 2005, *Ambridge in the Decade of Love. The Archers*—an exceptionally long-running BBC radio soap which conjures up visions of rural Englishness and persists among a very dedicated, though mostly older, fan base—like much radio drama and emblematic of gendered attitude toward radio soaps, was not recorded in its first few decades.



Empty Shelves at BBC Perivale, Image by Flickr User Bill Thompson, Image cropped by SO!, (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Likewise, anyone researching radio drama before the 1930s is playing a game of roulette; whether any scripts survive will depend entirely on the literary reputation of the author who may have had enough clout to publish them in book form. Even in the case of *Lance Sieveking*, the acknowledged creative aesthete behind early BBC radio drama, we lack concrete evidence of his most important work, *The End of Savoy Hill* (1932). And *The Truth About Father Christmas* (1923), the first original drama written specifically for British radio? Forget about it—it was made for children’s radio.

To return to *The Archers*, though daily 15-minute scripts were being churned out by *Ted Kavanagh* from the first years of the 1950s, the broadcasts themselves went missing into the ether (after all, no one suspected the show would still be going after sixty years). Transcription discs, meant for an overseas market, were found in a box in the BBC Archives, giving a reasonably complete overview of *The Archers* during the 1950s and ‘60s. Elmes was ebullient about this discovery.

While I got the general sense that the other archivists at the conference were amused but indifferent toward this particular trove, to me it was inspiring. I believe the future of audio drama will rely more and more on serials, so the rediscovery of these *Archers* episodes epitomizes to me the past, present, and future of audio drama in that it speaks of audience involvement and even audience interaction or co-production, which seems key for audio drama going forward, and the aspect of serialization which has vastly overtaken the single drama on television if not on radio.



Harry Oakes as Dan Archer and Gwen Berryman as Doris Archer, 1955.

Nevertheless, even if pursuit of these aural rainbows is a foolish one, such desire also enables scholarship. The hope of finding “originals” inspired me personally to discover the birth of what can conceivably be called audio drama. Having researched audio drama from the first known broadcast dramas in English (the adaptations: [2LO London's Five Birds in a Cage](#) in 1922, [WGY Schenectady's The Wolf](#) in 1922, [British Broadcasting Company's Twelfth Night](#) in 1923; original drama: WLW Cincinnati's *When Love Awakens* in 1923, [British Broadcasting Company's Danger in 1924](#)), I was astounded to learn that listeners from World War I might have enjoyed short, dramatized stories on the celluloid tubes (according to Tim Crook, the first audio drama of this nature is a war drama from 1917). While archives such as the [Cylinder Preservation and Digitization Project](#) of the University of California at Santa Barbara care for these recordings in the same way they do for musical and speech recordings, there is a significant lack of scholarship on them.

If commentary on specific pre-radio audio drama is scarce, it is heartening to read dissections of the performative aspects of “actuality,” such as [Brian Hanrahan's anatomy of Gas Shell Bombardment, 1918](#). Wonderfully, in discussing the “staging” of this war-time recording, Hanrahan brings in traditions from theatre and silent film in addition to the phonograph. [Professor David Hendy](#) has persuasively argued that some of the organizing tenets behind the British Broadcasting Corporation, whose management was by and large made up of ex-soldiers, was predicated on a desire for silence and calm, ordered, managed sound after the cacophony of war. Perhaps

“cylinder” drama, then, is not really of its time and properly belongs to earlier, or later, cultural milieux.



Wax cylinder playback at BBC Perivale, Image by Flickr User Hatter! [CC BY-NC 2.0](#)

The ephemera of the medium presents a recurring problem in radio drama studies, a weighty feeling of doom. With the future of the BBC’s existence currently perilous, one wonders what the consequences will be for archives like those housed at Perivale. If the internal function of the archives (for the BBC to make use during Radio 4 Extra broadcasts, for example) disappears, will the archives be opened to wider use? Or will material without commercial potential simply be discarded? Who would make the decision as to what was commercially viable and how would they make such decisions?

And the problem with the medium seemingly begins with wax cylinders. A beautiful, lyrical story from [Baron Munchausen](#)—alias Rudolph Erich Raspe, a German author who created a fictional travel writer and chronic teller of tall tales based on a real nobleman infamous for his boasting—cited by many of those fascinated with sound recordings is worth repeating here: the Baron is traveling in Russia in a snowy landscape and desires the postilion to blow his horn to alert other travellers that their sleigh will be coming around the bend. Unfortunately, the cold makes the horn incapable of any audible sound. Disappointed, they make their way to an inn. Diedre Loughridge and Thomas Patteson cite the “Frozen Horn” from their online [Museum of Imaginary Instruments](#): “After we arrived at the end inn, my postilion and I refreshed ourselves: he hung his horn on a peg near the kitchen fire; I sat on the other side.” Warmed by the fire, the horn *now* begins to play its reserved tunes.



*Illustration by Gustave Doré,
1865. Listen to ABC radio feature
on the “Frozen Post Horn” and
the Museum of Imaginary
Instruments [here](#)*

With a little leap of the imagination, it’s not difficult to see the parallels with the reality of sound recording limitation. The wax cylinders could only be played a few times before the sound degrades completely. Tin cylinders are not much better. This is the reason why the two Gladstone voices could be both “real” and “fake.” Celluloid is more durable, yet witness the reluctance of Dell to play one for longer than a few seconds, for preservation reasons.

Sound recordings are only as good as the medium on which they are recorded, a fact that surprisingly holds true even today. We were told by our BBC hosts that discs of shellac, vinyl, and acetate whose contents have already been digitised will not be discarded—digital recordings are ultimately taken from these physical originals.

In the future, we might invent means of reproduction and playback which could provide more fidelity to the original event lifted from the physical recording, in which case it will be the MP3s that will be redundant. There’s something both very modern and very old-fashioned about this. Once at a dinner party, I launched full-force into my postdoctoral rant about the eventual possible degradation of the MP3 as a recording format, that it was not infallible as we had been led to believe. I was surprised that I was wholly believed; furthermore, the older people participating in the conversation rued the disappearance of their CDs, tape cassettes and, vitally, their LPs, for the oft-cited reasons (which [Primus Luta distills](#) as the pricelessness of old recordings to one’s personal history, and the “fuller” sound and weighty materiality, one resonating with one’s emotional past).



Vinyl at BBC Perivale, including a lot of John Peel's old records. Image by Flickr User Hatter! ([CC BY-NC 2.0](#))

I admit, before I came to the UK and experienced the never-perfect but always interesting presence of BBC Radio, I treated radio as a background medium. I suppose recorded sound had always interested me, and I had had a strong relationship with local, classical music radio ([Classical KHFM Albuquerque](#)). However, I could not have predicted ten years ago that I would become a passionate proponent of audio drama and sound studies more generally. I'm almost embarrassed now at my excessive love of audio drama; I make almost no distinctions between "high" art like Samuel Beckett and Tom Stoppard and fan fiction radio serials like [Snape's Diaries as produced by Misfits Audio](#): I listen to almost anything.

And, truly, the future of audio drama is only assured if people *keep* listening. The digitisation and availability of cylinder recordings makes study of them more accessible, so the way is paved for further studies of the earliest audio drama. It is imperative that researchers continue to request sound recordings from the BBC, even if they have to use the relatively inconvenient system currently available.

There are signs that things are improving and that more people than ever before want to access such materials. As [Josh Shepperd puts it brilliantly](#), "Sound trails continue where paper trails end." As Director of the [Radio Preservation Task Force at the Library of Congress](#), his efforts have underlined the fact that often it is the local and the rural whose radio or audio history vanishes more quickly than the national or the metropolitan. This would historically be the case with the BBC as well, which for a long time privileged London sound above regionalism (and, some would argue, still does). Since 2015, the British Library (and the Heritage Lottery Fund) have invested significantly in the [Save Our Sounds](#) campaign, positing that within 15 years, worldwide sound recordings must be digitized before recordings degrade or we no longer have the means to play the material.

Out of curiosity, I downloaded the more than 600-page listing, the [Directory of UK Sound Collections](#), assembled rather hastily through the [Save Our Sounds project](#) in 20 weeks, and comprising more than 3,000 collections and more than 1.9 million objects. This document makes for fascinating and eclectic reading, ranging as it does between a [Sound Map of the English town of Harrogate](#) to the archives of the [Dog Rose Trust](#), which mainly provides recorded tours of English cathedrals for those who are blind. Undoubtedly, there are wedges of local or forgotten drama in these archives, too. The linking up of these archives and making them more widely accessible suggests how important sustained, collective effort is to unfreezing radio's archival post-horn, delivering more of its unique tunes.

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Featured Image: “The Route to Open Data” at BBC Perivale, Image by Flickr User Hatter! ([CC BY-NC 2.0](#))

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Leslie McMurtry has a PhD in English (radio drama) and an MA in Creative and Media Writing from Swansea University. Her work on audio drama has been published in The Journal of Popular Culture, The Journal of American Studies in Turkey, and Rádio-Leituras. Her radio drama [The Mesmerist](#) was produced by Camino Real Productions in 2010, and she writes about audio drama at [It's Great to Be a Radio Maniac](#).

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