

BBC WRITTEN ARCHIVES CENTRE

RESEARCH GUIDE

B|B|C Archives

Securing the past for the future

This guide gives a breakdown of the different ways to access the material held in the BBC's Written Archives.

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If you are looking for information about a person:

➤ Contributor Files

These record dealings with **non-staff contributors to BBC programmes such as artists, speakers and performers**. (Staff members may have Contributor Files relating to work outside their BBC duties). The purpose of these files was to store the contracts for BBC engagements and this is mainly what the files contain. However, any correspondence with contributors was also filed here and the earlier files (mainly pre 1960s) contain letters, memos and other written material in addition to contracts.

- Contributor Files are divided into **Radio Contributors (RCONT)** and **Television Artists (TVART)**. People who took part in programmes were booked by separate units according to the capacity in which they were used. This led to separate collections of RCONT files covering: Artists, Talks (Speakers), Scriptwriters, Composers and occasionally others. The TVART files are not subdivided by function in this way (and often contain less correspondence than RCONT files).
- If a contributor did not produce enough material to warrant an individual file, their contracts and correspondence are stored as **Miscellaneous Contributors**: small amounts of papers pinned and filed alphabetically together in a continuous run.
- Individual Contributor Files have full lists in the Reading Room. The absence of a name from the main lists may not mean there are no papers at all, since there may be a small number of papers among the miscellaneous files.

Contributor Files are currently available to view up to and including 1985.

- **Left Staff Files**: are held for permanent BBC staff members. These contain appraisal forms, memos and correspondence detailing the administrative details of their BBC career. Files have only been retained for a very small percentage of staff members, usually those in senior positions. **Left Staff Files are only available for research 30 years after the death of the individual, or a hundred years after their birth (whichever is shorter), unless the subject is known to be alive, in which case they remain closed.**
- **BBC Staff Lists**: provide a list of staff members and their job titles for any given year (up to 1992). These are freely available to browse in the Reading Room. Note: they are not comprehensive and are described as containing details for staff 'whose duties involve them in frequent contacts outside their own units'.
- **Departmental Files (main Series R13 and T31, pre-1969)**: contain administrative and personnel information around the management, structure and staffing of individual departments. If the department in which a staff member worked is known, the relevant departmental files may contain further details on the administrative structure in which an individual worked.

If you are looking for information about a BBC Programme:

➤ Programme Files/Production Files

BBC Departments would often collate all documentation around the making of a programme into a **Programme File**, which was then filed as part of the BBC's internal registry system. These files span a wide range of originating departments and their content can differ greatly. Many contain routine material such as production documentation, booking forms, budgets and shot-lists. Further correspondence and memos are sometimes included, particularly if the programme created a lot of interest inside or outside the BBC.

- **Note: Only a relatively small proportion of programmes have Programme Files** that were retained for archival purposes, and many files do not contain correspondence. For later files (c1970s onwards) only the barest production details were recorded and often the files were not retained as these details were listed elsewhere.

➤ Programmes-as-Broadcast

The key record for tracking down details relating to BBC programmes is the **Programme-as-Broadcast** document (commonly referred to as a PasB). These consist of accurate daily logs of every broadcast on every BBC service, radio and television, domestic and overseas, and are primarily the basis on which payments are made (they are still in use today). The PasB was produced after the broadcast (thus incorporating last minute changes) and lists who took part, what music was played and gives precise timings. The main sequences for the London based services (eg Home Service, Light Programme, General Overseas Service) are virtually complete from 1922 onwards, but there are gaps in the Regions.

- Radio PasBs are held on paper before 1954 and on microfilm to 2001. Television PasBs are held on microfilm from 1936 to 2000.
- **PasBs are arranged by service and in date order in various sequences**, so it is not possible to locate programmes without knowing these details. Some sequences are available to browse freely while others need to be requested.
- All paper and microfilm PasBs are available for researchers to browse without prior vetting by staff. Post-2000/2001 PasBs are held electronically and are not available for browsing.

➤ Programme Scripts

Programme transcripts were collected to form a **BBC Script Library** and are kept in a range of sequences according to the type of programme and the production department (Eg. Talks, Drama, Outside Broadcasts).

- The script collections are wide-ranging, are held on microfilm and microfiche and cover scripts up to roughly 2006. Some sequences are available to browse freely while others need to be requested. Microform scripts are available to browse without prior vetting by staff. Post-2006 scripts are held electronically and are not available for browsing.
- Due to the nature of the collection you will need to have the broadcast date and title of the programme (often the service, type of programme and/or speaker's name will be needed) in order to locate a script.
- There is a person and subject card index to national radio non-drama scripts up c1970, which also includes some overseas broadcasts. (The card index is not freely available to browse so specific subject/person cards must be requested – these cards are then used to locate the script on microfilm).
- News bulletins transcripts for radio are held from 1939 to 1993 on microfilm. Television news bulletins are held from 1954 to 1997. There are smaller collections of regional and overseas services bulletins, including a small number of foreign language bulletins.

➤ Audience Research Reports

Systematic research into **Audience Reaction** to programmes was undertaken from 1936 after the formation of the Listener (later Audience) Research Department.

- From 1950 **Audience Research Reports** were created for specific programmes, which include reactions from test panels and statistical evaluations expressed as **Reaction Indices**. These are available to view from 1950 to 1991 (and 1995). From 1980 the collection becomes less complete and far fewer individual reports are available.
- Daily logs of **Viewing/Listening Figures** are available from 1939 to 2001.
- There also **Special Reports** on significant programmes, subjects and general topics relating to audience habits (which also cover dates the dates before the individual reports were compiled). Lists of these are available in the reading room.

➤ Programme Review Boards

These consist of minutes of weekly meetings where individual programmes of note were discussed by high-level staff. They are available on microfilm from 1955 to 1996 (radio) and 1963 to 1996 (television).

➤ **Press Cuttings**

There are two collections of press cuttings containing critical responses to BBC programmes and policy in the press.

- **BBC Press Cuttings from before 1960.** This collection consists of hard copy press cuttings relating to BBC related issues and programmes. It is indexed by person and subject, but indexes need to be requested.
- **General Press Cuttings from c1960 to 1990s.** This is a microfiche collection not specifically related to BBC. Cuttings are filed by Place, Subject, People and Countries. There is an extensive 'Broadcasting' section under Subjects that contains the same type of information as the pre-1960 cuttings. (E.g. Cuttings for individual programmes are under 'Broadcasting, Programmes, Named'). These cuttings are not freely available to browse, so specific fiches must be requested.

➤ **Publications**

Programmes may be featured in the BBC's published output. There are collections of **BBC published material**, including magazines and programme tie-in material. These holdings include Schools Broadcasting pamphlets, Promenade Concert programmes, Symphony Concert programmes and other BBC publicity material, including posters and small leaflets. Lists of serial publications are available to view but for individual publications detailed listings must be checked by staff members.

If you are looking for information about an aspect of BBC Policy:

➤ Policy Files

There is a large selection of files created by departments responsible for general BBC Policy. These cover topics such as the BBC's operational arrangements with the government and other broadcasting organisations, the Television Licence, programme content, political balance, editorial issues, complaints and viewer feedback.

- The main series is **R34: Policy (up to c1966)**. There are also separate series of policy files unique to radio and television (**T16: Television Policy**, **R92: Radio Management Registry** and **T62: Television Management Registry**).
- Correspondence around high-level policy decisions relating to the Director-General, Board of Governors and Board of Management can be found in **Management Registry Files (R78 and R101)**. Series **R62** consists of paperwork from the Director-General's Office.
- **Departmental Files (main Series R13 and T31, pre-1969)** contain administrative and personnel information around the management, structure and staffing of individual departments.

➤ Minutes and Papers

Files containing the minutes and papers prepared from the meetings of the **Board of Governors** and the **Board of Management** are available (**Series R1 and R2** respectively). There are also runs of minutes and papers for a wide range of other BBC Boards and Advisory Committees, internal and external (Main series are **R3: Internal Administrative Committees**, **R4: Government Committees** and **R6: Advisory Committees**).

Note: Most post 1980 policy and management files need to be retrieved from storage and need careful review before they are released – please allow extra time if you wish to see files of this nature.

If you are looking for technical information about broadcasting:

There are several series of files from the **Engineering Department** covering transmitters, lines, relays and the broadcasting process, including the BBC departmental papers for **Engineering Research and Development**. The main series are **R53 (Technical: General)** and **R57 (Technical: Recording)**.

- Series **R95** consists of a collection patents for **BBC Equipment**
- There are collections of **Engineering Technical Reports** (part of series **R65**: a list reports is available in the Reading Room) and **Engineering Research Reports** (these are not a complete set and spread across several groups of files)

If you are looking for BBC coverage of a News Event or Subject:

➤ News Bulletin transcripts for Radio and Television

These provide a record of how the BBC reported on world events. News bulletins transcripts for radio are held from 1939 to 1993 on microfilm. Television news bulletins are held from 1954 to 1997. There are subject indexes for news broadcasts available on microfilm alongside the scripts themselves (Indexes are available up to 1992).

- Meeting minutes are available for the **News and Current Affairs Group** (spanning roughly 1958 to 1996), which discuss how news events were handled by the BBC in their broadcast output.
- **Radio Talks scripts** often include noted individuals commenting on current affairs and subjects of the time. A comprehensive person and subject index is available for Radio Talks to c1970. (The Card Index is not freely available to browse so specific subject/person cards must be requested – these cards are then used to locate the script on microfilm). Many of these talks are reproduced in The Listener magazine, copies of which are also available to view. The magazine is also available digitally through many academic institutions.
- Major national and international events generated **Management/Policy files** covering specifically how the BBC presented them to its viewers and listeners – they are also frequently discussed in **Board of Management and Board of Government Minutes**.
- **Summaries of World Broadcasts (SWBs)**
Published by BBC Monitoring, SWBs are summarised reports of the domestic and overseas output of broadcasters around the world. They contain details of how foreign broadcasting organisations cover domestic and international news from their own perspectives.

If you are looking for BBC broadcasts to, from or about a country or territory outside the UK:

➤ External Services files

These files include a large run of files divided by country (**Series E1**). They cover the BBC's dealings with broadcasting services operating in these countries, as well as the BBC's own overseas broadcasts to these places.

- The series on policy for **general foreign broadcasts (E2)** also contains much material on overseas services to specific countries. In 1965 the BBC's overseas services became known as the World Service. After this date more material for individual services can be found in series **E40: World Service Registry**. There are also several file series for specific services (mainly post 1965) E.g. **E42: Russian Service, E48: Japanese Section**.
- **BBC Monitoring's Summaries of World Broadcasts (SWBs)** contain details on reporting of domestic and international events by other broadcasting organisations around the world.
- **Staff Files, Departmental Files and Contributor Files** can provide details on people and/or parts of the BBC involved in broadcasting to specific countries. Many departmental files in series **R13** cover the administrative and staffing details for individual language services up to c1960s.
- **External Script Collections**. Unlike the internal Script Library, the collection of overseas transcripts is sporadic with many gaps, depending largely on what individual services donated to the archive. Most overseas scripts are stored in hard copy and need to be requested to be viewed. Indexes exist for some services but others have very little guidance on their holdings. However, some Overseas Talks are included in the general collection of Radio Talks scripts so it is worth checking this index for overseas talks broadcasts.

If you want to view BBC Magazines, Books and other Publications:

- There are multiple collections of **BBC published material**, including BBC magazines and programme tie-in material.
 - **The Radio Times:** a complete run is available in hardcopy or microfilm. For earlier issues we will refer you to microfilm as hardcopies are fragile. The Listings sections to 2009 are available online as the [Genome Project](#), so copies of the magazines themselves should only be requested for the articles or other sections.
 - **The Listener:** a complete run is available in hardcopy. All issues have been digitised and are available to academic institutions via [The Listener Historical Archive](#)
 - Complete runs of many other BBC Magazines are available in hard copy including **London Calling, Ariel and Prospero**.
 - **BBC Handbooks, Staff Lists, Annual Reports and Accounts are freely available to browse in the reading room.** Handbooks to 2001 are also available online at the [British Online Archive](#) (subscription website).
 - There are separate collections of BBC individual publications (including books), Schools Broadcasting pamphlets, Promenade Concert programmes, Symphony Concert programmes and BBC publicity material, including posters and small leaflets. **Lists of serial publications are available to view but for individual publications detailed listings must be checked by staff members.**
 - The Reading Room also contains a catalogued collection of non-BBC published books that cover subject matter relating to the history of the BBC and the contents of the archive.

Personal papers donated by individuals (not collected by BBC):

- Our series of **Special Collections** contain material that has not been accessioned to the archive through the BBC. They are discrete collections of the personal papers of individuals (usually former staff members) that are relevant to the history of the BBC or the history of broadcasting. A list of donors is available to view.

Material not available at the Written Archives Centre:

- **Audio-Visual Material**

The BBC Archive site at Caversham does not hold any audio-visual material or offer facilities for viewing or listening to BBC programmes. The BBC does not provide access to archive material of this type, but other institutions offer viewing and listening facilities where BBC programmes can be accessed for research purposes. More information is available on the [Researching the BBC Archives web page](#).

The BBC does not supply copies of BBC programmes for research or otherwise, other than those made available commercially through retail outlets. If you contributed personally to a BBC programme copies may be available through the [BBC's Contributor Access web page](#).

- **Material out of scope for research**

Whilst we endeavour to make as much material as possible available for research, some internal records remain confidential or out of scope. Material less than seven years old, material that has not yet been deposited with BBC Archives, or material held by BBC Archives that is held for legal or business reasons is not in scope for general research. Materials held in electronic formats only are also out of scope. For archival material that is in scope, some records such as Contributor Files or Left Staff files have specific closure and/or release criteria, whilst confidential information could exist in virtually any file. As a result, to ensure that any material released for research complies with relevant legislation such as data protection and libel laws, and also with the BBC's Editorial Guidelines, all files are reviewed in detail prior to being made available for research, and material is sometimes withheld. In general, the more recent the material, especially from the mid 1990s onwards, the more likely it is to contain contents that remain confidential or out of scope. Each request will be dealt with on a case by case basis, but reviewing more recent material for release is often more complex and can take much longer than older material.