'Best efforts' audio digitisation at the Borthwick Institute for Archives

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In the beginning...

- 2012 - I started at the Borthwick as digital archivist
- 1st task - find out what digital archives we had
- Whilst finding digital CDs/DVDs/tapes in the strongroom, we also kept coming across AV formats
- What is happening to these? Is it my problem?

Accessions including audio at the Borthwick Institute 1998-2018
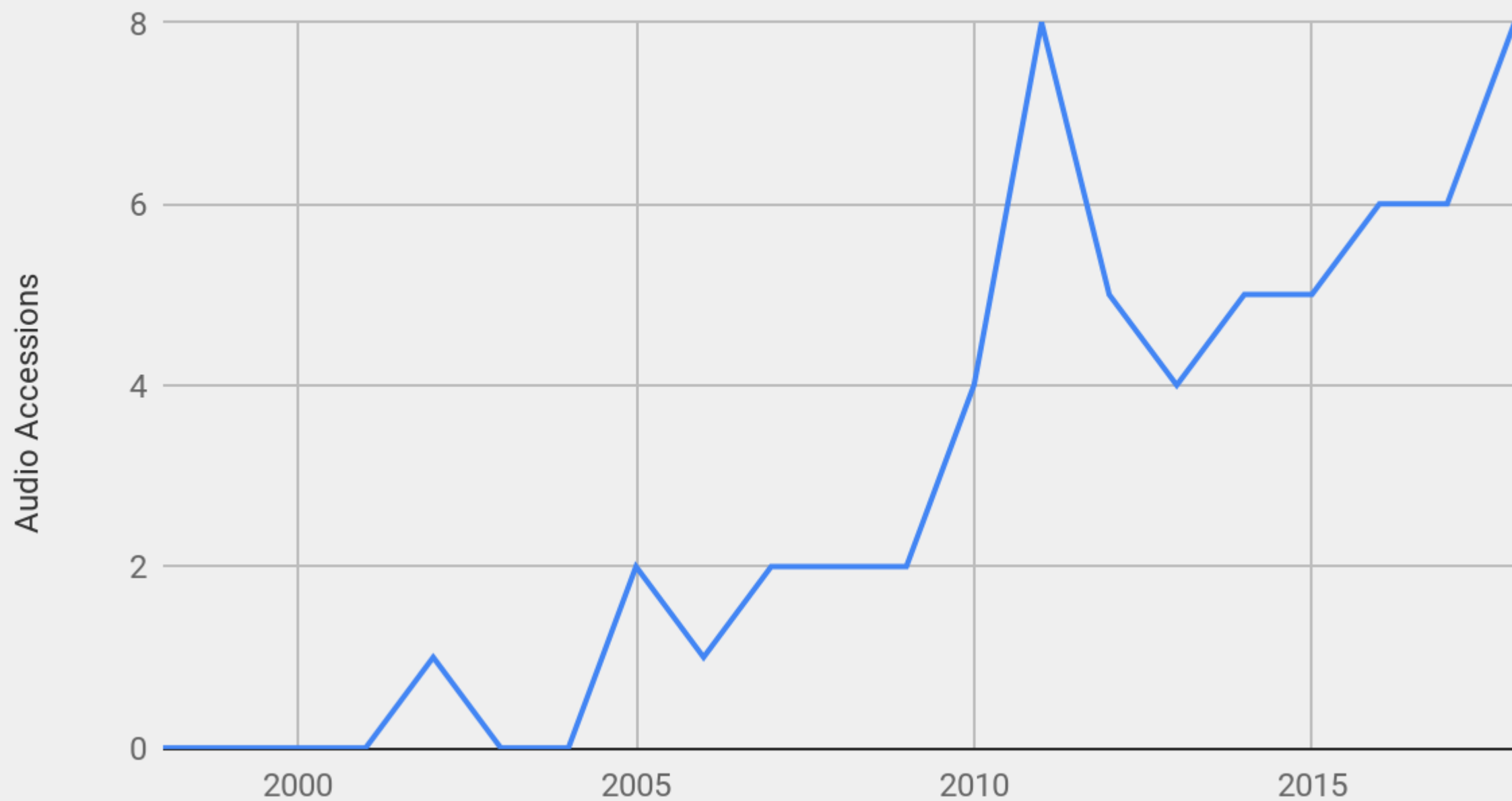
Understanding our AV archives

Administrative area

Edit administrative area

Acquisition type	Gift
Title	Addition to Music Preserved.
Date(s)	• 1960-1969. (Creation)
Scope and content	1960s recordings from Radio 3. The tapes were given to Music Preserved by _____. They were sent to _____ of the Department of Music in early March 2009 and were transferred to the Borthwick Institute on 16/08/2011.
Physical condition	Good condition. Conservation not needed
Received extent units	118 tapes.
Processing notes	Not catalogued Final Reference: Music Preserved: The Anne de Bruyne Collection

Archival descriptions area

Archival descriptions	Music Preserved Archive

Where was it?

- Bespoke strongroom for modern media
  - Physically separated from the Borthwick
  - Access not as locked down
- Other audio that came in ad hoc was in the main strongroom (mixed up with paper archives)

Who's job was it anyway?

- No audio archivist
- Conservation team not specialists in this area
- Digitisation team not specialists in this area
- Digital archivist knows about digital stuff only
- Music department don't know about archiving

Digitisation

- Some digitisation equipment in Audio Transfer Suite
  - But not for all carriers
- Some audio digitisation had been carried out
  - Ad hoc and on demand
  - Project based
  - Different people (some external)
  - Done to different standards
  - Workflows not always documented
  - Not consistently sent to digital archive

Aims

- Understand what we have and where it is
- Establish workflow for new AV material coming in
- Set up digitisation processes and procedures (audio)
- Establish route to the digital archive
- Build capacity and skills
- Look for further resource to take this forward

To gain some level of control and understanding

'Best efforts' approach

This was not a project.

Neither was it 'business as usual' (though we'd like to make it so).

It was carried out using what software and hardware we already had.

It was carried out with the staff we already had in whatever time they had available.

What we were not trying to do…

We were not addressing moving image archives.

We were not addressing the 2 huge audio archives.

We were not addressing online access.

We were not trying to solve all problems at once

Understanding the collections

What is the minimum information required to safeguard collections and begin the process?

- what have we got?
- what formats?
- which archives?
- how much?

The end result:

A big spreadsheet listing the 33,985 audio items that we held

Workspace protocols

- Posters in the audio transfer suite
- Conservation team input into handling guidelines
- Helps set expectations for those working in the digitisation space

Preservation Guidelines for Digitisation

Caring for archives is the responsibility of everyone who uses them. We appreciate you taking the time to keep this information in mind while you are working.

Before you begin:

- Please make sure you have clean and dry hands!
- Ensure that your equipment and surfaces are clean.
- Food and drink are not allowed in this room.

While you are working:

- Use both hands to move items.
- Avoid direct handling of film, tape and photographic materials.
- Note the packaging and order of the archives and return correctly.
- Check that your digitisation area is tidy, to avoid damage or confusion.

At the end of the day:

- Return all archives in the correct order to the appropriate packaging.
- Ensure all archives have been returned to the strongroom.
- Clean your digitisation area so that it is ready for the next person to use.
- Remove all plugs from sockets and switch off the lights.

Prioritisation

- In an ideal world we would be looking primarily at the threats to the analogue media and the value of the content
- In the real world we focused on what equipment we could confidently start using first

Pragmatic decision:
Start with audio cassette tapes
…and learn by doing

Defining digitisation procedures

- Assess and develop understanding of available equipment and techniques
- Review workflows available from other institutions
- Learn by trial and error
- Create user manuals

Digitisation Workflow: Compact Cassettes

Undertake the digitisation process outlined below for both sides of the cassette. The object of the task is to create an identifiable folder containing 2 WAV audio files (one for each side of the cassette) and a single PDF file documenting the process.

Once this has been checked, it will be added to the digital archive.

Switching on

In the transfer room, plug in and switch on the following equipment:
- PC and monitor
- Playback speakers

In the rack to the left of the PC, turn on:
- Focusrite Saffire PRO 40 Firewire Analogue-Digital Interface (ADI)
- Studer A721 Cassette Tape Recorder
- Samson Servo 120a Amplifier

Press the 'speaker' button to the right of the 'Power' button so that it is illuminated in red.

Progress so far

- We know what we've got
- We know what descriptive metadata we want
- We know capabilities of equipment
- We have detailed documented procedures
- We have a storage area for the digitised copies
- We have strengthened our relationship with music department

   ...some digitisation has been carried out!
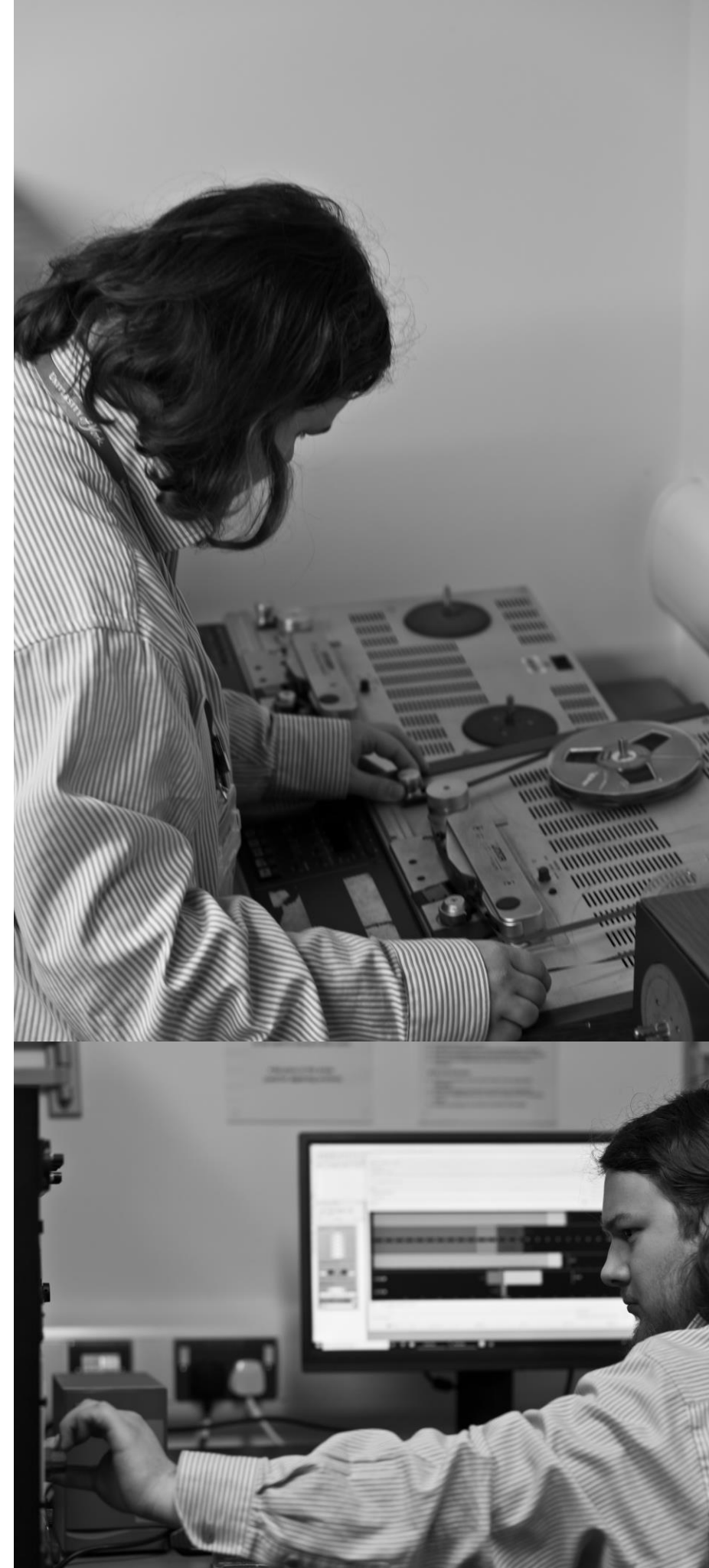
Takeaway points and tips for success

- Make a start! Don't wait until everything is perfect
- Huge value in getting stuck in
  - Learn by doing
  - You don't have to solve all the problems at once
- Make best use of existing staff, their expertise and interests
- Digitisation itself is just one piece of the puzzle
- Gain the knowledge you need to bid for further resource
  - Eg to calculate how long it would take to digitise audio collection at current rate on current resource …would all the equipment and media survive that long?

Useful resources

Task Force to establish Selection Criteria of Analogue and Digital Audio Contents for Transfer to Data Formats for Preservation Purposes, Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives, IASA Editorial Group. https://www.iasa-web.org/task-force

Best Practices for Audio Preservation, University of Indiana, 2007.http://www.dlib.indiana.edu/projects/sounddirections/papersPresent/sd_bp_07.pdf

Capturing Analog Sound for Digital Preservation: Report of a Roundtable Discussion of Best Practices for Transferring Analog Discs and Tapes, Council on Library and Information Resources and Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., March 2006. http://www.clir.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/pub137.pdf

Audio Tape Digitisation Workflow: Digitisation workflow for analogue open reel tapes, https://www.jazzpoparkisto.net/audio/

Tracking the reel world: A survey of audiovisual collections in Europe, European Commission on Preservation and Access, 2008 http://www.tape-online.net/docs/tracking_the_reel_world.pdf

IASA Cataloguing Rules, International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives 1999 & 2005 https://www.iasa-web.org/cataloguing-rules

IASA TC-03: The Safeguarding of the Audiovisual Heritage: Ethics, Principles and Preservation Strategy, International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives, 2017.https://www.iasa-web.org/tc03/ethics-principles-preservation-strategy

Audiovisual research collections and their Preservation, European Commission on Preservation and Access, Amsterdam, 2008. http://www.tape-online.net/docs/audiovisual_research_collections.pdf