

Film - the Firm Favourite

Chris Taylor reports after a visit to The East Anglian Film Archive in Norwich

I've had an association with the East Anglian Film Archive since its early days in the 1970s when its founder David Cleveland was establishing the collection at the University of Essex in Colchester. I had been collecting and showing old films of my own home town in Southend, and I was asked by the council to find a home for a collection of movies it was holding. Amazingly some were even nitrate 35mm and so to find a safe home was essential. I passed these films to the Archive and we collaborated in making a series of videos for the Archive to sell, using the Southend films that I had collected and others as they were donated.

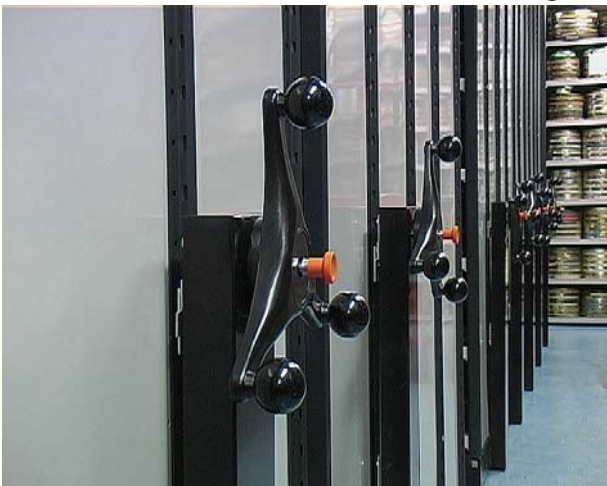
Some years later the Archive moved from Colchester to the University of East Anglia and remains a part of the university to this day, although it has recently moved yet again, this time to purpose built premises at the new Norfolk Records Office. The film might be historic, but there's nothing old and dusty about the premises. They are modern and functional and the archive's entrance hall is lined with display cabinets with examples of film equipment spanning a whole century, much of it of a type known and loved by IMM readers.



Chris Taylor

The primary role of the archive is to collect and maintain the film collection as a record of the social history of the region. This enables broadcasters, historians, people in education and the public to access it and I would urge readers to visit the website to find out more about access to the archive's collection. (www.eafa@uea.ac.uk) Another facet of the work of The East Anglian Film Archive is its MA course in Film Archiving. The archive has a staff of eight full and part time archivists also receives help from around 20 volunteers, who take film shows out across the East of England. Annually, the archive's volunteers have direct contact with up to 13,000 people in the region

The Archive preserves original films and video tapes in temperature and humidity controlled vaults where nitrate, colour stock and video materials each have their own environments. Moving racks ensure that space is used optimally. Where collections have been donated from a particular source the donor is identified in the store. I was pleased to see a box with my name on it and one for the



collection of the late, great John Wright, he of *Movie Maker* and *Making Better Movies* magazines.

The East Anglian Film Archive collection comprises over 60,000 films and videos. The collection includes a large amount of non-fiction material, such as documentaries, television productions, family and personal films, home videos, newsreels, educational films, travelogues. There are films produced by municipalities, councils and government sponsored, as well as advertising films, dramas and an increasing

number of feature films relating to the region in some way. The television collections contain material from regional broadcasters, Anglia television and BBC East from 1959 to the present day. The film archive cares for these collections on behalf of the broadcasters and works closely with both to make sure the films are preserved properly and remain accessible.

The majority of films in the collection arrive through donation or deposit by individuals or organisations who have recognised the importance of having their moving images looked after professionally. The archive collects films on any subject related to the East of England region. Particularly well represented are images of people at work, town and village life, farming and fishing, transport, holidays and family life. The Archive also collects the work of film and video makers in the region, amateur or professional. Although it is a national collection, discussions are in place, I believe, for the IAC's film library to be transferred here.



The oldest moving images date from 1896 and the most recent accessions are films and videos made this year. EFAFA collects film on all film gauges, video and disc formats, and specialises in the conservation of smaller gauge films, such as standard 8, super 8 and 9.5mm. For movies such as our own the archive has telecine facilities in all the amateur gauges from standard 8 upwards and donated films are copied so that the donor has a copy of his work on his chosen video format. Unless agreed otherwise, the donor also retains copyright and access should he want to have a further copy made in future.

My interview with David Cleveland

The main purpose of my visit was to discuss with David Cleveland and his team the impact of modern technology on their work and if they had any advice for those making their movies electronically. David was in the viewing room surrounded by equipment which allowed one to see, by one means or another anything from 9.5mm film to Digi-Beta video. My first question was to ask David a leading question.

CT 'Here you have film which is 50 years old and more, and it is still viewable. Will I be able to see the DVD I made yesterday in 2054?'

DC 'This is a question we are often asked. We have more than 50,000 films here and we know from experience that many will last more than 100 years. We have some on 35mm nitrate that are still in very good condition and even 16mm from the 20s which can be projected perfectly well. Video however is changing all the time. The earliest broadcast video goes back to 1958 and it came in during the 60s in education. In the 70s Philips



introduced their VCR for home use and we are often sent tapes to see if we can recover the pictures. The problem is that we don't have a playback machine and the only one is in London and it's very expensive. Later came VHS and Betamax and only VHS survived. Even Betamax machines are getting few and far between. So the answer to your question about the DVD is 'probably not!'

CT *'But you use video extensively in the Archive?'*

DC *'When we started the Archive, for economic reasons, we used the industrial U-Matic format to record films arriving as this provided a stable and reliable access medium. These were large cassettes and lasted as much as 20–25 years, but now when we try to play them the oxide comes off and sometimes the plasticizer is released and clogs the heads so we have special machines to clean them before transferring the content to a newer format. Later we moved to the M2 format to master on, but this had a shorter life and as we move on all systems have a shorter life. We mainly use Beta SP here at the present but I expect it to only last another 5–10 years. We also have digital in the form of DVCam and Digibeta.*

Digi-Betacam is the broadcast norm but can only remain so while Sony support it. The next move is to record directly onto computer servers.'

CT *'So the problem is in finding a playback machine?'*

DC *'Exactly, as time moves on all the equipment goes out of production faster and faster and as it's full of 'chips' and things the engineers can't repair them and they are supported for a shorter and shorter time.'*

CT *'So ideally then, even digitally shot material would survive better if transferred back to film. Say, **Fahrenheit 911** which was shot on video, is likely to survive longer as a 35mm cinema print than in its original video form?'*

DC *'Yes the 35mm will survive quite well. The problem is that cinema prints are made for a short life. The recent Harry Potter film had a 1000-copy print run for the UK and Europe, but after release these prints are destroyed. The National Film Archive tries to keep 2 copies of each film but sometimes the copyright owner won't allow it. The original negatives don't always fare too well in Hollywood's archives either. You can't guarantee they'll be looked after. They have recently tried to restore 'The Graduate' but the master material is in poor condition and they are struggling to get it back.'*

CT *'Amateurs like us remember Kodachrome type 1 being replaced by the wonderful Kodachrome2 in the early sixties and have on the shelf maybe 43 years later some lovely looking pictures of the family and loved ones. Should we transfer it to video or digital?'*

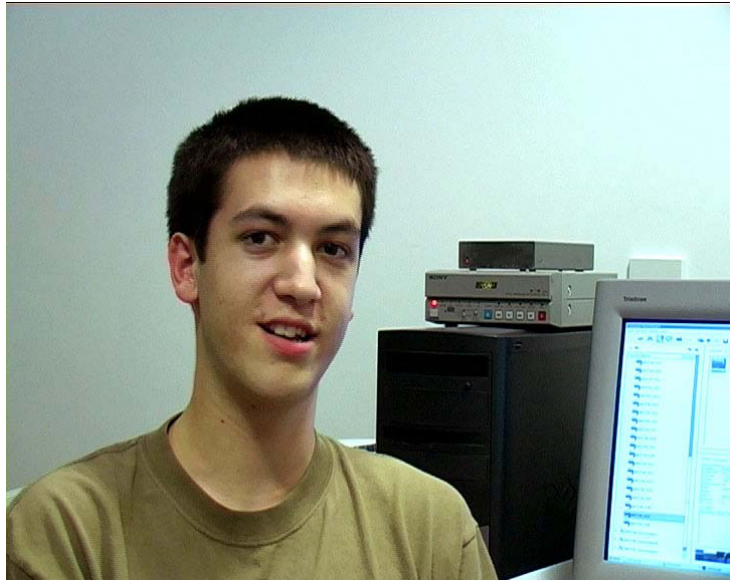
DC *'Simply transferring the existing material onto new formats or so called 'digitising' is not a short cut to saving our moving image history – the majority of work carried out to keep images has to be on the film itself and then it has to be stored in good conditions. Video transfers however are a good way to see the film, and as telecine machines are getting better you can go back from time to time and re-copy it to get the best results. The next generation of telecine machines will go up from 625 to 2000 lines then to 4000 lines to enable us to get better and better results from the film.'*

CT *'It would appear from what you have said David, that your advice is that if we wanted to shoot a record of something really important that we wanted to last for as long as possible, maybe a century, we couldn't go far wrong by loading up with Kodachrome – preferably 16mm?'*

DC '16mm Kodachrome is a wonderful film stock. We have some Kodachrome in the archive from 1939 and looks like it was shot yesterday. Because of the way its colours are incorporated, it lasts well, and transfers from originals shot on a good 16mm camera look little different from 35mm prints. It's still available but so very expensive that sadly most amateurs can't afford to use it. So for advice for the digital movie-maker wanting to preserve his family history for his grandchildren to see, I'm going to hand you over to our technical expert Peter White'

CT 'David, thank you, and can I take this opportunity to wish you well in your forthcoming retirement. Perhaps you should take up film-making as a hobby!'

My interview with Peter White



Peter White is a technician who specialises in advanced telecine and the computer-related processes and I asked him the same question. From his perspective what was the future of high-tech image gathering and where should the amateur go when seeking to preserve family history.

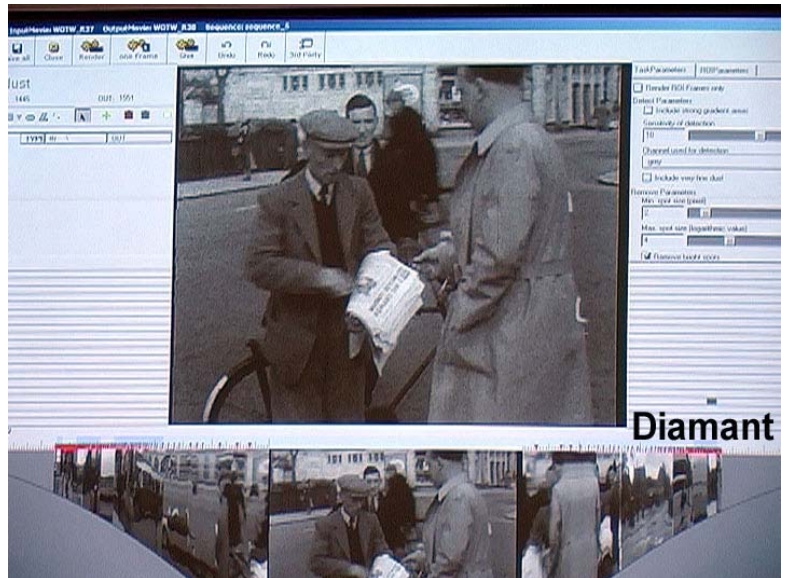
PW 'The problem is that modern formats have a life expectancy of about 5 years – even less. As most cameras are mini DV and as the tape gets smaller it means that tape lasts less time. Film can last 100 years, whereas a camera tape system will last maybe 5 – 10 years or less. In the last 10 years or so we have had VHS, VHS-C and its SVHS variants, then Video8, Hi-8, Digital 8 and MiniDVD. No sooner had Mini-DV arrived than we had cameras with small DVD drives and in months JVC will launch a camera with a micro hard-drive to record the images. This lack of stability is a real problem.'

CT So let's assume this material, whatever it's source, has been transferred to a computer using the systems available today. What's the best way of outputting it for viewing and long-term storage?'

PW Recording to DVD is certainly a convenient way of viewing and distributing the movie in the short term but very risky as a long-term practice. Especially the dye-based DVDs you burn in the computer at home. I would give them 5 years at most! The best advice I can give is to record back onto mini DV or DVcam tape, then if it's really important get it copied onto a larger format like Digi Beta or Beta SP which stands a better chance of surviving.

Peter and I then went on to chat about the situation of the Wedding Video man who sold expensive DVD copies of the wedding to the happy couple and all their friends. We concluded that in this day and age the DVD's would probably last just about as long as the marriages so the question was a pretty academic one anyway!

The final part of my investigation was for Peter to show me a computer-based film restoration machine which is used to restore the images on old film before it is used in modern programme making. With all the digital channels and thirst for documentary subjects on TV, archive material is much in demand, especially if the quality is improved to broadcast standards. The capability of this software called Diamant (www.hs-art.com) has to be seen to be believed. It operates like a movie version of the well known Adobe Photoshop programme for stills. If the work is really extensive, repairs can be made a frame at a time, or if the condition of the film is reasonable, dust and scratches, for example, can be removed 'on the fly'. The machine assesses the same part of the image in preceding and following frames and removes 'differences' such as specs of dirt.



It will also correct jumpy frame lines, side-weave and flicker, and if it's done its job so well, it can also add grain to make the material match other film it is cut with.

At several thousand pounds, this is not the kind of kit to go home with and so I left empty handed except for memories of the day that I was persuaded that film was still the firm favourite!

Chris Taylor
2nd March 2005