

Wargrave Local History Society

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The Wessex Film and Sound Archive

The November meeting of the Wargrave Local History Society was a most enjoyable presentation by David Lee of films from the [Wessex Film and Sound Archive](#) .

David began by outlining the history of the Wessex Film and Sound Archive. It had begun in 1988 under the auspices of the Hampshire Archives Trust. It has enabled the owners (both corporate or private) of film, and sound or video recordings - to deposit items for safe storage, where their copyright will be respected. Old film and tape was made on plastic material that needs to be kept at a constant temperature and humidity throughout the year in order that it does not deteriorate - conditions that apply in the archive strongroom, but not in the attic of a house. The Archive is now part of the Hampshire Record Office, but it was deliberately called the Wessex Film and Sound Archive, as it was the only place in the south of England that had the expertise, equipment or stor-age to care for such film. In 1993, the Archive moved into part of the new purpose built Hampshire Record Office, but government regional policy now limits the collecting policy to the south east - including Berkshire.

The Archives hold about 32000 items, the earliest being a sound recording made in 1890 by Florence Nightingale. The earliest film dates from 1897 (only 2 years after the Lumiere brothers first demonstrated cinema film), and shows the firing of a torpedo from a ship in harbour. The Royal Navy were so pleased with the result that they commissioned Albert West to produce a series of films of 'Our Navy' for recruitment purposes - and a later series was also called for 'Our Army'. Albert West retired in 1913, and the films were sold to a businessman - who tragically had the film melted down to salvage the silver and use the cellulose nitrate to make explosives. - at the time, the raw materials were thought to be worth more than the images. Copies of a few of the films were found in a Southsea cinema, fortunately, but otherwise all that survives are still frames from Albert's catalogue. A similar fate has befallen many old films. Even the BBC only kept a very small percentage of its output - items for its library that were thought may be of interest to programme makers.

The archive welcomes, and holds, both amateur and professional films, as the content is equally valid from an historic point of view. They have access to the equipment needed to copy and to preserve the material, which is placed with the Archive for safe custody, but the copyright and ownership remains with the original owner if they so wish.

David then showed three selections from the film archive. The first was the films taken at The Piggott School in the late 1940s or early 1950s by Maurice Willis, who was the craft master at the time. The sequence began with sports day on the school field - the usual running and jumping activities, and one where one 'team member' moved two stepping stones (upturned flower pots?) for the other to tread on. The film also showed the swimming gala at the pool in Waltham St Lawrence. Next came some country dancing and PE exercises on the school quad, followed by film of science and rural studies lessons, and snowballing on the field. The main part, however was titled 'The Met Man of the Future'. And showed the planning, building, erecting and use of the weather station at the school, even showing how hair for the hygrometer was obtained! Next came film of the Wargrave and Shiplake Regatta in the 1930s, opening with shots of the punt ferry from the St George and Dragon and ending with the firework display. We then saw Berkshire farming of the same era, with either horse powered implements or using a what was a then modern tractor.

Last was a 1937 professionally made sound film of biscuit making at Huntley & Palmers in Reading. This period piece showed all the stages from growing the wheat, hand milking cows, collecting the cocoa beans, coconuts or sugar from 'foreign lands', the transport all of these ingredients, by ship aeroplane and lorry, and their preparation. Specialist tasks included the coconut barbers - who would give the coconuts a 'hair cut and shave but not a shampoo' said the narrator. The factory had lots of special machinery, but many tasks were still labour intensive, producing 500 kinds of biscuits - 1 mile, 20 deep, passing through the ovens per day.
