

SERIES LEVEL DESCRIPTION
CHILDREN'S HOUR (R11)

Scope & Content

The papers relate to the policy, programming and non-broadcasting activities of the radio *Children's Hour* department (later known as Children's Programmes (Sound) department) and children's programmes broadcast overseas. The papers cover policy discussions and directives; programme suggestions and broadcast arrangements; programme schedules and publicity; engagement of speakers; praise and criticism of programmes; departmental organisation and staffing issues; regional *Children's Hour* departments and associated non-broadcasting activities such as *Children's Hour* publications and the Radio Circle. The files mainly consist of memoranda, though also include letters, minutes of meetings, planning schedules, research notes and occasionally scripts and audience research reports.

The papers include correspondence and official paperwork from the following sources: Controller (Programmes); Controller, Entertainment; Regional Directors, Children's Hour Organiser (later known as Children's Hour Director, Head of Children's Hour and finally Head of Children's Programmes (Sound)); Assistant Children's Hour Director (later Assistant Head of Children's Hour and finally Assistant Head of Children's Programmes (Sound)); Regional Children's Hour Organisers; *Children's Hour* producers and other staff members; various departments within the BBC including the Religious Broadcasting Department; the Overseas Services Division and the Presentation Department; contributing writers and speakers; outside agencies such as publishers and overseas broadcasting organisations; *Children's Hour* listeners and members of the public.

Archival History

The majority of these papers were originally filed in Central Registry and were transferred to the Written Archives Centre in two batches, the first covering 1927 to the late 1940s and the second batch covering the late 1940s to 1964. A run of *Children's Hour* speaker files covering surnames Sadler to Wolfenden formed a later accrual (file references R11/82 to R11/103). Two more files (R11/104 and R11/105) were compiled from miscellaneous correspondence files acquired by the Written Archives Centre and subsequently added to the *Children's Hour* series.

Arrangement

The files are arranged numerically, though a complete alphabetical listing of all files in this series is available.

There are detailed file précis available for this series.

Related Areas

Correspondence and contracts between the BBC and *Children's Hour* contributors are held in the radio contributor series RCONT1, which covers 1922 to 1962. Files are arranged alphabetically by surname and lists are available on request

Files relating to *Children's Hour* Appeals are held in the R7 Appeals series and files relating to the policy of *Children's Hour* and children's programmes in

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general can be found in the R34 Policy series, e.g. R34/298 and R34/632. Additional files relevant to *Children's Hour* are held in the Programme Correspondence Section (R41) and the Publicity (R44) and Relays (R47) series.

Files covering *Children's Hour* programmes produced in the Nations and Regions are held in the M4 Children's Hour series (Midland Region); N1 Children's Hour Programmes series (North Region); NI6 Children's Hour series (Northern Ireland) and SC30 Children's Hour series (Scotland). Lists are available on request.

There are several Special Collections relevant to *Children's Hour*. Collections include postcards, cigarette cards and photographs depicting early *Children's Hour* staff members (see S19, S31, S211 and S105 for examples) souvenirs such as a *Children's Hour* pencil (S370); accounts of the experiences of *Children's Hour* staff members (see S18 and S385) and Radio Circle badges and certificates (see S96, S243, S456 and S480 for examples). Lists of Special Collections are available on request.

Examples of *Children's Hour* publications are held in the 'A' sequence of the Publications section. These include Children's Hour Annuals (A414 and A423); Children's Hour Broadsheets (A422); Children's Hour Certificates (A407, A408 and A409) and various Radio Circle magazines and certificates (see A411, A413 and A415 – A420 for examples). Lists of publications are available on request.

Files relating to TV children's programmes are held in the TV Children's Programmes (T2) series.

Scripts of many *Children's Hour* programmes are available on microfilm.

Administrative History

The first BBC broadcast for children took place on 05/12/1922 when A. E. Thompson, an engineer on the Birmingham station, presented a few minutes of entertainment just for children. Other provincial stations soon followed Birmingham's example, as did the London station, which broadcast its first *Children's Hour* on 23/12/1922. These early *Children's Hours* had no definite organisation or planning, but were informal and improvised programmes featuring songs, poems and stories performed by various members of station staff (often of senior status) known to listeners as Aunties and Uncles.

By early 1923, the *Children's Hour* was becoming established as a permanent and popular part of the daily programmes and with a rapidly growing audience, it was felt the broadcasts could no longer continue in such a haphazard fashion. Consequently, Ella Fitzgerald was appointed as Central Organiser of *Children's Hour* for London and the provinces in April 1923, with responsibility for the conduct of *Children's Hour* and for finding suitable material and artists. In December 1923, at the Station Directors' Meeting, it was announced that *Children's Hours* were to be better organised in future, various Uncles and Aunts were to have set periods each week to appear and the programmes were to be much better prepared and less spontaneous in nature. In March 1924, a Children's Hour Committee was formed to advise the BBC on suitable topics and speakers. It was a short-lived committee and was soon disbanded after producing little in the way of constructive suggestions.

In the meantime, the *Children's Hour* was steadily growing in popularity. From 1923, individual stations formed Radio Circles (also known by names such as the Fairy

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League and the Radio Sunbeams, depending on the station). The Radio Circles were essentially clubs for *Children's Hour* listeners, who paid a membership fee of one shilling (this was later replaced by an annual subscription). Members received a Radio Circle badge and other gifts such as a certificate or calendar and were also invited to events such as picnics and Christmas parties, yet the main function of the Circles (other than encouraging links between children and the BBC) was to motivate children to devote time and energy to good causes in their local areas. The main outlet of this charitable work was the collection of silver paper; the money raised in this way was then donated to good causes, most notably the Children's Hour Wireless Fund which donated wireless sets to children's hospital wards. The BBC decided to end the Radio Circles in 1934 due to the administration and costs involved.

The first birthday greetings were broadcast on *Children's Hour* in January 1923 and proved so popular that they soon occupied a large proportion of the programme. A strict time limit was imposed in 1924, with greetings to sick children taking precedence, however the sheer amount of requests eventually proved impossible to deal with and the last birthday greetings were broadcast on the 31/12/1933.

In February 1925, the Programme Board suggested a reorganisation of *Children's Hour* especially to reduce backchat during broadcasts and to improve the current haphazard and disorganised nature of the programmes. C. E. Hodges was appointed in April 1925 to take entire charge of the broadcasts and in September, J. C. Stobart became Education Director overseeing *Children's Hour*. In November 1926, a Children's Hour Programme Board was instituted and one of its first proposals was that the terms Auntie and Uncle should be dropped in an attempt to generate a more dignified atmosphere. Protests from parents and children meant the pseudonyms were allowed to linger on but were no longer encouraged. More preparation was advocated and linking dialogue was to be prepared beforehand to eliminate cross-talk on air. In addition, it was decided that one individual would be responsible for the conduct of *Children's Hour* at each station, although Hodges would still be responsible for preparing the programmes.

The centralisation of broadcasting through the Regional Scheme in the later 1920s and early 1930s changed the broadcasting of *Children's Hour*, as the provincial Relay Stations ceased to originate their own programmes and instead transmitted **Children's Hour** programmes from their parent Regional Station. When these new arrangements came into force many listeners protested against the loss of their local *Children's Hour*. This was amplified in 1933, when the London and Daventry *Children's Hour* was transferred from the National to the Regional wavelengths causing the loss of further regional *Children's Hour* programmes.

By the mid 1930s, the *Children's Hour* was a national institution. Programmes such as *Toytown*, *Out With Romany* and the *Zoo Man* were firm favourites, as were plays written by Laurence du Garde Peach and talks by Stephen King-Hall. Request weeks stimulated thousands of children to write in requesting repeats of their favourite items and appeals generated substantial donations to charity. Names forever synonymous with Children's Hour emerged during this period, such as Derek McCulloch (known as 'Uncle Mac' to millions of children) who headed the *Children's Hour* from 1933 to 1951, May E. Jenkin, who was McCulloch's deputy and eventual successor and regional *Children's Hour* producers including Kathleen Garscadden in Scotland, Ursula Eason in Northern Ireland and Nan McDonald in Manchester. The *Children's Hour* itself came under the control of the Drama section in July 1935, with Val Gielgud at its head. During the late 1930s, national relays of regionally produced *Children's Hour* programmes also became a more frequent occurrence.

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The outbreak of the Second World War saw the *Children's Hour* staff move to Bristol. There was an initial four-day break in *Children's Hour* broadcasts but from the 06/09/1939 programmes resumed, with only a half-hour transmission at first. The usual quarterly planning scheme had to be dropped and initially, there were many difficulties in providing good quality material for the *Children's Hour*. McCulloch was particularly critical of the standard of programmes produced by the regions, who in turn were unhappy with their lack of air time. Within a short time however, the *Children's Hour* re-established itself as a forty-five minute broadcast within the Programme Division and in October 1939, it expanded to incorporate a *Sunday Children's Hour* which was broadcast in conjunction with the Religious Broadcasting Department. The Sunday *Children's Hour* was the basis for the BBC launching its most ambitious religious project to date – a series of plays about the life of Christ written by Dorothy L. Sayers. The series *The Man Born to Be King* was broadcast in December 1941 and despite critical acclaim, caused much press controversy. Another success of the wartime period was the series of programmes *Children Calling Home*. Although the programmes were not organised by the *Children's Hour*, they proved very popular with children and parents alike; the programmes were a collaboration between the BBC and overseas broadcasting organisations and provided a forum for children evacuated overseas and their parents at home in Britain to send messages to each other and eventually converse on air.

In 1946, the *Children's Hour* (almost always a misnomer) was increased to fifty-five minutes every day (including Sundays) and became part of the Entertainment Division. Its popularity continued throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s and maintained its large audience under the leadership of W. E. (David) Davis, who took over the post of the Head of Children's Hour in 1953. However, the spread of television reception throughout Britain began to affect the listening figures and by 1957, there was real concern regarding the future of the *Children's Hour*. Despite the introduction of new programmes such as *Children's Newsreel* and *Saturday Excursion* and the publication of a *Children's Hour Broadsheet* advertising forthcoming programmes, audience numbers continued to decline as young listeners became viewers. In April 1961, it was decided to drop the name *Children's Hour* in an attempt to lose the dated feel of the programme and to attract new audiences; the department became known as Children's Programmes (Sound) with David Davis still at the helm. Despite a public outcry, the *Children's Hour* was repackaged as *Junior Time* and later as *Home At Five*. Despite all these attempts at reviving children's radio broadcasting, listening figures continued to fall and on the 27/03/1964, the final programme of *For The Young* (the last incarnation of *Children's Hour*) was broadcast. The *Children's Hour* had been a mainstay of the BBC for over forty years and despite numerous protests from the public, the press and even Parliament, the growth of television broadcasting had ultimately led to its demise.

Further reference:

More about the history of the *Children's Hour* can be found in Ian Hartley's book *Goodnight Children...Everywhere* (Kent., Midas Books, 1983. ISBN 0 85936201 9). Asa Briggs' *A History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom* also contains information about the *Children's Hour*.

c. 6800 items
182 files
1926 - 1964