

**SERIES LEVEL DESCRIPTION**  
**TELEVISION DOCUMENTARIES DEPARTMENT (T56)**

**Scope & Content**

The papers relate to the creation of each documentary programme, potentially covering items from the initial proposal, through the arrangements for filming and editing, to the broadcast stage. Some files are more complete in this respect than others. In addition to correspondence, they can include such items as budget documents, clearances, daily logs of Programmes as Completed, research notes, interview transcripts, press releases, audience research reports and scripts.

The papers include correspondence and official paperwork from the following sources: producers, directors, writers and other production staff; Head of Documentaries Department, Television; Head of Films, Television; Film Organiser, Television; Controller Programmes, Television; various departments within the BBC including Finance, Presentation, Publicity, Film Library & Outside Broadcasts; contributors to programmes; outside agencies, such as film processing laboratories and unions.

**Archival History**

The papers arrived as six separate deposits. Five of these, which make up the bulk of the papers, arrived at the Written Archives Centre in December, 1991.

The largest of these deposits was originally stored in the Television Programmes Registry (formerly called Television Central Registry), where they were initially kept under a group of files named as the 'Talks' department. It was recognised that this was a false designation as the Talks department had ceased to exist in 1965, when the Documentary Department became its own entity. In 1984 the files were therefore split back into their original provenance and the existing Talks lists superseded. The files were transferred to the Records Centre in October 1979, where they were reviewed according to the selection criteria of whether film of the programmes existed and whether the files had historical value.

Of the smaller deposits, a selection of files relating to the programme *Yesterday's Witness* originated from the office of Chris Cook, the last producer of the programme, and moved with him when the Documentary Department was merged with General Features to become Documentary Features. They were transferred from his office direct to the Records Centre in December 1980, and appraised there in February, 1981.

A further small set of files dating from 1964 was transferred to the Records Centre from the office of a PA in the Documentary Features Department in March 1986. They were reviewed at the Records Centre and selected files were retained. Similarly, some files that had been held in the office of Richard Cawston (former Head of Documentaries Department) and relating to his productions, were transferred to the Records Centre in June 1987, where they underwent review.

A further set of files, dating from between 1968 and 1979, arrived at the Records Centre

## BBC WRITTEN ARCHIVES CENTRE

from the Documentary Features Department in March, 1989. The pre-1970 files were appraised and selected there.

The remainder of the files in the T56 series are made up of files from the period 1972-1992 and were transferred from the Records And Programme Information Centre (RAPIC) to the Written Archives Centre in October, 1999.

### Arrangement

The first sequence of files in this series (T56/1-30) relates to programmes from the series *Yesterday's Witness*, dating from 1967-1980. This is followed by a random set of files (T56/31-47) representing three different deposits, including one from the office of Richard Cawston, former Head of Documentaries, Television, relating to programmes such as *Royal Family* and *This is the BBC* and another deposit relating mainly to the programme *Footprints*.

This is followed by a lengthy sequence (T56/48-320) arranged in alphabetical order, mainly covering programmes made between 1964 and 1970. There is then a further short alphabetic sequence (T56/321-326) from the mid-late 1960s, followed by two sequences covering individual programmes, *The Lost Peace* (T56/328-335) from 1966 (a programme that also has files in the main alphabetic sequence above) and *Royal Family* (T56/336-342) from 1969. These are followed by two further short alphabetic sequences (T56/343-348 and T56/349-356) relating to files covering the late 1960s.

T56/357-409 relate to the programme *Forty Minutes* dating from the late 1980s and the remaining files (T56/410-472) are made up of several short alphabetic sequences.

A complete alphabetical listing of the files in this series is available, and there are detailed precis for some files (in numerical order).

### Related Areas

Files for early documentary programmes are filed in the T4 TV Documentaries sequence, which broadly covers 1946-1973, although it does include some files outside that date range. The T4 sequence overlaps considerably with the T56 series, as does the T64 Documentary Feature series, which covers the bulk of the material from the 1970s and 1980s. There may also be some files of interest in the TV Talks series (T32).

The equivalent Radio files can be found in the R51 Talks sequence, and there may also be some material in the regional programme files, some of which have sections on Talks, though these mainly relate to Radio programmes.

The scripts for many documentary programmes would also be available on microfilm.

## Administrative History

Early BBC television documentaries were often dramatised accounts of events or situations. The first conventional documentary, combining real filmed sequences and studio interviews, was Robert Barr's *Report From Germany* (1948). Barr was a producer in the newly formed Documentaries and Magazine Programmes group (formed in 1948), which also employed the first full time documentary scriptwriter, Duncan Ross. It was reorganised into the Documentary Programmes unit in 1953, under Paul Rotha, but was dissolved in 1955. During its existence, however, this small department produced a wide variety of documentaries (the files for which are found in the T4 TV Documentaries series).

Between 1955 and 1962 there was no separate documentary making unit (broadly speaking it was the responsibility of the Talks Group), so there is very little material from this period. In 1963 a Documentary and Music Programmes unit re-emerged as part of the Talks Group, under the leadership of Huw Wheldon. In 1963 a Documentary and Music Programmes unit re-emerged as part of the Talks Group, under the leadership of Huw Wheldon.

In 1965 the Talks Group ceased to exist, but the Documentary Programmes department was created under the leadership of Richard Cawston, who remained in that post until 1979. During this period, which the main body of the T56 files cover, a wide variety of programmes were made, including the film *The Royal Family*, which allowed a film crew inside Buckingham Palace to observe the daily lives of Queen Elizabeth II and her family. Other notable programmes included the series *Yesterday's Witness* which recorded interviews with ordinary people who had lived through notable events in history; *Eton*, which went behind the scenes at the private boy's school; a major history series, *The Lost Peace*, about the period between the two world wars; and the travel series *Whicker's World*.

The most controversial production during this period was the docu-drama *The War Game* (1965) by Peter Watkins, about the aftermath of a nuclear holocaust, which was not actually broadcast until 1985. As with Watkins' previous film, *Culloden*, it was filmed mainly using hand held cameras and with non-professional actors playing the parts, and starkly depicted the probable effects of a nuclear weapon detonating in south-east England. The finished film was viewed by the Chairman of the Board of Governors along with the Director-General and BBC Secretary, and subsequently by a group of senior civil servants. The decision as to whether to show the film was left to the BBC, and it was announced to the press in November, 1965 that it would not be aired as it was considered too horrifying for broadcasting. It would, however, be made available for theatrical release through film societies, meaning that a large number of people did see the film. The decision not to broadcast, however, remained controversial and Watkins left the BBC.

The department became known as Documentary Features in 1981, when it was merged with the General Features Department, and returned to being called Documentaries from 1992.

**c. 58,050 items**  
**540 files**  
**1957 - 1993**