

Small steps: long view

Glasgow Museums

This is one of a series of case studies created to illustrate digital preservation in practice, sharing honestly the challenges of establishing digital continuity in practical environments. It provides key messages from institutions that are taking digital preservation seriously.

Introduction

Glasgow Museums has spent the past decade planning for the preservation of its collection through the completion of an expanse of environmentally controlled, bespoke stores in the south side of the city. The Glasgow Museums Resource Centre is dedicated to preserving the city's museum collection of around 1.2 million objects and a related archive which includes a significant collection of oral history interviews.

The Museums' focus has very much been on conservation and access to the physical objects, but it has become increasingly aware of the importance which a growing body of digital resources play in interpreting and managing the physical collection – and that the digital collection is of significance in its own right. This collection is diverse in form and function and managed by a range of different departments within the organization.

Where to start?

Much of the literature in digital preservation emphasizes the tools and technical requirements for long term access. However a team of technicians, curators and conservators across the Museums recognized that they could only justify the effort of securing the digital collection if they could also demonstrate the impact and value which it could have in the context of the Museums' wider mission. So, rather than starting with tools, a digital preservation working group was established within Glasgow Museums in 2008 to look at what digital collections were most valued by each department, and to report which ones were at greatest risk. A survey quickly established that four collection areas were deemed to be of greatest value and at greatest risk: digital images, audio visual materials, digital art and oral history recordings.

Family photograph donated by an interviewee during oral history project, 2000 Glasgow Lives.



Of these four, it was noted that the oral history collection presented both the greatest opportunity and was at greatest risk. There was no single member of staff or section to look after this collection which included a proliferation of media types some of which were already obsolete, containing material that was unique, local and directly relevant to the mission of the Museums. The collection was growing and most recording was taking place in digital form, but with no guidelines or standards for cataloguing or format. Even so it was recognized that, properly managed, the oral history collection, could be very rewarding in support of research, interpretation and access. It is not hard to justify why a local museum service should prioritize care of a collection like this.

Key Message:

The benefits of digital preservation can be expressed in terms of new opportunities they create in the short and long term. Even relatively simple steps can bring early rewards if properly embedded within the mission of an organization.

Therefore the Museums' Research Department commissioned a targeted project to assess the scale of the problem, to pilot low-cost approaches to managing the collection and to make recommendations about what further actions might be needed.

Assessment

Glasgow Museums has been gathering oral history for almost 30 years and it continues to do so. The assessment revealed a substantial collection of over 700 oral history interviews. The earliest oral history in the collection is an audio recording on a magnetic reel-to-reel tape dating from 1980; however the majority of recordings are on analogue cassette tapes. There are over 600 cassettes in the collection plus 15 digital audio tapes (DAT) and around 80 analogue videotapes. Simultaneously, a major project on the urban history of the south side of the city associated with the extension of the M74 motorway and research ahead of the opening of the Riverside Museum were producing extensive new collections. A community oral history project in a housing estate to the north of the city was being planned which would have further added to the collection.

These interviews cover people from a variety of ages, nationalities, traditions and interests, all offering recollections of people, places and events or objects in Glasgow Museums collection. But this extensive and important collection was underused mainly because of a lack of knowledge of the content of the recordings. Many of the interviews had an accompanying summary sheet detailing the basic details of the interviewee rather than the interview and very few of the recordings had transcripts. It was also clear that analogue media within the collection was particularly fragile and was unlikely to survive repeated use. This lack of basic cataloguing data, and the impossibility of cataloguing the interviews properly without listening to them, meant that much of the analogue collection could simply not be catalogued in its current state.

So, as well as bringing order to the small digital collection, it became obvious that an equally pressing and larger problem existed in safeguarding the analogue collection – and that a single approach to both would be sensible.

Options for preserving oral history:

Following the inventory, options for preservation were reviewed. The first option considered was to transcribe the interviews, keeping the content either in electronic or hardcopy. This was quickly deemed problematic.

There would be no guarantee that a transcription was not an interpretation of the interview, or even a misinterpretation. Furthermore the time involved in transcribing over 700 interviews was indeterminable.

The collection includes a series of interviews on the history of cycling in the city. This helps interpretation of the collection of cycles, such as the Argyle made by the Glasgow Cycle Co (circa 1938, T.1966.20)



The other option was to standardize the digital collections then digitize the analogue collections to the same standard. This was recognized as a risk: if the tape were to break during the transfer the content would be lost. However, as the collection had languished in a store unused, the question of loss was outweighed by the ineffectuality of the recordings in their current format. The technical advice from Glasgow Museums Audio Visual specialist was that making a digital copy would actually reduce the risk of loss as the tapes would only be required to be played once during the digitization process: transcribing would require the tapes to be played, paused and rewound repeatedly. Moreover the process of digitizing sound does not preclude transcription at a later date, whereas it was impossible to reconstruct the sound track from the transcription alone. Consequently the digitization option was favoured.

It was important that the pilot demonstrate the significance and scope of the collection.

Pilot Study in Digitization:

A trial was undertaken to demonstrate the viability of migrating analogue recordings to digital waveform audio files. This study provided a workflow and template for a larger program of digitization and highlighted

practicalities such as costs, staffing and related policy issues.

With over ninety per cent of the original recordings in the collection on fragile analogue media, it was initially presumed that media degradation would be the reason for loss. However, it quickly became clear that the immediate danger was the obsolescence of the equipment to play the tapes, due to advances in audio and video technology.

It was important that the pilot demonstrate the significance and scope of the collection. Five oral history interviews were selected for a variety of reasons. The first was chosen because the Museums had two copies of the interview, therefore mitigating the risk of the tape being damaged. A second interview was selected because it had an accompanying transcript which had been produced shortly after the recording was made, thus testing the accuracy of the transcript. Two interviews were selected because their subjects were public figures and their importance would be easily understood and a final was selected because it was germane to a separate project ongoing at the same time.

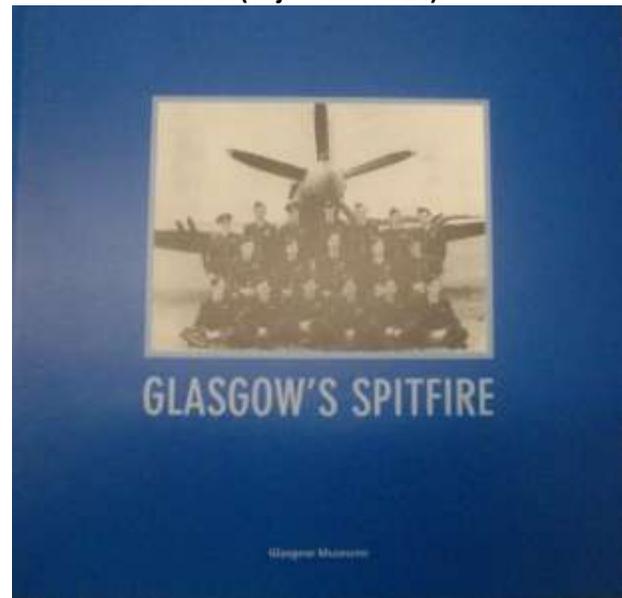
Glasgow Museums own AV technicians undertook the media migration using existing equipment. The cassette tapes were recorded onto a Marantz Professional PMD660 Portable Solid State Recorder connected to a cassette player. The cassette was played at real-time, creating a 'wav' file in the recorder. An identical process was used for the transfer of the digital audio tapes using a DAT player gifted to Glasgow Museums by BBC Scotland in 2008. The project followed recommendations from the Arts and Humanities Data Service on audio files - storing as a continuous waveform files, from which other formats such as mp3 files can be created quickly to allow the recording to be attached to websites or feature in exhibition interpretation panels as appropriate.

The inventory and trial digitization have been directly responsible for the emergence of a number of new research projects, including funding to support a PhD studentship and a major knowledge transfer fellowship.

The digitization of analogue material takes place in real-time therefore transfers take at least as long as the

running time of each tape. Initially this seemed like a prohibitively long time but in reality very little effort is required whilst the process is underway: the migration requires someone to start the process, turn over the cassette tape plus extra time converting the digital recording to the required formats. The process of digitizing five interviews – over six hours of material – and converting the wav file into mp3 was completed in one working day.

An account of the City of Glasgow (604) Squadron is one of the few oral history collections published. It supports interpretation of Spitfire LA198 in Glasgow Museums collection (object T.1999.14).



Outcomes

By the end of this process the analogue and digital collection of oral history could be managed simultaneously on the same servers and using the same formats and basic cataloguing information. Recordings which were previously little known, difficult to manage and difficult to access were significantly enhanced. Moreover, although this simple project is by no means a comprehensive answer to Glasgow Museums' emerging digital preservation role, it has provided a readily understood example of why that role is important and the sorts of challenges the organization may face it grow into this role. By using familiar concepts – such as creating an inventory, measuring risk and assessing significance – Glasgow Museums are now much better placed to understand less familiar technical challenges which digital preservation creates.

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Legacy

A welcome and perhaps unexpected outcome has been the extent to which this project has benefited the Museums directly. The inventory and trial digitization have been directly responsible for the emergence of a number of new research projects, including funding to support a PhD studentship and a major Knowledge Transfer Fellowship in conjunction with the University of Strathclyde. Glasgow Museums now has an ongoing program of digitization for the oral history recordings still on analogue material. Around one-sixth of the collection has now been transferred from an analogue to digital format over a period of several months and this transformation of physical archive to digital archive is set to continue. In the meantime the collection has become popular with researchers and curators. So, by making tentative and carefully judged efforts to address digital preservation, Glasgow Museums have created new opportunities for access and attracted new types of research.

Conclusions

Glasgow Museums has a large and growing digital collection whose management has not progressed as effectively as recent improvements in the physical

collection. For example, the hundreds of interviews in the Museums' oral history collection were practically inaccessible. Simple steps to assess, catalogue and secure this collection have allowed the museums to make wider institutional progress and develop more effective long term access to its collections. In doing so it has provided a glimpse of how taking these steps can be advantageous both now and in the future.

In philosophical terms oral history is the 'first form' of history - the representation of an individual's opinion on an event, place or person. Digital collections of oral history are a vital resource for a forward-looking memory institution such as Glasgow Museums. They need careful management but are quick to reward even simple steps to secure their long term future.

Glasgow Museums Resource Centre, home to the oral history collection and one of the largest civic museum collections in Europe.



Glasgow Museums are now part of Glasgow Life and are funded by Glasgow City Council. For more, see <http://www.glasgowmuseums.org.uk/>

This case study was prepared by Tracey Hawkins of the Glasgow Museums, for the Digital Preservation Coalition. It was made possible with funding from JISC. September 2010. Images courtesy of Glasgow Museums.

