

Peter Downes: Early Radio Recordings and Archiving in Aotearoa New Zealand

Presented at Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision, Wellington, 18 March 2016

I'm going to begin with two tracks that couldn't be more different but were among the very first radio items to be archived.

The first one is Lord Bledisloe, Governor General of New Zealand 1930 – 1935. He was said to be one of the best-liked Governors we've had although he's mainly remembered as the donor of the annual Bledisloe Cup. Not so well remembered, is his purchase of the site where the Treaty of Waitangi was signed and presenting it to the country in 1934.

His official farewell in Wellington was on the 14th of March 1935 and the speeches were broadcast on 2YA, the state-owned National Broadcasting Service station in Wellington. And, more importantly, his speech was recorded and was thought worthy of being preserved. I can't say for sure, but it's likely that Lord Bledisloe's speech was the first entry in what was to become the radio sound archives. This is a part of it.

*Audio insert: Farewell speech of the Governor General, Lord Bledisloe
14 March 1935, Wellington Town Hall
Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision reference #32881 (excerpt)*

In 1935 pushing wheelbarrows for fun was apparently a popular pass-time. Wheelbarrow Derbies had been held in Australia so, not surprisingly, New Zealand had to follow. No money was at stake, just some, er, blokes who were crazy enough to see if it could be done: from Auckland to Wellington in no more than 31 days: 492 miles, or near enough to 792 kilometres. Two men volunteered, L.G. Lukey and J.C. Schofield.

Lukey pushed Schofield in the wheelbarrow all the way, travelling via New Plymouth. The barrow wasn't your usual garden variety, far from it. It was fitted with a pneumatic tyre and ball bearings, a seat and back rest, foot rests, a dashboard with a clock, and a small horn. They set-off on the 5th of August and they reached Wellington on the morning of 5th September. It had taken them 31 days exactly.

The pair made their way to the Opera House, where a lunch-time Community Sing was in progress and being broadcast by Wellington radio station 2YA. Once they were on the stage, there was a tumultuous welcome – and after some speeches, Mr Lukey replied, not knowing that his voice was being recorded, preserved, and would be heard again today, more than 80 years later.

*Audio insert: Auckland to Wellington in a wheelbarrow, Mr L.G. Lukey
September 1935, #31954*

Lukey and Schofield seem to have started a trend and 'Wheelbarrowing', as it was called, became popular at events all around the country until the World War 2 intervened.

Now for some archive history.

I started work at 2YA in Wellington in 1947 as an entertainment programme producer and it wasn't until the end of 1949 that I had my first real encounter with archiving. I'd already written

and produced a couple of music series and it bothered me that they were so ephemeral. All that research and work for one or maybe two broadcasts at the most – and that was it.

Then I discovered the locked “cupboard” that Gareth Watkins has mentioned [in an email to staff]. It wasn’t large but the fact that it was locked made me very curious. None of my colleagues knew what was in it – some suggested that it might contain gramophone records of salacious material that had been banned. It didn’t, as it happens. They were in another cupboard. But that’s another story.

After nagging my boss to open the cupboard for me, I discovered a small number of acetate records of what had been considered as important broadcasts worthy of keeping. The dates began in early 1935 and I was told that this was the year the Broadcasting Service had acquired a recording machine. There was only one recorder to begin with but over the next few years many more were added. These machines were limited to cutting acetate (sometimes called lacquer) records on 12 or 16 inch diameter discs and that was the end of the process. It was a one-off situation. Commercial recording plants took several steps more and produced shellac pressings from their acetates. These could be sold and played over and over but this facility was not available in New Zealand – in fact it didn’t arrive until 1948. The acetate discs had to be played with a special soft needle as a stylus so as not to damage the grooves. They couldn’t be played over and over, either, as the soft grooves soon deteriorated.

Prior to 1935 the nearest full recording facility to New Zealand was the commercial Columbia company in Sydney. Quite a number of New Zealand performers travelled to Sydney to take advantage of this and had their records sold in both countries. Some of them were radio artists and will come up in this talk a bit later.

So! Back to the cupboard. I asked if anyone had made any programmes using this material. “No”. “So could I make one?” “If you want to, but be extra careful with the discs.”

There seemed to be quite a few items marked 1935 so I decided to prepare a semi-documentary feature called “Scrapbook for 1935” – looking at the events and music of that year, using the cupboard material where it fitted. And that’s when the two tracks we heard earlier came into my life.

As the years passed the cupboard became rather full, and in 1955 the management decided to set up a proper Archive unit to collect radio audio and make it available for future use. Space was found in Timaru and the first Archivist to be appointed was Asquith Thompson, always affectionately known as “Tommy”.

So began the Timaru years. Tommy Thompson created a card index and took into the archive any material that was sent to him from all over the country and some that he asked for. It took a long time for producers to get into the swing of sending their programmes to him; some were sceptical that their work wouldn’t be kept and preferred to hold on to it themselves. Others couldn’t be bothered. When the Radio News Service began in 1962 the volume of material being sent grew immeasurably and around this time Tommy was given an assistant. By this time, too, the huge collection of wartime recordings had found a permanent home there along with another large collection of live recordings from the Royal Tour of 1953 and 1954. There’ll be a bit more about those later.

Now we skip to 1975. By this time, the individual non-commercial radio stations were being networked with two common programmes coming from Wellington under the titles of the “National” and “Concert Programmes”.

But in 1975 the New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation, as it was by then, underwent a government ordered total restructuring. By then Television was established and radio's role was changing quite quickly. The NZBC controlled both radio and TV and it was seen that because of the immensity of the combined job, the two should be separated. It made good sense, and that was when Radio New Zealand and Television New Zealand were born; on the 1st of April 1975. Each had its own Board of Governors, Director-Generals and relevant staff.

Any management matters common to both radio and television (such as administration and funding) were brought together in a third unit, known as The Broadcasting Commission under a third Director. Included in this, for some strange reason, was the Sound Archive – with Tommy Thompson due to retire fairly soon. Who was going to be responsible for finding his replacement? Good question.

It was not a satisfactory arrangement, far from it, and after all these big changes had settled down, a committee was formed to examine both radio and television archives and recommend whether they should be combined or be totally separate, and which of the three divisions should control them. By this time I'd been appointed Manager of the National Programme and I was asked to be Radio New Zealand's representative on that committee. After a lot of meetings and arguments, and consultation with other sound archives overseas, it was eventually decided unanimously that the two archives should be separate. In fact they'd never actually been together. It was the only possible and sensible solution. Radio would have its own individual archive and so would television.

By the time this was settled, Tommy Thompson had retired and his assistant was keeping the archive work going as best he could.

I'd studied the briefs of the BBC and Canadian sound archives and thought that Radio New Zealand should have something similar as a reference point. While I was pondering this, I had a visit from Rosemary Collier, who'd recently resigned from the National Archive and was planning to set herself up as a free-lance archivist and consultant. She was about to travel to the UK and North America and other places to study archiving methods and regulations. On RNZ's behalf she offered to visit sound archives in the countries she was to visit and to prepare a report and recommendation for the New Zealand Sound Archives on her return.

There didn't seem to any reason why we shouldn't engage Rosemary to do this and her report was brilliant. It was instantly accepted as the way ahead for us to go and the "Rosemary Collier Report" became the Founding Document for the new-age Radio New Zealand Sound Archive. This was in 1980.

With Rosemary's report in hand, it was time to appoint a new archivist and look for someone with a strong radio background and, if not a university degree, at least a sound interest and knowledge of New Zealand history. Jim Sullivan met all these criteria and was appointed.

With some much-needed stability and direction, the archive flourished as it never had before. After some years Jim resigned and others, equally dedicated, progressively took his place and the staff increased as the work load grew, especially with the coming of digital recording.

My association with the archive became even closer in 1985 when I was appointed Executive Manager of Production and Services, and along with eight sections, such as Drama, Spoken Features and Documentaries, my responsibility included the Sound Archives. I had no direct input into the day-to-day operation of the archive but was responsible for getting it the best

budget I could, along with all those executive management things that helped keep the unit afloat. I retired in 1988 and not long afterwards most of those dedicated production sections were to disappear as Radio New Zealand changed its programme policy and staff structure to meet with the new challenges it faced. However, the Archive remained as a vital contributor to the network's daily schedule. As it still is.

Well now, let's have some more audio examples.

"Aunt Daisy" has become a radio icon in New Zealand. From 1936 until only a few days before her death at the age of 83 in July 1963, all the ZB commercial stations of the New Zealand Broadcasting Service (as RNZ then was) at 9.30 in the morning, Monday to Friday, they brought on Aunt Daisy's half-hour session and countless women and many men throughout New Zealand stopped what they were doing and listened to this extraordinary woman. Few people knew that her real name was Maud Ruby Basham and until she died in 1963 even fewer knew her age. She was regarded as "The first lady of radio" and in the years since her death no radio personality has quite reached the amazing popularity of this small, bustling, and hyper-energetic woman. Her programmes were basically what we would now know as "Infomercials" and it was not unknown for her to mention a new product between 9.00 and 9.30 in the morning and for it to be sold out by lunchtime. She had tried every recipe she read out, she has tested appliances she recommended, or had them tested for her, and because of this she was totally trusted. In the context of her time and place she was a phenomenon.

*Audio insert: Aunt Daisy's morning session
16 February 1950, New Zealand Broadcasting Service, #21079 (excerpt)*

And so she went on ... and on, but her multitude of listeners just plain loved her.

Unfortunately there aren't many recordings of Aunt Daisy for the very reason that apart from only a few, her broadcasts every morning were live.

This next track's a bit of self-indulgence on my part but I think it needs to be included because as an item it has its own piece of history.

Here's the background. It's a bit complicated, but please bear with me.

In December 1953 Queen Elizabeth was in Auckland as part of a 6 month Commonwealth Tour and on December the 25th she was to give her annual Christmas Talk from Auckland at – the first and only time the sovereign's homily has originated outside the UK. In the early hours of this Christmas Day news had come through that there'd been a disastrous railway accident at Tangiwai and many passengers on the train had been killed or wounded. I was on what was known as "Presentation" duty in the control room that day and with several others we spent the day replacing many of the programmes that had been planned to reflect the joy of a royal visit. With no newspapers being published on Christmas Day, radio was the country's only source of information. And radio in New Zealand didn't yet have it's own news service. But that's also another story.

All this was centred in an emotionally-charged atmosphere of receiving and broadcasting live reports and eye witness accounts from Tangiwai and detailing the numbers of people killed or injured. Names were not broadcast until next-of-kin had been advised. Leading up to the Queen's message at 9 pm our time, the BBC were producing a live, hour-long documentary with contributions from all the countries the Queen was to visit. This was to originate from Sydney and was to be carried by countless radio stations around the world, including us. It was to end

with Sir Edmund Hilary introducing the Queen from where he was staying in the English county of Norfolk.

Now – fifty-five years later, in 2008 I was asked by RNZ to write and present some programmes of personal reminiscences and I decided to include my memories of that Christmas Day in 1953 and I wanted to include Ed Hilary’s introduction to the Queen at the end of the BBC production. I knew it would be included in a recording of the BBC’s programme, but – would you believe – it appeared that nobody had a recording of that programme. Not the BBC, not the ABC in Australia, not the Sound Archive in Canada and certainly not the Sound Archive in New Zealand. My producer was Alison Lloyd Davies and we tried everywhere we could think of with the same result. However, not long before my deadline I decided to try Australia again. After all, they’d originated the programme. I searched through their digitised catalogue yet again and then, totally frustrated, I keyed in just two words, “Christmas 1953”. Nothing – but there was one mysterious entry under the heading of “Christmas Music – Antill, John”. Now I knew that John Antill had composed the background music for the BBC production; maybe, just maybe, this was the full programme. We asked the Australian Sound and Film Archive people to listen and check if it was. And there it was! Ed Hilary and all. They warned us that the sound quality ranged from passable to poor but when a copy arrived we found that the Hilary segment was acceptable. And away we went.

And after all that introduction, here’s an excerpt from that 2008 programme beginning with the presenter of the BBC show, Chester Wilmot.

*Audio insert: Christmas 1953 - Sir Edmund Hillary and Queen Elizabeth II
From A Sound Life, Radio New Zealand National, 2008, #292211 (excerpt)*

The importance of including Sir Edmund Hilary was because the programme was coming only a few weeks after his death in January 2008 and almost everything that he’d ever recorded was being played in range of tribute programmes on radio and television – but not his 1953 introduction to the Queen, which everyone must have forgotten. However, we’d found it and the copy now rests very happily in the New Zealand Sound Archive.

Now here’s another “Aunt”. Aunt Gwen who ran the children’s session at 2YA Wellington from 1927 until 1930. I should mention here, that this business of calling Children’s session presenters “Aunts” was because in those days radio announcers were not allowed to give their names. But it was thought that Children’s Sessions deserved something more comforting for the kids and they were allowed to be Aunts, or Uncles, or Big Brothers... or whatever. And if you’re wondering how Aunt Daisy had come to be everybody’s Aunt, it was because she had begun in radio as presenter of the Auckland Children’s Session in the late 1920s and the nom de plume stayed with her for the rest of her life.

But, back to Aunt Gwen – or Gwen Shepherd in full. She was immensely popular with mums and dads as well as the kids. So much so that when she married in 1930 her wedding ceremony at St Paul’s Pro-Cathedral and speeches from the reception were broadcast live on 2YA in Wellington and relayed to 3YA in Christchurch. It was estimated that more than 2000 people gathered in the streets outside the church but how many more thousands listened to the radio broadcast is anyone’s guess. After the wedding Gwen moved to Sydney, where her husband, Bruce Stennett, was working, but soon after their arrival they made a three-minute private recording of a miniature children’s programme, exactly as it would have been broadcast from 2YA. This was completely lost and forgotten until a few years ago when Gwen’s daughter found it among some of her then late mother’s belongings. As far as I know it’s the only known audio example of how a New Zealand children’s session sounded in the 1920s so it’s double precious.

In the track we'll hear I've removed the middle of a fairy story Gwen is telling. It's a bit long. You'll hear a fade down and a fade up again.

Audio insert: Aunt Gwen of 2YA Wellington's Children's Hour with Uncle Bruce c. March 1930, Columbia Studios, Sydney, #27900 (excerpt)

After making that recording in Sydney in 1930, Aunt Gwen retired from public life. After only two years as probably the first of New Zealand radio's high profile personalities, she settled into family life and that was that. She died in 1982.

Now, Billy Hart.

Not a lot is known about Billy Hart and even fewer people know his name, but he earned his place in radio and music history as the first New Zealander to sing quietly into a microphone and let an electronic amplifier give body and volume to his voice. He was a popular broadcaster from 2YA in Wellington from around 1927, with a contemporary describing his approach as "whispering". Although he probably didn't know it, he was following a new singing trend being set in America by Bing Crosby and Russ Colombo, the American pioneers of what became known as "crooning".

In 1930 Billy went to Australia to try his luck and was almost immediately invited by the Columbia company to make a commercial 78 rpm gramophone record. By so doing this we have his voice in the New Zealand sound archives. His song is one of the favourites of the late 1920s, South Sea Rose.

Audio insert: Billy Hart with orchestra perform South Sea Rose (Gilbert and Baer), March 1930, Columbia 01920, #28416 (excerpt)

Billy Hart didn't set Australia on fire, and he didn't make any more records, but there's evidence that he did some radio broadcasting in Sydney. A note referring to a 1938 broadcast said that he was unmarried and 29 years old. And that's really all that's known about him.

Now I'm going to delve into the War History section of the archive. In 1940 the New Zealand National Broadcasting Service (now RNZ) sent a Mobile Recording Unit to Egypt with three commentators. Their brief was to gather material from the New Zealand forces for radio broadcast back home: news despatches, personal experiences, entertainments and so on. One of the correspondents was Arch Curry and the track I've chosen is his unique eye-witness account of the military attack by British Infantry on Monte Cassino in Italy in May 1944.

Audio insert: Eyewitness account of Monte Cassino battle, Arch Curry 18 May 1944, New Zealand Broadcasting Unit, Italy, #18936 (excerpt)

That piece acquired a good deal of fame at the time because it was the only live commentary made on the Battle of Cassino. The BBC put it in their radio news coverage and other radio organisations did as well. Incidentally almost the entire output of the Middle East recording unit is preserved in the archive: a unique collection of World War Two history.

Here's another track from the Middle East unit, a group of Maori Battalion soldiers relaxing with a good old sing-song. This was recorded in North Africa some time in 1943 and the song is "Ka rongote pakanga nei", Listen to the Battle. After the last track it's quite appropriate.

*Audio insert: 28th Māori Battalion perform Ka Rongo te Pakanga Nei
1943, Italy, #41338*

Back at home, New Zealand radio helped the war effort in more ways than being on the spot in North Africa and Italy and one way was to boost troop morale. Concert Parties of popular radio artists were organised to perform in military camps up and down the country as well as in scattered and often isolated stations. Some of their shows were broadcast, but precious few were recorded. One of the more popular songs with the troops was one called Bungin' 'em in, written and composed by William Graeme-Holder a well-known Wellington writer. It was always sung with great gusto by the Wellington funny-man, Wally Marshall, who made it very much his own, and – yes, there's a copy in the sound archive.

*Audio insert: Wally Marshall performs Bungin' 'Em In
(William Graeme-Holder), 1940, #33629*

This next track is from some strange recordings I found about 10 years ago when I was asked to sort out the papers of Jim Hartstonge who'd worked in New Zealand radio since the mid-1930s and had been Radio New Zealand's Director General from 1975 until 1977. He died in 2002.

I found six double-sided 6 inch discs labelled "Home Recording" but after trying every sound reproducing device known, and being afraid of damaging them, I just couldn't hear what was on them. The actual discs indicated that they'd been made in England by the Gramophone Company, a former name of HMV, now known as EMI. Eventually I contacted the EMI Sound Archive in London and, they put me in touch with Roger Beardsley, one of the top sound restorers in the UK. He did know a little and became quite excited about the discovery. I sent him the discs and after trying everything he knew without success, he eventually went to the trouble of measuring the grooves and having a special stylus made that would reproduce the sound. He transferred all the discs to a set of CDs and a [a digital copy is] in the Sound Archive.

The machine was introduced in 1930 and it was available in New Zealand late the following year. It looks like one of those elaborate 1930s floor-standing radiograms with a 6-inch turntable at the top alongside a pickup fitted with a special stylus, and a back-up box of these was supplied. One stylus could be used 15 times. The discs were pre-grooved without any sound on them. The machine was capable of live recording through an included microphone or from a radio that was part of the general set-up. A New Zealand advertising campaign for them stopped after about a year so presumably not many were being sold and anyway the pinch of the 1930s Depression was beginning to be felt.

To make a recording you had to place the special pickup stylus in the first groove of the disc and away you went. The sound was cut into the existing empty grooves. The discs were limited to not much more than one minute of recording time. To play the sound back you had to use the same machine. You switched to "listen" mode and used the same stylus.

The short track I've chosen is of a couple of 4YA Dunedin announcers just clowning around. Unfortunately it's not dated but as May 1937 is noted on many of the discs it's fair enough to assume that this was 1937 too. They were just on 80 years old when I found them and I think they'd deteriorated somewhat. They're a bit noisy.

*Audio insert: Home recording – James Hartstonge
1937, #292215 (excerpt)*

You might have picked up that the two speakers were Lionel Sceats and Jim Hartstonge. They were both announcers at 4YA in 1937, and both were to be Director Generals of state-owned radio, Lionel Sceats from 1970 to 1975 and Jim Hartstonge from 1975 to 1977.

I can only guess that they didn't get these top jobs because of their humour and I'm not sure that either of them would be very happy to know that all these years later we've been listening to one of their not-so-fine moments.

From their start in New Zealand, the commercial radio stations – the ZBs – made a feature of broadcasting serials – soap operas – in their prime time. They attracted huge audiences, desperate to know what happened after the inevitable cliff-hanger ending of each episode. The majority of these were recorded in Australia but there were a few of American origin as well. Not long after they were under way in 1936, the management of Commercial Radio decided that they would produce and record a soap-opera themselves. It was the first time this had been attempted in New Zealand, so they bought the scripts of a show called “One Man's Family” from America and with a cast of well-known Wellington amateur actors, away they went with the first episode played on 29 April 1936.

Here's a little taste of how it sounded.

*Audio insert: One Man's Family
1937, 2ZB, #27063 (excerpt)*

There's no information about whether “One Man's Family” was popular or not but it ran for 18 months, which is not too bad. Apparently the end came when the sponsor ran out of money.

Now, I'm coming to the end of my time, but before I end I'd like to go all the way back to the beginning of radio in New Zealand as an entertainment. This is not to 1935, when the first recording machines arrived, but to 1921, the 17th of November 1921. On that day the first organised radio programme was broadcast in New Zealand. I'm not going to go into how it all happened but I'll just say that Professor Robert Jack, of Otago University, was a keen radio-telegraph enthusiast and had formed the opinion that formalised programmes of music and speech could become part of the radio, perspective. Already it was happening in the USA and he introduced it to New Zealand, from Dunedin.

His programmes consisted of gramophone records borrowed from a local music store, with appropriate announcements in between.

Out in the backblocks of Otago, Prof Jack's first broadcast was heard by a brother and sister, Brenda and Frank Bell, and Brenda wrote in her diary (now in the Hocken Library) that “they got some items plainly”. She also noted that among the songs broadcast was a popular tune of the day called “Hello My Dearie”. And that's how we know that “Hello my dearie” was a part of New Zealand's first ever radio programme broadcast. No other titles have ever been discovered.

For many years we didn't have a copy of “Hello My Dearie” but it was pretty near the top of our wish list. Eventually in the 1990s one turned up in a private collection in Australia and we were able to get a copy. We can only imagine what it was like to hear the rather scratchy acoustic record made in 1917 coming over the primitive radio-waves in 1921 but, anyway, here's a part of it. This is true New Zealand radio broadcasting history. It's sung by Cicely Debenham.

Audio insert: Cicely Debenham performs Hello My Dearie

(Buck and Stamper), February 1917, Columbia 1138, #24060 (excerpt)

Now, as a grand finale, here's something that I think brings both parts of Ngā Taonga together. It goes back to the 1940s and the National Film Unit's "Weekly Review" newsreel. The opening sequence showed a platoon of soldiers marching along to the tune of a toe tapping march whose name not a lot of people knew. And what-do-you-know, the original record is in the Sound Archive. It's part of a selection from the Victor Herbert operetta *Sweethearts* and it's played by Louis Levy and his Orchestra.

Audio insert: Louis Levy and his orchestra perform On Parade from Sweethearts Selection (Herbert) 1939, HMV EA2549, #292219 (excerpt)

That was recorded in 1939 so it would have been relatively new when the National Film Unit took it up in October 1942.

And in the time honoured way of movies as they used to be, this, then, is THE END.

A very special thank you to Peter for allowing us to film his presentation and reproduce it online.