

SERIES LEVEL DESCRIPTION
RADIO CONTRIBUTORS – FIRST SECTION (RCONT1)

Scope & Content

The files contain correspondence and contractual papers relating to the engagement of speakers and performers to contribute to BBC radio programmes before 1963. They cover the whole range of broadcasting, and every sort of broadcaster is represented here : actors, composers, comedians, musicians, politicians, writers, and authoritative speakers drawn from the full spectrum of the arts and sciences. The papers cover contributions to both the BBC's domestic and overseas programmes, but not, generally, the regions. Papers relating to copyright cover both radio and television broadcasts.

The papers may vary both in quantity and quality, with much depending on the contributor's propensity to correspond with BBC staff. Some files are purely businesslike, with exchanges limited to the relevant booking departments of the BBC. Many, however, contain detailed correspondence with producers about the subject's broadcasting work. These are generally supplemented with internal BBC memoranda, thus providing a record of the programme-making process from conception to broadcast and beyond.

The files in this section concern broadcasters external to the BBC. Salaried members of BBC staff, or those on long-term contract, do not have files of this sort, unless they made contributions to programmes outside their normal duties. Similarly, the BBC's house orchestras are not represented here.

It is noticeable that, as this series of files comes to an end in the early 1960s, the telephone is starting to replace the letter or memorandum as the principal means of communication, and the files tend to become progressively less rich in detail.

Archival History

The files are essentially contract-based, and were therefore originally created according to the separate departments of BBC radio responsible for the issue of different categories of contracts. The principal ones are Talks, Artists, Scriptwriter, Composer and Copyright; the others are Children's Hour, Gramophone Recital, Music Copyist, Music Publisher, Outside Broadcast Commentator, and Radio Times Articles. (It should be borne in mind that BBC contractual practices have varied over the series' span of forty years, so that some categories were incorporated into others and may not appear throughout the period covered). The papers were held at the BBC's Central Registry in London and were transferred to the archives in the 1970s.

Arrangement

The files were probably originally created according to standard Registry practice. This was to create alphabetical runs of "main" files where there were sufficient papers on one subject to warrant making a file on each one. Each of these file series were followed by a second alphabetical run of "miscellaneous" folders containing a number

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of small clumps of papers pinned together, none of which were as yet sufficiently bulky to be worth making into “main” files. At some point before their transfer to the archives, all the main files from the different contractual series were amalgamated into one alphabetical run, bringing together the separate files on each person. The Miscellaneous files, however were left in their separate sequences. (see Related Areas below). In the 1960s, when it was thought that the bulk of the files might be discarded, a selection of those thought to contain the most eminent broadcasting names was taken into the Historical Records Office. In some cases, where those individuals had files from more than one booking area, the files were broken up and all the papers placed in one straight chronological sequence. These files were in some cases numbered 910 as part of an older classified system introduced for the Archives, or later given N numbers, as part of an attempt to use in the Archives a new classified system being introduced in the current filing Registries from c1965. This practice was not widespread, and was soon abandoned. Since the 1970s, the files have been held as one unified sequence at the Written Archives Centre, and given the classification RCONT1 to indicate that it is the earliest run of radio contributors’ files.

All contributors’ files are arranged alphabetically by surname. Those files not concerned with individuals (e.g. orchestras, pop groups, commercial enterprises or public bodies) form part of the same alphabetical sequence. The files are not numbered, and do not currently appear on any database.

An alphabetical shelf list, originally created by Registry, is available in the Reading Room and provides additional information. This includes the overall dates of the correspondence, the number of files held for each contributor, and an indication of the capacity in which the broadcaster was engaged. The two largest of these categories are Talks (for speakers contributing to programmes as themselves) and Artists (for performers of any kind). Other categories include Composer, Copyright, and Scriptwriter : there are additional minor ones, as above. (It is thus quite common for versatile contributors to have separate, concurrent, files in more than one category, but they are both listed and stored together under that person’s name). The shelf list will also indicate if a file is officially missing, or is known to have been destroyed in the past. Researchers should be aware that even if a particular name does not appear in the RCONT1 shelf list, there may still be papers for that person in any of the related “Miscellaneous” sequences RCONT2 - 11.

The files in this sequence are contained in buff file covers. This is in accordance with early Registry practice, and was intended to distinguish contributors’ files from programme, departmental, or policy files, which generally have pink covers.

Related Areas

There are concurrent runs of miscellaneous papers (‘clumps’) covering the correspondence of infrequent, or would-be, broadcasters who generated insufficient papers to warrant the creation of a file. Unlike the main file run, these are still stored in separate sequences according to Artists, Talks etc (as above) and, although filed alphabetically, are entirely unlisted. These form sections RCONT2- RCONT11 (see Related Areas below)

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There is a continuation sequence, RCONT12, covering the years 1963-1972, and a further sequence, RCONT15, which covers 1973-1979.

There is an equivalent section of files for television (TVART1) which covers the same period (i.e. up to the end of 1962). There are also sections of contributors' files within the Written Archives Centre's holdings from the BBC nations and regions, although these vary both in scope and organisation. There may also be correspondence with contributors in separate programme production files. It is also possible to supplement or cross-check information held within RCONT1 with the various indexes to programme output, and the index to the radio script library.

Administrative History

This is by far the largest section of files in the BBC Written Archives Centre, and does not represent the body of work of one single department, but nonetheless it is among the most straightforward to use. Generally, a person either appears by name or he/she does not (an exception being some established writers, whose affairs were dealt with by literary agents). There are, however, omissions. Some are the result of Registry weeding practice, some files were lost or destroyed during the Second World War, and doubtless some files never entered, or were lost from, the Registry system over the years.

c. 12 million items

c.114, 800 files

1924-1962