My first encounter with the BBC monitoring collection was back in the early 1990s when I undertook a piece of work on IWM’s storage of its collections. This involved getting to grips with the vast quantities of material stored at Duxford Airfield and the rate at which they were growing. Much of what I was surveying was military hardware and shelves of film cans, but I can remember being shown the BBC Monitoring Collection, hearing what it represented, sampling one or two wartime files, and thinking ‘this is a gold-mine for historians’. It was mind-boggling to realise the scale of broadcast output that those serried ranks of papers – still in their original boxes – represented.

Fast forward a decade or so and with a new responsibility to grow our research capacity, I was really pleased to learn that Peter Busch at King’s College London had taken the initiative in getting a bid together for a Collaborative Doctoral PhD studentship to explore the collection. Laura Johnson was the successful candidate. When her IWM co-supervisor, Richard Golland, our former head of library, retired, I took over as Laura’s co-supervisor.

In December 2010 two things happened: first IWM got Independent Research Organisation status – meaning that we became eligible to apply for research grants from the AHRC. In the same year, I went to a one-day conference at Reading University on radio propaganda during the Cold War. Listening to Jean Seaton and Alban Webb made me realise that here we had some important potential allies in opening up the BBC Monitoring Collection. It was clear that this archive – our largest paper collection and now the subject of a second PhD initiated by Peter Busch, this time on a Cold War theme – was a very strong candidate for a research project.

We considered the options. We recognised that the collection’s sheer size – it amounts to 15 million sheets of paper – made it particularly challenging to address. If the collection could be better understood and assessed with a Network, it would add ballast to the argument to open it up.

A meeting in 2013 got commitment and support from several quarters. Robert Seatter at BBC History wrote a wonderful letter in support of our application, as did Rosy Wolfe at BBC Monitoring.

I must confess to being susceptible to the undeniable romance to be found in BBCM’s history. I particularly like the paragraph in Asa Brigg’s history of the wartime BBC where he writes:

> The origins of the service were very humble. The BBC spent £810 on a wooden hut, six receivers and a number of aerials.

Briggs goes on to describe how Wood Norton – the Service’s first home – soon became ‘a genuine international centre, almost a kind of international university’.

With the help of our Advisory Group, we devised a programme of five workshops to explore not just the academic potential of the collection but – on Jean Seaton’s recommendation – the value of BBC Monitoring as an institution.
The first workshop was particularly memorable, being held at the Caversham where the Service has had its headquarters since 1943. Several former monitors came and shared their memories of joining the Service and making life-long careers there – recording history as it happened and becoming expert in the often arcane economic and political developments of ‘their’ countries.

The second, held at the University of Westminster, brought together a number of former users of the Service – including senior former diplomats and others, who, in a lively session chaired by Lord Hennessy, considered the value of the Service across government and beyond.

The papers given at our two historical workshops affirmed just how rich the transcripts are as a source. I must pay tribute to those academics who took the trouble to visit and research at Duxford. The interviews and the blogs on these webpages convey the excitement of a visit to Duxford’s Building 6, where the lack of facilities was made up for by the sense of adventure and quest as boxes unopened for seventy years revealed their contents.

We could not have done this project without a very great deal of external help and I am profoundly grateful to Jean Seaton, who made the project fun as well as hugely thought-provoking. Her extensive contacts and deep understanding of the BBC were a boon. The Advisory Group and others closely involved in the project are listed separately and again their insight and good judgement were invaluable. I would finally like to pay special tribute to colleagues past and present here at IWM: Stephen Walton, archivist, who looked after the collection for at least two decades; Richard Golland, now retired, who first saw the collection’s value and facilitated the first CDP studentship; and Roger Smither, Meriel Royal, Sara McCallum and Emily Peirson-Webber, who in various different ways, and with energy and dedication, ensured the smooth-running of the Network.

It is testament to the richness of the collection that the papers and blogs on this website were written with such speed and commitment. Those involved could see the importance of conveying to the wider world the huge scope that the collection offers, and the importance of ensuring that what Sir David Omand called ‘a treasure-trove for our island story’ is well used in its current home at the BBC Monitoring headquarters in Caversham.