



## British Film Institute

This is a critical moment in the history of the BFI National Archive. There is an audience at home with more time than ever to engage with culture and a desire to watch and share interesting material. Yet the management team has been faced with making significant changes to their services and activities as a result of the coronavirus crisis. Safety and welfare of staff has been top priority, while the care and security of the national collection has presented real operational challenges. Physical, digital and paper-based collections require 24-hour security, power sources and environmental controls across two BFI sites. Working within government guidelines, only a limited number of security and maintenance staff are now allowed on-site to continue essential checks for collections safety and carrying out testing programmes on specialist machinery and archive technology. Other key activities normally carried out on site, such as digitisation and film restoration work, have been placed on hold. This includes the preparation, cleaning, lending and borrowing of materials as well as a pause on sending out tapes to framework suppliers working on mass digitisation projects. Those supplier relationships must, however, continue to be managed in order to work out what will be possible in future as there is an inherent risk to some UK film and TV heritage if the work to digitise vulnerable and obsolete tape formats is cancelled or postponed. And unless materials are already digitised and accessible to remote workers, there is a potential impact on the BFI's commercial revenues (e.g. footage sales) with management actively considering how to maintain essential income streams during this time.

Maintenance and security staff aside, all other National Archive staff are now working from home, with their focus on supporting the full range of archive users (audiences, researchers and programme makers) and a commitment to maintaining public access to the national collections through increased online engagement, using existing digital materials. The archive has been digitising their collections for years and has a good amount of content to reinterpret, repackage and reshare, and this is currently happening in ways and volumes not seen before. The BFI has long enjoyed huge success with its Britain on Film archive digitisation project, with over 75 million online views to date Britain on Film had transformed access to archive films and cultural heritage, opening up national and regional collections for audiences across the UK to explore and enjoy over 10,000 films all for free. Curators have responded to the current crisis, and an increased appetite from audiences for digital on demand content, by reinterpreting and repackaging already digitised archive films into new themed collections including Eating in, Cats v Dogs, Films for under

Fives and VE Day – to appeal to a wider, more family focused audience - and promoting existing collections such as NHS on Film at a time when the country is pulling together in support of key workers, health workers and carers.

And while cinematheques and cultural organisations around the world have closed (and therefore there are fewer loans of BFI material to third parties), the BFI has moved some of its own festivals online, such as the BFI Flare London LGBTQ+ Film Festival. This is a positive example of a quick response to the coronavirus situation, unfolding in the week the festival had been due to start, with a selection of titles from this year's programme made available on BFI Player for a limited period, including live filmmaker Q&As and a virtual closing night party playlist. The BFI Flare at Home titles are no longer available – but the offer did link to a wider BFI Flare offer on BFI Player for Subscribers, rental titles and free films from the BFI National Archive.

These are innovative times for those involved in reframing the BFI's digital offer to their audiences: giving access in new ways, promoting further access to already digitised material and generating greater awareness through social media. At the same time, remote workers are also taking the opportunity to work on data cleansing projects - addressing crucial records and enhancing documentation - and management is investigating and encouraging staff to do Continuous Professional Development which isn't always possible in normal times due to the intensity of running large scale digitisation projects.

These first few weeks of the crisis have focussed minds at the BFI on the importance of their digital offer to their audiences, and where improvements may be needed. It has also highlighted the importance of the underlying infrastructure and the need for all roles across the organisation to be able to work remotely when necessary; the archive team has always enjoyed the luxury of proximity to their collections but this means it hasn't needed to build systems for sustained remote working. The coronavirus experience has shown the value of having robust business continuity plans and will make for a more digitally front-facing organisation in the future. There will be a review of connectivity and a likely move to video meetings and less travel. More data and documentation will need to be uploaded to the network to support flexible working, and there is an ambition - firmly highlighted by the crisis - to make digital paper collections (important documents relating to Britain's film and television heritage) more widely accessible across the UK - which may in turn require a change in UK copyright law to make this possible. Quite simply, it seems apparent and is assumed that people will work differently, more flexibly and sustainably, in future.

The importance of archive digitisation and a need to further improve the underlying operational infrastructure have been highlighted by the crisis. Yet with a lot of hard work and innovation, the BFI National Archive team has worked quickly to ensure continuity and a strong digital offering to its audiences and users, and has exposed their crucial work to protect Britain's cultural heritage and make it accessible.

For more information on the BFI's digital offers visit <https://player.bfi.org.uk/>