

Salvaging Apollo Eleven*

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For those of a certain age, it was the televisual event of their lives. It certainly was for me. There can have been few, if any other occasions when I was willingly dragged from my bed at around 02:30. But to watch those blurry pictures of Neil Armstrong clambering down the side of the Apollo Lunar Module, stepping out onto the lunar soil and uttering those immortal words was unmissable. I have always found it impossible to accurately convey the excitement that I felt as a nine year old to those too young to have experienced it. Now, the events of Apollo 11 seem to belong to quite another age, as if they actually happened more than the twenty seven years which have passed since those heady days.

That psychological distance was reinforced very strongly three years ago when, at the first Missing Believed Wiped event, Steve Bryant of the British Film Institute listed the BBC's Apollo 11 broadcasts among the Top Twenty most wanted missing television programmes. Aware as I was of the BBC's dismal record of maintaining its archive, it was nevertheless with complete disbelief that I heard that they had "lost" - a euphemism for destroyed - their own record of one of the Twentieth Century's defining events.

But why make all this fuss about the BBC's footage of the Apollo 11 mission? Surely we have all seen documentaries containing extended sequences of astronauts stumbling around on the lunar surface? Indeed so, but that footage derives from NASA's chronicle of the mission, containing material which was recorded live at the time and which was also incorporated as "live feeds" into the BBC's broadcasts. Apparently missing, however, are the studio scenes where James Burke and Patrick Moore reacted to the events as they happened, and also the BBC's captions and studio sound overlays which were used in conjunction with the NASA live feeds. To those people who are interested in the history of current affairs broadcasting the difference between NASA's footage and the BBC's broadcasts is an important one.

Still, the difference did seem rather a theoretical one given that the BBC's master videotapes had been wiped long since. All that was known to remain for certain was the some home movie cine footage (shot from a TV screen), some amateur audio recordings (also from the TV broadcasts) and a few canned documentary sequences used by the BBC

to fill in during quite periods of the mission. The announcement of the discovery of the home movie footage was made at the second Missing Believed Wiped meeting. Good news though it was, it still felt like history at one remove; and there appeared to be little prospect of further finds.

Let us backtrack a little to a period about four weeks before that second BFI event - a couple of months after the twenty fifth anniversary of the first moon landing. I subscribe to a magazine called 405 Alive, an excellent publication which mainly covers the arcane world of old television sets, studio cameras and associated broadcasting paraphernalia, but which also covers vintage television programmes. At the back of the magazine one finds classified adverts which from time to time offer films and videos for sale or swap, although they are rarely of much note. But an advert in Issue 22 certainly was notable, offering as it did the opportunity for readers to bid for a 16 mm negative film with a separate magnetic soundtrack containing excerpts from the BBC's Apollo 11 broadcasts.

In a state of some excitement, I contacted the BBC's archive unit, enclosing a photocopy of the advert with my letter. I received a prompt response from the acting archive selector (Jan Hawkins) which stated that the matter would be investigated. With a naivety I now find embarrassing I left it at that. When I bumped into Ms Hawkins at the second Missing Believed Wiped event, I was disappointed to find that no progress had been made. Feeling a bit let down, I decided to contact the advertiser immediately in order to register a bid. I was not at all surprised to find that the film had been sold already. Needless to say, I cursed my inaction and resolved to act promptly should I ever have a second opportunity - not that I expected one.

In the mean time I tried to remedy the situation, writing a letter to 405 Alive in the hope that the film's new owner would be willing to lend it to the BBC, BFI or even to me! To no-one's surprise, least of all mine, no answer was forthcoming. I also mentioned the matter to Steve Bryant around the same time.

I never expected to get a second opportunity, but almost exactly twelve months later the same film collector advertised another Apollo 11 film in the back pages of 405 Alive. This time I acted immediately, and after some negotiation obtained not only the advertised mute 16 mm print, but also a negative film containing further Apollo 11 sequences. There followed a rather lengthy period during which I arranged to get a fellow collector's help in performing a trial transfer to videotape, so that I could compare the contents of the films with various tapes of non-BBC footage which I had obtained during

the previous couple of years. (A contact in Northern Ireland provided a video recording of the whole three hour moonwalk complete with apparently untransmitted interjections from NASA's mission control staff. Conspiracy theorists everywhere will be disappointed to hear that there was no sign that the astronauts encountered any alien artefacts or little green men.)

While waiting to arrange the tape transfer, I wrote to Steve Bryant at the BFI to let him know that I had obtained the two films, offering them to him without preconditions. The silence, if not exactly deafening, was a little disappointing. Meanwhile, by Christmas 1995, I had the precious video transfer and could study the films' content at my leisure. The first film, lasting sixteen minutes but unfortunately lacking a soundtrack, was particularly interesting. It contained four sequences, two of which were unique to the BBC broadcasts: a 90 second documentary clip of James Burke demonstrating NASA's moonwalk training simulator, and 22 seconds of the same presenter talking to camera in the BBC's studio. The other sequences contained shots of the astronauts inside the LEM while en route to the Moon, and some views of the lunar surface from orbit, roughly a day before the landing; both contained BBC captions.

The second film contained twelve minutes of more familiar material, including clips of Armstrong collecting the contingency soil sample just minutes after he emerged from the LEM, Aldrin stepping off the ladder, Armstrong reading the LEM-mounted plaque containing the words "We came in peace for all mankind", and several other sequences of the astronauts setting up instruments, etc. A few clips of the splashdown three days later completed this compilation. Although there were no studio sequences, the various captions confirmed that the film originated from the BBC's broadcasts.

A second, much more detailed letter to Steve Bryant in January did the trick. His answering letter was encouraging, so I delivered the films to him, with the result that the films were transferred to D3 digital tape at the National Film and Television Archive in Berkhamsted, where they are now archived. The NFTVA technical staff significantly improved the visual appearance of the first film, removing much of the line structure which had been present on the first video transfer. To my considerable surprise, they also found that the second, negative film actually had a magnetic sound stripe, something that had been missed during the first inspection of the film. The resultant soundtrack on the video transfer includes several examples of James Burke's commentary, including a cherishable moment when he congratulates Patrick Moore on the accuracy of his

prediction about the nature of the lunar surface. Patrick rather humbly and charmingly states that "it is early days." It is little moments like that which make the discovery of part of the BBC's Apollo 11 footage so worthwhile.

You might think that this was a case of mission accomplished then. Well, not quite. The two films which I recovered - I hesitate to say "found" since there are several other people in the chain which lead to their return, not least the collector who made them available to me - present quite a mystery in their own right. The poor picture quality and the particularly clumsy way the sequences have been compiled suggest that the films were hastily recorded in a BBC back room prior to the wiping of the master videotapes. I suspect that someone just pointed a 16 mm film camera at a TV monitor and hoped for the best - a primitive form of telecine transfer which is guaranteed to produce poor results.

Even stranger is what is not contained in the two films. There is no coverage of the actual landing, nor is there anything of Neil Armstrong's exit from the LEM and his first steps on the moon's surface. Perhaps there is another film in this unofficial series, one which contains the missing sequences.

Which brings me back to that first advertised film, the one which I failed to obtain. After some digging around, I did eventually turn up a candidate name for its new owner. Ironically, the name was a familiar one, belonging to a collector whom I had found to be trustworthy in the past. After we exchanged a couple of letters on the subject, he agreed to send his film to the BFI for examination. That film turned out to be the negative from which my first film was struck, and is of generally similar visual quality. Fortunately, the separate magnetic soundtrack does indeed match the film, and examples of James Burke's and Patrick Moore's commentary can be heard throughout. It is now clear that the short studio sequence is a wrap-up at the end of the bulletin which had featured the live transmission seen in the film's second sequence.

But the strange thing is that even before I contacted him, the film's current owner had tried to return it first to the BBC and then the BFI. The former messed him around thoroughly, first claiming that they had all the Apollo 11 material they needed, then trying to pass him on to the BFI. A letter to Steve Bryant apparently elicited no reply. In the circumstances it is surprising that the collector agreed to try one last time, but perhaps my positive experience encouraged him afresh. Further titbits of information gleaned from various sources indicate that the original advertiser of the films had also offered them to the BBC and BFI, again with no positive response. All of which makes the presence

of the Apollo 11 broadcasts in the BFI's "top twenty missing programmes" seem a bit strange. Nor is this phenomenon confined to space travel footage. I understand that the BBC archive unit recently showed little interest in a missing episode of *Till Death Us Do Part* - a 60s series which was central to debates about decency and racism. Particularly worrying is the statement made to me by an informed source which suggests that the BBC archive unit now only accepts missing programmes that it regards as commercially viable — a truly deplorable attitude, if true.

The situation is rather different at the BFI, whose staff are, in my experience, genuinely interested in the recovery of missing films and television programmes. What is not widely understood, however, is that such activities form only a very small part of their television work. Most of their effort is actually expended on the recording (off-air), classification and archival of newly broadcast programmes. This situation will only intensify when Channel 5 starts transmission in 1997, and as satellite and cable channels continue to proliferate. Nevertheless, a more consistent policy on the recovery of old programmes is needed, not least so that members of the public are not discouraged from trying to help. The BFI also needs to address the problem of the lengthy periods which often occur between a rare item being handed in and it being copied and returned to its owner. It is not uncommon for a year or more to pass, a duration which is surely unacceptable. So if you are keen to help with the search for lost television programmes, whether of the cult variety featured in this magazine or of a more general nature, I suggest that you develop reserves of persistence and patience. You will probably need both. Nevertheless, I would stress that the search remains a worthwhile one.

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