



# Best Practices in Filmstrip Archiving. Report

Workshop, Frankfurt am Main, 27–28 November 2025

## Participants:

Steve Foxon (BFI London)

Isabelle Hasler (freelance restorer)

Katherin Howells (The National Archives)

Matt Lee (Bill Douglas Cinema Museum)

Sarah Mackay (National Library of Scotland)

Sharon Maxwell (Museum of Engl. Rural Life)

Anke Mebold (DFF Frankfurt)

Daniel Meiller (Deutsche Kinemathek)

Alison Metcalfe (National Library of Scotland)

Anke Napp (Deutsches Bildbandarchiv)

David Pfluger (Kinemathek Lichtspiel)

Vasylyna Polianska (Dovzhenko Institut)

Clare Watson (Imperial War Museum)

Maxi Zimmermann (DHM Berlin)

## Aims of the Workshop

The workshop *Best Practices in Filmstrip Archiving* brought together archivists, scholars, and practitioners from different institutional and national contexts to address the challenges of preserving, cataloguing, digitising, and providing access to filmstrips. Filmstrips, once a widely used educational, governmental, religious, and entertainment medium in the twentieth century, now occupy an uncertain position in archival collections. They are often misclassified, inconsistently catalogued, or overlooked altogether, despite their historical significance and their role as precursors to contemporary formats of audiovisual presentations.

The workshop was organised by the AHRC/DFG funded research project *Relocating Filmstrips, Remapping Europe*. A preliminary questionnaire completed by workshop participants revealed a diverse range of experience with filmstrips, from little or no prior engagement to expert-level knowledge, as well as significant variation in the size and scope of filmstrip holdings across institutions. Despite these differences, participants identified shared challenges, particularly in relation to metadata, access, preservation, and digitisation, and expressed a strong interest in exchanging knowledge, developing pragmatic best practices, and strengthening networks across archives.

A central goal was to initiate dialogue between institutions and to work towards realistic, shared models of best (or “better”) practice that acknowledge both ideal standards and practical constraints.

## **Filmstrips as Media Packages**

After an introductory presentation by the research team, the opening plenary discussion foregrounded the concept of the filmstrip as a *media package*. Participants emphasised that filmstrips rarely exist in isolation: they are often accompanied by texts, sound recordings, boxes, and other contextual materials. These accompanying materials are often crucial for understanding context and use. Several speakers noted that while filmstrips themselves are often in relatively good condition, accompanying paper materials may be more endangered.

A recurring concern was whether and how to separate components of these media packages for preservation purposes. While separation can reduce certain material risks, it also threatens the loss of contextual information. Many participants argued that only a few well-resourced archives can manage separation without losing relational data. This led to broader reflections on the difference between “best practices” and what participants variously described as “realistic,” “better,” or “modest” practices—approaches that accept institutional limitations while still aiming for responsible guidelines.

The plenary also addressed the perceived lack of value attributed to filmstrips within archives. Participants argued that the intermedial nature of filmstrips—their combination of image, text, and sound—constitutes a key asset. Unlike many films, filmstrips derive much of their meaning from their contexts of presentation, making the preservation of contextual materials particularly important.

## **Cataloguing and Metadata**

The sessions on cataloguing and metadata revealed widespread inconsistency in existing practices. Participants highlighted terminological challenges, including the absence of clear or standardised terms for filmstrips in some languages and the frequent ambiguity between single items, publications, and entire collections.

It was noted that it is difficult to apply standard filmographic metadata (such as authorship and date) to filmstrips, which often require alternative contextual information or cannot be determined at all. Therefore, metadata would typically refer to the physical object in a collection, rather than an audiovisual presentation as an abstract entity (“work”).

Participants discussed the risk of over-cataloguing versus under-documentation, with several arguing that researchers generally prefer an abundance of contextual information to insufficient description. The importance of using both contemporary and historical terminology was strongly emphasised, as historic terms are often essential for discovering related materials and legacy catalogues. At the same time, cataloguing

practices should allow researchers to locate filmstrips both as a distinct medium and within the broader context of audiovisual presentation formats, such as slide lectures or PowerPoint-based media.

The researchers suggested the potential of expanding the project database into a shared access point that would enable research across multiple filmstrip collections and institutions. To this end, the data model developed within the project will be made available to partner archivists for discussion and evaluation, and, where necessary, will be revised accordingly.

Participants agreed to develop a dedicated and accessible cataloguing guide for filmstrips, potentially framed as a “beginner’s guide” to support institutions with varying levels of expertise and resources.

### **Storage and Preservation**

In general, the preservation requirements of filmstrips are similar to those of other film materials: lower storage temperatures are preferred, moisture should be avoided, and temperature fluctuations should be minimised. Compared to negatives and other film materials, filmstrips often are in surprisingly good condition, presumably due to the small quantity of material and also to the fact that they have been untouched for a long time. Nevertheless, risks such as acidity from paper enclosures, inappropriate containers, rubber bands, and plastic materials were highlighted.

Once again, the question arose as to whether the different components of a filmstrip should be stored together or separately. While the various materials may have different requirements for archival storage, they can also negatively affect one another when kept in close proximity. Participants therefore discussed the suitability of different boxing materials in relation to their chemical stability and long-term preservation risks, including original containers made of metal, plastic, or cardboard.

Participants also debated other practical questions such as whether filmstrips should be stored flat or rolled and the feasibility of freezing. Freezing was often seen as theoretically desirable but financially unrealistic for many institutions. Nitrate film was discussed as a specific preservation risk due to its high flammability and chemical instability.

The overarching message was not to be overly careful with filmstrips, but to focus on avoiding major risks such as moisture and heat. Preservation strategies should not render collections effectively inaccessible after digitisation.

## **Digitisation and Access**

After David Pfluger presented the project partner Scan2Screen and the technological innovations and digitisation services it offers, the afternoon session addressed digitisation as both a preservation and access strategy. Participants discussed what it means to digitise a filmstrip “meaningfully,” debating whether digitisation should prioritise the object (e.g. raw scans including perforations and edgecodes), the reconstructed audiovisual experience, or user-friendly online formats. Several speakers proposed working with multiple digitisation outputs: a high-quality archival master, a presentation format, and an online access version.

Participants emphasised that filmstrips must also be understood as a performative medium, whose meaning emerges not only from the physical object but also from its presentation as a showing, shaped by analogue projection, duration, and elements of showmanship that contribute to an authentic and pleasurable viewing experience.

Broader discussions explored potential audiences for digitised filmstrips, including researchers, educators, and the general public. Ideas included linking filmstrips to contemporary media forms, engaging with social media, and activating nostalgic or living memory through public events and educational use.

## **Conclusions and Outlook**

The workshop demonstrated a shared recognition of filmstrips as significant yet undervalued archival objects. Rather than defining rigid standards, participants emphasised the importance of pragmatism. Filmstrips were seen not only as objects deserving preservation in their own right, but also as a means of confronting broader blind spots within film and media archives, where short-form, instructional, and intermedial formats have often been marginalised in favour of feature films.

The discussions laid the groundwork for future collaboration, including the development of shared cataloguing guidelines, improved metadata practices, and exchange between institutions to address incomplete media packages. Ultimately, the workshop underscored the need to balance preservation with access, ensuring that filmstrip collections remain visible, contextualised, and meaningful for contemporary and future audiences.