

# **WOMEN IN FOCUS**

**A TOOLKIT FOR  
ARCHIVING WOMEN'S  
AMATEUR FILM**

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## Introduction: Women in Focus Toolkit

This toolkit emerges from the research project ‘Women in Focus: Developing a Feminist Approach to Film Archive Metadata and Cataloguing’ Our key aim was to advocate for a new approach to the cataloguing of women filmmakers in local, regional, and national archives.

Women’s creative work has been under-reported or under-recognised due to a lack of recorded primary information on their films, filmmaking style, or contributions to collaborative productions. This is exacerbated when dealing with amateur or non-professional filmmaking, where the work of individual women filmmakers has been even more invisible. This elision is often as a result of how films are spoken about before they reach the archive, and the collecting remit of the archive, which might emphasise geographical or thematic content over authorship or technical skill. Women’s amateur filmmaking is, therefore, made doubly invisible because of gender and a lack of emphasis on amateur film producers.

The array of ‘tools’ in the next few pages has been designed to aid archives and archivists when approaching amateur films and amateur film collections that may contain contributions of women as filmmakers or film-takers or as collaborators in small group or cine club filmmaking. While our focus remains the development of approaches that grow awareness of the cultural significance of these creative women, many of our strategies can be extended to filmmakers from other marginalised groups.

We acknowledge here that women filmmaker collections can feature in different archival settings: from mixed-media archives to institutions with specific responsibilities for film and media material. Our focus on women amateur filmmakers represents an additional layer of complexity: cataloguing such films can be a struggle against traditional metadata standards for film. Amateur or non-professional film practice does not always embody the typical production roles of filmmaking labour (e.g., producer, cinematographer), and archived films may not list production metadata: given their invisibility, this works to further obscure the participation of women in amateur film practice.

This toolkit offers five tools that support archives in representing women’s amateur film practice through existing practices of metadata creation and small but significant adjustments to metadata schemas and information gathering that allow for recording of women’s names and other relevant information. Each tool is accompanied by a case study that illustrates its rationale and suggested use. The case studies are formed from issues and challenges we encountered and which will likely be familiar to archivists.

### Those tools are:

#### TOOL 1:

**Acquisitions Questionnaire:** how to use acquisition / donor interviews or questionnaires to gain information about women’s specific contributions to the film collection.

#### TOOL 2:

**Expanded Film Viewing and Inspection:** how to adapt existing techniques to draw out more material on women filmmakers and their filmmaking craft.

#### TOOL 3:

**Agent/Authority Records and Finding Aids:** how to create spaces for the identification of women filmmakers, including biographies and filmographies.

#### TOOL 4:

**Metadata and Controlled Vocabulary:** how to use existing metadata fields to better represent women filmmakers.

#### TOOL 5:

**Using Other Research Resources:** how to utilise other information sources that enhance your metadata, particularly when faced with time constraints.



TOOL

01

## Acquisitions Questionnaire

**Problem:** Amateur films, particularly home movie or cine club collections that have multiple filmmakers and contributors including women, often come to archives without typical film metadata like titles or production credits, making it difficult to locate women's participation later on.

### Strategies to Adopt:

- 1. Offer a questionnaire prior to donation agreement:** Consider offering an accessible online questionnaire for anyone who may want to register that they have a collection, even if they have not been in direct contact with your archive. This can act as a labour-saving tool as information captured here can feed directly into future metadata and collection level descriptions. Potential donor responses to a questionnaire at this early stage may also assist in acquisition decisions.
- 2. Complete questionnaire at the time of donation:** Used alongside a typical donor survey or agreement at the time of donation, the questionnaire encourages donors to provide more qualitative information about those involved in the filmmaking and the context in which the films were made. This will aid in the production of film and collection metadata.
- 3. Include questionnaires as part of the donation:** If the volume of free text questionnaire data is too much to incorporate into your archive's extant metadata structure, you could, instead, house it wherever donor surveys or agreements are kept so that future users or researchers can access it.

**Other Benefits:** If designing a questionnaire, you may also want to consider capturing other 'hard to reach' data at the same time to include gender, ethnicity, LGBTQ+ and/or socio-economic status. Your organisation may have guidance on collecting this kind of information and may require a DPIA.

[SEE SAMPLE QUESTIONNAIRE ON OUR WEBSITE](#)



A still from Margaret Currivan's *A Day to Remember* (1966), showing Currivan's daughter on her First Communion. Information gathered at the time of donation can provide important details and help identify participants. Image provided courtesy of the Irish Film Institute.



*The Stray* (1966, Marjorie Martin, East Anglian Film Archive).

## 01 CASE STUDY

Here we refer to a case of a filmmaker whose sister donated 15 of her amateur films after acquiring them as part of her estate. While some of these films came with very basic credits, most had none at all. Based on viewing the films (see *Tool 2: Expanded Film Viewing and Inspection*), we could tell that the filmmaker's practice was informed and varied, that she utilised many experimental techniques, entered her films into international film competitions and clearly viewed herself as a creative, though we knew very little about her.

She also maintained a collection of related papers and ephemera. The family were unsure about donating the paper collection but were happy to be interviewed and to provide information about the filmmaker and films. The donor herself, the filmmaker's sister, often acted in the films and had an intimate understanding of the filmmaker's practice.

This presented a unique opportunity to glean information about this fascinating filmmaker and her work from someone who knew her and her practice personally. Most of the films in the collection were made throughout the 1960s, after which time the filmmaker left the country. She may have continued her practice abroad, but there is relatively little information about her available to the public.

Consequently, information gathered from the donor at the acquisitions stage offered the archive an opportunity to fill in gaps in the metadata by collecting the names of cast members and participants from the donor, which would otherwise take extensive future research to obtain. Utilising the questionnaire allowed the archive to intervene early in information loss. It also reduced the labour that typically goes into both interviewing donors and researching collections.



## TOOL

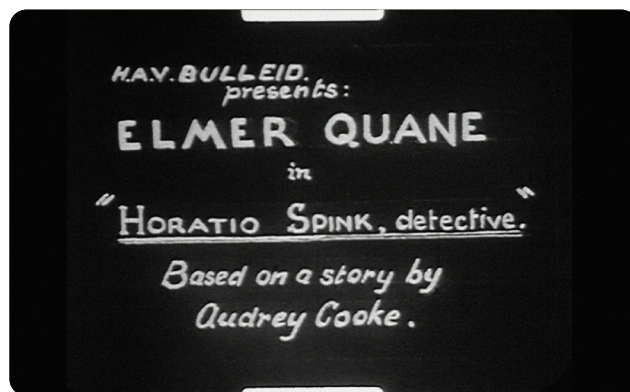
## 02

## Expanded Film Viewing and Inspection

**Problem:** Archives may have a dearth of primary information on the women who made and were involved in the making of amateur films. This results in a lack of recognition of women's amateur film titles, filmmaking style, or their contributions across a range of collaborative productions.

## Strategies to Adopt:

- 1. Undertake physical inspection:** Check cans and reels for additional information about all contributors to a film that can be included in the metadata: address stickers attached to can exteriors, or ephemera stored inside (e.g. script notes, colour grading charts, newspaper clippings).
- 2. View film credits:** Make a full listing of credits (that appear on the film at the beginning or end) that captures the range of collaborators involved in a film (this is particularly important with cine club or small group productions). Where possible, include all contributors in the film metadata. You can also cross-check or confirm this information with other data gathered (via Tools 1: Acquisitions and 5: Using Other Research Resources).
- 3. Locate and identify people:** Check if the attributed filmmaker(s) appears in the film in order to capture a visual record of them. Also note any recurring individuals as this can build knowledge of the filmmaker and their subjects, can act as point of comparison across multiple films, and a filmmaker photo can be useful for future usage.
- 4. Note filmmaking craft and technique:** Note any stylistic elements used in each film to track similar craft or techniques across the collection: this could include styles of camerawork, editing, or optical effects (irises, dissolves, etc.). Including references to the amateur filmmaker's craft in film metadata creates a clear sense of her authorship.



Film credits can help identify additional contributions from women. *Horatio Spink, Detective* (1934, H.A.B. Bulleid, East Anglian Film Archive).



It can be useful to look at how shots are framed even in home movies in order to get a sense of a filmmaker's style and creative practice. Agnes Heron's 'Roll 21: Achill, 1969.' Image provided courtesy of the Irish Film Institute.

## 02 CASE STUDY

In one case of researching cine club collections at a regional film archive, it became clear that film viewing was used to generate a shot list focused on film content related to local places or events – often the main element of extant catalogue records. Our experience across multiple collections was that film viewing could be used to source information about the filmmakers, too.

To better ascertain the varied contributions of women across three different collections at that archive, we developed and applied our expanded film viewing and identification process. This process revealed a diverse range of information:

- **Film cans:** In some instances, it was possible to identify women's involvement through stickers and ephemera found within film cans. Address stickers allowed us to highlight cases where the wife of a previously identified cine club member was also a filmmaker in her own right, but this was not captured in film metadata; while a script page showed how another woman had shaped a club documentary associated with a male filmmaker.

## – Identifying filmmakers and subjects:

In a collection misidentified with a male donor, film viewing revealed not only the filmmaker herself but a range of family and friends who appeared across multiple films. In another wife-husband collection where we used films to generate biographic metadata, we noted that films previously attributed to a male filmmaker often featured him, thus identifying the involvement of a previously uncredited wife in a filmmaking partnership.

- **Film credits:** In the case of one cine club film, its catalogue record associated it only with the club. A viewing revealed individual credits that enabled the identification of multiple contributors including the woman whose ideas shaped the whole film. This led directly to additional research (see *Tool 5: Using Other Research Resources*) that expanded archival knowledge of the club and its members.

Left: Film credits (alongside additional amateur journal research) revealed the key creative role Audrey Cooke played in Derby & District Cine Club, including writing its first film, *A Run for Her Money* (1934, East Anglian Film Archive).

Right: Information gleaned from film cans can reveal other filmmakers, such as Jean Smithson, whose role in the High Wycombe Film Society was otherwise unheralded. Used with the permission of Wessex Film and Sound Archive.





TOOL

03


# Agent/Authority Records and Finding Aids

**Problem:** Agent records or finding aids within an audiovisual archival Collections Management System (CMS) are traditionally used for professional filmmakers and not amateur film collections. That means there are fewer places in which to identify women filmmakers in an existing CMS.



*Discord* (c1962, Flora Kerrigan. Courtesy of Frances Farrell).

**Amateur Cinema** FILMS -



Stuart seen in *Egypt and Back with Imperial Airways* via EAFA.

### Ruth Stuart Rodger

Dates active:  
1931-1938

Club Affiliation  
**Amateur Cinema League**

Gender:  
Female

Awards/Recognition:

AMDB entry for Ruth Stuart Rodger, offering basic information on filmography, club affiliations, and bibliographic sources. AMDB pages can be linked to relevant Work or Agent records with the CMS. Image courtesy Amateur Movie Database Project ([www.amateurcinema.org](http://www.amateurcinema.org)).

### Strategies to Adopt:

1. **Develop agent records:** If 'person' agent records are available to use in your CMS, biographies of women filmmakers and their creative practice should be added here. If the functionality of the CMS does not allow for the creation of detailed agent records, brief biographical notes and filmographies can be added to free text fields at the collection level.
2. **Prepare finding aids:** Because there are many instances in which women working in groups or cine groups have been unattributed at the collection level, the creation of short finding aids can be used to aggregate data on women who contributed to films in the collection. Each finding aid can comprise a brief description of the provenance of the collection, known women contributors, biographical data, and a complete list of associated works.
3. **Utilise external authority records:** If you have biographical information on amateur women filmmakers but lack appropriate fields in your CMS in which to hold that information, external databases such as the Amateur Movie Database (AMDB) can be used to deposit such primary data. The AMDB, a content aggregator for amateur film records sourced online, welcomes new contributions from archives that identify key women amateurs. This can subsequently be linked to your archive CMS.

Left: *High and Dry* (1970s, Joan Hammond, East Anglian Film Archive). Right: Historical research revealed the significant contributions of women to club productions and allowed the creation of new bibliographical entries within the collections record. *Royal Day* (1953, High Wycombe Film Society, Wessex Film and Sound Archive).



## 03 CASE STUDY

In one case, we worked with a collection comprised of over 150 films produced by a British amateur cine club between the 1940s and early-2000s whose activities were reported regularly in the amateur film journals. The collection was donated to a regional archive along with documentation largely consisting of shot lists for each title.

The specific contributions of women could only be identified through on-screen credits reproduced verbatim in the shot lists and through the free-text description field. In this instance, there was no option to use agent records in the CMS. Subsequent historical research into the cine club (see *Tool 5: Using Other Research Resources*) revealed additional biographical and filmographic data linked to several key women filmmakers previously identified in the film credits.

As an alternative to the agent records, we created downloadable PDF finding aids which collated data sourced from historical research and viewing of key films in the collection. In addition to an overview of the collection and history of the cine club, individual entries were created for notable women club members. Abridged versions of the cine club history and individual biographies were also introduced to a free-text field at the collection level in the CMS, allowing for improved searchability within the database. New authority records were created on the AMDB which were subsequently linked to the CMS.



TOOL

04

## Metadata and Controlled Vocabularies

**Problem:** Amateur filmmakers, particularly women who are home movie makers, tend not to adopt traditional filmmaking roles and often use non-traditional methods of filmmaking. As such, typical metadata standards are not necessarily built to capture amateur film information effectively.

This problem occurs in two ways: 1) existing fields may encourage misattribution or misidentification; 2) existing fields may not be expansive enough to capture subject headings and keywords that reflect amateur filmmaking practice. This means that vital information about a film or filmmaker might not appear in the records at all.

### Strategies to Adopt:

#### 1. Existing fields and misattribution:

- Collection titles: Most archives have their own internal method for generating collection titles; amateur film collection titles can present an opportunity to recognise women filmmakers. Where possible, name the filmmaker in the collection title or have a multi-author collection title. In the case of a collection of home movies titled the 'John Smith Collection' (after the main family filmmaker), if your acquisition questionnaire and film viewing reveal that more than one family member contributed to filmmaking, you could title the collection the 'Smith Family Collection'.
- Director/producer fields: Although many metadata standards (e.g., Library of Congress) promote use of 'director' and 'producer' fields (even containing subject headings for women's professional filmmaking), these are not always suitable for amateur films. Home movie makers, for example, often do not identify themselves as directors or producers. In order to accurately represent and attribute authorship, we suggest avoiding use of these fields and instead including a stock statement in a free text field like summary or description. This makes it clear that these films were made by a particular individual. If your metadata template utilises a 'creator' field, that may be a useful option as well.

#### 2. Capturing amateur film practice in keywords and subject headings:

- Keywords: One easy way of increasing the visibility of women in your CMS is to adopt the keyword 'women filmmakers'. You can apply this to any films in your collections that you know to have been made by women, or that women contributed to. It can also be deployed alongside keywords like 'non-professional' to identify women's amateur filmmaking.
- Subject Headings: We suggest broadening the scope of subject headings beyond what is typically used for home movies and travelogues (e.g. 'children,' 'travel,' 'holiday,' 'tourism' and names of locales). When processing these films, try not to neglect aspects of the film's subject matter beyond domestic or place-based headings. For example, consider applying industry, object, or craft related headings where applicable. At the time of writing, the Library of Congress also recommends the use of 'amateur films' rather than 'home movies' (LCSH 44, H-220), which we find useful in terms of production type or genre fields, as well.

**Amateur Cinema** FILMS - FILM

Subjects:

- Arts
- Motion pictures
- Abstract films
- Music

Tags:

- windmills
- women filmmakers

Genre:

- Experimental
- Music

Form:

- Animation
- Short

Metadata and controlled vocabularies on the Amateur Movie Database, which has adopted our suggested 'women filmmakers' keyword as a tag. Image courtesy Amateur Movie Database Project ([www.amateurcinema.org](http://www.amateurcinema.org)).

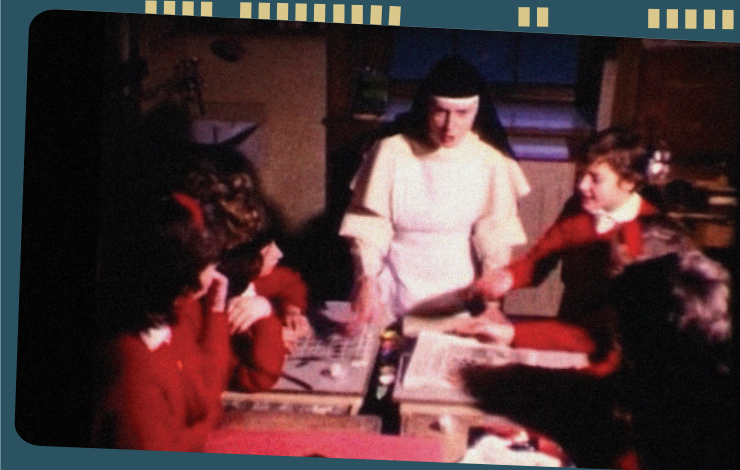
04 CASE STUDY

### Existing fields and misattribution

One collection we worked on comprised about 40 amateur films created by two sisters, where it was often difficult to determine which sister was filming. Perhaps as a result, neither sister had been named as a film's creator anywhere in the existing records. As the films were uncredited home movies, it would not be appropriate to list both or either sister as 'director' since we had no basis on which to call them this. There were also no keywords used to suggest the filmmakers were women and the collection title was a generic '(Last Name) Collection'. Even though we could demonstrate that the films were shot by women, we couldn't see this in the records or in the collection title. Here, a short statement, such as 'This film is part of the Smith Family Collection which was shot by Jane and Janet Smith,' could be added to each summary and used to indicate the full names of the sisters and the fact that they are the filmmakers. Such a statement could also appear across other fields such as a 'notes' field. The location of such a statement matters less than its consistent inclusion in the records.

### Capturing amateur film practice in keywords and subject headings

In the case of another woman filmmaker who worked both alone and as part of a filmmaking group, her work was found to sit across a number of collections. In this instance, existing records made it difficult to identify her work or to identify these collections as containing work by a woman unless she was already known to the archive user. In this case, the addition of a keyword such as 'female filmmaker', 'women filmmakers', or another related controlled vocabulary term, and its consistent application to related records, would aid in the identification of these films as having been made by a woman. While utilising keywords in this manner may seem obvious, it is particularly effective in helping to identify women filmmakers. All the collections discussed throughout our toolkit also benefitted from a re-examination of subject headings. Particularly in the case of collections containing home movies, expanded subject headings allowed for better identification of topics, activities and places featured in the films.



Filmmaker Sister Maureen MacMahon appearing briefly in *No Straight Lines* (1970), which she also created as part of The Black Raven Film Group. Image provided courtesy of the Irish Film Institute.



*Holiday* (c1928, Mabel Basham, East Anglian Film Archive)



TOOL

05

## Using Other Research Resources

**Problem:** Limited information about women filmmakers is held within and beyond the archive. Even when archive metadata exists, it can offer little depth: limited to a name and associated film titles, with no details on women's creative careers or filmmaking craft.

### Strategies to Adopt:

Additional research can deepen your knowledge of women filmmakers and their approaches to filmmaking and lead to better metadata.

#### 1. Recruiting external research support:

If you have limited time or resources available for further research on amateur filmmakers, you could offer a small annual bursary to local community heritage/history groups or college students to engage in targeted research.

#### 2. Collection documentation:

Use pre-existing data (names, titles, cine club roles) as prompts to begin any expanded search of other resources. Note any significant gaps in those data.

#### 3. Historical sources (paper/online):

Useful resources include census records, amateur film press, and local newspapers: begin with those resources that have built-in search options (online) or indexes (paper). Many historical sources contain sexist and patriarchal attitudes that limit research such as foregrounding men's contributions over women's, or truncating / removing women's names (e.g., 'Mr and Mrs John Smith').

#### 4. Oral histories:

Where a filmmaker or the donor is alive, undertaking an interview can answer specific questions, or reveal new information, new titles, or data on collaboration and craft.

#### 5. Triangulate information:

Once data are located, you will need to triangulate and gauge the reliability of comparable information (donor questionnaire, film credits, newspaper article) to ensure the accuracy of your new metadata.



*Balloon Adventure* (c1970s, Phillipa Miller, East Anglian Film Archive).



Triangulating information from film credits, filmmaking craft, census records, transport manifests, and local newspapers informed the creation of fuller metadata on Miss Mabel Basham. *Untitled Cable Films* (1935, Mabel Basham, East Anglian Film Archive).



### 05 CASE STUDY

When working with cine club collections, we occasionally found the names of women filmmakers in archive metadata but with no further biographical data available. Although it can be time-consuming, historical research using online, paper and human sources was very helpful in building up a fuller picture of women filmmakers and their creative work.

– **Amateur journals:** Using two such sources (*Amateur Cine World* and *Movie Maker*) we were able to identify over 1000 women involved in amateur film across the UK & Ireland between the 1960s and mid-1980s. This allowed us to clarify the different creative and collaborative roles these women played as lone filmmakers, via small production teams, or the larger productions of amateur cine clubs, across multiple collections at local, regional and national film archives.



Conducting an interview and remaining in communication with a filmmaker can gather additional information on their filmmaking career, including an expanded list of film titles and collaborations. *135... And Rising*, (1979, Breeda Kiely, East Anglian Film Archive).

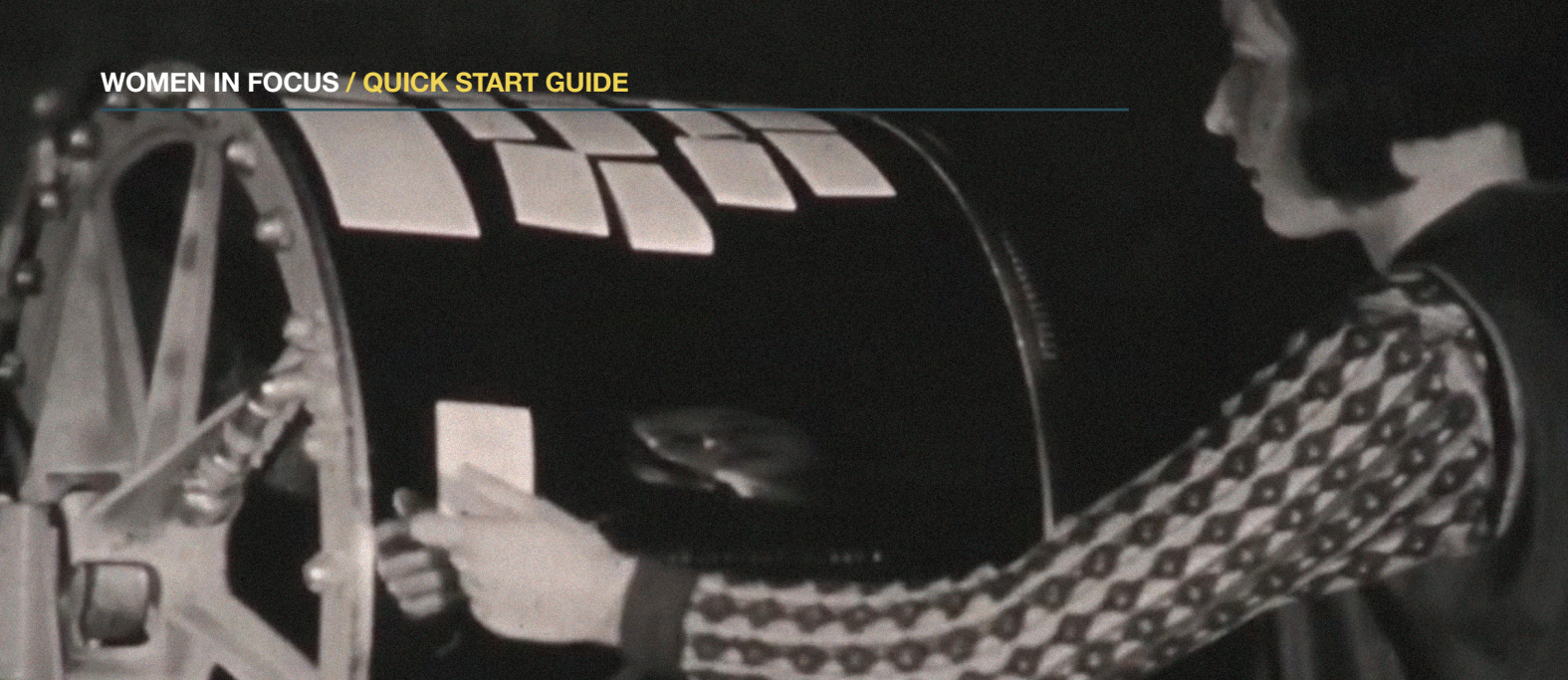
– **Oral history:** Interviewing one filmmaker, particularly when done in association with a known or new collection, can be illuminating. Through different interviews, we have been able to ascertain fuller production histories, expand archival knowledge of collaborative filmmaking practices, and identify additional film titles for acquisition.

– **Triangulation:** Given the sparse nature of historical information, particularly around amateur film, we worked with one smaller regional film archive to pull together disparate sources from different publications (including amateur journals, newspapers, census records, film viewing, film society notes, and acquisitions paperwork) in order to create new film records and a collection overview that identified nine previously unheralded women filmmakers.

– **Recruiting external support:** We offered a small bursary to a local college student to carry out document and newspaper research on local amateur cine clubs. This helped to enhance some of the amateur film metadata for specific archival collections and we were also able to publish the collected data on external authority records like the AMDB.

Research in newspaper and amateur journals such as *Amateur Cine World* can reveal information about previously unknown film titles and women's filmmaking collaborations.





AV526/6 Kodak Lab (1930s, Molly Coleman, Wessex Film and Sound Archive).

## Quick Start Guide

**Q: ‘We are under resourced, and short on time – how can we address some of these issues quickly and effectively?’**

**TOOL 1:**  
Acquisitions Questionnaire

Ask the right questions at right time.

**TOOL 2:**  
Expanded Film Viewing  
and Inspection

When viewing films take a critical view: ask: ‘who is holding the camera?’

Look at the physical object – does it tell you anything? (labels, ephemera, edits etc.)

**TOOL 3:**  
Agent Fields

Make a note of what you find, in a way that works for your CMS

**TOOL 4:**  
Metadata and Controlled  
Vocabularies

Don't be afraid to add gendered keywords to records – more words may mean more chance of a record being surfaced by a researcher.

Consider how helpful the title of an item is – if you have learned something new about gender, is this reflected in the title?

**TOOL 5:**  
Using Other Research Resources

Upskill volunteers to use this toolkit, and support them to feel confident in questioning current practices and metadata.



Image courtesy of Wessex Film and Sound Archive.

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Our biggest thanks go to all those women filmmakers, old and new, amateur, non-professional, and professional. From the earliest days of cinema through current digital productions, women have been making amazing films and their continued archival absence is a significant gap in UK and Irish filmed cultural heritage. Reclaiming just some of those invisible innovators has been the catalyst for this project and our future plans.

We thank the filmmakers and their families who provided us with rich histories of amateur filmmaking and gave us access to new and exciting films from their private collections. We hope the suggestions we have made throughout this document go some way to ensuring more of your work can be saved and made available for the next generation(s) of potential viewers.

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*Whither Shall She Wander* (1957, Marie Partridge, East Anglian Film Archive).