

How can I digitise oral history recordings?

For a while now, digitisation has been one of the buzz-words in archival circles. Everyone is talking about digitising everything from museum collections to the complete works of Shakespeare. However, the word "digitise" covers a multitude of sins, and we would urge you to think about exactly **what** you want to digitise and **why** before you start to worry too much about the **how**.

In simple terms **digitising** simply means transferring any body of information whether it be words, pictures or sound into a series of numbers (digits) that can be read by computers and a variety of other devices. Digital information can be stored in a variety of different formats that you will probably be familiar with already (computer hard disc, mini-disc, CD, digital tape, DVD etc, etc.). **We would advise that for archival purposes you store your digital information on Gold CDRs if possible.**

There are a number of different ways to digitise analogue (non-digital) sound recordings. Essentially you can either use a computer with specialist software or you can use a domestic CD copier as part of a hi-fi system.

This sheet will:

- Advise you about the digitisation of oral history.
- Offer two possible ways of digitising, using your hi-fi or your computer.
- Alert you to some common problems and suggest ways to overcome them.

Recording CDs on your hi-fi

There are a number of CD recorders on the market that can just be plugged into a normal domestic hi-fi system. Normally they will require that you have a separate system with an amp with an input and output designed for a CD recorder. Most modern amps should have this, but it is worth checking before you buy a new amp.

CD recorders could cost anything from about £150 to almost any price you are willing to pay. We have used the Philips CDR 600 which is towards the cheaper end of the market and has worked pretty well so far.

Operating the CD recorder is very simple. All CD recorders should come with a manual that will undoubtedly make the process of recording a CD sound more complex than it is. However with a little perseverance you should find that recording a CD is very similar to recording a tape on your hi-fi, and that it is just a matter of a few button presses.

Note: CD recorders require that you buy special Audio CDRs. The data CDRs that you may have used on your computer will not work on these machines although the final result that both produce are to all intents and purposes identical for audio material. You may find it difficult to find Gold Audio CDR. If you can find them, use them, if not, don't worry about it.

Advantages and disadvantages: The advantage of using your hi-fi to digitise your sound recordings is that it will enable you to get going very cheaply and simply and will not require any specialist knowledge. On the down side it can be a little inflexible and the quality is more difficult to control than on a computer. If you are going to be doing a lot of work with your digitised recordings it would probably be worth using a computer for some of your work.



What should I use to edit sound on my computer?

There are a variety of programs available for editing sound on your computer. You can download Audacity (<http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>), a good sound editing program, for free. Other free options are available at tu cows (www.tucows.com). If you have some money to spend you might want to look at Adobe Audition (note that Adobe have bought Cool Edit and this no longer exists) or Sound Forge (which has been bought by Sony). Cheaper software packages often cost up to £40. For basic tasks these products do not offer many advantages over the freeware alternatives. However they do offer a series of useful ad-on modules that allow you to do hiss removal, work with multiple tracks or apply a variety of effects to your sound.

How do I edit a sound file?

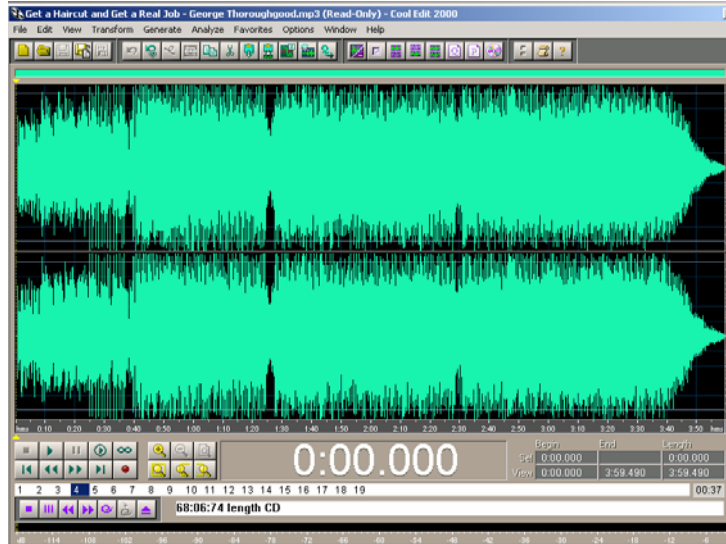
Your sound editing program will allow you to edit sound files in a variety of formats (MP3, wav etc) that are already on your computer or that you have downloaded from the internet. These formats are different ways of storing sound. They are likely to be of variable quality and size and we would recommend that you store in **.wav** for archival purposes.

If you open a sound file in a recognised format in your sound editing program you should see something that looks like this:

What if it doesn't work?

There are a number of fairly common reasons why you might not be able to hear your sound file playing if you are using a Windows system.

- *Your speakers are turned down.* Simply turn the volume knob on the speaker up.
- *Your sound card is turned down.* Go to the **Start** menu and then choose **Settings** and **Control Panel**. Click on the **Sounds and Multimedia** icon and then on the **Audio** tab on the dialogue box that is displayed. Next choose the **Sound Playback** volume button and check that the **Volume Control** slider is pushed into the top half of the slider and that the mute box is not checked. This all sounds very technical, but is actually very straightforward to follow once you get the hang of it. If you are going to edit a lot of sound you will unfortunately have to get used to fiddling about with the various sound controls on your computer.
- *You haven't got any speakers.* These can be bought cheaply and plugged into your computer very simply.
- *You haven't got a sound card.* You will need to make sure that your computer has a sound card before you attempt to listen to any sound using your computer. These are not expensive but you will probably need some guidance from your PC retailer on how to fit one.



If you press the play button below the sound file you will see a line begin to work its way through the sound file and hear the sound file play.

You are likely to find that your hard disc fills up very quickly as sound files are very large. You should think about archiving your files regularly using a CD writer or zip disc.

Nothing is recording!

Check that your Sound Card is set to the right input. Go to the **Start** menu and then choose **Settings** and **Control Panel**. Click on the **Sounds and Multimedia** icon and then on the **Audio** tab on the dialogue box that is displayed. Click on the **Sound Recording Volume** button and make sure that **CD Audio** is selected and that the volume is pushed up to the top.

How do I record onto my computer?

You are likely to want to record sound from a number of different sources. You may have sound on CD, mini-disc or tape or even a variety of other formats.

Recording from CD

Recording from CD is easiest as you are likely to already have a CD player in your computer.

Note: If you want to archive your digital recordings to CD you should ensure that you record at 44100 hz as this is the CD standard.

To record a section of sound simply press **Play** on the CD player and **Record** on your sound editor. You should then see the sound copy from your CD to your screen. You can then save the sound file to your hard disc.

Note: You should aim to record at around the **-6db** level on the **Record Level** bar at the bottom of the Cool Edit window. You can use the Sound Recording Volume level to adjust this if it is peaking too high.

Recording from external sources

In principle recording from external sources is exactly the same as recording from a CD. Simply take a line out of the headphone socket and plug it into your soundcard. Ensure that your sound card is set to **Line-In** rather than **CD-Audio** (see the speech bubble to the left). Your sound editor should then pick up the sound that is being sent and allow you to record.

The most difficult thing is probably getting the right cable to connect from your source to the mini-jack that your soundcard requires. If you can't find one purpose built, talk to your local electrical components retailer and they will make one for you for a few pounds.