

# The mum and son team that can bring the past back to life

By Bob Smyth

**“IT’S like archaeology for sound. You never really know what you’re going to find.”**

So says audio expert Chris Frear, who’s been rescuing cherished recordings from old discs and tapes for the past seven years.

He’s even unearthed the first “broadcast” by Scots radio and TV presenter Nicky Campbell.

Chris has no shortage of grateful customers, delighted their family memories have been preserved by Precious Voices, the company he runs with mum Beth in Thornhill, near Dumfries.

The oldest recording they’ve brought back to life was a 78 rpm record from the 1920s.

Chris (33), one of only a handful of audio restorers in the UK, said, “It was someone reciting the story of David and Goliath in a Highland dialect.

“We discovered it was one of the earliest records made by the companies that used to tour around with equipment for the public to make recordings.”

Twenty years later smaller discs were being used by troops to record Voice of the Forces messages to send home.

Chris explained, “During World War 2 little metal discs of aluminium were coated in French polish.

## Primitive

“Each one could be scratched on a primitive stylus machine and carry just a few precious words home to loved ones.

“In 1941 one of Monty’s Desert Rats had a brief respite in Cairo. He thought it was the height of modern technology to record one of these little discs and send it home to his young family.

“More than 60 years later it resurfaced, brittle and damaged, and was passed to us. On either side the label had faded, but still visible in pencil was the inscription, ‘To Sunshine from Daddy.’

“On it he assures his infant daughter of his love for her and promises good times ahead when the war is over and he comes home. He did come home safely and lived to a good age.

“By then in her 60s, ‘Sunshine’ was able to listen to the message again after we recovered it from the disc.

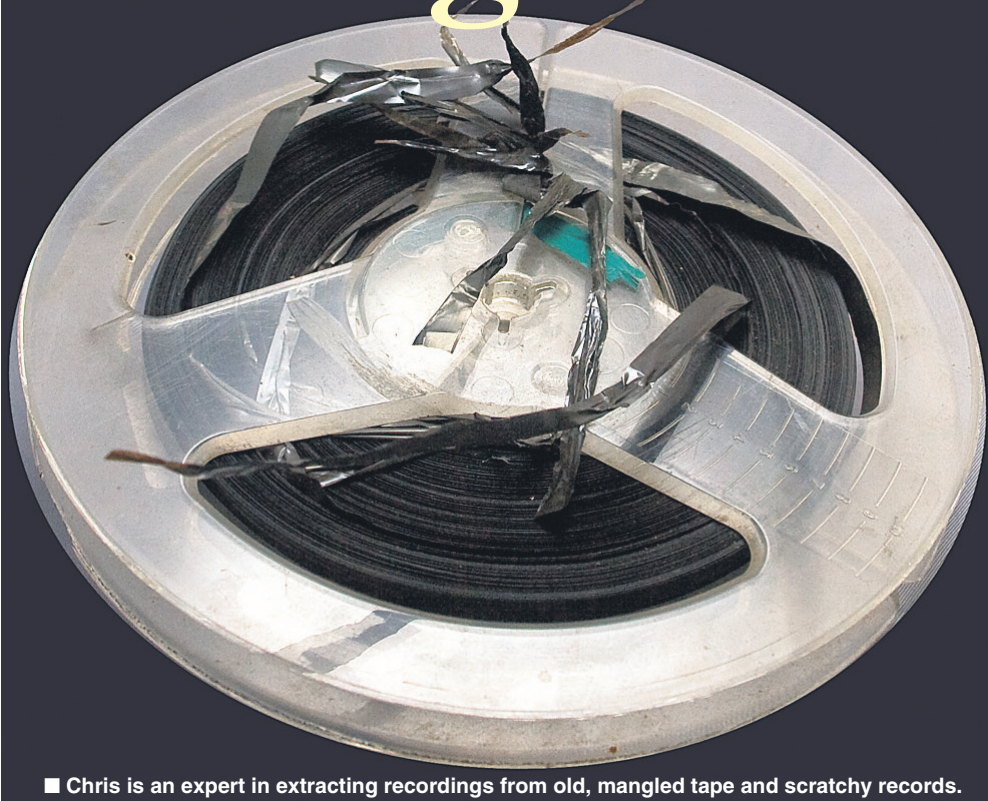
“Another badly damaged wartime recording was made on a Bakelite record on top of the Empire State Building in New York.

“Speaking into a gramophone, a British Merchant Navy captain described what it was like to be in the North Atlantic Convoys, hunted by the German battleship *Scharnhorst*.

“We also dealt with a record cut by a BBC reporter in the midst of the Battle of Arnhem in 1944. On the flipside he’d recorded the sounds of conflict to be edited in with his reports. It was chilling to think it was the real thunder of artillery, not sound effects.”

Most of the old records, reel-to-reel tapes

# Unearthing voices from beyond the grave



■ Chris is an expert in extracting recordings from old, mangled tape and scratchy records.

and cassettes are family recordings that folk want to hear again.

Among them was the wife of Nicky Campbell, presenter of *Watchdog* and Radio 5 Live’s breakfast news.

Chris said, “She sent us a recording of him as a child, demonstrating his early talent in front of a microphone, because she knew it would make a great gift.

“We also get a lot of wedding tapes, which were sound recordings in the days before video.

“Before cellulose tapes they recorded on paper. It’s very fragile but I managed to save a paper recording sent to us by a vicar of his wedding in 1948.

“He’s now a widower in his 90s and had never heard the recording. It can be difficult to listen to a loved one’s voice after they’ve died but he was delighted to hear his late wife again.”

Beth (58), who helps with the administrative side of the business, laughed, “You can always tell if the best man recorded the wedding. There’s a muffled sound as he jams the microphone under his arm while he rummages for the ring!”

## Touching

Chris said, “We get some touching feedback from people who have entrusted their memories to us.

“We recovered a recording of a man singing during the war, which had been captured on an unusual square piece of transparent plastic.

“His daughter wrote to us to say her children were baffled to find their mum and uncle standing in the middle of the room with tears streaming down their faces as they listened to what we’d sent them.

“One woman said she wouldn’t have got through her first Christmas as a widow without being able to hear the sound of her husband’s voice on a CD we’d made from an old tape.

“We try to go out of our way to help customers. One man had a recording of his wife phoning from hospital shortly before she died.

“It was on a digital answering machine and he was worried an upcoming electrical storm might damage it.

“We advised him to put a mini-cassette player next to the speaker to record her message so we could preserve it on CD.”



■ Even the BBC have called on Chris’s expertise, though it was just to find out what to do with a cassette tape!

Chris recently received an unusual request to help an alleged crook with his alibi.

“His solicitor called us saying his client had a tape that apparently proved his innocence of some charge — we didn’t ask for details!

“It was too mangled to get anything off it, although I could tell them it had been deliberately stretched to make it unplayable.”

Self-taught in the art of audio restoration, Chris’s interest in sound began when he and Beth did voluntary work for talking books for the blind, then made their own documentaries which they offered free to radio stations.

Chris goes through tapes inch by inch, repairing dried-out splices and removing twists and knots. Then he transfers the sound to a computer to find the right speed and clean up distortion and snap, crackle and pop.

“It’s not easy,” he said, “especially when you’re dealing with a language like Hindi or Bengali and you don’t know what speed it should be.

“I recently copied some tapes from a heavy metal band called Obnoxious. Most of the distortion was in the blaring music, not caused by the old tape!”

## Damaged

Customers get a CD of the finished product and the original is safely returned.

“We’ve never lost or damaged anything,” said Chris, who started the business while living in Lincolnshire and has been based in Scotland since 2005.

He and Beth are scrupulous about refusing to transfer anything that’s copyright without written permission.

“We advised one customer to check with a record label. When she phoned them there was a crashing noise at the other end of the line.

“The man at the record company had literally fallen off his chair because he was so surprised someone was bothering to ask permission.

“We made contact with the BBC’s chief solicitor a while ago and now we email her and she usually gives us the OK to make one-off copies of their stuff.”

In fact they had a call from Broadcasting House just the other week, but it wasn’t about copyright.

“It was one of their young technical staff asking for advice,” said Chris. “Believe it or not, he had a cassette tape and didn’t know what to do with it!

“They’re so used to dealing with digital technology they don’t know what a cassette player is.”

Christmas and New Year is the company’s busiest time, as people give gifts of long-forgotten recordings to family members, who then phone up asking Precious Voices to tackle their old tapes.

“We’ve been sent a recording of a couple of children on a Christmas morning about 30 years ago,” said Chris.

“You hear them thumping down the stairs then bursting into the room shouting, ‘Has he been? Look! He has!’

“They have their own kids now, who’ll no doubt love to hear their parents as excited youngsters when the family get together this Christmas.”

■ [www.preciousvoices.co.uk](http://www.preciousvoices.co.uk) or tel. 01848 331999.



■ Chris gets ready to decipher another old recording in his home studio.