



CARING FOR YOUR VIDEO TAPES

In the 1980's Scotch videotapes ran TV ads featuring a skeleton - the implication being that their tapes would last a long time (some ads even mentioned the word "forever").

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=639pnqpppbQ>

Sadly, this had more to do with overly 'enthusiastic' copy-writers than fact. True, video tapes stored in optimum conditions can last a long time but, take heed, ALL video tape is in a constant state of deterioration even if it's never played – and it will not last forever.

If you're fortunate enough to have have home video of your family you are sure to have priceless footage of babies who are now adults, grandparents who may no longer be with us, and special occasions such as Birthdays, Christmas and Holidays celebrated 20 or 30 years ago. Chances are these precious memories are languishing in the loft or basement. If that's where *your* video tapes are, then retrieve them at once! Cellars are often damp, humid places and the temperature in your loft fluctuates wildly throughout the year - from icy cold to roasting hot. Cellars, Lofts and Garages are among the *worst* place to store video tape. So keep them *inside* the house at around room temperature.

Of course, the best way to preserve that golden footage for posterity is to have your tapes digitised and transferred to DVD or other digital media such as USB flash drive. Tapes stored in lofts, cellars or in a garage will degrade much more rapidly and at some point become unplayable.

Here's a few tips you can use until you get around to digitising your analogue video:

- Don't mix up cassettes and cases/sleeves - especially if they have titles and writing on them - as this can often provide valuable information when you come to have them digitised.
- Inspect tape cassettes for physical damage – broken parts or loose and damaged tape.
- Look inside the reel windows for mould, debris or other contamination.
- If the tapes are dirty/dusty don't use wet-wipes or anything similar to clean them. Instead wipe gently with a slightly damp microfibre cloth.
- Never use a vacuum cleaner on them (that is likely to end in disaster with your precious video tape disappearing up the tube!)
- If you still have a video player or camcorder don't try playing tapes in it unless you know for certain that it's working properly.

What to look for if you find old video tapes

The number one problem for tapes stored in lofts, sheds, garages etc. is mould. It shows up as a white powdery substance on the tape reel surfaces. Here's what a very mouldy VHS video tape looks like.



If you come across a mouldy tape then separate it from other tapes to avoid cross-contamination. I suggest sealing inside individual Zip-Lock freezer bags. Do *not* attempt to play the tape. Mould can cause the tape substrate to stick together - snapping the tape when you attempt to play it.

That said, the damage often looks worse than it actually is. The tape in the picture above, for example, was cleaned and the recordings recovered. Tapes that have been stored in dry, cool (not cold) conditions with minor fluctuations in temperature and humidity are most likely to be in good playable condition. However, they may still have suffered some degradation - notably colours 'bleeding' and lines of interference known as 'drop-out'. Eventually they will fail to altogether.

Long-term storage for camcorder video tapes

If you intend storing your tapes long term then it's a good idea to keep them in a sealed container with a silica gel pouch. Keep them in a cool, dry place away from magnetic fields (such as loudspeakers), major temperature changes, sunlight and heat sources. The tapes will still degrade over time but with reduced risk of damage from environmental factors.

Conversion to Digital for now and the future

The sure way to preserve footage from old videos is to have your tapes digitised and the digital files stored in two different places - e.g. USB Flash Drive (memory stick) + Hard Drive. Or DVD + Cloud Storage. Perhaps the safest of these is DVD but if it's only for back-up purposes (i.e. not for use on a daily basis) there's really not much to choose between them in terms of reliability and cost-per-gigabyte.

Most new TVs have USB or network connections capable of playing digital video files. MP4 is currently the most common type of digital video file. MP4 also works with smartphones, tablets, laptops and computers. Backup is easy and although the files are quite large, many hours can fit on an USB stick.

Once your tapes have been digitised you can make backup copies of the digital video files. It's easy to make perfect 1-to-1 copies with no quality loss by simply copying and pasting the files from one place to another. You can even back them up to the Cloud with affordable services from Dropbox, Google Drive and Apple's iCloud.

I hope this article has been useful (and not too alarming!). If anything is not clear, don't hesitate to contact me, Keith Jones, with your questions on 07813 449521 or email me at

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