

HOW TO LOOK AFTER 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 of the ads even mentioned the word "forever").

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

Sadly, this was more to do with overly 'enthusiastic' copy-writers than fact. It's true that video tapes stored in optimum conditions can last a long time but, be warned, ALL video tape is in a constant state of deterioration even if it's not played – and will not last forever.

If you're fortunate enough to have have video of your family you probably have priceless footage of babies who are now adults, grandparents who may longer be with us, and special occasions such as Birthdays, Christmas and Holidays from 20 or 30 years ago. And the chances are that these precious memories are languishing in the loft or the basement. If that's where *your* video tapes are, then go and retrieve them at once. Cellars are often damp, humid places and the temperature in your loft fluctuates wildly - from icy cold to roasting hot. Cellars and Lofts are among the *worst* place to store video tape.

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 medium such as USB flash drive. Tapes stored in lofts, basements or in a garage will degrade much more rapidly and at some point will become unplayable either through age or contamination. Here's a few tips:

- Don't mix up cassettes and cases/sleeves especially if

they are labelled

- Inspect for physical damage – broken parts or loose and damaged tape
- Look inside the reel windows for mould, debris or any other contamination
- If the tapes are dirty/dusty don't use wet-wipes or anything similar to clean them
- Don't use a vacuum cleaner on them (that can end in disaster!)
- If you have a player don't try tapes in it unless you know for certain that it's fully working

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 either white or brown stains/marks on the tape reel surfaces. Here's what a very mouldy VHS video tape looks like.



If you find a mouldy tape then separate it from other, uncon-

taminated, tapes to avoid cross contamination. Do *not* attempt to play the tape. Sometimes the damage looks a lot worse than it actually is. The tape in the picture above was cleaned and the recordings were recovered. Tapes that have been stored in dry, cool (not cold) conditions without fluctuations in temperature or humidity are most likely to be in good playable condition. However, they may still have suffered degradation - notably colours 'bleeding' and lines of interference known as drop-out. Eventually they will fail to play.

Long term storage for old 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 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 by environmental factors.

Conversion to digital for now and the future

The sure way to preserve footage from old video tapes is to have them converted to a digital format. Perhaps the safest of these formats is DVD. It offers stability, convenient storage and playback. There are of course other options - USB flash drive, for one. 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 files also work with smart phones, tablets, laptops and computers. Backup is easy and although the files are quite large, many hours can fit on an USB stick - but make sure you keep to known brands such as SanDisk, Kingston or Verbatim.

There will be no further deterioration in quality once the tapes have been digitised. I recommend you make backup copies of your 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 and Google Drive.

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 kj@keithjones.net - or visit www.keithjones.net