

'Heaven for magazines': the archivist fighting to preserve our paper past

Vogue for dogs; every issue of Beatles Monthly; a journal devoted to hacking. All this and more can be found only at Hymag – for now

By Tanya Gold
2 February 2021 • 5:58pm



A small selection of the Hymag archive | CREDIT: Matt Benson

Scent creates the most acute kind of nostalgia and it is heavy in this former cannon factory in the south east London, close to the river. Inside I find Hymag, the world's biggest collection of magazines according to the Guinness World Records, with over 150,000 magazines.

Hymag is open to visitors for a fee: to students, academics, magazine fanatics and brands, who use it, among other things, to research their own histories. (A representative of the House of Dior, for instance, is a regular visitor.) Hymag is in the process of digitalisation, to reach a wider audience and preserve the material which will, without intervention, eventually degrade.

There are plans to offer the entire archive online via subscription with AI assisting the search process; without it there would be simply too much material to search. It has established a crowd funder to assist the digitalization; it would be a tragedy if this were lost.

The magazines live on 3,000ft of shelving under soaring ceilings. It is cold here, lit only in pools, with chairs placed seemingly randomly. It all smells of that glorious thing - paper. There is a desk with angle poise lamp, elegant between the shelves. This is apt, because this is not a place for people, but a place that people fold themselves into and they must, because very few magazines are archived online, and those that have been are not easily searchable. (There is much greater value for the historian, or researcher, in magazines being archived together, where they form a more complete portrait of the culture).

They exist in these numbers here because of a man called James Hyman who is dressed for cold weather in a bulky black coat and woollen hat. He used to spend a lot of time in the Book & Comic Exchange in Notting Hill. "Also known as church," he says, "because I used to worship there".



The Hyman Archive for BBC

He has made a museum, and a history, of magazines, which amounts to a coincidental history of many things: fashion; music; design; advertising; technology; cinema; humour; human errors, longings, and whims.

Hyman, though, sees the world from the perspective of magazines and so calls the archive, "heaven for magazines".

He became a fanatical collector when he worked as a scriptwriter at MTV in the 1990s and needed them for research. He would buy two copies of each magazine – one to read and one to remain pristine for the archive he had yet to establish.

Eventually the collection outgrew his home (his wife, he says, once slept on a bed of Playboy magazines). He found himself with 453 crates of magazines, and co-founded Hymag with Tory Turk. As knowledge of the archive grew people came to donate their magazines. A woman arrived with a campervan full of copies of Athletics Weekly. The fashion writer Colin McDowell loaned 2680 English, Italian and French fashion magazines when they outgrew his London flat and country house. (They are stored together, should he wish to reclaim them.)



Just a fraction of the 3,000ft of shelves containing the Hymag archive | CREDIT: Matt Benson

Today the photographer Luke Archer, whose portraits of Tony Benn and Roger McGough appear in the National Portrait Gallery collection, brings in copies of Loop and Nightshift in a suitcase, because he is moving home. "I'd like to get them into an archive," he says wistfully, "You can learn so much from magazines". Hyman stares at the magazines, opens them, comments: "This is good". He takes them all.

Not just magazines either. [Edda Tasiemka](#) - the "human Google" - kept the best cuttings library in Britain, with six million items in her semi-detached Golders Green house. She refused offers to sell it to Eddie Shah and Robert Maxwell but left Hyman the entire collection when she died in 2019, on the condition that he kept it intact. ("Sports are in the loft," is how he remembers the archive now, "and dead people are in the loft"). Her filing system was idiosyncratic, but it worked. Lynn Barber adored it. The Queen's biographer [Robert Lacey](#) said he could not have written Majesty without Edda.

The writer [Nicholas Coleridge](#) put her in a novel. She knew Hyman would understand how special it is; how, if it were lost, it could not be recovered. It is housed on the other side of the building in plain manila folders. Touch one – I touched David Bowie - and a life tumbles out in thrilling discord. It's impossible to find material of this quality online, because so little of it been digitalised; and even when it has it is somehow less interesting to read than on these fragile pages where it belongs.

Magazine is an Arabic word meaning "warehouse" or "depository". The first magazine appeared in Germany in 1663. It was called Erbauliche Monaths Unterredungen (Edifying Monthly Discussions). In 1688 came "Entertaining and Serious, Rational and Unsophisticated Ideas on All Kinds of Agreeable and Useful Books and Subjects." The first woman's magazine, the Ladies' Mercury, came in 1693. The Tatler arrived in 1709 and the Spectator, for which I write, in 1711, with the tag line: "to enliven [morality](#) with wit, and to temper wit with morality". In the 19th and 20th centuries magazine publishing swelled to immense proportions. It seemed there was a magazine for everything. Now they, and print itself, [are in decline](#).

To someone like me, for whom ink is a drug and the Internet an oppression veering into a mental illness, this is an incomparable treasure house. I mean to go through it comprehensively, but I find it is impossible; the best archives can only be trodden lightly because there is always more. There should be more; or it would not be a worthwhile archive. I fall down wormholes, and so does Hyman. We begin to discuss something – American Vogue, for instance, or GQ, or Mad magazine – but then he pulls out a different magazine and we are talking about something else. He likes all magazines, but he loves the arcane, the rare and the bizarre.

He pulls out a 1994 interview with Bryan Ferry in Ray Gun magazine written entirely in the font Zapf Dingbats, because the journalist got bored and so published in a font no reader could read: "It's rare," says Hyman, "It's a cultural artefact". He lent it to Design Museum's exhibition California: Designing Freedom.

Then he pulls out a copy of the FBI Internal Law Enforcement Bulletin from 1983: "Real under the counter stuff" He shows me a Beatles Monthly containing material not published elsewhere: "A guy came from Liverpool and said, 'please keep these'". He shows me a hacking magazine called 2600 from 1984: "How to hack traffic lights. How to hack computers. How to hack anything. They published all the numbers of the Reagan White House. So, you could phone up the president".

I like the oddities too because they have a wit and variety journalism simply can't afford these days: they are filled with hope. I touch a magazine called Tiny Magazine, which I cannot read it because it is tiny, but am glad exists nonetheless, and a magazine called Dogue - "a parody of the world's most famous fashion magazine: Vogue for dogs."

It is disorientating, and soothing: to be among these artefacts is like listening to multiple conversations, some with ghosts, but, even if it deals with the transient and the whimsical, it is more meditative and kinder than Twitter. Books are varnished and considered selves. Newspapers are swift impressions. Magazine journalism is between the two: a record of enthusiasms made at speed and forgotten, but not here. I wonder if they are, on the whole, more truthful.

I find an interview with Donald Trump in a winter 2000 issue of Millionaire magazine. The headline is a prophecy: Trump for President. "Lest anyone question his potential as a national leader," says a piece by Linda Marx, "Trump cites a success scored in New York's Central Park". (The success is: he helped fix the ice rink. Or he said he did).

I pull more out: Tatlers from the 1990s; Telegraph magazines; Spectators; a colour supplement from the Jewish Chronicle in the 1970s. I find it oddly mesmerising, and not just because no Anglo-Jewish weekly has the advertising revenue to publish a glossy magazine in this century, or probably any future century. I feel I am communing with many female, Jewish ghosts.

These are a few things I pause on: a Telegraph Sunday magazine from 1976 with "Man of Wit – Frank Muir and Family [including a dog]" on the cover. An ancient Tatler with [Ghislaine Maxwell](#) in a pink Moschino jacket that looks like a balloon animal, which feels like folly now, and was folly then.

A feature called "Notable Doubles in Real Life" from The Harmsworth London Magazine. More than a century after the journalist – who was he? – searched for likenesses I am stunned by them: the Duke of Northumberland and Mr G Manville Fenn. Professor Stewart MP and Mr Stanley J Weyman. The Rt Hon Lord Rosebery and the Hon Philip Stanhope MP. That only I am staring at this now is much of the pleasure. It feels subversive, intimate, and secretive.

The adverts are fascinating too: Jilly Cooper, a star in British journalism in the 1970s, appears in a Sanderson advert for interior design: "very Jilly Cooper, very Sanderson" says the copy under a photograph of Cooper stroking a dog near explosive orange florals. I had forgotten what a beauty she was; and I did not, until now, how influential. (We like to imagine that advertising has nothing to teach us. It does.)

There are cigarette adverts, like little puffs of madness, selling snobbery as if lung cancer itself is posh: The world of Lambert & Butler [Park Lane, London]with a quality and style that sets them apart from other cigarettes". There is an advert disguised as an open letter to feminists: "We, the undersigned," it says, "believe in better working conditions for women". The solution, maddeningly, is to buy an Hygena kitchen.

I know that I became a journalist in 1999, as all this magical variety was ebbing away. So perhaps Hymag is particularly special to me. But I don't think so.

For more information on James Hyman's archive visit [hymag.com](#)