



# Alexandra Palace: television in the beginning

It probably did not seem as if it were history in the making, but that's exactly what was going on at Alexandra Palace 70 years ago and then again 60 years ago after a lengthy intermission for the Second World War.

The television pioneers were not offered a lot of encouragement.

When the young Bob Mears reported for duty in February 1938 he was given a realistic assessment by the EiC, Douglas Birkenshaw, 'You are very welcome. You are entering an exciting service and some people in broadcasting are not sure it has a future.' Some future!

## Pre-war and close down 1930s and 40s

Bob Mears:

### Chamberlain's return

Bob Mears had about 18 months at Alexandra Palace before the outbreak of war.

He was category C and was told that in the event of war senior engineers would go to other wartime transmitters. Young category C staff would be expected to join the forces.

'War was effectively declared on Friday September 1 when Shift 1 was on duty. On Saturday my Shift 2 was on duty and when we reported the place was almost vacant.'

The AP months were eventful. He recalls having a go at all the jobs before settling for vision mixing. A number of highlights stick in the memory.

'Producer D.H. Munroe managed to persuade, I believe, Sadler's Wells Ballet Company to provide 12 wonderful 30 or 45 minute ballets for £75 total. The yearly budget was about £1000.

'I mixed many of these shows involving Margot Fonteyn and Robert Helpman. Munroe introduced a very low slung camera on a low tripod, the cameraman almost on the floor, to get her beautiful legs!

'Then there was the *Black and White Minstrels* - it would not be allowed today, but to the best of my memory we produced this at that time with white actors, throwing the electronics into reverse phase and so whites became black.

'In zoo shows, the chief keeper would bring along a variety of birds and animals. On one occasion a bird escaped in the afternoon show and we were still trying to catch it at the time the evening show went on the air!

'A local weekly outside broadcast would be Middleton's garden. This was a plot of ground just below AP tower. It was a nightmare to engineers. It meant taking out nearly 1000 feet of camera cable that had to be joined every 20 yards or so. It was always troublesome. Often when the camera was joined on there would be no picture - not an enjoyable show but a nice man!

'Outside shows were exciting. Rather late in the proceedings it was thought to be a good idea to interview Chamberlain arriving at Heston after his last meeting with Hitler. So an OB van was rushed to the site and just before the plane's arrival signals were received at AP and his piece of paper declaring piece in

This year sees two major television anniversaries - the launch of the world's first regular service of high definition television from Alexandra Palace in North London on November 2, 1936 and re-launch on June 7, 1946 after the war.

But it took a while for the penny to drop for some at BH. As late as 1951 when Brian Johnson applied for and got a job as assistant dubbing mixer at AP, scepticism was still prevalent.

He recalls, 'My corduroy, duffle-coated, purist colleagues in radio drama were appalled. 'You're going to television; you

must be mad; it will never last.'

'I think I was the only applicant for the post. On January 1, 1951, I rode to Alexandra Palace on my ex-army motor cycle in a blizzard, to join what was then sneeringly known in Broadcasting House as 'Unsound Radio.'

Prospero has tracked down some of the people who were there in the early days of television. It's not an official history, but it does add up to some brief personal memories of a few of the people who survived on faith, hope, team spirit and what must have seemed like charity from BH to lay the foundations of the television service we know today



Control room A, Alexandra Palace 1946, with engineers supervising the quality of the picture appearing on the monitor screens

our time was duly televised. I was vision mixer that day.

Bob recalls the genuine 'hot-house' nature of AP. 'The studio lights were many and massive ... and the heat unbearable.' He adds, 'The control rooms were even worse than the studios on a summer's day.'

And what about the resulting pictures. Bob concludes, 'The amazing thing about the vision equipment was that each individual picture had each line and frame corrected by an engineer looking at a cathode ray tube.' (see above)

Frank Holland:

### The page boy

Frank Holland began his career at Alexandra Palace as a very young man. He says, 'At the age of 14, in 1938, I joined the BBC as a page boy/messenger. The letter informed me that my wages would be 15 shillings per week plus 2/6d a week dress allowance, and I was to arrive at Broadcasting House dressed in black suit, white shirt with stiff white collar.'

In September 1939 Frank was transferred to AP. He was told to report to the commissionaire, Mr. Coupland, only to discover that most of the BBC had moved on.

He says, 'The majority of staff at Alexandra Palace had been sent to Wood Norton, Evesham.'

Frank settled to doing the commissionaire's bidding. AP adapted to the arrival of 'new tenants - the R.A.F.'

Franks says, 'Admittance to the control room was strictly for RAF personnel. The building also housed the Auxiliary Fire Service.'

'The Palace re-opened in 1946 and the first programme was the second half of a Walt Disney cartoon - the first half having been transmitted when AP was told to close down. By this time the majority of AP staff had returned. I myself did not arrive home until 1947 as my regiment was one of many British Units to remain in Palestine on internal security.'

But on return Frank had his first foot on the promotion ladder - he was a clerical assistant.

Ron Pottinger

### Before and after war

Ron 'Pots' Pottinger was one of the select band that had been told to report AP before the war - in March 1938 to be more precise. He was also there for the resumption.

He says that as a radio man he arrived at AP with a degree of uncertainty. Television reception was officially recognised only within a 30-mile radius of Alexandra Palace.

With that newness came a willingness to 'muck in' and do what was necessary. Officially Ron was a junior engineer but in reality he says he 'did a bit of everything'.

The Television Service closed down in 1939 but at the resumption Ron returned. He was back at AP in January 1946 helping to pick up the pieces. Come the spring, producers began to arrive and in the summer of 1946 transmission began again.

Ron recalls that BBC staff remained on the BBC books while away on war duty. He adds, 'One never knew who was coming back, but, happily, most of them did.'

While away Ron had a promotion confirmed, so he was now a technical maintenance engineer but the same collective spirit prevailed. These were 'challenging, worrying and exciting times.'

He recalls being in Studio B on a day when Sylvia Peters did her audition.

They could also be 'moving' times. Ron was on duty in the central control room for the coverage of the Victory Parade in the summer of 1946. Having served through the war years, he says, 'I don't want to be too emotional, but I recall standing to attention.'

Other memories relate to the technical problems which came with producers trying to push out the boundaries. Ron recalls organised chaos as producers attempted to embrace the output of two studios in one live studio. They sometimes had cast and orchestra running up and down the corridor as they left one studio to appear in another and then, 'with luck' return as needed.

This feature continues on centre pages

## Heritage website

The BBC Heritage website is now open - [www.bbc.co.uk/heritage](http://www.bbc.co.uk/heritage)