



Reith's innovative vision

John Reith, the BBC's founding father, looked westwards in the 1920s to America's unregulated, commercial radio, and then east to the fledgling Soviet Union's rigidly controlled state system. Reith's vision was of an independent British broadcaster able to educate, inform and entertain the whole nation, free from political interference and commercial pressure. The innovation of a Post Office licence fee of ten shillings (50 pence), of which half went to the BBC, ensured that the BBC was not financially dependent on the Government of the day nor on advertising revenue.

The British Broadcasting Company, as the BBC was originally called, was formed on 18 October 1922 by a group of leading wireless manufacturers including Marconi. Daily broadcasting by the BBC began in Marconi's London studio, 2LO, in the Strand, on November 14, 1922. This was followed the next day by broadcasts from Birmingham and Manchester. Reith, a 33-year-old Scottish engineer, was appointed General Manager of the BBC at the end of 1922. Within a year the fledgling BBC had broadcast plays, concerts of popular and classical music, talks and variety programmes. There was some news but in the early days only after 7pm to avoid upsetting the sales of newspapers.

The best of everything to the greatest number of homes.
John Reith, first BBC Director-General

Reith defined the BBC's role as "to bring the best of everything to the greatest number of homes". He was sufficiently visionary to see immediately the potential of broadcasting. "Listening in" to the wireless in the United Kingdom quickly became a social and cultural phenomenon as the BBC in London and regional stations around the country gave birth to a new form of mass communication. The Big Ben time signals and the Greenwich "pips" entered the national psyche in 1924. The monarch could speak to his people as never before. King George V was first heard on radio during a broadcast from the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1924. The speech was relayed on loudspeakers outside major department stores and the crowds were so large that they stopped the traffic in the road.

Technical advance

At home, people first listened in on primitive "crystal" sets with the help of a cat's whisker (a fine wire) that was moved until it made best contact with a crystal. The radio signal could then be picked up on earphones. More advanced valve sets followed. By the Thirties there were mains power sets contained in the familiar Bakelite cases. The opening of the first long-wave high-power transmitter at Daventry in 1925 made it possible for nearly all of Britain to hear the BBC. By 1926 there were two and a quarter million licences, far more than anyone anticipated. That figure increased to eight and a half million by 1938. By that time 98% of the country's population could listen in to the BBC's radio services.

Editorial independence

The General Strike of 1926 brought the BBC its first serious confrontation with the Government over editorial independence. With no regular newspapers being published, the country turned, not for the last occasion in times of national turmoil, to the BBC. Winston Churchill, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, favoured the BBC being taken over by the government, but this was resisted by the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, and Reith. Although the BBC's coverage of the strike was cautious and far from comprehensive, historians consider that it was reasonably fair.

Governance structure

In 1927 the British Broadcasting Company became the British Broadcasting Corporation when it was granted its first Royal Charter and John Reith was knighted. The Charter defined the BBC's objectives, powers and obligations. The current Royal Charter, the eighth since 1927, runs until 2013. Under the Charter, the BBC is answerable to the BBC Trust (replacing the earlier BBC Board of Governors)

which is appointed to act as trustees for the public interest and to ensure that the organisation is properly accountable while maintaining its independence. It is mainly concerned with broad issues of policy, while the Director-General and senior staff are responsible for detailed fulfilment of that policy. The Trustees are appointed by the Queen in Council (the Privy Council) on the recommendation of the Prime Minister. The Licence and Agreement is the second constitutional document governing the BBC's activities. Under the Royal Charter, the BBC has to obtain this Licence from the relevant Minister with responsibility for broadcasting matters. Originally this was the Postmaster General and later the Home Secretary. Today it is the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport.

1920s Behind the Scenes



THE RADIO TIMES

Launched 28 September 1923, Price 2d.

Initially, the newspapers refused to carry the transmission times of radio programmes because they feared their sales would be affected if radio became too popular. Because of the boycott, John Reith initiated the publication of the BBC's own weekly 'Radio Times'. Its letter pages reflected how radio affected people's lives.

JOHN REITH

Thirty-three year old John Charles Walsham Reith became General Manager of the BBC on 14 December 1922. The son of a Presbyterian minister, Reith knew nothing about broadcasting but relished the challenge his new position presented him. There were no rules, standards or established purpose to guide him. He immediately began innovating, experimenting and organising, and with the help of his newly appointed chief engineer, Peter Eckersley, the service began to expand.



SAVOY HILL

The BBC moved to Savoy Hill, its first formal premises, in 1923. It was friendly, but rather quirky. Each evening a rat-catcher looked for rodents and office boys in rubber gloves puffed germicide everywhere to prevent coughs and sneezes among the broadcasters. It was described as the most pleasant club in London, with cosy rooms, coalfires - and a whisky and soda awaiting the visitor.

BAIRD AND THE BBC

By 1928, John Logie Baird's television experiments could progress only with the help of the BBC, with its broadcasting monopoly. But the radio men - themselves just finding their feet - didn't know how to react to this complex new medium. John Reith was jealous of Baird and would not support his work, favouring instead the Fultograph, which could send only still pictures into people's homes.



'2LO CALLING'

2LO was one of Marconi's experimental stations transmitting programmes from The Strand in London. The British Broadcasting Company began daily broadcasting from here on 14 November 1922. '2LO calling' were the words that preceded all 2LO programmes from Marconi House and the call sign was also used for a short time after the move to new studios at Savoy Hill.

WRITTLE TESTING

Peter Eckersley, Chief Engineer with the BBC, began his career as a wireless equipment officer in the Royal Flying Corps. After the war, he joined a small team at Writtle, Chelmsford, charged with the task of broadcasting a weekly half-hour 'programme'.

1922

- 18 October - British Broadcasting Company formed.
- 1 November - Ten shilling broadcasting licence fee introduced.
- 14 November - Daily transmissions from 2LO in London begin.
- 15 November - Transmissions from Birmingham (call sign 5IT) and Manchester (call sign 2ZY) began.
- 14 December - JCW Reith appointed General Manager of BBC.
- 25 December - The Rev. J. Mayo gives the first religious address on Christmas Eve, the same day broadcasts from Newcastle start.

1923

- 8 January - First outside broadcast.
- 18 January - Postmaster-General grants BBC licence to broadcast.
- 26 March - First daily weather broadcast.
- 1 May - The BBC moves to new studios at 2 Savoy Hill.
- 28 September - Radio Times first published (Price 2d).
- 26 November - First experimental broadcast to America.
- 30 December - First continental programme relayed by landline.

1924

- 6 January - First religious service broadcast.
- 5 February - First Greenwich time signal broadcast.
- 17 February - Big Ben time signals inaugurated.
- 4 April - First national broadcast to schools.
- 23 April - First broadcast by King George V (opening the British Empire Exhibition in Wembley).
- 10 November - First live running commentary from an Outside Broadcast (from the Lord Mayor's Show).
- 26 November - First relay from America.

1925

- 27 July - Daventry LW transmitter opened.

1926

- 24 January – First broadcast of *The Week's Good Cause*
- 17 January - Scottish inventor John Logie Baird succeeds in transmitting television pictures
- 4 May - General strike begins. In the absence of newspapers, BBC broadcast five news bulletins daily.
- 31 December - British Broadcasting Company Ltd dissolved.

1927

- 1 January - The BBC established by Royal Charter as the British Broadcasting Corporation – Sir John Reith becomes the first Director General.
- 4 January - First meeting of the Board of Governors.
- 15 January - First running commentary on a sports event was a Rugby International match between England and Wales at Twickenham (followed in the spring and summer by first commentaries on: Association Football, Grand National, Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race, FA Cup Final, Cricket, Royal Tournament, Trooping the Colour and Wimbledon Tennis).
- 13 August - First BBC Prom from the Queen's Hall.
- 11 November – Experimental broadcasts to the Empire begins from Chelmsford short-wave station. First BBC Christmas Fund for Children (later Children In Need).

1928

- 2 January - Regular weekday religious services begins.
- 5 March - Ban on broadcasting controversial material lifted.
- 12 March - First broadcast by the BBC Dance orchestra, led by Jack Payne.

1929

- 16 January - The Listener first published.
- 19 July - Toytown (Radio).
- 20 August - First transmission of Logie Baird's experimental 30-line television.
- 6 November - *The Week in Westminster*, the world's longest-running political programme (now on Radio 4), started under the name *The Week in Parliament*, a series of talks by women MPs.