



### Radio's War

With the television service closed for the duration, it was radio's war and the BBC nearly lost it in the opening skirmishes. Listeners wrote in to complain about the new Home Service, which had replaced the National and Regional programme services. There was criticism of too many organ recitals and public announcements. But the BBC had some secret weapons waiting in the wings. Colonel ('I don't mind if I do') Chinstrap and Mrs ('Can I do yer now, sir?') Mopp were just of the two famous characters in Tommy Handley's *It's That Man Again* (ITMA) team. The comedian attracted 16 million listeners each week to the programme. This, and other popular comedy shows like *Hi, Gang!*, boosted morale during the war.

Vera Lynn's programme *Sincerely Yours* (dismissed by the BBC Board of Governors with the words: "Popularity noted, but deplored.") won her the title of "Forces' Sweetheart". In 1940 the Forces programme was launched for the troops assembling in France. The lighter touch of this new programme was a great success with both the Forces and audiences at home. After the war it was replaced by the *Light Programme* which was modelled on the Forces Programme. Distinguished correspondents, including Richard Dimbleby, Frank Gillard, Godfrey Talbot and Wynford Vaughan-Thomas, helped to attract millions of listeners every night with *War Report*, which was heard at the end of the main evening news.

*We shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets...we shall never surrender.*  
Winston Churchill, address to the nation on BBC Radio

### Lifeline news

Churchill, who had no love for the BBC in the Thirties when he was virtually boycotted, found that the BBC did have its uses. Many of his inspirational wartime speeches were broadcast on radio, including "This was their finest hour..." in the summer of 1940. The BBC emerged from the war with an enhanced reputation for honesty and accuracy in its news broadcasts. Half the nation regularly listened to the nine o'clock news every evening. For listeners in the occupied countries the BBC's wartime radio services were a lifeline. The *Ici Londres* broadcasts proved vital in passing messages to the French Resistance. General de Gaulle's broadcasts from London were an important factor in encouraging the resistance movement. By the end of the war, the BBC was broadcasting in 40 languages. Josef Goebbels, Hitler's master of propaganda, was said to have admitted that BBC Radio had won the "intellectual invasion" of Europe.

### New creative radio formats

The Forties was a rich period for new styles of radio. This is when *Workers' Playtime*, *Music While You Work* and *Desert Island Discs* were first broadcast and became firm favourites. The *Reith Lectures* were inaugurated in 1948 and Bertrand Russell gave the first series. The post-war period saw a significant expansion of radio with the launch of the *Third Programme* in 1946. The new cultural network offered concerts, opera, drama, talks and features. When the *Third Programme* opened, Sir William Haley, the Director-General, said: "Its whole content will be directed to an audience that is not of one class but that is perceptive and intelligent". In the austerity of postwar Britain, listeners enthusiastically welcomed having access to the great classical repertoire in music, drama, literature as well as talks by leading academics, philosophers and authors.



### **AN INDEPENDENT VOICE**

In 1940, Churchill contemplated a BBC takeover. He was no lover of the Corporation since the General Strike. The BBC was Churchill's 'enemy within the gates'. He loathed Reith - called him "old Wuthering Heights" - and sacked him from the Ministry of Information. But Churchill needed radio's power to 'shake a fist at the beastly gang'. When Brendan Bracken joined Information, talk of takeovers ceased.

### **WARTIME CENSORSHIP**

Ministry of Information 'guidance' on censorship took two forms. One covered Defence Forces security and the other the morale of the nation. Scripts had to have both stamps before being broadcast. Regiment names, troop numbers or locations were never given, nor were the whereabouts of Cabinet members or the Royal Family. And there were no weather forecasts - which would reveal conditions for bombing.

### **POST-WAR TELEVISION**

Many who worked in television after the war feared that their 'Sleeping Beauty' had become the 'BBC's Cinderella'. There were differences of opinion between Broadcasting House and Alexandra Palace about how television should be financed and controlled. The slowness of progress eventually forced the resignation of Controller Norman Collins - who went on to do more than anyone else to bring commercial television to Britain.



**WAR REPORT 1944**

The BBC's War Reporting Unit was established in 1943. Its members underwent rigorous training in military survival techniques - and learned how to work in battle conditions by non-broadcast reporting of secret army exercises. Correspondents used a new, light recording device developed by BBC engineers and, because they recorded straight onto disc, had to learn the art of instant 'censorship'.

**THE OLYMPICS 1948**

Coverage of the XIV Olympiad was the most ambitious television event yet undertaken. It took 12 months to plan. A cable was laid from Broadcasting House to Wembley and two new mobile units were brought into service - using, for the first time, cameras with turret lenses. 32 channels, 200 engineers, 25 venues and 130 commentary positions were controlled from a 1924 British Empire Exhibition building.

**SUTTON COLDFIELD OPENS 1949**

When the Postmaster General announced the standardisation of the 405 line transmission system, television began to expand. Sutton Coldfield, serving the Midlands and central Wales, was the first transmitter to be built outside London. Sylvia Peters announced its opening. It became, in its time, the oldest working television transmitter in the world. It was dismantled in 1982.

**TELEVISION NEWSREEL 1948**

During wartime the BBC had, by arrangement with Movietone and Gaumont-British, screened two newsreels a week. Post-war, as the agreement lapsed, television produced its own newsreel from the Film Department at Alexandra Palace. Television began to play a crucial role in the development of broadcast news - although it took several more years before television news bulletins broke free from Broadcasting House control.



**1940**

- 7 January - Forces Programme began.
- 19 May - Churchill's first broadcast as Prime Minister.
- 5 June - J.B. Priestley's first *Postscript* to the news.
- 23 June - *Music While you Work* first transmitted (Radio).
- 15 October - Bomb exploded in Broadcasting House during 9pm news, killing seven staff.
- 8 December - Broadcasting House badly damaged by a landmine.

**1941**

- 1 January - The Brains' Trust began.
- 14 January - 'V for victory' campaign broadcasts began in the Belgian Service.
- 10 May - The Queen's Hall destroyed during an air raid.
- 31 May - *Worker's Playtime* began.
- 9 November - *Sincerely Yours*, Vera Lynn first transmitted (Radio).

**1942**

- 29 January - *Desert Island Discs* first broadcast.
- 22 March - First daily news bulletin in Morse transmitted for the Resistance in Europe.
- 6 May - *The Radio Doctor* first transmitted (Radio).

**1943**

- 18 January - Richard Dimbleby accompanied RAF bomber crew in raid on Berlin
- 5 April - Yehudi Menuhin played with the BBC Symphony Orchestra for the first time
- 12 July - BBC introduced special news service for editors of resistance newspapers in Europe
- 14 November - BBC celebrated its 21st birthday with an evening of special programmes

**1944**

- 10 February - Start of self-imposed 14-Day-Rule which forbade the BBC to broadcast material on subjects due to be debated in Parliament.
- 6 June - D-Day. *War Report* first transmitted (Radio).
- 30 June - Bush House, home to the European Services, damaged by a flying bomb.

**1945**

- 8 May - VE-Day. Broadcasts by King George VI and Winston Churchill.
- 29 July - Regional broadcasting resumed. The Light Programme began.
- 1 August - *Family Favourites* started.
- 15 August - VJ-Day. Broadcasts by King George VI and Prime Minister Clement Attlee.
- 9 October - *Today in Parliament* first transmitted (Radio).

**1946**

- 4 March - *Housewives' Choice* began (Radio).
- 24 March - Alistair Cooke's *Letter From America*.
- 7 June - Television service resumed on 405 lines. A combined £2 radio/TV licence fee introduced.
- 8 June - Victory Parade televised.
- 7 July - *For the Children* - the first children's television.
- 15 September - First religious service televised.
- 29 September - Third Programme started.
- 4 October - *From Our Own Correspondent* first transmitted (Radio).
- 7 October - *Woman's Hour*, *Dick Barton Special Agent* (Radio) first transmitted.
- 20 October - *Muffin The Mule* first transmitted (TV).
- 29 December - *Down Your Way* first transmitted (Radio).

### 1947

- 2 January - *Much Binding in the Marsh* began (Radio).
- 28 February - *Twenty Questions* (Radio).
- 9 April - *How Does Your Garden Grow?* (later called *Gardeners' Question Time*) (Radio).
- 13 September - First TV coverage of *The Last Night Of The Proms*.
- 2 November - *Round Britain Quiz* (Radio).
- 9 November - Service of Remembrance from Cenotaph televised and telerecorded for retransmission that evening (first use of telerecording).
- 20 November - Radio and TV cover Princess Elizabeth's marriage to the Duke of Edinburgh.

### 1948

- 5 January – *Mrs Dale's Diary* (Radio).
- 5 January - *Television Newsreel* (TV).
- 23 March - *Take It From Here* (Radio).
- 3 July - *Top of the Form* (Radio).
- 29 July - First televised Olympic Games at Wembley.
- 12 October - First edition of *Any Questions?* (Radio).
- 26 December - First Reith Lecture broadcast: Authority and the Individual by Bertrand Russell (Radio)

### 1949

- 31 January - *Book At Bedtime* (Radio).
- 6 March - *Billy Cotton's Band Show* (Radio).
- 29 July - First TV weather forecast.