

ROYAL CHRISTMAS BROADCASTS.

The first Royal Christmas broadcast was made when the Empire (now World) Service was ready to begin in 1932. Sir John Reith, founder of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) thought that a message from the king would be an ideal way to launch it. His Majesty was doubtful at first but after a visit to the BBC in London, he was so impressed by the new technology that he agreed to speak.

The royal family traditionally spent Christmas at Sandringham so two rooms were converted into studios for the occasion. One was his study where old photographs show him sitting at a desk wearing a lounge suit, with a carnation in his buttonhole, reading into a microphone. His message was relayed by landline to the BBC and then to transmitters around the country. Among them was Brookman's Park Transmitter in Hertfordshire, the first purpose built transmitter to be able to broadcast two stations simultaneously on medium wavelengths. Opened in 1929 it was powered by a diesel generator as there was no power to the site. At the same time the message was relayed to the six short wave transmitters at Daventry from where it was successfully sent out over the airwaves across the world. Three o'clock was the time chosen as the most convenient for about twenty million listeners around the Empire who had access to a wireless which was still a relatively modern invention. The sets were mainly wood with fretwork cut outs in Art Deco designs over a fabric covered speaker. Not all families possessed one but people crowded into the homes of those who did to hear the king's voice for the first time. His two hundred and fifty word speech was written by Rudyard Kipling and began 'I speak now from my home and from my heart to you all. To men and women so cut off by the snows, the desert, or the sea that only voices out of the air can reach them.' He continued for about two and a half minutes marvelling at the wonders of technology and drawing in his people from all parts of the world.

The impact was tremendous. Previously the monarch had been a distant figurehead. But when the people heard his reassuring voice they realised that he was a human being who had their interests at heart. The broadcasts proved very popular. He continued to speak to the nations every Christmas until his death in January 1936.

His heir Edward VIII never spoke to the people at Christmas as he had made his abdication speech on 11th December so there was no broadcast that year. In 1937 his brother King George VI made his first annual broadcast despite his speech impediment. With judicious editing of difficult word combinations, the help of his speech therapist, Australian Lionel Logue, and the encouragement of his beloved Queen Elizabeth, he struggled through thanking the public for their support during his first year as their king. He persevered with speaking in public and continued the Christmas broadcasts which were a great morale booster to the people through the arduous years of the Second World War. His most memorable was the Christmas following the outbreak of hostilities when he quoted from *God Knows* taken from *The Desert*, a collection of poems by Minnie Haskins:

'And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year, "Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown, And he replied, "Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way."'

After his early death in 1952 the young Queen Elizabeth II continued the broadcasts sitting in the same chair at the same desk as her father and grandfather before her. Her message and those until 1956 were also broadcast in sound only on British television. After 1957 eager viewers were able to see the Queen, in black and white, speaking as they huddled around television sets which would appear very odd to us today. They often only had nine inch screens, barely bigger than some of the portable electronic gadgets we carry around. From 1960 she recorded her message a few days before Christmas so that copies could be sent to distant parts of the world to be shown at the appropriate time.

The only year the tradition was broken was 1969 when *Royal Family*, a documentary, was shown. A public outcry followed and the broadcasts were resumed the next year. They have kept pace with technology, having subtitles available for the hard of hearing since 1979. Although the commonwealth audience gradually shrank as countries became independent the number of British viewers had reached a staggering twenty-eight million by 1980. The message has been modernised by inserting clips of the royal family and highlights of the year.

Each year the Queen decides on a theme for her message quite early on then appropriate clips of film can be gathered. As early as 1966 she spoke especially about women and their place in our changing society. 1983 saw her extolling the virtues of technology but urging us not to forget to continue communicating as human beings.

In 2002 she broadcast her fiftieth Christmas message. At the end of a year that had seen the death of her mother and sister within a few weeks of each other and the Golden Jubilee of her accession. She still managed to make a positive speech paying tribute to all those who serve their country, and ended by promising to continue serving her people.

And of course she has spoken about war and the role of our armed forces in conflicts around the world. During the Iraq conflict her 2003 message was filmed entirely on location from the Household Cavalry Barracks at Windsor. She stressed the need for teamwork and support for the families of servicemen in this country.

The multicultural aspects of our society and religious tolerance was her theme for 2004. Clips showed the royal family visiting various groups including Sikhs and Muslims. The Queen has also been seen visiting a Sikh Temple and meeting Nelson Mandela. Her plea for tolerance of different cultures and faiths was well received on all sides.

Once exclusive to the BBC the programme has been produced in alternate years by ITN since 1997. Channel 4 has broadcast an 'alternative Christmas message' since 1993 for those who do not wish to see the Queen's broadcast. It has featured celebrities as diverse as Jamie

Oliver and Brigitte Bardot to Quentin Crisp and the Reverend Jesse Jackson, but it has never been a serious challenge to the sight and sound of Her Majesty.

Despite the changes to the format all the sovereigns' messages have contained words of encouragement that bond us together as a nation. This Christmas many families will settle down in front of the television as the clock strikes three and a hush will fall as the Queen appears to give her traditional message. And for those who are not at home they can catch it later on the internet or on a hand held device with a screen the size of one on an early television set.

Jean Gardner

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