

Account of Purley on Thames

Television

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BBC Television

Television Service began in 1938 with the BBC broadcasting from Alexandra Palace. It is doubtful whether the signal could be received in Purley and there is no indication that anyone even tried. This early service was suspended at the outbreak of war.

After hostilities ceased the BBC set about resuming the service. They switched to a different system as by this time television technology had considerably improved. The new standard was 405 lines and broadcast on the VHF band. Most television sets were pre-tuned to the transmitter for their local area and there was of course only one channel. Stations were very powerful and transmitted over a wide area. Purley's signal coming from Alexandra Palace. Transmitters were alternated between horizontal and vertical polarisation so the typical H or X aerial had to be aligned along the direction of polarisation, which for Purley was vertical.

The London service re-commenced in 1946 and it was very slow to take off. Sets were massive and had a very small 9 inch screen. Programmes were transmitted only in the evenings and everything was live. Gradually however the BBC extended the number of hours of transmission and built a network of transmitters covering most of the country. Sets improved and soon 15 or even 24 inch screens were the norm. Contrast was poor and usually one had to watch with only dimmed lights in the room, preferably situated on top of the TV set.

It was not until the Coronation in 1953 that television was regarded as much more than a novelty. People used visit friends to watch special programmes. In Purley the Coronation was shown on TV to people in the Memorial Hall and for many it was their first sight of the new medium. After the Coronation however take up was very high and soon around 70% of homes were equipped.

A second BBC channel known as BBC2 was introduced in 1962. At the same time the switch was made from 405 lines on the VHF band to 625 lines on the UHF band using the PAL system. This provided proper facilities for transmitting and receiving colour although it was some time before colour was generally available. The introduction of this new service meant that people had to get new sets and new aerials which were quite different from the old H or X aerials. Thus BBC2 was quite slow to get off the ground and both BBC1 and ITV were obliged to continue to transmit on the old system much longer than they desired.

Commercial Television

With the election of a Conservative Government in 1951 consideration was given to increasing competition and providing a second channel financed by advertising revenues. The purists were outraged. Dire predictions were made that the new service would be squalid and would destroy the moral fabric of the country etc etc. However the government set up an Independent Television Authority with very strict guidelines, for example sponsorship of programmes was forbidden, advertisers had no control over when their adverts were broadcast, only a certain number of minutes each hour could be used for adverts, etc.

Independent Television or ITV as it was known was launched in 1955 with Regional transmitters

owned and operated by the ITA. Within each Region a contractor was engaged to provide the services and a separate organisation Independent Television News was created to provide News and Current event programmes.

The new service was an instant success and described as 'a licence to print money' Franchises were issued to companies in the new ITV regions created by the Independent Broadcasting Authority.

Purley found itself on the junction of three areas, the lower part of the village received the Midlands services from Birmingham relayed from Oxford with the signal coming through the Goring Gap. The middle part of the village on the north facing slopes received the London signals relayed from Caversham and people at the top of Long Lane got the South of England transmitter at Hannington.

The Midlands service was provided by ?, the London by Thames Television during the week and London Weekend Television at weekend and the South by Southern Television based in Southampton. None of them gave much coverage to the Reading area, let alone to Purley.

The franchises ran out in 1974 and Central took over in the Midlands and TVS in the South. The latter established a news studio at the Civic Centre in Reading and provided some local coverage, although many people in the village were still unable to receive a signal.

Later breakfast television was introduced with a separate national franchise won by TV-AM.

In a third round of franchise letting in 1991, all the local companies lost their franchises, except Central. TVS lost out to Meridian which built a regional centre at Newbury and is promising a much better local coverage when it starts on 1st Jan 1993. Both Thames and London Weekend lost out and TV-AM is to be replaced by Good Morning Television.

Channel 4 was launched in 1975 as a second ITV channel. It was jointly funded by the BBC and ITV although some revenue was obtained from its own advertising. It started off catering to minority tastes and took some time to find its own place in the TV market. The cross subsidisation is ending in 1993 and it will thereafter have to stand on its own feet.

The video recorder came into its own in the 1980s to solve the problem which occurred when rival channels broadcast programmes which viewers wanted to watch at the same time. The answer was to record one and watch it later. This opened the door to the video rental shop which rented films which could be watched at leisure at home. The local M&W store on Knowsley Road quickly got into the business and now does a thriving trade in overnight rentals.

Satellite broadcasting became a reality as soon as geostationary satellites were in place. Signals are relayed up to the satellite from a ground station and then re-broadcast back to earth. It was used first to exchange TV programmes over long distances but gradually the home market evolved. Several systems were developed and a UK franchise was given to SKY TV which provided several channels. Initially these were free but from January 1990 scramblers were introduced and subscribers had to purchase unscramblers and keys which enabled the signals to be viewed.

Soon after SKY was launched using the Astra satellite, a second franchise was granted to BSB who used a revolutionary new system with a much higher definition. Unfortunately this meant that the two systems were totally incompatible and people had to buy two different receiving dishes. The matter was resolved, somewhat unsatisfactorily when SKY bought out BSB and abandoned development of the new system. Satellite broadcasting has still not really caught on as people are very reluctant to pay the quite high subscription fees after investing considerable sums of money in dishes and decoders.

Finally mention must be made of Cable TV. In this system all reception is done at a central location and signals are re-channeled and rebroadcast over wires, nowadays optical cables are used rather than traditional cables. They started in areas of poor reception and were quite popular in some

areas. They usually broadcast all the terrestrial programmes, plus satellites and often locally produced programmes. A franchise for the Thames Valley, Telecental, was let around 1989 and initially only parts of Tilehurst were cabled in this area. The availability of such a high capacity distribution system however opened the door to all sorts of other services for example alternative telephone service and computer links.

Since then cabling has exploded to cover pretty well all of Purley and the business has been taken over by Virgin Media after they took over from Telecental. The same cables are used for telephone, broadband and many other services. The number of television channels has grown to around 700 but there us a sharp division between those that are free and those that have been bundled into packages such as for sports, movies and other specialised interests.

One can also received television via one's mobile telephone or tablet and the remaining land based transmitters now called Freeview broadcast the channels that are free to air.

Perhaps the greatest innovation was in the control boxes. These allow you to record programmes to view at ones leisure and fast forward over adverts or to stream programmes from stores so you can watch almost anything you like, when you like.