

TELEVISION.

'THE MIRACLE'.

In an age when people have become blasé about the miracle of 'The Box' my mind often goes back to the first time I saw a television working. I had seen them in shop windows of course, but don't forget there was almost no daytime television in the early 1950s. Broadcasting started at 5pm with 'Children's Hour' it would then go off air until 7pm and go off air again at approximately 10-3pm. My first glimpse of a TV was throughout the window of a terraced house in Jockey Terrace, The first one I saw one working, so to speak. The curtains left drawn back so that neighbours could marvel at seeing the receiver. The ultimate status symbol in those early years of the 'little screen'. Obviously I had no idea what was on at that first sighting, very possibly What's my Line or a similar programme. I could only see one person's head and shoulders in each shot, and until the next time I saw a TV. In my naivety I thought that was the limit, only one person on the screen at a time. I know it sounds ridiculous but it's quite true! I think it would be 1950/1951, I know by the time of The Coronation (1953) a few families were proud owners of this fantastic invention.

I was once invited to watch Children's Hour on a neighbour's recently purchased set, a 12 inch SOBEL. Having become over excited I knocked a plant pot over, a red geranium in a green jardiniere, neither pot or plant received lasting damage, but from that moment forward I became 'persona non grata' in that particular household. Try as I may, offering to go errands or anything else for that matter hoping to get into good books again, alas all to no avail, a second invitation never materialised. I managed to convince myself that it wasn't my fault anyway, if the plant hadn't been placed in such precarious position, if I hadn't knocked it over someone else would, and they would have been banished! 60 odd years later I'm sticking to that theory.

For accuracy, rather than use national data about prices of televisions and average wages I consulted copies of The Wigan Observer for 1951 (available on Microfilm at Wigan Local Studies based in The Museum of Wigan Life). I think this gives a better indication of how expensive a set was in comparison to income and shows what a luxury it was to own one. Using national figures I think would skew the figures.

Haywood's, have an advert for 9 inch and 12 inch sets prices ranging from £44/00- £233/00. The latter a consul model with built in wireless! As an example, to show what a luxury these new fan-dangle contraptions were in comparison to earnings, in the same edition there's an advertisement in the Situations Vacant page for a labourer for North West Gas, wages for 44 hours £5/15 shilling. Another example of wages, the N.C.B. (National Coal Board) rates for 1950, one week's holiday pay was £7 16s 0d (£7.80) for adults, £6 5s 0d (£6.25) for 18 to 20 years and £4 14s 0d (£4.70) for under 18. Back then, a state pension was £1/10s (£1.50) with a further £1 paid to married couples.

Even in families fortunate to have the wherewithal to buy one there was an anxiety about the cost if "the tube went" a major expense in those days. Consequently people would ration themselves as to time watched, in the belief the the less it was used the longer the tube and valves would last. I know of at least one firm Walker Bros, where the workforce formed a 'tube club' members would pay half a crown (twelve and a half pence) in the unfortunate circumstance that the tube failed they claimed from the club, this insurance didn't cover other malfunctions, valves etc.

Older readers will recall how difficult it was to get a 'good picture' needing to fiddle with the horizontal and vertical hold, having stabilised the picture and returned to your armchair of it would go again spinning like a fan on steroids, atmospheric also played a part. If a lorry or bus went past the screen would fill with white dots (snowing). In what seemed a relatively short time TVs became much more reliable.

Then, came an all new ballgame when ITV made its first appearance in 1955. Older sets couldn't receive the new programmes but it was possible to have a converter fitted to the back of the receiver that would make it possible. On the first night of broadcast from the new service the BBC, I imagine annoyed at losing its monopoly tried the biggest "spoiler" of all time, they decided that would be the night that a tragedy would befall Grace Archer and her horse Fury. It worked, The Archers had a fantastic following, it was estimated that 20 million listened to that broadcast. The figures for television ownership is remarkable, in 1951 only 350 thousand households had a set by 1960 three quarters of homes had one. Today most homes have numerous sets and other devices capable of receiving crystal clear pictures

In the fifties, the hours people watched television were tightly controlled. The 24 hour broadcasting of today was unheard of. The Postmaster General stipulated how many hours of television could be shown each week. In 1956, for example, the BBC was allowed to broadcast television on weekdays between 9am and 11pm, with not more than 2 hours before 1pm. There was also a period between 6pm and 7pm when no television was broadcast. This period was used by parents to trick young children into thinking that the evening's television had finished so they would go to bed without complaint. It was known as the 'toddlers' truce', imagine that today! At the weekends, the rules were no more relaxed. A maximum of eight hours broadcasting was allowed on Saturdays and 7 3/4 hours on Sundays. On Sunday another anachronism reigned, television shown between 2pm and 4pm was intended for adults, children were meant to be at Sunday School! Gradually the rules on broadcasting hours were made less strict; The 'toddlers' truce' for example.