



Development threat to the palace where television was born

By Terry Kirby
Chief Reporter

Just over 70 years ago, on 2 November 1936, the following words by the BBC presenter Elizabeth Cowell were beamed out over London: "This is direct television from Alexandra Palace." It was a moment that changed history, ushering in the television era.

Now, the future of the disused original studios at Alexandra Palace, the extravagant Victorian structure and London landmark which can lay claim to being the birthplace of television, is in doubt.

Haringey Council, which owns the building through a trust, plans to lease it to Firoz Kassam, an entrepreneur and property developer, which has caused widespread concern among senior BBC figures, historians and conservationists, who fear a vital part of broadcasting history may disappear.

And English Heritage, the government body which oversees historic buildings, is considering upgrading the listing on the building, which could restrict any plans to radically alter "Ally Pally". Dozens of objections have been lodged with the Charity Commission, which

is in the middle of a month-long public consultation over whether to allow the trust to lease the building to Mr Kassam's Firoka group for a multimillion-pound redevelopment as a hotel, leisure and exhibition complex. Mr Kassam is a former chairman of Oxford United football club and owns hotels and conference centres.

Objectors fear the long-empty, but still-intact studios in the building's tower could be lost because the proposed lease does not cover their preservation, despite Mr Kassam's promise to create a broadcasting museum on the site. They want public access to the studios guaranteed and the whole building handed over to a national body.

Jacob O'Callaghan, conservation officer of the Hornsey Historical Society, which is among those leading the campaign, said: "These studios are of historic importance; it is the birthplace of television, the place where the global village began. They should be retained for posterity."

Lynne Featherstone, the local Liberal Democrat MP, has tabled an early-day motion, and written to Secretary of State for Culture, Tessa Jowell, the BBC and the Royal Television Soci-

ety for backing. She said: "The TV studios are a piece of history, for our country, and indeed the world. The first public television broadcasts are a milestone that need to be commemorated, and I was shocked to discover no thought has been given to the preservation of the original studios."

John Trenouth, the former senior curator at the National Museum of Photography, Film and Television in Bradford, said: "I don't think future generations will forgive us if they are lost."

Alexandra Palace opened in 1873 as The People's Palace, a recreation centre on a hill in acres of parkland. Destroyed by fire within two weeks of opening it was rebuilt in two years, a vast building, containing banqueting halls, art galleries and function rooms, centred on the Great Hall, dominated by a steam engine-powered organ.

In 1935, the BBC took over part of the building because the television transmitter aerial could be sited on top of its tower, giving the necessary 600ft elevation. News broadcasts stopped in 1969 and Open University programmes ended in 1981, when the equipment was stripped out and the studios shut.

The Television Studios at Alexandra Palace:

A Case for Preservation

Submission to English Heritage

by the BBC

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About this submission

On 15th November 2006 Mark Thompson, Director-General of the BBC, wrote to Dr Simon Thurley, Chief Executive of English Heritage, suggesting that the television studios at Alexandra Palace might warrant protection beyond the Grade II listing that currently covers the entire building. This was in the light of remarks reportedly made by the prospective tenant of the site, Mr Firoz Kassam, that he could not guarantee that the studios would survive the refurbishment of the building.

Mr Kassam's organisation, Firoka, has since concluded an agreement to lease the site for 125 years subject to Charity Commission approval. We understand that the Firoka organisation has yet to develop detailed plans for the site.

Mark Thompson indicated to Dr Thurley that his letter would be followed by this more detailed submission.

It is our contention that:

1. Appreciation of the impact of television on the world is growing. As television, still an achievement in living memory, grows older so the story of Alexandra Palace and the contest between the rival systems that took place there will become increasingly treasured. Furthermore, given how media study has expanded over recent years, the studio spaces at Alexandra Palace will increasingly have educational as well as historic value.
2. The firsts achieved at Alexandra Palace in 1936 have been underscored by Britain's pre-eminence in television in subsequent decades. The studios at Alexandra Palace are an important part of a great British achievement
3. Relatively little else survives, anywhere in the world, from the pioneering days of television. And in terms of studio spaces, there is nothing comparable to Alexandra Palace.
4. A great many people in Britain and across the world care passionately about the studios. We feel that, particularly in the light of Dr Thurley's remarks at the launch of *Heritage Counts* (November 14th 2006) about the importance of buildings which have 'emotional resonance that goes far beyond their very bricks and mortar', these views should be taken into account.
5. Accordingly, urgent steps should be taken to ensure that as Alexandra Palace is refurbished the studios are appropriately protected. We appreciate that Grade II Listing does afford protection for the studios, but it is clear that in the forthcoming redevelopment, much that currently has Grade II listing will have to be modified or

destroyed. We are concerned that the particular historic value of the studios should not be overlooked now or at any time in the future.

This submission focuses on

- **the history that unfolded here**
- **the significance of television as a British achievement**
- **the uniqueness of the surviving spaces**

The submission also draws attention to expressions of support for the studios.

Note: Enclosed with the submission is a DVD of *Imagine... And Then There Was Television* – a BBC One programme broadcast on 19 December 2006 in which television veterans recall the pioneering days at Alexandra Palace.

Section 1 – Broadcasting history at Alexandra Palace¹

How Britain led the world

1.1 The development of television technology began in the 19th century. Credit for the achievement of the medium as we know it must be shared by many individuals around the globe - including Edwin Belin and René Barthelemy in France; Japan's Kenjiro Takayanagi; the Russian Boris Rosing; the Germans Paul Nipkow and August Karolus; the Hungarian von Mihaly; Americans Charles F. Jenkins and Philo Farnsworth and the Russian émigré Vladimir K. Zworykin; and in the UK, Campbell Swinton and John Logie Baird.²

1.2 Ahead of the BBC launch in November 1936, there had been primitive low definition television systems in Europe, Russia and America. In the US, for example, some 30 US stations broadcast mechanical television from 1930-32, on 24, 45, 48 and 60-line standards. In London, Baird offered an experimental 30-line service from 1929-1931, followed by the BBC 30-line service from 1932-1935, and the German Post Office ran a medium-definition (180 line) service in Berlin from March to August 1935.

1.3 To receive the British low-definition programmes, viewers of the Baird system had to buy 'televisors'. In the first 6 months of broadcasting, because the BBC had only one transmitter, the service consisted of alternating transmissions: two minutes of pictures, followed by two minutes of sound. With the adoption of the 30-line system by the BBC in 1932, the public began to receive professional productions with proven hardware, yet severely limited by having a picture of only 30 lines. By the time the BBC service closed in 1935 several thousand sets had been sold and over 1,500 BBC programmes had been broadcast. Programmes included the historic

¹ Historical Survey of Television at Alexandra Palace, Simon Vaughan, 2003; John Trenouth, Hon Research Fellow NMPFT, 2006

² Don McLean, TV Dawn (<http://www.tvdawn.com>)

transmission of a performance of Pirandello's play *The Man With The Flower In His Mouth*.

1.4 The German service was limited to motion pictures transmitted to audiences of no more than 30, assembled in public viewing rooms in Berlin. It closed after a fire in August 1935, but re-opened for the 15 days of the Berlin Olympic Games the following year.

1.5 Although significant television engineering developments were taking place in the United States, their achievements in mechanical television and their introduction into service of a high definition television broadcasting service came much later than those in Britain. The Soviet Union enlisted the American corporation RCA to equip a complete television service (initially 343 lines, later 441 lines) for Moscow by December 1938. RCA, Don Lee (Los Angeles) DuMont and Philco ran experimental electronic television in America from 1932-38, but there was no serious high-definition television service in the US until April 1939. The French did not adopt a regular service until 1947, and there was no regular television service in post-war Germany until 1952.

1.6 Thus Britain is recognised as being first to provide a high-definition national television service. Modern television - that is, a sustainable, high-definition service of programmes delivered to a published schedule - arrived with the formal launch of 405-line transmissions from Alexandra Palace on 2nd November 1936. In the opening sentence of *Television: An International History*, author Anthony Smith refers to the Alexandra Palace service as 'the world's first regular public service of television'.

How Television came to Alexandra Palace³

1.8 In the summer of 1934 the Government set up a committee, chaired by Lord Selsdon, to investigate the possibility of providing a high-definition television service given the engineering advancements in television that had been demonstrated by EMI and the Baird Company. The Selsdon committee recommended that 'two television systems of high-definition television' should be tried at a 'London station'. The television station was to be built and operated by the BBC and the two systems (Baird and Marconi-EMI) would broadcast on alternate weeks for a trial period of six months.

1.9 Meanwhile the BBC, tasked with providing a suitable building complete with the studios, sound transmitter, mast and aerials - all within 18 months - began a frantic search for a suitable site. Alexandra Palace, a run-down Edwardian entertainments complex in North London, was not the first choice. However it had two significant advantages: One, part of it was available for rent; and two, it was on high ground.

1.10 The BBC knew that to get a reliable range of 25 miles reception with a 17 kilowatt transmitter, the aerial had to be about 600 feet (180 metres) above sea level. Alexandra Palace was already half that, so the transmitting tower only needed to be another 300 feet (90 metres).

³ The Golden Age of Wireless, Asa Briggs, 1965; John Trenouth, Hon Research Fellow NMPFT, 2006

1.11 A year later, the building work was sufficiently advanced for the two rival companies to move their equipment in. Each had their own studio and control room but shared facilities such as dressing rooms, scenery workshop and canteen. The summer of 1936 saw a hive of activity as everyone worked frantically towards the official opening date of early November – but all that was about to change.

1.12 The 1936 Radio Show at Olympia was scheduled for the end of August. *Radiolympia* was an annual exhibition put on by the Radio Manufacturers' Association, and a number of the exhibitors were displaying new television sets. Concerned that there would be no programmes to display on them at the show, the BBC came under huge pressure to provide demonstration transmissions during August. A variety show was quickly put together called *Here's Looking At You*, and it went out twice a day for two weeks, with the two competing television systems alternating on a daily basis.

1.13 BBC Television formally opened on 2nd November 1936 at 3pm, with speeches by the Postmaster-General, the Chairman of the BBC, and Lord Selsdon. The new BBC Television Service had started, and it was the first regularly scheduled true high-definition television service in the world.

1.14 It soon became clear that the Marconi-EMI system was far more suitable for programme making, gave superior performance, and was much more reliable. The decision was taken to end the competition early, and the final Baird transmission went out on 30th January 1937.

(For more about the historic achievements at Alexandra Palace, including its special war-time mission, and developments in news programming and colour techniques, see Appendix 1)

The Studios

1.15 The rooms in question are Studios A and B, in the South East Wing, beneath the transmitter tower. These upper-floor spaces were grand high-ceiling tea-rooms overlooking London when Alexandra Palace opened in the 1870s. They were modified for television production in 1935-36. The windows were masked, and a gallery created for each system - Marconi-EMI in Studio A, and Baird in Studio B. The balconies were bricked up to provide production offices. Studio B, in which evidence of Baird's high-speed film processing system can still be seen, is unlit and now in a dangerous condition. Water comes through the roof in extreme weather. Studio A is in far better condition, and still has the feel of television. The BBC provided a rack of lights in 2003, and the Alexandra Palace Television Society and the British Vintage Wireless and Television Museum, with help from the National Museum of Photography, Film and Television (now the Media Museum), have created displays evoking the pioneering days of television. In November 2006 the Test Card Circle staged a reconstruction of the launch of television to mark the 70th anniversary of the BBC service.⁴

⁴ Historical Survey of Television at Alexandra Palace, Simon Vaughan, 2003

1.16 The studios measure 70 x 30 feet, so are of a reasonable length but proved rather narrow for television. Each had a separate control room and nearby there were dressing rooms and a band room. It was originally intended that the terrace outside would also be used for performances and the cameras could be taken down in a lift and out via a concrete ramp. High shots would come from the balcony just outside the studios.

1.17 It soon became clear that these two small studios were insufficient for a full television service. The old Victorian theatre in the North East Wing of the building, which had not been used for years, was acquired by the BBC as a rehearsal space, and plans were in hand to deploy it as 'studio C' when war was declared, forcing the service to close down.

1.18 From 1936 until the early 1950s Alexandra Palace remained the major production centre for BBC television, broadcasting landmark programmes and historic events (including the 1937 and 1953 Coronations as well as the Victory Parade). Between 1956 and 1969 it was used exclusively for television news broadcasts and in 1970 it was re-equipped to allow the BBC to produce television programmes for the Open University. This continued until 1981 when the University moved out to purpose-built studios in Milton Keynes.

1.19 During the 1950s, experimental colour television programmes were broadcast from Alexandra Palace to allow the BBC to evaluate colour equipment and production techniques.

1.20 The design of the BBC's Television Centre in West London (officially opened in 1960) took account of many of the lessons learned at Alexandra Palace.

1.21 In the early 1960s the BBC pioneered the design and use of robotic cameras for news studios (techniques which are now commonplace worldwide) at Alexandra Palace.

1.22 The studios were vacated in 1981, 45 years after the launch of the medium. For the last 25 years they have remained unused and virtually untouched. We are fortunate that, 70 years after television started, the world's first television station remains extant.

Section 2: Television as a great British achievement

The standard-setter for quality television

2.1 From 1936 to 1939 many of the television programme and production techniques still used today were pioneered at Alexandra Palace. Broadcasters, engineers, inventors and government ministers from around the world came to Alexandra Palace to seek advice and ideas for their own fledgling services. Businessmen and governments watched and waited to see if the new medium would succeed. During this time Britain led the world in television production – all from Alexandra Palace.

2.2 The closure of the service for the duration of the war was, inevitably, a setback. By the time BBC Television returned in June 1946, America had taken the lead with its 525-line standard, adopted in 1941.

2.3 But nevertheless the BBC went on to specify as it had in radio, the highest technical standards in television, and its engineers worked closely with Marconi, EMI, PYE, STC Cintel and others to design and develop ground-breaking equipment such as the standards converter, enabling British and American broadcasters to transmit each other's pictures.⁵

2.4 BBC engineers were frequently seconded to help emerging nations set up their own services. Similarly, nations hosting major events such as the Olympic Games leant heavily on the British industry for advice and expertise.

2.5 It was Britain that paved the way for the formation of the European Broadcasting Union at Torquay in 1950, and it was under the auspices of the Royal Television Society that the annual International Broadcasting Convention was pioneered.⁶ This showcase for communications technology is now so vast that it has had to move from Brighton to a large exhibition centre in Amsterdam.

2.6 Similarly, Britain is a leader in editorial standards in broadcasting. After the fall of the Berlin Wall former Soviet bloc countries looked to the BBC for tuition, under the BBC Marshall Plan of the Mind programme, in developing the role of their newly liberated broadcast media. We have, observed Canadian-born critic Milton Shulman, the 'least worst television system in the world'.

2.7 The BBC, through its commercial subsidiary, is a significant international television broadcaster, showcasing British values as well as broadcast product. BBC Worldwide owns wholly or partly some 18 channels across the globe, as well as 10 UKTV channels held in a joint venture with Flextech. Hundreds of BBC programmes are aired on every continent each year, and the BBC has a rich showcase of international prizes.

2.8 Similarly, ITV and Channel 4 have built formidable reputations with high quality award-winning programmes - e.g. Jewel In The Crown and Brideshead Revisited.

2.9 British television still leads the world in its quality and ambition. On the occasion of the Millennium, images of celebrations in every corner of the world were compiled in a live 24-hour television broadcast that went out across the globe and brought communities together as never before. The hub of all this output was the Television Centre in west London. Of all the hundreds of partners involved, only the BBC had the resources and capacity to devise and achieve such a feat.

2.10 Britain is a significant exporter of television. BBC Worldwide's programme sales and programmes made by independent producers generate significant export revenues⁷ exporter of television.

⁵ John Trenouth, Hon. Research Fellow, NMPFT ; The Electric Eye: affiliation and rivalry in the development of television, 1900-1940, Paul Marshall, 2006

⁶ Sound and Vision, Asa Briggs, 1979

⁷ BBC Annual Report 2005-06; DCMS survey of PACT membership

Growing appreciation of the impact of television on the world

2.11 For better or worse, television has changed lives. In a short space of time it has had the effect of shrinking the world and making us all more familiar with each other, our doctrines and cultures.

2.12 It opens horizons and empowers individuals to draw their own conclusions about how lives should be influenced, and by whom.

2.13 It influences events. We saw in Vietnam, and later when CNN stayed in Baghdad at the outbreak of the first Gulf War, how battlefield commanders are held to account by the camera as never before. And images of the 1984-5 famine in Ethiopia mobilised whole nations to offer help.

2.14 Increasingly, television is a medium of the people. Coverage of the London bombings, for example, was provided by ordinary citizens with phone-cameras.

2.15 But there is still much to be understood about its impact. Anthony Smith, in *Television - An International History* (1991) observes: 'Many have tried, but no one has yet succeeded in distilling the essence of the nature of its influence, but much passes between us and television that shapes and alters us.'

2.16 Recognising this some two decades earlier, Lord Annan recommended further study of the impact of the medium in his 1974 report on the future direction of television.

2.17 Given the speed at which television and other electronic media are now developing, it is unsurprising that we have seen an acceleration of interest in media study. In four years, from 2001 to 2005, the number of media students in the UK more than doubled from 13,000 to 26,500⁸.

2.18 Hitherto the preserve of newer universities, media study has now been embraced by Oxford University with the opening of the Reuters Institute (20th November 2006).

Section 3: Why the studios are unique

3.1 There is no comparable building anywhere in the world. All other pre-war sites were either destroyed by bombing, or swept away for newer premises in the post-war reconstruction. The south-east corner of Alexandra Palace represents the earliest surviving television station in the world and the birthplace of television as we know it.

Other television buildings

3.2 Baird premises: None of the premises used by the British television pioneer John Logie Baird have survived unscathed. Although some of the buildings remain, (blue

⁸ Higher Education Statistics Agency

plaques mark the sites in Hastings, Frith Street, Long Acre and Crescent Wood Road) the interiors have long since been changed beyond recognition. The most important Baird site, where he had two big studios, laboratories and manufacturing capability, was Crystal Palace - destroyed by fire in November 1936, in the middle of the Alexandra Palace system trials.

3.3 Berlin: Nothing remains of the pioneering 180-line propaganda station launched by the Nazis in 1935. The transmitter and studios of the high definition 441-line service launched in 1939 were destroyed by Allied bombing.⁹

3.4 EMI at Hayes: EMI's Central Research Laboratories, where development work on electronic cameras and receivers for the Marconi-EMI system was carried out during the 1930s, have been destroyed.

3.5 Marconi, at Chelmsford: the 1912 New Street site has been sold and demolition looms after a proposal to convert the building to a hotel did not prove feasible. The Waterhouse Lane television laboratories, built in the 1960s, have already been demolished¹⁰.

3.6 USA: .6. The GE studio has not survived in Schenectady, New York, but the Proctor Theatre in downtown Schenectady where Ernst Alexanderson and RCA demonstrated projection television on a six-foot screen has been renovated and continues to operate¹¹. The RCA Victor research laboratories in Camden, NJ, were demolished over 20 years ago; the surviving factory building in the RCA Victor complex has been renovated into condominiums. The RCA Building in Rockefeller Center, New York City, where program content originated for much of the 1930s, has been renamed the GE [General Electric] Building. It still contains the studios used by RCA and NBC for television field tests, and NBC continues to use them although their structural fidelity to the 1930s layout is unknown¹². The Empire State Building enjoyed a renaissance as a site for VHF and UHF antennas in the NYC metro area after 9/11. The microwave relay system for television that RCA pioneered in the 1930s included legs extending to the RCA Communications labs in eastern Long Island, but those sites are now the David A. Sarnoff Pine Barrens [nature] Preserve¹³. After 1941, television research moved to the new RCA Laboratories in Princeton, New Jersey. The building where RCA invented electronic, monochrome-compatible, colour television now houses the Sarnoff Corporation, but the TV studio has been divided into smaller offices and the lab bays where staff worked on system components have been re-engineered, often with new doorways as well as equipment. A plaque in San Francisco commemorates the work of Californian pioneer Philo Farnsworth with the words: 'In a simple laboratory on this site, 202 Green Street, Philo Taylor Farnsworth, U.S. pioneer in electronics, invented and patented the first operational all-electronic "television system" on September 7, 1927.'

3.7 Moscow: There is undoubtedly television history associated with the steel Shuhovskaya tower, erected in Shabolovka Street in central Moscow in 1922.

⁹ John Trenouth, Hon. Research Fellow, NMPFT; Eduard Bauer, German television historian

¹⁰ <http://www.marconiveterans.com/>

¹¹ Alexander B. Magoun PhD, David Sarnoff Library, Princeton, NJ

¹² Steve McVoy, Early Television Foundation, Ohio; Alexander B. Magoun

¹³ Alexander B. Magoun PhD, David Sarnoff Library, Princeton NJ

Television studios were added in 1937/38¹⁴. There is little clarity about what happened, but we are assured that they no longer exist¹⁵. The site is currently home to the state television RTR sports channel.

See Appendix 2 for post-war UK television buildings of historic value.

Section 4: Expressions of support/concern for the studios

4.1 Early Day Motion: That this House notes with concern the lack of provision for the protection of the original television studios at Alexandra Palace contained in the proposed lease for the sale of the palace by Haringey Council; recognises the heritage of the studios as the site of the world's first public television broadcast and the birthplace of the BBC's television service; believes that this heritage should be properly preserved and conserved, with sensitive re-use, as part of national and international history; and urges the Government to take steps to ensure the continued existence of the original studios in any regeneration initiatives that might take place at Alexandra Palace. (Signed by 29 MPs)

4.2 The television industry: On 5th September 2005 representatives of all the major UK broadcasters came together at a seminar at Ofcom to explore ways of securing the future of the studios.

4.3 Interest groups that have expressed concern to the BBC: British Vintage Wireless and Television Museum; Alexandra Palace Television Society; The Test Card Circle; The Television Trust; the Early Television Foundation, Ohio.

4.4 Interested individuals: 1500-signature petition (of which we have had sight) gathered by John Thompson, Chairman of the British Vintage Wireless and Television Museum.

4.5 *Imagine ... And Then There Was Television*. Television programme, broadcast on BBC One on 19 December 2006 in which Maureen Lipman (actress) and Alan Yentob (presenter) express concern about the future of the studios. (DVD enclosed)

¹⁴ The Electric Eye: affiliation and rivalry in the development of television, 1900-1940, Paul Marshall, 2006

¹⁵ http://www.tvtower.ru/56_HistoryMRC/eng/

Appendix 1

Television at Alexandra Palace: Additional History

The Battle of the Beams

On 1st September 1939 the BBC ceased television broadcasting. Alexandra Palace was closed down because of fears that the Luftwaffe would use the transmission signals from its tower as a navigational aid to bomb London. In a curious irony the close-down served another historic purpose.

From the beginning of the war the Luftwaffe had used systems employing radio beams to enable bombers to find their targets. Although the early versions were relatively easy to jam, by 1941 they had developed a very sophisticated system called Y-Gerat (Y-apparatus).

Fortunately, thanks to excellent intelligence, the British military were ahead of the Luftwaffe, having learned that the frequency chosen by the Germans for the Y-Gerat was in the same band as the transmitters at Alexandra Palace and within range of re-tuning.

The weak Y-Gerat signals, broadcast from a transmitting station on the Cherbourg peninsula, were received in North London and re-broadcast by the powerful television transmitter, thus introducing errors in the aircraft navigation system. Over the following months, hundreds of tons of high explosives, destined for the capital, fell instead on the open fields of Kent.

The return of television

Within a year of VE Day, the pre-war system at Alexandra Palace had been restored. It had escaped bombing during the war and all the original 405-line studio equipment was still there. TV returned on June 7th 1946, the day before the first anniversary of Victory in Europe. It was the first television service in Europe to reopen after the war.

The nation was impoverished after five years of war but the return of Television was regarded as a priority. Not only would it raise morale, but it would also provide a platform for UK electronic manufacturers like EMI, Marconi and Pye to use their wartime research to develop new television cameras, receivers, transmitters and studio equipment. For the next forty years, British television equipment would be found in studios all over the world and be a valuable source of export income to the UK.

The Transmitters and Tower

By the end of 1955 the original Alexandra Palace transmitters were nearly 20 years old and were due for replacement. A replacement transmitter (using higher power but the same frequencies as Alexandra Palace) was built, along with a transmitting tower, at Crystal Palace in South London. The original Alexandra Palace transmitter was used for the last time on the 27th March 1956. The transmitting tower is now used to broadcast UHF television programmes as well as local radio and digital radio signals.

The tower, for many years the on-screen symbol of BBC television, has been adapted, with English Heritage consent, to meet modern requirements. In September 2000,