TAKING WESTMINSTER ABBEY (BY STRATEGY)

The previous DGs had been thrown in at various deep ends, mostly related to the war. Ian Jacob's was relatively benign by comparison, but no less dangerous. The Coronation was due just a few months into his tenure. Get it wrong and he'd be gone sooner than Robert W. Foot, and possibly beheaded (if he somehow messed it up so badly as to be treasonable, which was admittedly unlikely).

The Coronation was "proclaimed" (i.e. the date set and announced) on June 10th, 1952, just a few days shy of a year in advance, and that year was spent up and down the nation preparing it down to the minutest detail. D-day wasn't more carefully planned. This was an event requiring military precision, and fortunately Jacob was a military man.

Having said that, he didn't become DG until December 1952. He was still at the Ministry of Defence when the first of many, many meetings of the Sound Department was held to identify and appoint the major players in the BBC's side of the drama. Hats went on donkeys at a prodigious rate. Those who had worked on the previous Coronation in 1937 were quickly identified and assigned to appropriate roles - R.H. Wood, in charge of the sound engineering, C. Max-Muller and Seymour de Lotbinière on policy and general organisation.

It hardly stopped there. Although even at this point it was clear that this was television's big break, there was still a simultaneous radio broadcast to organise, which would inevitably have to be the most difficult and complicated such undertaking in the BBC's history. Not to mention the hugest, broadcasting solidly from 10:15 am to 5.30 pm, an unprecedented and extremely daunting length.

Preparations were aided, if rather ghoulishly, by the fact that George VI had needed to be buried and the resulting funeral covered by the BBC. They could therefore take advice and helpful hints from the reception their broadcast had taken. There were complaints, for instance, that (despite being a worldwide broadcast) there wasn't enough input from commentators from other parts of the Empire, sorry, Commonwealth. So for the Coronation, which would be described by over a dozen men and women dotted around the capital, voices were sought from all four corners of the Queen's domains. W.E.S. Briggs of Canada, Willy Richardson of Trinidad, the surprisingly not-made-up Talbot Duckmanton of Australia, and even some Welsh and Scottish voices, all joined the inevitable John Snagge and Andrea Russell, as did just about anyone who had ever held a microphone for the Corporation - John Arlott, already the voice of cricket, at Piccadilly Circus, future Tomorrow's World mogul Raymond Baxter at Trafalgar Square.

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Note was also taken that people apparently wanted to hear more from “the London Streets”, and the man and woman thereon, rather than having everything related to them from a studio set in Alexandra Palace. They even held open auditions for more women commentators, after criticism that there were too few feminine voices at the funeral. They only managed to dig up two, in the end.

A master control room was established in the Verger’s Office, as it had been in 1937, with state-of-the-art switchboard to be operated by C. Max-Muller. At the push of a button he could decide which feed the nation was listening to at any given moment, while communicating off-air with any one of the vast army of commentators, passing on crucial information or just making sure all watches were synchronised. They even provided television monitors for the radio commentators so they could still share the odd insight despite not being allowed in.

And this was just the radio broadcast. The main assault was going to be through television, and nothing like it had been attempted before - not at the King’s funeral, the Olympics, nor even the previous Coronation.

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