WINNING THE PEACE

Six years of war, turmoil and uncertainty was not quite long enough for previous notions of “normal” to be entirely forgotten. But nearly. It was long enough for the old normal to become a hazy memory, informed as much by personal prejudices and attitudes to the then-present as it was the actual truth about the past. With peace restored and something approaching predictability slowly returning to everyday life, the BBC necessarily had to take stock, not only of their war apparatus and how best to repurpose or (in most cases) dismantle it, but of their entire broadcasting output and how it was structured. Television was a whole continent of problems in itself, and as it was switched off it could wait for the time being. In the immediate aftermath of victory, the BBC had to sort out the medium they were actually using first.

Before the War there were two radio services, the National Programme and the Regional Programme, which was a way of keeping all the formerly-independent local stations together under one umbrella somehow. Both were abruptly shut down approximately eight attoseconds after war was officially declared and replaced with a single channel, the BBC Home Service. After a few months this was supplemented with the Forces Programme, which ultimately housed most of the lighter, more entertaining material under the principle of “keeping the boys’ spirits up”. It became more efficient at this after Haley relaunched it as the General Forces Programme in February 1944, but by then the war in Europe had only a year left to run.

As the fighting slowly wound to a stop, and the remaining occupying Allied forces gradually handed over to real Governments (or near enough), the GFP steadily wound itself up over the course of the first year and half after the war. It finally closed for good moments before the bells rang in the year 1947. By then, however, it was only half the station it used to be, broadcasting on shortwave frequencies alone. The space it occupied on longwave had already been taken over shortly after VE Day by the first of the new, post-war breed of BBC radio stations - the Light Programme.

Radio had come a long way since Nellie Melba on factory floor. Light entertainment was now a thing. Music-hall broadcasts, sketch comedy and easily digestible pick ‘n’ mixes like Monday Night at Eight, originally conceived to keep morale up in the forces and played out on their dedicated station, had become extremely popular during wartime both at the front and at home, to the extent that they were, by and large, what the listening public expected to hear now everything was “normal”. To that end, the Light Programme was conceived as a sort of demobbed Forces Programme. It became home to the likes of Music While You Work, the eerie school-tomorrow light music horror of Sing Something Simple, and the prototypical request show Housewives’ Choice. Beyond music, the Light also took on some of the BBC - and by extension Britain’s - first

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shuddering dips of the toe into the populist waters of the ongoing drama series known as “soap operas” which were so successful in America.

The genre was previously seen as far too vulgar for British ears, not to mention that most dreadful of qualities, inherently commercial - the very name “soap opera” comes from their original utility as a trojan horse for detergent advertising, for heaven’s sake. The latter point in particular was all the proof the BBC needed to eschew the very notion - until the war came along. The very first British radio (or any) soap opera, Front Line Family, debuted on the National Programme way back in 1941. The initial intention was as a form of passive-aggressive propaganda aimed at the Americans, who were still clinging to neutrality and non-interventionism. Seven months after the show’s first broadcast it became moot, but the show didn’t. America joined the War and American troops came to be stationed indefinitely in Britain, and in need of entertainment (not to mention distraction from impregnating the female population). Besides, the show was popular with British listeners as well - enough that it actually outlived the war, eventually moving to its natural habitat on the Light Programme as “The Family Robinson” for a couple of years, before being replaced with the legendary Mrs Dale’s Diary.

The Light also became home to Billy Cotton’s band, the earliest incarnation of Woman’s Hour (which was created a few months into its existence) and a large chunk of the Corporation’s sound comedy output - vehicles for Jimmy Clitheroe and Kenneth Horne, sitcoms Life With the Lyons and The Navy Lark - although the big names, such as ITMA and the Goons, debuted on the Home Service, which would be the only station essentially remain intact in peacetime. Material too “heavy” for the Light programme belonged here: classical gramophone records, relatively solemn talks and serious plays adapted from giant leather-bound novels. - although also Children’s Hour and the morning shift of Music While You Work. It was still fodder for the ordinary Briton. The truly special, the cognoscenti with brows reaching to the sky, were bereft. Or such was Haley’s concern, and the beneficiaries of probably his biggest and most lasting contribution.

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