TAKING WESTMINSTER ABBEY (BY STRATEGY) III

The broadcasting strategy itself was hit upon early. The Coronation ceremony itself would just be the climax of several months of programming on and about the subject of the Queen, the ceremony and the monarchy in general - albeit mostly in sound, because it was still more practical than television. It was the first step on the road to the concept of the theme night.

It wasn't just the Coronation that needed promoting. The Empire was transitioning into the modern-day Commonwealth as more and more former colonies were becoming republics - India being the most prominent recent example. The country needed to be sold on the idea of British dominion becoming a co-operative international association (at least in theory), and so the "idea of the Commonwealth" was carefully threaded through all the Coronation-related programming.

This started early - specifically October 1952, with programmes explicitly aimed at prospective visitors - "Getting to Britain" and "Getting About in Britain". The remaining months of the year saw programmes about making the robes for the Coronation, the design and minting of the new coins, and the manufacture of the Queen's velvet. Meanwhile, the ceremony was rehearsed to within a Planck length of its life.

The programming accelerated as the great occasion drew closer, with a full week of "gala programmes" cranking the hype to fever pitch. There were messages from the various Commonwealth Prime Ministers, a feature-length "life so far" called "Homage to the Queen", even a short address from the woman of the moment herself. There was a programme of historical music composed for previous Coronations, all the way back to Charles II and the Restoration, played by musicians from Australia (so as to promote the Commonwealth). Three episodes of the that-was-the-year-that-was documentary series Scrapbook were presented, concentrating on other years of royal transition - 1902, 1935 and 1937 (discreetly skipping over the whole issue of Edward VIII). There were gala performances of musical pieces about the previous Queen Elizabeth - Benjamin Britten's Gloriana and Edward German's Merrie England - to cash in on the excitement over becoming "Elizabethans" again. There were live reports from street parties - using similar techniques to the ones developed during the war for as-it-happened coverage of the Blitz, only several orders of magnitude less depressing - and Eamonn Andrews wandering the streets of London bothering people standing around the parade route, and asking for selections for Family Favourites.

The great day itself was overcast and windy, with intermittent rain showers (as the British people

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were probably expecting on the 2nd of June), and opened in Sound at 5.30am with a pointedly renamed Music While You Wait. But the wireless had arguably played its main part with the previews and festivities. There were now around two and a half million TV sets in the country, after a massive surge in the run-up to the ceremony. Suddenly, those crowds in London weren't as privileged as they had been. They were no longer the only people able to actually see the event itself. They had undoubtedly the best view, but not the only view. With (almost) the entire country covered for transmission, now anyone could see the ceremony, live as it happened.

Well, anyone with £85, anyway, which is what a television set cost at the time - or who knew someone else who did, which turned out to be the way most people ended up viewing the Coronation. On no more than two and a half million sets in Britain, it's estimated over 20 million sets of eyes actually witnessed the broadcast, mostly crammed into living rooms, squinting at a tiny black-and- white screen set against the wall.

In a single day, the broadcasting game changed forever. As Westminster Abbey opened up its doors to the eyes of the common man - unedited and unfiltered - so did the world. The tone was struck by an almost reverential article on the broadcast in the following day's Times. It ran anonymously, but quite possibly was written by the editor, who you'll recall was one William Haley.

"*At first it was difficult to grasp the fact that what one saw was not a news film but historic events unfolding even as one watched...Yesterday, for the first time in perhaps a thousand years, the Sovereign was crowned in the sight of many thousands of the humblest of her subjects.*"

Ian Jacob had taken over the nation's broadcaster just in time for the idea of what that meant to change forever.

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