

THE NIGHT THE LIGHTS WENT OUT IN BATTERSEA

When the lights flickered in the bar at Lime Grove shortly before BBC-2's launch night was due to start transmitting, a murmur went up about the grid being tested by all the people tuning in. It was a joke; with new aerials costing upwards of £100 the take-up of BBC-2-ready equipment had been relatively slow. When it kept happening, other voices started muttering darkly of sabotage, of revenge for Grace Archer (who had been killed off in a massive fire in the Home Service soap "The Archers" on the same night ITV began broadcasting by absolutely no coincidence whatsoever).

It soon became clear that it was neither. Instead a minor explosion at Battersea Power Station had led to a devastating fire, blacking out half of London. Buckingham Palace and the Palace of Westminster went black. Television Centre held on for an hour on so on stockpiled battery power, but before long it too was dead. And at Lime Grove, the planned launch night for BBC-2 was plunged into pitch darkness as the entire studio lost power in an instant - trapping George the kangaroo on the fourth floor, in the absence of a staircase.

The ITV network had been nervously planning to counter BBC-2's spectacular launch night for months. It had been planned as an exciting showcase of the new station, which was to open with the first episode of the explicitly self-promotional daily magazine show Line-Up, which would later evolve into Late Night Line-Up, hosted in both cases by Denis Tuohy. This would essentially consist of ten minutes of previews with Tuohy "assisted" by George, standing in for Custard (a joey had originally been booked but died). Followed by a prestige performance of Cole Porter's Kiss Me Kate, starring Patricia Morrison and Howard Keel.

Obviously none of this was possible now, although remarkably they held out, almost in tears, until a quarter to ten at night before finally surrendering. They were helped in this by Alexandra Palace lying just outside of the affected zone and therefore still having power, and as that was where BBC-2's newsroom was located they could at least provide the headlines. And so the first words spoken on the new station did not come from Tuohy, sitting miserably in pitch darkness at Lime Grove, but from veteran newsreader Gerald Priestland:

"Well, welcome to BBC-2 from where it all began, Studio A, Alexandra Palace, now the newsroom for our new channel."

At least as far as Priestland knew. Unfortunately the sound still wasn't quite working properly and most of the baffled viewers just saw him opening and closing his mouth in silence for the first two minutes as he attempted to read the headlines. This very nearly made the actual first words on the

new station “stinking wogs”, in reference to a bus conductor who had narrowly avoided getting the sack for racism.

The hapless Priestland would then hang around for a further three hours, sitting behind his desk while BBC staff milled around him, repeating the same news stories in a highly-trained calm voice, while his body language all but screamed in abject terror. Occasionally a bakelite telephone next to him would ring and Priestland would attempt to soothe the panicked voices on the other side: “yes, right you are..” All broadcast live onscreen. The complete and visible breakdown of all structure is, to modern eyes at least, quite genuinely terrifying, as Priestland desperately improvises trivia, receives notes from similarly internally-screaming men in suits and makes the occasional quip to try and settle his nerves (as the phone rings: “Just like channel 1.” After answering and putting it down in silence: “Unlike channel 1, there’s no-one there). At one point he actually turns his back to camera to ask the beleaguered newsroom staff if they’ve got anything else for him to say.

In between were longueurs where random standby records (including some Cole Porter numbers, so there was that at least) played over an increasingly optimistic “BBC2 starts shortly” caption, until all the denial in the world could no longer be sustained and everyone gave up.

As a result, the first proper programme (as opposed to vaguely existential Beckettian nightmare) on BBC-2 would be Play School at 11 am the following day. The big launch party would have to take place the following day, technically after BBC-2 had begun regular broadcasting. Tuohy appeared to open proceedings with a flickering candle and a tour around the main BBC-2 studios where all the programmes making up what was now being called “the Seven Faces of the Week” would be based, albeit now a day out of sync.

As for Priestland, he later became the BBC’s USA correspondent in the late sixties, covering the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, the Chicago riots and the moon landing. Unsurprisingly he had a breakdown at the end of the decade, which fortunately he recovered from to become a respected veteran of broadcast journalism and, later, religious commentary. He was the one who described Tahu Hole as “a monster in every sense” in his autobiography, in a section added at the last minute after Hole died shortly before publication.