

BBC Northern Ireland

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With thanks to: Mark Adair, Nan Magee, Lisa Kelso, Keith Baker, Grainne Loughran, Lynda Atcheson, Peter Johnston, Margaret McKee, Tracey Leavy, Caroline Cooper, Joanne Wallace, Paul McKeivitt, Veronica Hughes, Tony Dobbyn, Robin Reynolds, Rory O'Connell, Stephen Douds, Geraldine McCourt, Rachael Moore, Information and Archives BBC NI, Pacemaker and NewCreation.com

BBC Northern Ireland



Celebrating 50 years of BBC Television in Northern Ireland





The Magic Box – Celebrating 50 years of BBC Television in Northern Ireland

Television was one of the most socially important innovations of the 20th Century. Its arrival helped shrink the world, and to enlarge our understanding of its complexity. What began as a tiny and experimental affair quickly became a dominant means of communication. The magic box of television was transformed from an expensive luxury, with limited programming and even smaller audiences, to an everyday item watched by almost all of us. Over the last 50 years it has shaped our childhoods, connected us with big events and provided a rich source of information, education and entertainment.

Television has brought everywhere to every living room. It has transformed our sense of time and distance, and made the unknown and far-away, familiar. Its pictures have allowed us to glimpse ourselves and to catch proper sight of strangers, whether at home or abroad.

Local people have been part of this story of social and technological change. BBCNI made its first television broadcast half a century ago. Those flickering black and white images began a process which would, in time, turn occasional local programmes into a year-round

production effort in drama, news, sport, education and entertainment. Today's knowledge economy and information society, and our creative industries, owe much to Northern Ireland's television pioneers.

The Magic Box is a touring exhibition to celebrate 50 years of BBC television in, for and about Northern Ireland. It tells the story of our region through sound and pictures and underscores the BBC's long-established and unique role at the heart of community life and creativity.

*Professor Fabian Monds CBE
National Governor
BBC Northern Ireland*



Small Screen – Big Influence

When television came to Northern Ireland in 1953, few could have realised how important it would become. Its role as both “*mirror and window*”, in Sir Kenneth Bloomfield’s phrase, has been massively influential.

Television has allowed us to watch the events that shaped the second half of the twentieth century: wars, assassinations, the exploration of space, the fall of Communism and the coming of the new millennium across the globe. And through its images, the world has seen our conflict and local efforts to create a more peaceful future.

Television has given us opportunities to see ourselves and our neighbours in Northern Ireland. Our poets and writers have made this new medium their own. Children from town and country have learned more about each other through schools’ broadcasts, and all of us have benefited from a range of programmes documenting our history and celebrating local creativity, sporting achievements and cultural diversity. Television has created a powerful, living record of the ordinary and the extraordinary lives of people here. In the darkest days we

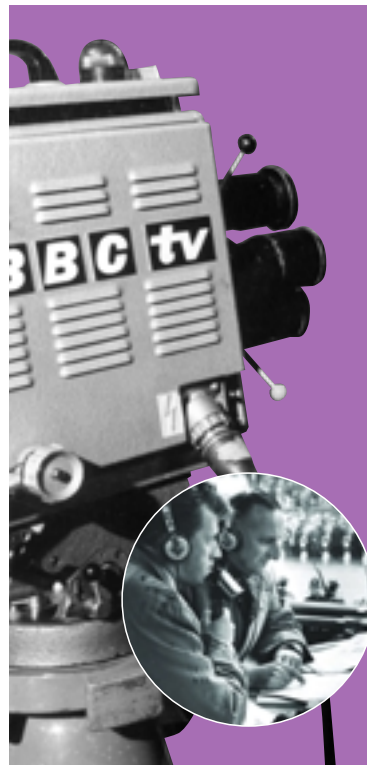
turned to it for reliable news of what was happening in our streets and countryside. And it also provided an important source of humour and entertainment that enabled us to laugh at ourselves and the predicaments of community life in NI.

The small screen has exerted a big influence on all our lives. This exhibition gives us an opportunity to count the gains of its first half century and to estimate local television’s promise and future direction.

Anna Carragher



Anna Carragher
Controller
BBC Northern Ireland



BBC Television made its debut in Northern Ireland in 1953, relaying network programmes from a temporary transmitter installed in an old Nissen hut on a hillside just outside Belfast.

The first viewers were thin on the ground. Television sets were expensive and the reception – black and white, of course – was far from perfect.

A typical day that month shows a schedule that included cricket, a western, a variety gala and news. There were long gaps in transmission and programmes had concluded by 10.30pm. 24 hour television was still some years away.

But on 2nd June 1953, history was made and people could watch it happening.

The Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II

was broadcast from Westminster Abbey. It was the first British Coronation ever seen live on television. It still is.

All over the country, people gathered round the nearest available television set to watch. It was a turning point. As one viewer recalled, ‘*the Royal Family were on television so therefore it was okay.*’

Television had become acceptable. And it was here to stay.



The first programme made by BBC Northern Ireland for local viewers was Ulster Mirror in 1954.

Shown every fortnight, it was a miscellany of items from around the region. However, no facilities existed in Belfast for either editing, or local transmission, so all the material had to be flown to London and it was broadcast from there.

But even that first tentative step into local programming demonstrated a commitment by the BBC to connect with its audience and to reach into the heart of communities in towns, cities and villages across Northern Ireland.

Today, BBCNI broadcasts almost 740 hours of locally produced programmes each year in areas as

diverse as drama, current affairs, education, sport and entertainment. It also produces popular programmes for Network audiences.



In Northern Ireland, with its long history of division, objective and informed journalism is vital.

News and Current Affairs has been a core service over the past fifty years.

Television news remains a vital link between the BBC and the community it serves.

The first bulletin was broadcast in 1957 and bore very little resemblance to the kind of coverage viewers expect today. There was no film. Video had not even been invented. A newsreader read a script illustrated only by the occasional black and white photograph. It was like radio, on television.

The first news magazine came on the air in 1959. **Studio Eight** was the name of the studio and the programme itself.

Other news programmes were to follow: **Six Five, Six Ten, Scene Around Six, Inside Ulster, BBC Newsline**. All have made their mark with the Northern Ireland audience.

So, too, the presenters. Names from the past and present include:

Malcolm Kellard, Larry McCoubrey, Barry Cowan, Sean Rafferty, Wendy Austin, Noel Thompson, Rose Neill. All became familiar teatime guests in our homes.

BBCNI journalism has always been characterised by authority and informed analysis – from correspondents such as *W.D. Flackes, Eric Waugh and Brian Walker* to *Stephen Grimason, Maggie Taggart, Brian Rowan and Dot Kirby*.

And the news that they, and others, reported was the often difficult story of Northern Ireland itself – Bloody Sunday, Bloody Friday, Enniskillen, Omagh, the Good Friday Agreement.

The television images of those events, captured by camera staff operating in often grim and dangerous circumstances, are seared into our memories. They are milestones in our troubled journey.



Since 1973, **Spotlight** has been BBC NI's flagship current affairs programme.

Investigating, challenging, and getting under the skin of important issues have been at the core of **Spotlight's** purpose.

And while politics and security issues have often dominated the wider agenda since 1969, **Spotlight** has kept audiences informed about other aspects of life in Northern Ireland.

More recently, **Hearts and Minds** has established itself as a uniquely engaging political series.

And **Let's Talk** has made a direct and intimate connection with audiences on a range of topics, providing a valuable platform for debate.

Throughout its history, **BBC NI** has shown a commitment to the big occasion, and to capturing and sharing events of significance.

Live election coverage has been a major part of that. And BBC NI has been the only local broadcaster to provide regular coverage of debates from the Assembly Chamber at Stormont. Once again, keeping audiences informed has been, and remains, a priority.

Since June 1953, there has been coverage of visits to Northern Ireland by the Queen and other members of the Royal Family.

Historic, too, was the Pope's journey to Ireland in 1979. BBC NI cameras brought his famous speech in Drogheda live into our

homes. It was the single biggest outside broadcast operation ever mounted by the region.

The moments leading up to the conclusion of the negotiations on Good Friday in 1998 gave us more history in the making.

And who can forget pictures of the first visit by President Clinton in November 1995?





James Young was a huge success in the Group Theatre long before his comedy was transferred to television in 1971.

But BBC NI gave his genius wider scope and a bigger stage.

It is a long time - but in many ways a short step - from *James Young* to the *Hole in the Wall Gang* and **Give My Head Peace**.

In their work, his scathing wit and cultural caricature live on.

Many others were given their first chance with BBC NI.

It was in the famous **Billy** plays that young *Kenneth Branagh's* talents first reached a wider audience.



Hollywood star *Liam Neeson* made his first television appearance in a BBCNI schools' programme about the railways.

Throughout the past fifty years, **BBC NI** has been committed to finding and nurturing local talent.

Some talent was already well established, of course.



Patrick Kielty has gone from a **BBCNI** stand-up comedy programme at **The Empire** to nationwide fame. And *Sauna Lowry*, now a familiar face to **Network** audiences, began her television career with **BBC NI's** **Youth Programmes Unit**.

**The search goes on.....
Could you be the next big discovery?**

We are committed to enriching the lives of our viewers and to engaging them in what we do.

Making A Difference encouraged people to nominate the unsung heroes who have had a beneficial effect on the lives of those around them and the BBC's **Children in Need** provides year-round support to young people throughout the region.



Fair Play, our first television consumer series, has struck a chord with audiences, who have brought complaints about everything from faulty washing machines to mobile telephone masts.

And think of the remarkable **Home Truths** documentaries which sought to establish what really happened in the Curran murder case and led to the release of Iain Hay Gordon.