

## 4. Enjoying Comforts of Home

### A home of our own

Around midnight, the Woodroffe family said a thankful good riddance to their home in Griffin Street, Blackburn. Beds, bedding, various chairs, stools and 'pisspots', together with a bench, table, orange boxes and assorted clutter were heaped onto a handcart. This was hauled along cobbled streets for an hour until arrival at their new home in Livingstone Street on the edge of town. What a contrast: a flushing indoor toilet, a bathroom and both front and back gardens. Their midnight flit had saved 7/6d rent money too, so all in all an excellent move.

As urban slums were cleared, four million new homes were built in the 1920s and 1930s that enabled ordinary people to have basic amenities usually associated with upper middle classes. Until 1914 houses were built 40 to the acre, in terraces with back yards. The new fashion was for semi-detached and detached houses in what was suburbia, at 12 to the acre and, as with the Woodroffes, front and back gardens. A dream of your own home had become reality for many. In 1909 building back-to-back houses was banned but many remained; damp, dark and squalid in comparison.

Amazingly, by 1910 there were over 1,700 'building societies' with assets varying enormously. This reduced to a little over 1,000 societies by 1925 but lending had increased five-fold and quadrupled again by 1936. Premier societies such as the Leeds Permanent, Halifax (formerly two societies) and Bradford & Bingley were well-positioned to take full advantage with the benefit also of tax concessions. By the late 1920s almost 75% of building society loans were for £500 or less, illustrating that most house buyers were those on modest incomes.

In 1918 Britain's housing shortage had tripled to nearly 300,000 and double this within a few years according to some reports. The Tudor Walters Committee report of 1917, endorsed by Lloyd George, conceded Britain did not have 'homes fit for heroes.' The Addison Act of 1919 gave subsidies to local councils with the aim of 500,000 houses within three years. By 1921 only 170,000 had been completed.

By 1938 rented council accommodation comprised 11% of housing stock with a major boost given to private enterprise through subsidies. Landlords often sold to sitting tenants. They felt the rental sector was uneconomic, faced with the expense of constant repair and upkeep, finding suitable tenants and ensuring rent was paid in full and on time. Before the war, the private rented sector accounted for almost 90% of all housing but by 1938 this had declined to 58%. Owner-occupation stood at 35% and continued to rise.

The cost of housing construction fell dramatically due to greater competition, economies of scale in building and the lower cost of building materials, including bricks, cement and paint. A shortage of wood for window frames was overcome by using steel, mass produced by firms such as Valentine Crittall. The housing boom of the 1930s was accelerated by a cheap money policy, the effect of which was to reduce an average interest rate of 6% to 4.5%.

By the mid-1920s in London, a bungalow could be purchased for £225, a non-parlour house for £340 - £400 and a three-bedroom parlour house for £500 - £600. During the 1930s a typical semi could be purchased for £450 with a deposit of just £25 with a weekly repayment of 14 or 15 shillings. Extending the repayment period from 15 years to 25 years increased housing demand as a mortgage was now in reach of those earning £4 a week, or even less.

The Garden City movement was inspired by Ebenezer Howard, creator of pre-war Letchworth, and Welwyn Garden City in the 1920s. His utopian ideas were for self-contained communities in a green setting, balancing the needs of housing, industry and agriculture. Others followed his concept, including Hampstead Garden Suburb (1907) and Guidea Estate, Romford (1911). With financial support from the Halifax Building Society, Richard Costain began building in Elm Park, in the London Borough of Havering, in 1934. He placed enormous emphasis on a mixed range of family homes and associated transport, shopping and leisure needs. Costain already had experience of large projects, having completed developments in Outer London and the Rylands estate opposite Fords in Dagenham in 1931.

At Elm Park, near Romford, a £400 house with a 90% mortgage, could be purchased for 11s 8p a week in a "complete country home town." An enticing advertisement showed two sets of scales with the heading: "Which Balance Is Yours?" In the first, Paying Rent, "the landlord gets all and you get nothing to call your own." This contrasted with Home Purchase, in which "you get a home and the building society interest only." A strapline beneath said, "THE SAME OUTLAY WILL DO EITHER! Costain opened show-houses and salesman whisked prospective buyers around by car, removing any lingering doubts on the merits of home ownership.

After completing his first 500 homes he part-funded Elm Park station in 1935, the last on the District line. A 1937 advert promised, "space to breathe the clear air of open Essex. Compare these wide, clean avenues," in contrast to "narrow, dust-laden streets in which many families unnecessarily remain when they could so easily live healthier, fuller lives at Elm Park." A further inducement was repayment of 13 shillings a week for anyone with a weekly income of £3.15s. At a shade over 17% this meant a home of your own was now affordable. Besides, with home ownership you had an asset that would spiral in value as demand increased.

Rather than a rather bland Type K or Plot C, homes had romantic names such as Rosewood, Hawthorne, Vilette and Bramblewood. Drives, closes and avenues, rather than roads and streets, added to a sense of spacious parkland. The estate of Elm Park comprised 7,000 homes, built on 600 acres at a cost of £3.5 million. Costain also built an 'assembly hall' for social recreation, further integrating the residents of Elm Park into a cohesive community.

This era saw the emergence of other large building firms such as John Laing, Leo Mayer and his New Ideal Homesteads, Frank Taylor of Taylor Woodrow and George Wimpey. Demand was such that banks and building societies were prepared to advance loans, and even small builders could obtain supplies on credit from builders' merchants. The housing peak was in 1934 when 287,000 houses were constructed, falling back to around 250,000 up to 1939.

A move to the semi-countryside was enticing, but critics were unimpressed by the attractions of Harrow, Beckenham, Finchley or Hendon. "Live in Ruislip where the air's like wine; It's less than half an hour on the Piccadilly Line." The semi had reached suburbia, much satirised by Osbert Lancaster as "Wimbledon Transitional, Stockbroker's Tudor and Bypass Variegated." Whilst Elm Park, Welwyn and Wythenshawe were conceived as garden suburbs, planners and builders mostly ignored the movement. There was little attempt at integrated living, other than to set aside plots for shops, pubs and cinemas.

The Ribbon Development Act of 1935 sought to avoid houses strung out along existing public roads by creating compact communities and new private roads. A problem was a charge was incurred when taken over by a local authority. Higgledy-piggledy and haphazard development had to stop. So had ill-thought out creeping urbanisation but results were patchy. Trees and

privet hedges proliferated. So did road names such as "Rise, Way and Gardens," portraying an idyllic rural ambience in contrast to the confines of urban living with high density housing.

Many homes had a traditional range in the lounge, fuelled by a back boiler, as coal was much cheaper than gas. They were derided by critics who had to accept the material benefits of fittings such as basins, baths, tiles, airing cupboards and electric points; pure luxury for house buyers. So was having an indoor loo and bathroom. By 1938 the Ideal Homes Exhibition was attracting 600,000 visitors. A major feature was 12-15 gardens, reached by a winding path, decked out with waterfalls, rockeries, shrubberies, woodland dells and other adornments.

A combination of suburban living, gardens and owner-occupation illustrated how far housing development had changed. There was now privacy, space and retreat into a world removed from the daily grind of work and intensity of urban life. Transport, school and access weighed heavily in where to live, according to one's means. The contribution to the British economy since 1900 virtually doubled to one third, thanks to a more productive and mobile workforce, fuelled by an unquenchable thirst for home ownership.

This included public rented housing too, though the main impetus for council house building was post World War 2. One notable development, built between 1921 and 1932, was the Beacontree estate in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham. With a population of 100,000 it is the largest development of its type in the world. Nicknamed Corn Beef City and famed for its prohibitive notices (cycling, ball games et al), homes had running water, indoor toilets and private gardens.

"We even had flamingos in the park", said one resident. He sighed. "They had to take them out because people were shooting them." A smile soon returned in recalling earlier times. "In those days the houses were luscious and beautiful. These days they're small and pokey." There was enormous pride and sentimental attachment in having your own home, whether on a mortgage or rented from the Council – and a community spirit too in forging a new life.

In these inter-war years, local councils built 1.1 million homes but demand for both council and private housing outstripped provision. Massive bombing and inevitable neglect during World War 2 greatly exacerbated this. New towns were required, expansion of existing ones and modernisation of housing stock. In 1943 Sir Patrick Abercrombie produced the County of London Plan and Greater London Plan in 1944 and drafted schemes for Sheffield, Doncaster, Bristol and Bath. He aimed to provide self-sufficient communities to combat urban sprawl.

### **Nourishment for a nation**

A wartime message was, "Waste is at all times folly, but in such a time as this it is unpatriotic. Every meal you serve is now literally a battle." Rationing was introduced in 1917 but did not apply to bread and potatoes. Meat, butter and sugar were rationed until October 1919 and only in March 1921 was the Ministry of Food wound up.

Intent on the imposition of tariffs, Baldwin lost the 1923 election. He should have listened to housewives, fiercely resistant to the prospect of higher shopping bills; "twould rush up the prices and seize us like vices." On returning to power in 1926 the solution was to buy Empire goods. An Empire Marketing Board was set up but abolished in 1932. Britain depended on foreign imported food to supplement home production, causing great alarm in Whitehall as tensions with Germany increased.

With the end of World War 1, the demand for staples such as tea, fruit, vegetables and eggs rocketed. Middle classes could look forward to a mid-day dinner of meat and vegetables and a nourishing supper in early evening. For some families Welsh Rarebit, milk pudding or even porridge might suffice, whilst a Sunday joint was a luxury. Crisps were a favourite, with their salt sachets, and so was fish and chips even before Harry Ramsden opened his first chippie at Guiseley near Leeds in 1928. By the late 1920s there were between 30,000 and 35,000 fish and chip shops according to the National Federation of Fish Fryers.

Sugar per head was the highest anywhere, exceeded only by Denmark, consumed in endless cups of tea, puddings galore, jams, sweets and chocolate. Wine gums and chewing gum were popular but chocolate was the lure. In Minnesota in 1923 Frank Mars created a Milky Way bar and in 1936 Mars introduced its famed Mars Bar. A year later Rowntree had the novel idea of a tube containing sweets resembling coloured pills. Welcome to Smarties and soon the delights of Bassetts' liquorice allsorts and Peace Babies, better known in the 1950s as Jelly Babies. For those of more limited means a small bag of bright yellow sherbert would have to suffice, weighed out to the penny.

In the 1920s Robertson opened a jam factory in Bristol, the largest in Europe, that augmented its Droylsden factory near Manchester. A Royal Warrant of Appointment was awarded by King George VI in 1933. Reputable jam manufacturers used only 45lbs of fruit in every 100lbs, a figure slightly exceeded today in cheaper brands. Between the wars a jar might contain as little as 10% of fruit. As with Cadbury and Rowntree, the firm of Wilkin & Son, famed for the Tiptree brand, were philanthropists too. The company had a village and owned over 100 houses and 8 farms and also ran a Factory Club and a Salvation Army Hall. Jam making was big business. By 1939 Chivers, primarily growers of soft fruits, owned more than 8,000 acres and had over 3,000 full-time employees in East Anglia, Montrose and Newry. Jams as well as jellies were highly popular.

Plums and apples were cheap and so were bananas imported from Jamaica, with consumption increasing from 1 million bunches a year in 1900 to over 11 millions in 1924. For most people peaches, pineapples and apricots were tinned. Grapes and oranges were a rarity, except at Christmas. Production and distribution of foodstuffs had changed markedly with the advent of the motor vehicle to supplement the railways with magnates such as Tate & Lyle, Spillers, the Co-op, United Dairies and Vestey's with their Union Cold Storage, based in Argentina to avoid British taxes. By 1925 Vestey brothers was the world's largest retailer of meat. The brothers grew so rich they lived not just off the interest, but the interest of this!

Between 1924 and 1931 several stores, including Liptons, merged with Home and Colonial to form a company with 3,000 branches. They then formed Allied Suppliers to act as a buyer for the entire group. International Stores, of which Kearley & Tongue were part, had some 200 stores but soon had a rival. The catchphrase of J Sainsbury was "quality perfect and prices lower." In 1922 it incorporated as a private company and by 1928 had 128 shops.

The final stage of a laborious purchase procedure was the payment process when both bill and cash whizzed by wires into a cashier's pulpit, to the sound of a ringing bell. Change was returned by the same method. This characterised the Co-op that often lost out to the corner shop as no tick was given.

Enterprising USA retailer Charles Clarence opened his self-service grocery chain Piggly Wiggly in 1916 but the idea was slow to catch on in Britain. The first checkout appeared in Croydon

in 1950. Canned products were everywhere from corned beef, salmon and condensed milk to peas, beans, ham, meat loaf and an array of fruits.

Crosse & Blackwell acquired a 150 acre site at Branston near Birmingham in 1920, to meet an expanding export and domestic market. Two years later Branston Pickle was produced at a factory employing 1,500 workers but, following a merger, the factory closed with most British production moving back to London. Meanwhile, in Pittsburgh the firm Henry J Heinz was expanding rapidly. In their first year in Britain 10,000 tonnes of foodstuffs was sold, mainly cream of tomato soup, baked beans, spaghetti and tomato ketchup. Standards were literally high as Heinz insisted all salesmen be at least 6ft tall, impeccably dressed, and fluent as well as eloquent in promoting the company's products. In 1931, to combat the depression, a wide range of ready to serve soups and baby foods were introduced.

Kellogg, founded in 1906, transformed the traditional breakfast of porridge and or toast. Over one million packets of cornflakes were sold each year in Britain as well as shredded wheat that first appeared in 1912, followed by All-Bran in 1919 and Rice Krispies, 1928. No wonder Kellogg opened a factory in Manchester in 1938.

Bird's custard powder was an established favourite. So were yeast extracts of Vitamite and Marmite and drinks from Bovril and Bourneville Chocolate to Horlicks and Ovaltine, a cure for "night starvation." Other slogans included, "Guinness for strength" and "Everyone drinks Typhoo." In 1932 Nestle introduced instant coffee. Milk Bars soon became fashionable with their art deco design and extensive use of chromium, glass and bright colours: apple green, cherry red and ivory white. Waitresses sported caps to convey a modern light image. Milk Bars were the place to meet and be seen.

Traditional stores frowned on the emerging 'multiples' that soon appeared in most towns such as Woolworth, Timothy Whites, Boots, Marks & Spencer and Dewhurst, the butchers run by the conglomerate Vestey's. It was an ominous warning to specialist independent retailers who took pride in quality and personal service, rather than mass-produced products and a desire to transact a purchase quickly. Shopping was to be enjoyed and a social occasion too, often daily. Customers were greeted by name with friendly banter whilst selecting items and keeping a close eye on prices, accuracy of weighing scales and correct change given.

### **Books for the fireside**

*Women in Love*, (1920) by D.H. Lawrence, passed the moral censor but *Lady Chatterley* did not. Published privately in Italy in 1928, and France and Australia in 1929, the unexpurgated version eventually appeared in England in 1960, selling three million copies, thanks to a failed prosecution against Penguin Books for obscenity. A similar fate befell a weighty tome of 780 pages. *Ulysses* by James Joyce was serialised in the USA from March 1918 until the end of 1920 but was not published in full in England until 1936.

A dip into a selection of books reveals that not only were they popular at the time but in the decades that followed. Several were turned into stage plays and films. We may speculate why this was, such as subject matter, genre, prose, writing style, content, innovative ideas, imagination, or a fusion. Important too are reviews on publication, and since, that often shed another light with more than a hint of political correctness, and varying degrees of hubris.

In contrast to the *Forstyte Saga* by John Galsworthy, published between 1906 and 1921, *A Passage to India* (1924) by E. M. Forster is set in India, against the backdrop of the Raj and desire for independence. A review complained of Forster not examining Indian life but being

examined by it. As an observer he accentuated an unfathomable India, at least to British readers and maybe some colonials as well. Later critics protested that he failed to condemn colonialism and chaotic nationalism, nor seek to change it. Why should he! Forster was an observer of the myriad cultures and idiosyncrasies of Indian life.

For many, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) by Virginia Woolf, is the most famous work by this modernist writer, pioneering the 'stream of consciousness technique.' A New York Times review refers to the events that "capture in a definitive matrix the drift of thought and feeling in a period, the point of view of a class, and seem almost to indicate the strength and weakness of an entire civilization." Whilst deemed rather inferior in another review, *The Lighthouse* (1927) "emphasises the richer qualities of mind, imagination and emotion and a portrayal of life that is less orderly, more complex, and so much doomed to frustration."

In his mocking and amusing *Decline and Fall* (1928), Evelyn Waugh derides the absurdities of life, whilst dealing lightly with its tragedies. It is a tale of a failed Oxford undergraduate who teaches at a ghastly prep school, becomes involved in the White Slave trade and goes to jail, only to meet ex-school colleagues. For some, social satire; for Simon Heffer an "orgy of bad taste." For sheer humour, *Right Ho Jeeves* (1934), by P.G. Wodehouse, was more popular. It contains the memorable scene of an inebriated Gussie Frink-Nottle presenting prizes to the delighted and highly amused scholars of Market Snodsbury Grammar School.

Aldous Huxley's vision of the future in *Brave New World* (1932) is doom, fear, Totalitarianism and social stratification, with children decanted in hatcheries. This dystopian novel resonates with H.G. Wells' in *The Shape of Things to Come* (1934) and George Orwell's *1984*. A loss of freedom and absence of personal responsibility are palpable, set in a future where "everyone belongs to everyone else." Orwell's novel transcends time with hypnosis and brainwashing in succumbing to ideological imperatives. All three authors were ahead of their time.

In *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932) by Stella Gibbons, orphaned Flora, is expensively educated and possesses "every art and grace save that of earning her own living." She prevails upon distant relatives, the Starkadders of Cold Comfort, to take her in. Once ensconced, Flora addresses herself with 'hygienic interference' in the affairs of this clan. The book is a parody of doom-laden, tragic, close-to-the-earth novels of Mary Webb, D.H. Lawrence, and Thomas Hardy. Stella Gibbons enters the tragic landscape, tidies it up and sets things to rights. The message remains upbeat: marriage and fulfilment, rather than death and disgrace - and good haircuts, smart clothes and lashings of common sense.

C.S. Lewis, a great friend of J. R. R. Tolkien, commented in a Times Literary Supplement review of *The Hobbit* (1937), "Alice is read gravely by children and with laughter by grown-ups. The Hobbit, on the other hand, will be funnier to its youngest readers, and only years later, at a tenth or twentieth reading, will they begin to realise what deft scholarship and profound reflection have gone to make everything in it so ripe, so friendly, and in its own way so true. Prediction is dangerous: but *The Hobbit* may well prove a classic." The two authors helped found the 'Inklings,' an Oxford literary group that used to meet in the Eagle and Child pub, otherwise known as the Bird and Baby in Woodstock Road, close to the Ashmolean.

*Goodbye to All That* (1929) by Robert Graves signifies passing of the patriotic old order and an awakening of atheism, feminism, socialism and pacifism, whilst the acclaimed *I Claudius* (1934) goes back 2,000 years to the days of the fourth Roman Emperor.

On the publication of *Rebecca* (1938), by Daphne Du Maurier, critics pulled no punches. The Times said, "the material is of the humblest; nothing in this is beyond the novelette," whilst V.

S. Pritchett predicted the novel “would be here today and gone tomorrow.” Publisher, Victor Gollancz, predicted a “rollicking success,” in spite of allegations of plagiarism. Few critics saw what the author wanted them to see: the exploration of the relationship between a powerful man, and a woman who is anything but.

A qualified teacher, and nursery governess, Enid Blyton published educational texts. In 1926 she took over editing *Sunny Stories* and had a column in *Teachers' World* and then a weekly page. In collected poems, *Child Whispers* (1922), *Real Fairies* (1923), and *Book of Brownies* (1926), children are transported into a magical world of fairies, goblins, elves and pixies. Later critics spoke of “slow poison” and mediocre material” and her books being elitist, sexist, racist and xenophobic. Some libraries banned her books.

An acid comment was she thought like a child and wrote like a child, detached from reality in a world of privilege, class and snobbery. Enid Blyton viewed life through the prism of a child, not the perspectives of an adult. Two short stories, *Adventures of the Wishing Chair* (1937) and *The Enchanted Wood* (1939) were interspersed by a full-length novel, *The Secret Island* (1938). The output of Enid Blyton was prodigious and constituted a literary emporium, amidst claims of using ghost writers. The BBC refused to dramatise her books, feeling they lacked literary merit. It was a view shared by intellectual adults - but not by most children.

A prolific writer, and ‘Queen of Crime’ with over 2 billion books sold, Agatha Christie lies third in the most published rankings, behind Shakespeare and The Bible. Her most sold book, *Ten Little Niggers* (1939) was published in the USA the next year under the title: *And Then There Were None*. The initially rejected *Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920) features Hercule Poirot as does *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), voted as the best crime novel ever written by the British Crime Writers’ Association in 2013. Another successful character, Miss Jane Marple, was based on her grandmother and her “Ealing Cronies,” expecting the worst in everything and everyone. She first appeared in a short story collection, *Thirteen problems* (1927).

The disappearance of Agatha Christie in early December 1926 had all the hallmarks of one of her own mysteries. Her Morris Cowley was found at a beauty spot on the North Downs, near Guildford. Inside was a driving licence and clothes. After frantic searches, she was found in the Swan Hydropathic Hotel at Harrogate, having booked in as Mrs Teresa Neele, surname of her husband’s lover. The debate continues whether Agatha Christie had suicidal intentions, or was seeking to maximise publicity at the shenanigans of her errant husband with Mrs Neele.

As with many writers in their childhoods, Enid Blyton and Agatha Christie were both voracious readers. They possessed inspired imaginations, much influenced by Edith Nesbitt’s *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* and *The Railway Children*, and Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*. Said a young Enid Blyton, “Those were real children. When I grow up I will write books about real children.” *Black Beauty* by Anna Sewell, Charles Kingsley’s *The Water Babies* and works of Lewis Carroll were favourites too. A. A. Milne’s *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1926) and *The House at Pooh Corner* (1928) were eagerly read. For children seeking light relief, or refuge from literary works, there were comics galore with mischievous characters in the *Beano* and *Dandy*.

Literature now covered an enormous span, appealing to a very diverse readership that might often obtain their books from the local library, or subscription libraries. The fear of rejection was ever-present in the minds of authors, but little changes as J. K. Rowling can testify. The moral compass pointed at explicit sexual relations between men and women and between men, rather than lesbian relations. An absurdity was such books could often be purchased abroad only. Literature was reaching new heights in exploring the psychology and emotion of

relationships in an increasingly uncertain world. The imagination ran riot, too, especially in children's stories, far removed from the capricious Grimm's Fairy Tales.

### **Listening to the wireless**

Radio was largely a hobby of devoted amateurs, twiddling with their own receiving apparatus and sending signals to each other, until October 1919. Marconi then opened a station MZX at Chelmsford, broadcasting recitals of "the world's best artists," including Dame Nellie Melba. Metropolitan Vickers soon followed. That year the Radio Corporation of America was founded and in August 1921 RDK Pittsburgh broadcast major sporting events. The magazine *Wireless World*, sensing the public mood, implored politicians to provide band wavelengths that would not interfere with "the defence services of the country."

The Postmaster General invited major companies to form an enterprise for radio broadcasting and included the views of others, notably Sir William Bull on behalf of Siemens. His assistant was an engineer, John Reith. After the war Reith returned from the Remington Corporation in Delaware and became chief engineer of the struggling firm Beardmore of Coatbridge, sponsor of the exploits of Ernest Shackleton. Reith's attention was drawn to an advertisement in The Times. The fledgling British Broadcasting Corporation was seeking a director of programmes, chief engineer, company secretary and general manager. John Reith applied for the latter post. The favoured candidate withdrew and on 18 December 1922 he was appointed by Sir William Noble on a salary of £1,750, just £250 below what he requested. "We're leaving it all to you. You'll be reporting at our monthly meetings and we'll see how you are getting on." Sensing the silence, Nobel added, "That's all right isn't it?" Reith replied, "Quite all right!"

The remit was broad. "The general manager will have the full control of the company and its staff, and will be responsible to the directors." The board sought a share of the licence fee. It assumed all possessing a radio would pay and that the BBC would receive a percentage of the wholesale price of each radio sold. Broadcasts began from Marconi House in London on 14 November 1922. They ended one hour after midnight to avoid pre-empting news in the morning papers.

Daily news, restricted between 1,200 and 2,400 words, began with the words 'copyright news' to avoid upsetting the barons of Fleet Street. They imposed a ban on programme advertising unless a payment was made. Reith dug in. By good fortune, Gerald Selfridge was a wireless enthusiast and offered to include broadcast schedules in the popular Pall Mall Gazette. With the prospect of a huge rise in its circulation the press proprietors relented but Reith had ideas of a BBC publication. He decided to call it *The Radio Times*. George Newnes, founder of *Tit-Bits*, helped produce the first edition in September 1923. Demand outstripped the initial print run of 285,000. The future of radio was guaranteed.

By January 1923 the BBC was broadcasting lectures, orchestral concerts, operas and religious homilies that helped promote the sale of wireless sets. Ten months later an annual licence of 10 shillings was introduced, about 20% of the weekly wage of labourers. By the end of the year 200,000 licences had been issued, with the Post Office collecting payment.

A recurring issue for politicians, and the press, was control of programme content with Reith insisting the BBC should be its own censor. His aim was to offer "everything that is best in every department of human knowledge, endeavour and achievement." He said "incalculable harm" would ensue if constraints were imposed, insisting that broadcasting was for human improvement. It was to be an "integrator of democracy," of appeal to a "more intelligent



electorate.” The compromise was a BBC board comprising the press, trade unions, industry and others. It rarely met. Programme management and oversight was devolved to Reith.

Programmes gradually became more eclectic. Lewis Casson and Sybil Thorndike appeared in *Medea*. The first serialised novel was Charles Kingsley’s *Westward Ho*, not popular fiction such as Ian Hay’s *Knight on Wheels* or Jeffrey Farnold’s *The Amateur Gentleman*. Serious music was emphasised with a little lighter music such as Albert Sadler from the Palm Court of the Grand Hotel, Eastbourne. Humour had its place. George Robey wasn’t a success though Tommy Handley was, and remained a favourite. Reith was keen to broaden boundaries but said the public didn’t really know what they wanted, but knew what they didn’t like. Concert hall proprietors and theatre managers were worried they might be forced out of business with reduced box office takings, whilst newspapers feared outside broadcasts would scoop news stories, such as live commentary of the boat race and other sporting events.

Reith faced a dilemma as the Postmaster General held the purse strings. After deducting 12.5 % collection costs, the BBC was to keep 90% of the first million licence fees, 80% of the next million, 73% of the third and 70% thereafter. This meant an annual revenue of £500,000, some £100,000 short of the required budget. In 1927, at the instigation of Reith, the BBC became a corporation, at arms-length from parliamentary control and scrutiny. Reith was elevated to Director General. When offered a knighthood he was underwhelmed, believing he was worthy of the prestigious Knight of the Garter. Reith reluctantly accepted the offer of a mere knighthood, prompted by a telephone call from Downing Street asking him to make up his mind – and quickly.

By the 1930s Reith had a dictatorial image problem in an age of dictators. When taking tea with his mother at the House of Commons, Lady Astor MP asked if he got his “Mussolini traits” from her, and George Lansbury said he “would have made an excellent Hitler for his country.” Reith remained forthright in his views on expanding BBC radio services. It was he who pioneered the Empire Service that became the World Service, broadcast from imposing Bush House in the Strand. Reith was less interested in television. The historian Asa Briggs thought he felt it a morally corrupting threat to society.

Why he left the BBC in June 1938 remains a mystery though some in higher echelons of the ‘establishment’ may have wanted him out. Summoned to Downing Street to see Sir Horace Wilson, Chamberlain’s top adviser, Reith was offered the full-time job of chairman of the ailing Imperial Airways, “starting tomorrow if possible.” On 30<sup>th</sup> June he departed the BBC. A week later the chairman of the BBC reminded him he had not submitted a resignation letter. Reith responded tersely at this administrative nonsense. “I resign, I shall resign, I have resigned. There it is – in all three tenses.”

Reith’s accomplishments at the BBC were immense, helped by sheer force of character and relentless determination to succeed. In spite of his grave reservations, the growth of TV prospered. The breakthrough came in 1933. BBC engineers discovered that Baird’s television set was inferior in quality and reliability to that produced by Westinghouse. Within twelve months EMI was making Emitron Tubes, signalling the termination of the Baird contract.

A select committee of the House of Commons foresaw the potential of visual media with “the ultimate establishment of a general television.” In spite of such advances, by early 1937 only 400 sets had been sold and 2,000 by the end of the year. The popularity of television would have to wait until well after World War 2, helped by the expansion of programme content too.