

Seen and Heard: The Birth of Children's Television

British children's television began in London in the 1940s, when there was only one channel on the air. As television became more accessible to families after the Second World War, programmes like *Andy Pandy* and *The Flowerpot Men* delighted a generation of children, but the variety of programmes on offer was meagre in comparison to the wealth available to children today. An entirely new genre, children's television fired young imaginations and became a formative part of the childhood of millions, but its future success was uncertain as programme-makers experimented with this new, and often controversial medium.

The BBC began showing television programmes for young audiences in 1946. The *For the Children* programmes were narrated by Annette Mills and featured puppet characters, including 'Muffin the Mule', who quickly became a household name. These early programmes were not specifically aimed at the under-fives and the BBC consulted the Ministry of Education, the Institute of Child Development and the Nursery Schools Association for advice on suitable programming for this target audience. At the same time, concerns were being raised about the 'Americanisation' of British society and the potentially harmful effects of the new medium of television on young minds. A *Woman's Own* columnist, for example, warned of the 'dangerous foreign' influence of television in 'respectable' homes. The BBC was entering controversial territory in aiming this new technology at pre-school children.

In July 1950 Andy Pandy made his screen debut, featuring in the first programme specifically intended for the under-fives. The BBC had already aired the children's radio programme *Listen With Mother* in the same year, but Andy Pandy and his friends Teddy and Looby Loo heralded a whole new brand of children's entertainment. These characters never spoke, but rather the narrator spoke for them and directed the children watching to sing along and join in actions, highlighting the prescriptive nature of the programmes/supervision of children. The programme's creators were the future head of children's programming at the BBC, Freda Lingstrom, and her friend Maria Bird. Lingstrom and Bird shared something of the popularly expressed concerns over the dangers of television, but they also saw its potential for entertaining the young and influencing them positively. When they produced *Bill and Ben*, the 'Flower Pot Men', first airing in December 1952, the use of a nonsense-language called 'Oddle Poddle' raised fears amongst critics that children's vocabulary would be corrupted. However, the new programme proved enormously popular and Lingstrom and Bird showed that they could overcome controversy and produce programmes which would be popularly accepted as suitable viewing for children.

Watching television became more deeply rooted in family life after the televised coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953, an event watched by around 20 million people. Many families bought television sets especially for the occasion, and this ensured a much larger audience for *Watch With Mother*, the banner for the weekly BBC children's programme schedule from the same year. This schedule now included *Rag Tag and Bobtail* and was later added to

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by *Picture Book*, a storytelling programme featuring the characters Bizzy Lizzy and Little Mo. In September 1955 *The Woodentops* completed the *Watch With Mother* line-up. A nuclear family living on a farm, the Woodentops represented an idealised form of English rural life and the programme strongly promoted traditional family values and had a strong hint of nostalgia. The classic *Watch With Mother* schedule featured: *Picture Book* on Mondays; *Andy Pandy* on Tuesdays; *The Flower Pot Men* on Wednesdays; *Rag Tag and Bobtail* on Thursdays and *The Woodentops* on Fridays. *Watch With Mother* was shown alongside programmes aimed at women, like *Shop at Home* and *Women of Today*, and the afternoon schedule was clearly intended for the housewife with children.

As the fifties wore on television became a more accepted part of family life, and the fears about its potentially corrupting influence waned. The early history of children's television tells of a nation trying to recapture its innocence after the barbarism of war, and the world conceived by Lingstrom and Bird was a safe environment for the young imagination to be nurtured in a time of economic austerity and social uncertainty.

Let's leave the last word to Andy himself: "Time to go home, time to go home, Andy is waving goodbye."

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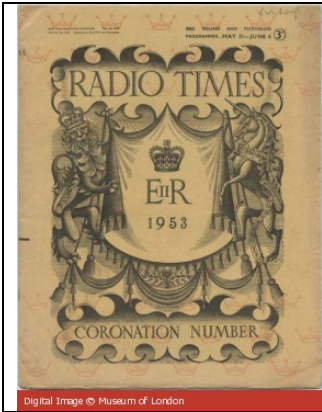
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