YORKSHIRE AND THE NORTH-EAST

YORKSHIRE TELEVISION

The new Yorkshire seven-day contract area was a region to the east of the Pennines previously served by Granada on weekdays and ABC Television at the weekend. At the start of the contract period in 1968 the newly formed Yorkshire Television (YTV) was therefore a fifth network company where previously there had been four. In some quarters it was regarded as a fifth wheel on the ITV coach.

The region was not coterminous with the county of Yorkshire. In that respect, despite its base in Leeds and a two-thirds shareholding by Yorkshire companies and individuals, the company’s name was misleading. The main transmitter on Emley Moor served parts of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire as well as Yorkshire. Most of north Yorkshire became part of the Tyne Tees area in 1971 when the Bilsdale transmitter was allocated to the Newcastle-based company, and in 1974, when the Belmont transmitter was transferred from Anglia, YTV extended its coverage over Lincolnshire, Humberside and the area round the Wash. The transmission area then stretching from the Tees to the Wash took in a population of 7 million, about 70 per cent of whom were in Yorkshire. Two million lived in five great conurbations: Bradford, Hull, Leeds, Sheffield and Teesside.

With two new companies in London and the injection into the system of an additional network company to the north, arrangements for the supply of network programmes were initially in a state of some disorder. The result was over-production, with too many programmes chasing too few network slots. In 1969 the YTV board was told that an absence of centrally controlled programme planning was costing the company £900,000 a year. Only when agreement on relating the volume of network programme contributions to advertising revenue took effect was network output rationalised and pruned. Then YTV’s drama production fell from 76 programmes in 1970 to 46 in 1971; comedy and light entertainment programmes from 103 to 56. Even so, with its quota now assured under the
programme exchange system this company remained a large producer in every programme department, maintaining a network share of between 15 and 16 per cent of the total. By the end of the period in 1980 it was producing and transmitting its own programmes at the annual rate of 700 hours – 350 for the network and 350 for its own area.

Industrial relations made a bad start from which it proved hard to recover. Upon union insistence the ITA extracted an undertaking from the company that, in recruitment, priority would be given to ABC staff employed at Didsbury in Manchester, none of whom must be disadvantaged under their new terms and conditions of employment. These workers, resentful at the loss of their jobs in Lancashire, were thus in an impregnable position when confronting a new management team with demands for parity of pay and conditions with their union colleagues in London and the retention of restrictive methods of working and lines of demarcation hallowed by ‘custom and practice’.

Further difficulties arose from the necessity of maintaining production at ABC Didsbury until the end of the expiring contract period and making programmes in Leeds in an old trouser factory while new studios and facilities were being hurriedly constructed. The initially high level of production required to establish the company’s network status added to its vulnerability to union demands.

Work on building new studios on an eight-acre site in Kirkstall Road, Leeds, began in the summer of 1967. When opened a year later, they were the first in Europe to be purpose-built to operate in colour. Most teething troubles had been overcome when on 19 March 1969, nine months after the station went on air, the Emley Moor transmitter collapsed. News reached the management while they were assembled at Leeds University to hear a speech from Lord Hill, Chairman of the Authority, which was responsible for the transmission service. At one fell blow the company was deprived of virtually all its income, and it had not thought to insure against loss of profits arising from such an unlikely contingency. ‘With its advertising revenue life-blood seeping away’ after this severance of its main artery to the public, it faced ‘the grim prospect of a staggering potential loss of £500,000 a month’. The ITA erected a temporary mast within four days, and after some instant research the company claimed that signals were reaching two-thirds of the audience and advertising rates were charged accordingly. An unexpected wave of sympathy for the distressed company from advertisers produced a generous flow of revenue until a new mast brought from Sweden became operational after four weeks. Full rates were then restored, revenue returned to its former level, and the management’s swift reaction to a sudden disaster enabled it to report to shareholders an estimated loss of no more than £250,000.

Transmitter problems at Belmont and Bilsdale were of a different kind.