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'A History Of North Regional Broadcasting' - REGINALD JORDAN

(Interview 38 - Notes Revised)

Trevor

Hill On the 15th of November 1992, broadcasting from the North of England will have reached the grand old age of seventy.

The very first words to be heard over the Trafford Park transmitter of what, one month later, was to become the British Broadcasting Company in the November of 1922, were these:-

Reg

Jordan " 2ZY calling, 2ZY calling. Our transmission tonight will consist of Special late News followed by Musical items. At 7.0pm, we shall send a short Story for children !"

Trevor It is with the greatest of good fortune concerning this 'History of North Regional Broadcasting', that **Reginald Jordan**, who's with me now, was in the studio the night Station 2ZY did its opening programme from Manchester - just one day after Station 2LO in London began a public broadcasting service. But back in 1922, to use a Northern phrase, you must have been 'nobbut a lad' !

Reg (Explains he was then a schoolboy, living only a few miles from Manchester when it was announced that **Kenneth Wright**, a friend of the Jordan family, had been appointed as the first Station Manager. Kenneth was an enthusiastic musician who'd already studied under Sir Henry Coward for whom he'd acted as deputy conductor, and was now working on experiments in radio telephony as part of the Metropolitan Vickers engineering team, under **Arthur Fleming** who was in charge of Research at Trafford Park)

Trevor You were more or less 'adopted' by Kenneth Wright; did you see anything of this new and exciting venture during the earlier experimental days?

Reg (Explains that he was taken many times to see progress being made on the building of the new station - and describes it in some detail, please. Also to mention that the Metro team's first 'wireless' experiments were conducted from Arthur Fleming's own home some six miles away from the factory, whilst a small Conference room in the two-story modern Research building was being prepared as a studio, - 30ft by 16ft).

Trevor And the transmitter at Metro Vick's ?

Reg (explains that was under the staircase - a 700 watt Radio Communications Company piece of equipment, which was tested for the very first time on October 25th, 1922. The experimental Transmitter and Receiver at Mr Fleming's home , 'Highclere', was to be used to monitor 2ZY's output and to act as a 'stand-by').

Please briefly describe the outside of the building at Trafford Park, dominated by the Metrovicks water tower. From that tower and the other highest point of the main building was suspended the transmitting aerial. The water tower was dismantled at the start of the war to prevent it being used as a landmark by German aircraft.

Please now quote from Page 2 of your own splendid 'Reminiscences', Reg, describing the approach to 2ZY).

Trevor I believe that Kenneth Wright and his small team at Trafford Park were given only 24 hours notice that they were to begin 'official broadcasts' for the very first time, having been granted a temporary licence so to do by the Post Master general.

Reg (to comment - and then the following, in his own words: -

But going back about a year, Arthur Fleming in Manchester, like John Reith in London, was particularly interested in programme standards and content. Having seen and heard for himself the proliferation of radio stations in the States, all feverishly competing with each other, Fleming not only agreed with Reith, as General Manager, on the advantage of one Broadcasting organisation being set up for a far far smaller country, but Arthur Fleming also brought back from that visit to the United States the idea of reading stories to children 'on the wireless').

Trevor And here, I think, is where young Master Jordan first came to the attention of the listeners. For the sake of posterity, will you now reveal the soubriquet under which you broadcast w-a-y back in the 1920's?

Reg (Does so - and here, please describe the Trafford Park studio itself - the sort of microphones you used in that room with its wooden-framed walls, acoustically draped in fine sailcloth in order to kill any echo or 'reverberation' - the fact that certain singers and others found it hard-going as there was no resonance at all to aid their performance).

Trevor Can you recall if 'things technical' improved at all within three months of 2ZY going 'on air' ? I ask that because it was in February 1923, that an ex-maritime Wireless Operator who built his own wireless receivers and other bits of broadcasting equipment as a sideline, was taken onto the staff of Metro Vicks. We both knew him very well in post-war years as our Regional Engineer. I refer, of course, to Basil Harcourt Vernon, Esquire !

Reg (to talk about him in those early days - how it was Basil Vernon who probably invented the first 'cueing apparatus' - and please quote from Page 3 of your 'Reminiscences').

Trevor I know you were present on the opening night of Station 2ZY; were you heard yourself that evening when **Miss A. Bennie** presented the very first 'Kiddies Corner' assisted by Kenneth Wright.?

Reg (Replies - may like to refer here to Kenneth as 'Uncle Humpty Dumpty'; to Miss Bennie as, 'The Lady of The Magic Carpet', later, 'Cousin Bunny', et cetera)

Trevor Having been responsible for 'Children's Hour' from the North for ten years, I find it of particular interest that 'The Lady of the Magic Carpet's' story reading that very first day was 'The Happy Prince', by Oscar Wilde. And when the BBC did away with 'Children's Hour' on 27th March 1964, **David Davis** read another story by the same author, 'The Selfish Giant'. As David later declared, "Good Friday, a day of national mourning.!!"; and his feelings that one big giant, in the guise of **Frank Gillard**, had 'killed off' one of broadcasting's best known programmes. Hence David's own choice of the final story.

But let's stay in the 1920's. Tell me more about broadcasting from Trafford Park in those pioneering days since you were recruited in advance not only to take part in Children's Corner, but to fill juvenile roles in other programmes, and to 'help out', - school and homework permitting.

Reg (to talk, please, about Miss J.M. Cormach; **Jessie Cormack** who was the studio accompanist - and here, please, your lovely story of her rebuke to Kenneth when he demanded that **Leonard Hirsch**, who played violin for Station 2ZY's 'Trio', shouldn't stand there doing nothing when the heavy Steinway player-piano needed shoving from one end of the studio to the other; 'Unlike you, Leonard's delicate fingers are his living !')

Then to talk, please, about **Victor Smythe** - Pages 6 and 7 of your 'Reminiscences', and about **Eric Fogg**. How Victor 'discovered' Eric when, for the very first time, the Station did an 'Outside Broadcast' with Basil Vernon as the engineer, from the Oxford Cinema Manchester, the Post Office having connected a cable between the picture house and the studio.

Eric was the cinema's pianist, playing accompaniments to the then silent films. He broadcast under the nome-de-plume of 'Keyboard Kitty' - but became one of North region's best loved Radio Uncles as 'Uncle Eric'. Please then go on to tell your lovely story concerning a visit to Manchester Racecourse with Victor - and then a little about Kenneth's leadership in getting Music appreciated by those listening to 'the wireless' - those who were not, perhaps, concert-goers; **Isobel Baillie** becoming one of the first to regularly broadcast from Trafford Park, living as she did at nearby Stretford).

Trevor You 'lost' your friend and broadcast mentor when Kenneth Wright moved to London at the end of 1923. Despite her acid comment, he married Jessie Cormack, - Kenneth, of course, becoming at later dates head of Television Music Programmes and the BBC's Deputy Director of Music. But in July, 1923, station 2ZY had also moved; into the centre of Manchester, conducting its broadcasting business from the top storey of a Warehouse, No 57 Dickinson Street. Did you get to know Kenneth Wright's successor, **Dan Godfrey Jnr** ?

Reg (Replies - saying Music was Godfrey's first love and how he formed the **2ZY Orchestra**, with T.H. Morrison as leader, later to become the conductor; - today in 1991, it is now the celebrated **BBC Philharmonic Orchestra**)

Trevor Another young entertainer in your own age group must have been **Hubert Taylor**, a teenager who played the piano for your Children's programmes.

Reg (to comment, please - also to say that it was in 1923 that the '**Radio Circles**', run in conjunction with Children's Hour, were started. The badge for the North of England depicted rays coming from a loudspeaker and it cost 9 pence, - the profits going towards the Children's Hour Appeals).

Trevor (Mentions that from those very first Appeals started in the 1920's, the **BBC Children In Need** appeal for this year of 1991 has topped 21 million pounds).

Reg (Please go on to explain that, by 1927 the programme began to drop the 'Aunt and Uncles' image, and more informative material was included - for example, how you started the '**Children's Newsbulletin**' compiled with the co-operation of Arthur Mee's, 'Children's Newspaper'; how Manchester was the first Station to introduce Competitions for young listeners, - painting and poetry competitions)

Trevor I, and my predecessors, used to present the winners of four competitions with inscribed Silver Pencils - as you will recall when you were in charge of Press and Publicity in Manchester. What did they get in your day ?

Reg (Replies)

Trevor Is it true that the very first 'S.O.S' to be broadcast from the Dickinson Street Station was to ask either Mr Dan Godfrey or Mr Victor Smythe to come to the studio at once since it was on fire ?

Reg: (Replies . Goes on to say that Dan Godfrey turned out to be a better musician than administrator, eventually moving to London as Musical Director of the 2LO Orchestra, - **Basil Nichols**, later to become Sir Basil, taking his place. He pioneered the broadcasting of programmes for Schools, and then came the appointment of the first official to be called **North Regional Director**. He was **Edward Liveing**. He had the job of increasing programmes made within the Region rather than taking so much from the London-based National Programme)

Trevor At what point did you have to part company with broadcasting as a teenager and pursue a career of your own ?

Reg (Replies)

Trevor But in the spring of 1946, you joined the North regional staff of the BBC 'officially' when you were appointed as their Press Officer, taking over from, would it be John Batten ?.

Reg (Replies - mentions **John Salt**, - and in particular, how he now saw 'the BBC' with a time lapse of some twenty years. Please mention some of those with whom you were working as your new Regional colleagues; **Muriel Burton**, **Vernon Noble**, and those outside your own department).

Trevor You were well into your stride, writing about and publicising programmes when I joined North region in 1949. And one of the very first publications I read was, '**This is the North of England**' price one shilling, which you organised and edited.

Reg (Tells the story behind getting that done)

Trevor And to accompany the text, a series of quite exciting photos. 'Running up the standby diesel-alternator in the Engine Room of Stagshaw Transmitting station' is one of my favourites. A very different picture from Station 2ZY's affair under the stairs. And pictures of many of the stars of the day, **Wilfred Pickles**, **Norman Evans**, **Sir Thomas Beecham**, **L. du Garde Peach**, broadcaster and creator of many many radio plays - and, of course, **Gracie Fields**, - variety producer **Bowker Andrews** having been sent by **Ted Wilkinson**, the then Assistant Head of programmes, over to the Isle of Capri to see if he could persuade her to come and do a series for North Region.

You and your wife, Mary, became personal friends with many in the world of entertainment. Did you accompany the lass from Rochdale on her '**Gracie's Working Party**' tours.?

Reg (to briefly mention her and other celebrities of his choice)

Trevor In those days, the Head or Assistant head of Programmes, as I recall, held the weekly Press Conference in the Boardroom of our Manchester Piccadilly studios, led by you and by **Muriel Burton**. In researching this 'History Of North Regional Broadcasting', I'm amazed to see just how much press coverage you and your department managed to get for us - not just on a regional but on a national basis, besides many articles and photos in the 'Radio Times'.

Reg (to comment on this)

Trevor We missed you as one of our Manchester colleagues when you were appointed as the BBC Representative in Liverpool, - **Ted Wilkinson** now holding the similar post up in Newcastle, and, would it be **Ken Severs** in Leeds?

As others have said, 'Reg Jordan was the BBC in Liverpool'.

Reg (to talk about his work there - how he was also responsible for representing the **Isle of Man**, and the sort of contacts he made both inside and, particularly, outside the BBC; Editors, Artists, Educationalists, Regional members of Parliament, Mayors, Town Clerks, Councillors, et cetera)

Trevor Your experience covers a very wide span in the history of broadcasting in the North, - from 1922 to 1970, was it ?. I won't ask which were the most exciting days. You descriptions of the start of it all answer that question. But as a full-time member of staff from 1946 onwards, is there a period you rate as being the hey-day of broadcasting in the BBC's largest region?

Reg (Replies)

Trevor And what, in adult service, gave you the greatest sense of satisfaction ?

Reg (to reply, please)

Trevor You've shared memories of the beginning of broadcasting which go back almost seventy years. That must therefore be unique.

Is there one moment, one moment which you single out ?

Reg (replies)

Trevor (signs off the Interview)

(Interview 38 - Reginald Jordan,
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