

Is this the end of public service broadcasting?

Something has happened for the first time in the UK. An area that previously had good TV reception has had it taken away by the broadcasters. Bill Wright explains

Yes, incredibly, TV has been switched off in Sandsend, a couple of miles from Whitby on the North Yorkshire coast.

I know what you're thinking: 'A whole village that didn't pay the licence fee has been made an example of!' But it wasn't like that. The good licence payers of Sandsend have always been able to get good reception from the Whitby relay transmitter, which stood above the town for 40 years, but this year that transmitter was dismantled and replaced by another one a few miles away.

The old station would soon have fallen into the sea due to coastal erosion, but a new station could have been built 100 yards farther inland and the story would have ended there as such a small move would have had no effect on TV reception.

But it seems that Scarborough Borough Council regarded any visible TV mast as an eyesore – despite most Whitby residents regarding the mast as a landmark – so a disastrous blunder was made. The public was given a number of alternative possible locations, and asked to vote.

Out of sight

Of course, Joe Public is not *au fait* with the arcane peculiarities of RF propagation so, given the chance to put the TV mast on low ground totally out of sight, he fell for it hook, line and sinker. It was a bit like doing brain surgery by having a referendum among hospital porters; it didn't occur to anyone that if you put a TV transmitter over the horizon you will reduce its effectiveness to zero.

Accordingly, the new mast was built on rather screened ground on an industrial estate some way out of town and well out of sight. During the period of changeover, when both stations were in operation, people realised this meant 'out of range'. There was great disappointment with the coverage of the new mast. The powers-that-be declared that there was no problem, but local aerial installers were e-mailing me with lists of residential locations where there was no chance of reception.

The transmission authorities had admitted at the planning stage that as the new location was unfavourable, a 'filler' station would have to be built in Sandsend because it was obvious that the village would have no TV otherwise. Plans for the filler station were published, Sandsend residents' worries were ameliorated, and on that understanding the location of the new Whitby station was finalised.

Then, shortly before the old transmitter was switched off, the bombshell was dropped. The promise to build the 'filler' would be reneged upon. No filler for Sandsend, and thus no TV! What's more,



Whitby's original TV mast (left) had great coverage. The new mast (below) is rubbish!

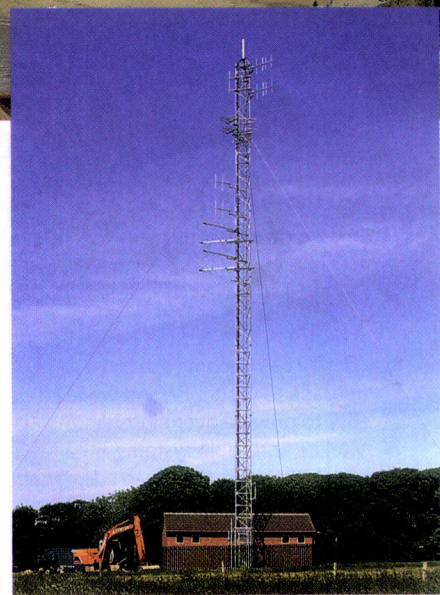
no apology, credible explanation nor financial compensation was forthcoming. Reception became very poor in many other parts of Whitby, but it was Sandsend that suffered most. The new mast provided not a smidgen of signal to many homes. The local MP was of little help, saying that he understood that 'there is something called Freesat'. He evidently didn't understand that £150 per TV set and VCR is a lot for retired people to find. Then Scarborough Council announced that residents had better not install dishes on their properties without planning permission, or else!

There's another ludicrous aspect to this story. We have now entered the 'switch to digital' era, and in the same month that the new Whitby transmitter turned its four analogue channels on the analogue transmitter at Whitehaven was switched off!

Relay race

The only example I can find of TV reception being deliberately worsened is in the early 1950s, when BBC TV moved from Alexandra Palace to Crystal Palace. A few people north of Ally Pally needed better aerials, so the BBC had a van on site for weeks, offering help. There have been later examples of transmitters being abandoned – buildings being demolished or landslides – but in every case reception has been restored by other means at no cost to the local people.

New relay stations have been provided for smaller communities than Sandsend on a national programme that continued from the 1970s almost to today, as it has always been a principle of public service broadcasting that signals should be



available to as many people as possible. It has always been accepted that transmission costs per capita for the last few percent of the population will inevitably be high, but that has been seen as part of the contract between the people and the public service broadcasters. The BBC and the other public service broadcasters are the paymasters of the transmission companies, so they dictate transmission policy. Have all public service principles now have been abandoned?

If, after 40 years, the UK has abandoned the PSB obligation to serve small communities, should we view the promise to convert all the thousands of small relay stations to digital with some scepticism? At the last moment, when it's too late to argue, will there be a quiet announcement that the smaller relays are not viable? ■