

**Extract from interview with Peter Dimmock in 1990 about the BBC's television coverage of the Coronation in 1953**

The Olympic Games was quite successfully but we are talking about a very very small television audience because television didn't really take off until 1953 -Oh we did a lot of firsts; we did Royal Ascot, that had never been televised before the War and we did the State Opening of Parliament - I got to remember the order, no these came later but the really big event was the Coronation because this was the watershed in 1953. We brought in every piece of equipment. By that time television had expanded to the regions and the units based out in the regions. We brought them all to London plus borrowed some equipment from the studio as well and we did it really like a military exercise. Seymour de Lotbiniere (BBC Head of Television and Radio Outside Broadcasts), who I referred to earlier, was wonderful because he masterminded the commentary side of it. He and Richard Dimbleby sat down for hours on end writing and rewriting his commentary for the Abbey Service. I produced the Coronation service from the Abbey. But up till then the Television Service had been regarded, certainly by Broadcasting House but also by the public and particularly the Establishment as really a 'Peeping Tom' and I mean nobody ever talked about it at dinner parties, they didn't talk about television at all and you never admitted you watched television even if you did and a lot of people hadn't got sets. But of course the moment it was announced, and there is a whole story about how we came to televise the Coronation, but once it was announced that we were going to televise it, everybody wanted a set. It was the biggest bonanza for the manufacturers that could ever have happened and it did mark the respectability of television. Suddenly everybody sat up and took notice of it. It all turned out to be so stressful but the battle that we had to get it was really incredible. Lobby (Seymour de Lotbiniere) was well named Lobby, because we had to lobby everybody. I mean Lobby and I were put in charge of the whole day as far as everything outside studios went. It was a mammoth thing we had planned it like a military operation and Lobby was the commander-in-chief and I was the general and we spent literally, I think we got about an average of 4 1/2 hours sleep in the six or nine months leading up to it because

initially we were told by Churchill and the Government, and it was suggested this was also the wish of the Queen to be and the Royal family, but I never believed that and I've always forgotten to ask her Majesty whether that was true or not and I must remember to do it if ever I get the opportunity again. Because I don't believe that they were guided by Churchill and the Cabinet and I think they were really 'the stick in the muds' and I think they were trying to protect the Establishment's privilege and they said 'why should the 'hoi polloi' be allowed to see the Queen crowned' which was pretty selfish of them really. Anyway we lobbied and lobbied and lobbied everybody from any Member of Parliament, the Government, the Cabinet, the Queen's private secretary, literally anyone and we enlisted someone who subsequently became the press officer for the BBC, a fellow called George Campy who at that time was writing the television column for the Evening Standard and he was extremely helpful. Because once or twice we managed to leak things to him which would not annoy the Government but would at least it would make the Government continue to address their minds to the problem which was to get permission to go into Westminster Abbey. Well eventually the Government relented and said all right go into Westminster Abbey but you can't go beyond the choir screen, which is where everything happened. 'No it is impossible for you to go there' (they said) which was still a problem. Well we thought at least we have got to stage one. But still we battled away, battled away - eventually they said alright, well because by that time, as I said, George Campy and other journalists helped stir the pot and public opinion was really beginning to come round our side, saying this is ridiculous. So they said 'Alright you can have a trial with cameras'. So we took a camera to Westminster Abbey and put it on the floor in front of the choir screen. We had, if I remember rightly, we had the Queen's press secretary, Cmdr Colville, The Archbishop of Canterbury, several people from the Home Office, myself and two of our senior engineers. And I put a 2" lens in the camera because there was a rule at that time that we couldn't have a newsreel camera or television camera closer than 30 feet from the Queen. It was a somewhat archaic rule that still existed and was very much enforced. When we did royal arrivals at Victoria Station in at that the camera platform had to be 30 feet from where the Queen was going to be. So I put this 2" lens in which made

the altar look a long way away. We asked I think one of the secretaries to walk where the Queen would walk and of course she looked quite small and it was great. Thank goodness they never asked me to put a 12" lens or a 18" lens on, which would have changed the whole thing but they said- 'Well it doesn't seem too bad, we will think about it' and so we were biting our nails the days after that. I think it was about four or five days and we kept hearing rumours that 'No they still were not going to give us permission.' But suddenly we got a message from Downing Street 'Okay - you can go in'. So then it was wonderful because I actually used a 12" lens from that particular - from the choir screen which gave one of the most wonderful close-ups of the Queen that we've hadn't seen on television up to that time. And then we began the planning in the Abbey. We had five cameras and the tricky thing was where to put them. We had a lot of restrictions. We had to hide them but there were some obvious places to put them. Over the West door for the procession out. We finally settled on the other positions. We had one problem I obviously wanted to be absolutely in the centre of the choir screen so that I could look at what they called the theatre, which is the space in front of the altar where the Queen is crowned and everything happens. And the orchestra were there under, he became Sir William Mackay, At the time Dr Mackay then. And they said 'No- because you will be between him and everybody will see this ugly camera and the cameraman' I said we will put him in tails, since all the audience will be in white tie and tails. 'No, no, no.' they said. Then Dr Mackay, bless his heart, turned to a Ministry of Works official who was there helping to find these camera positions, said 'How difficult it would it be to cut a hole in the floor? So I said that is a marvellous idea. So the Ministry of Works said we will look at it and a message came back to me 'Yes - they could do it'. So then we also had the bright idea. Well we said we have got one cameraman called Bud Flanagan, wonderful cameraman, but he was only about four foot six. So we said 'Bud, whether you like it or not, you are on that camera for the Coronation.

We hit the camera behind the balustrade, stood Flanagan in this hole behind the camera and you could only just see the top of his head above the camera And it didn't interfere with the orchestra at all. And we put him in white tie and

tails as promised. The next snag was that being so close to the action, he couldn't use his talkback. Every cameraman had a microphone to talk back to the producer and so I could talk to him from the control van to any cameraman and say will now go to this lens or that lens and then I might say to him now what you would you think and you see this or can you see that and he would talk back. But he couldn't use his microphone so we devised a system whereby if he scratched his nose that meant no if he tapped the top of his head that meant yes. And so I think all the peers and Peeresses ranged up in the transepts couldn't understand this funny little chap in front of the orchestra continually either scratching his nose or tapping the top of his head. It was really quite a saga I still think that there was some divine presence helping us that day because absolutely not one piece of equipment went wrong. I know that everybody were on their toes obviously to the ninth degree but at the rehearsal quite a lot of things had broken down and you know it wasn't the engineers fault. It was old equipment, some of it had been in use pre-war and it didn't break down on that day which was absolutely incredible. When you think a lot of the equipment had valves in and you know you could never tell when a valve was going to go. They go just like that but nothing went wrong. It was very much the 'Bon Jour' that day.