A short history of the BBC

A Birth of the BBC

At 6 p.m. on 14 November 1922, Arthur Burrows read a news bulletin. It included a report of a train robbery and an important political meeting, some sports results, and a weather forecast. This was the first ever broadcast by the British Broadcasting Corporation, or BBC. It had a staff of just four, and its mission was to ‘educate, inform and entertain’.

B Entertainment for the ears

By 1930, half the homes in Britain had a radio. They could listen not only to the news, but also to dramas, classical music concerts, chat shows, children’s programmes and live sports coverage. When the Second World War started in 1939, BBC radio was a very important source of news, and of entertainment to cheer people up in difficult times.

C Going global

The BBC World Service began in 1932, mostly for the British people who lived in Africa and Asia. During the Second World War, it broadcast in many different languages and had large numbers of European listeners. Today it broadcasts by radio, internet and satellite in twenty-seven languages. 188 million people listen every week.

D From radio to TV

Television broadcasting had begun in 1936, but stopped during the Second World War. When it returned in 1946, viewers could enjoy anything from Disney’s Mickey Mouse cartoons to coverage of the Olympic Games. In 1953, 20 million people crowded round the country’s 3 million TV screens to watch Queen Elizabeth II’s coronation. After that, the popularity of TV grew fast. Hancock’s Half Hour, a funny 1950s sitcom, reflected Britain’s
changing entertainment preferences. It began as a radio show in 1954, then two years later became a show for both radio and television. Finally, in 1959, the BBC decided to broadcast it only on TV.

E The BBC today

The BBC is now the largest broadcaster in the world, with a staff of more than 23,000 people, ten UK TV channels, fifty-nine radio stations (local, national and international) and a strong presence on the internet. In Britain, more than 30% of all TV viewing is on the BBC. People can watch BBC channels all around the world, and its popular TV programmes, like reality show Strictly Come Dancing and car programme Top Gear have versions in many different countries. Other popular BBC shows include costume drama series Cranford, the wildlife documentary Frozen Planet, and EastEnders, Britain’s favourite soap opera.

F What next?

The BBC is popular partly because it has no advertising. Instead, it gets its money from the licence fees that everyone with a television in Britain has to pay. However, some families now have hundreds of cable channels and rarely watch BBC programmes. Other viewers watch shows on iPlayer, the BBC’s internet-based TV service for which no TV licence is required. There are people who feel that the system is unfair and needs to change. However, even its strongest critics agree that the BBC will continue to play a central role in the British media in the future.