



Development threat to the palace where television was born

By Terry Kirby
Chief Reporter

Just over 70 years ago, on 2 November 1936, the following words by the BBC presenter Elizabeth Cowell were beamed out over London: "This is direct television from Alexandra Palace." It was a moment that changed history, ushering in the television era.

Now, the future of the disused original studios at Alexandra Palace, the extravagant Victorian structure and London landmark which can lay claim to being the birthplace of television, is in doubt.

Haringey Council, which owns the building through a trust, plans to lease it to Firoz Kassam, an entrepreneur and property developer, which has caused widespread concern among senior BBC figures, historians and conservationists, who fear a vital part of broadcasting history may disappear.

And English Heritage, the government body which oversees historic buildings, is considering upgrading the listing on the building, which could restrict any plans to radically alter "Ally Pally". Dozens of objections have been lodged with the Charity Commission, which

is in the middle of a month-long public consultation over whether to allow the trust to lease the building to Mr Kassam's Firoka group for a multimillion-pound redevelopment as a hotel, leisure and exhibition complex. Mr Kassam is a former chairman of Oxford United football club and owns hotels and conference centres.

Objectors fear the long-empty, but still-intact studios in the building's tower could be lost because the proposed lease does not cover their preservation, despite Mr Kassam's promise to create a broadcasting museum on the site. They want public access to the studios guaranteed and the whole building handed over to a national body.

Jacob O'Callaghan, conservation officer of the Hornsey Historical Society, which is among those leading the campaign, said: "These studios are of historic importance; it is the birthplace of television, the place where the global village began. They should be retained for posterity."

Lynne Featherstone, the local Liberal Democrat MP, has tabled an early-day motion, and written to Secretary of State for Culture, Tessa Jowell, the BBC and the Royal Television Soci-

ety for backing. She said: "The TV studios are a piece of history, for our country, and indeed the world. The first public television broadcasts are a milestone that need to be commemorated, and I was shocked to discover no thought has been given to the preservation of the original studios."

John Trenouth, the former senior curator at the National Museum of Photography, Film and Television in Bradford, said: "I don't think future generations will forgive us if they are lost."

Alexandra Palace opened in 1873 as The People's Palace, a recreation centre on a hill in acres of parkland. Destroyed by fire within two weeks of opening it was rebuilt in two years, a vast building, containing banqueting halls, art galleries and function rooms, centred on the Great Hall, dominated by a steam engine-powered organ.

In 1935, the BBC took over part of the building because the television transmitter aerial could be sited on top of its tower, giving the necessary 600ft elevation. News broadcasts stopped in 1969 and Open University programmes ended in 1981, when the equipment was stripped out and the studios shut.

The Television Studios at Alexandra Palace:

A Case for Preservation

Submission to English Heritage

by the BBC

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About this submission

On 15th November 2006 Mark Thompson, Director-General of the BBC, wrote to Dr Simon Thurley, Chief Executive of English Heritage, suggesting that the television studios at Alexandra Palace might warrant protection beyond the Grade II listing that currently covers the entire building. This was in the light of remarks reportedly made by the prospective tenant of the site, Mr Firoz Kassam, that he could not guarantee that the studios would survive the refurbishment of the building.

Mr Kassam's organisation, Firoka, has since concluded an agreement to lease the site for 125 years subject to Charity Commission approval. We understand that the Firoka organisation has yet to develop detailed plans for the site.

Mark Thompson indicated to Dr Thurley that his letter would be followed by this more detailed submission.

It is our contention that:

1. Appreciation of the impact of television on the world is growing. As television, still an achievement in living memory, grows older so the story of Alexandra Palace and the contest between the rival systems that took place there will become increasingly treasured. Furthermore, given how media study has expanded over recent years, the studio spaces at Alexandra Palace will increasingly have educational as well as historic value.
2. The firsts achieved at Alexandra Palace in 1936 have been underscored by Britain's pre-eminence in television in subsequent decades. The studios at Alexandra Palace are an important part of a great British achievement
3. Relatively little else survives, anywhere in the world, from the pioneering days of television. And in terms of studio spaces, there is nothing comparable to Alexandra Palace.
4. A great many people in Britain and across the world care passionately about the studios. We feel that, particularly in the light of Dr Thurley's remarks at the launch of *Heritage Counts* (November 14th 2006) about the importance of buildings which have 'emotional resonance that goes far beyond their very bricks and mortar', these views should be taken into account.
5. Accordingly, urgent steps should be taken to ensure that as Alexandra Palace is refurbished the studios are appropriately protected. We appreciate that Grade II Listing does afford protection for the studios, but it is clear that in the forthcoming redevelopment, much that currently has Grade II listing will have to be modified or