

HARRY ELTON

# CORONATION STREET



*Continuing our discussion of typical television programmes in Britain, this article is based on a recorded interview with Harry Elton, who is an Executive Producer with Granada Television Network Limited, and is responsible for planning those programmes which take the form of series and serials. Granada TV are the I.T.A Programme Contractors for the North of England for weekdays and have their main studios in Manchester.*

*How much programme time is devoted to series and serials?*

AT THE MOMENT we are transmitting each week, one hour of *Knight Errant* and two half-hour episodes of *Coronation Street*. During the summer, we are increasing this to three hours by replacing two comedy programmes with a series called *Family Solicitor* written by Tessa Diamond, who was responsible for *Emergency Ward 10*, one of the most popular programmes on British television.

*How, for example, did the idea for this new series originate?*

We were discussing future programmes with Tessa Diamond, when she mentioned this idea of a mythical firm of family solicitors, and we immediately saw its possibilities. However, an idea is not enough. We need people who can write, act and produce the series so that the whole thing makes a closely knit and successful show.

*Where do you fit into all this?*

My job really is to plan ahead and keep the machine fed with raw material, and just try and help out wherever I can. The biggest problem is recognising the qualities which will give us a successful series. A lot, of course, depends on the timing.

*What sort of clue do you get on the right timing? Does programme research help?*

No, research results come in after the event. In this Company, we have a very capable Programme Committee which includes four members of the Board and several Executive Producers, and it is their task to sift all the ideas coming through and to keep a check on all the programmes now in production. It is only when an idea has been passed by this Committee that work starts in earnest. Trial scripts are made, and a scheme which we have found most valuable is to produce an audio tape with a sequence of still photographs (made in the right television screen format) which, with a little showmanship, can give a very clear idea of how a story will turn out. This gives a chance to check the actors with the actual dialogue, backgrounds, the graphic material for use in captions, the music and so on.

*What an excellent way for an author to put over his ideas! Howard Thomas has recently written an article for us*

*in which he raises this whole problem of "filling the screen". I would imagine that there is a real shortage of ideas.*

I don't think it is a shortage of ideas so much as a shortage of the people who can carry them out. Take, for example, the *Coronation Street* series which is running now. It was all started by a young writer—Tony Warren. The setting is any back street in Lancashire, four miles from Market Street, Manchester. The idea as such has probably been presented to the Company at least fifteen times during the last four years by fifteen different people and, given the right people to do it, we felt it would be good. About three years ago, Tony Warren then about 21, was writing for a crime series called *Shadow Squad*. His script wasn't very good but the writer had a kind of talent for portraying Lancashire people. The dialogue had a unique quality and we employed him for a while writing presentation and promotional material.

*That sounds like a cub journalist earning his spurs with Police Court reporting.*

Yes, indeed. However, this sort of work nearly drove him crazy and so we transferred him to a magazine programme. He had a crack at some more scripts which were not really very successful, finally he got very angry with us and determined that he must write something in his own style. He wrote a draft script about some Lancashire people and produced a synopsis for five other episodes. He showed us this in July 1960. Immediately, it clicked—here was the

right idea and the right man to write the series. The Programme Committee recognised this too and he was told to get on with the job of writing more scripts.

*I take it that your particular job is to recognise such talent, in spite of the failures, and to encourage it forward to produce the sort of programme you want.*

Yes, and there is the problem, too, of finding the right producers and other script writers, because one man cannot carry an hour's programme each week for very long on his own. At this stage, too, we must work out as accurately as we can what it is going to cost to put on the programme.

*You do not work to a budget then?*

Once we have decided what it would cost to put on the show properly, we must of course stick to that budget, but it is a matter of policy with Granada to work out what it would cost to do a programme as sensibly and as economically as possible and yet still fulfil the purpose that we set out to achieve. The estimates are put to the Company and they will either say "O.K, go ahead" or, as they often do, "You must take another look at these figures". But in this Company there never is a lack of money to do a programme properly. Mind you, people cannot ask for the moon, and they have got to demonstrate that the money is going to be well spent.

*Taking 'Coronation Street' as an example, how do you proceed from the sample script stage?*

Given the financial go-ahead, the team worked for two months solid to get six episodes done. This is the hardest part for the writer—to get six episodes with an individual style of their own and to establish each of the characters and really keep them established. The directors joined about the beginning of November. There are three directors who take it in turn to direct the episodes and a producer and script editor with overall responsibility. The editor has done a monumental job finding other writers who can maintain the style established in the first series of half-hour episodes. By the time the directors joined the production, the producer had knocked the scripts into shape and had had preliminary discussions with the casting department and designer. They knew the studio they were going to be in; they knew their





programme schedule and were set a target date for getting the programme on the air. In this programme we elected to use tape in a rather unusual way. The series was scheduled for transmission on Friday and Wednesday nights and we chose to transmit the half-hour programme Friday, live, and immediately afterwards tape the Wednesday night programme. This meant that we could rehearse as a one hour programme with a whole week to work in and furthermore, it gave us a very direct comparison between a live transmission and a taped recording. Although we all agreed that there was no discernable difference from the viewers' point of view, the actors and production people felt that they were not getting the best out of themselves when it was known that it was a taped recording. Subsequently, however, a change in the schedule has made it necessary for all the programmes to go out on tape.

*Did you have the opportunity of seeing any episodes before finally going on the air?*

We did two "dry runs" for this programme in November and both of them were disastrous! Nothing seemed to come right and the outlook was very dismal indeed.

*Disastrous you say; but what sort of troubles? Mechanical ones?*

Oh, no! It is difficult to say exactly, but my own feeling is that we had not been entirely successful in the casting and some of the actors, although fine artistes, did not fit completely into their parts, and threw the rest of the cast out of gear. Although we made several other adjustments, we did not change the scripts and they were the ones we used for the first two shows. The show had been originally conceived with the title *Florizel Street* as this seemed to have the right romantic Victorian flavour contrasting with the grim reality of life there, but

it was agreed that that title would mean nothing to viewers and eventually *Coronation Street* was adopted. We needed music, and a theme was composed by Eric Spear, who had previously done some other successful scores for us.

*When did he come into the story?*

Eric only came in a rush at the last minute; talked about the show but never actually saw it, went away, whipped up a theme in two days and had it recorded, sent it along and, as is the case with all theme music at the time, it didn't sound right. Theme music never does sound right on its own. When the programme had established itself, however, we got many letters praising the choice. I think theme music must, firstly, be a good tune that people can whistle or hum; secondly, be well recorded and instrumentally interesting and lively; and thirdly (and very much down the list) it should have something to do with the programme. The usual mistake is to go around looking for music which sounds something like the show. I think it is a very healthy thing for the television industry to be commissioning original music rather





than going back through existing scores. This immediately provides another market for composers, and frankly in the long run the costs are not very much different.

In spite of the gloom over the two dry runs, the team were very enthusiastic about the programme and the first transmission was on 9th December. The show was immediately successful and the programme contractor for North East England (Tyne Tees) took it from 25th January and the Midlands picked it up on 6th March; since then it has covered the entire network, and has consistently been around the Top Ten.

*How does it go in regions with a different local dialect: in Scotland and Northern Ireland, for example?*

It has gone very well there, but perhaps not quite so well in Wales. It has had unusually good ratings in Southern Television, but the programme time of 7.00 p.m. was perhaps a little too early for it to be so popular with London audiences. However, on the 6th March it was moved to 7.30, which has helped.

*How long do you think it will go on?*

We think it will continue for a long time, but already, of course, I personally am very much concerned by what will take its place. It seems pretty certain to me that it will not be possible for a long while to devise a programme series which is based on a hospital ward, a Scotland Yard detective or a Lancashire backstreet, since these have already been the subjects of very popular series. We will have to look for something quite different. There will, of course, come a time

when another Lancashire series will be popular with the audience, but not until the current series has been off the air for some time. It is a very interesting point, by the way, that the majority of the Top Ten programmes are British programmes and are live television. I personally would always much rather work with studio productions than in any other medium, in spite of all the limitations.

*What about the future?*

I am considerably bothered by the thought that the people who will be making the best television shows five years from now have probably not walked through the doors yet. I don't necessarily mean the producers and directors, but the writers.

*Are you in fact doing anything to train them? What are independent television companies doing to get them through their doors?*

For writers we cast our net as widely as we can and will never refuse to see new work. We use these long series as "try outs" for new writers.

*How far ahead do you work?*

Videotape has helped tremendously, and we have in fact sometimes got a complete series on tape before we put it on the air. One great advantage of tape is that a weekly programme can be produced on a fortnightly production schedule, since half the programmes can be taped in advance. This makes for very much more economical use of resources.

*Doesn't this advance taping restrict your flexibility and mean that you cannot make alterations to the show after it has started?*

One of the functions of the Programme Committee is to keep a close check on current productions, and we are very conscious of any criticisms which make changes desirable. One interesting characteristic of the Granada organization is that they have a large cinema circuit and the managers of these cinemas are given the opportunity of criticizing the programmes at the early "dry runs". Now these are men with a very wide experience of public entertainment tastes and their criticisms are both shrewd and valid. These men have a very good idea of what sells and we want to put on the sort of programme which we think should be put on—in a way that sells.