

THE TIMES FRIDAY JUNE 25 1999

TV buffs find first live BBC recording

By Paul Wilkinson

THE oldest recording of live British television will be screened tomorrow for the first time since it was broadcast more than 60 years ago. The four-minute corn-pilation from 1938 exists only because of a technological fluke and the enthusiasm of two television buffs, one in Britain and the other in America where, thanks to freak atmospheric conditions, it was picked up and recorded on a cine camera placed in front of a television screen as the images came in.

Andy Emmerson, the British enthusiast, spent five years tracking down the recording and believes that it is the only surviving example of prewar live British television. The flickering black-and-white footage includes Jasmine Bligh, one of the original BBC presenters, an excerpt from an unknown period costume drama and the BBC's station identity and the end of the day's output.

It was made at a time when no technology existed to record live broadcasts directly. Videotape was not perfected until the late 1950's and "tele-recording", the quality copying with a cine camera mounted in front of a television screen was not developed until after the Second World War. There are other recordings from that time, but they are all cine film shot from a camera alongside the television lens.

The American recording will be shown to an audience as part of the reopening ceremony tomorrow at the refurbished National Museum of Photography, Film and TV in Branford.

Mr. Emerson, 50, a freelance researcher and writer on the television industry, said: "Rumors of a recording existing in America have circulated for years, but no one had ever got to the bottom of them. It was known that about this time there had been tremendous Sun spot activity, which had a dramatic effect on the ionosphere. Broadcasts from the BBC at Alexandra Palace travelled less than 30 miles, but because of the Sun spots they were being bounced off the ionosphere and picked up 3,000 miles away on the East Coast of America."

"There were reports that KCA, which was working on its own television system, had conducted an experiment to film the broadcasts. About five years ago I decided to check it out, but with no success. RCA could not trace anything, nor could anyone else. Then last year a friend at the American Vintage Wireless Collectors' Society agreed to mention it in their magazine."

One of the respondents was Maurice Schechter, who worked in a New York television studio. He had a collection of television material and among it was one of the RCA recordings on 16mm film.

"He cleaned it up digitally and transferred it to a videocassette for me," Mr. Emerson said. "I was astounded. This was the oldest and probably the only example of live television from that period."



Steve Cummings, of the National Museum of Photography, Film and TV, plays a tape of the oldest "live" broadcast, with Jasmine Highb on screen