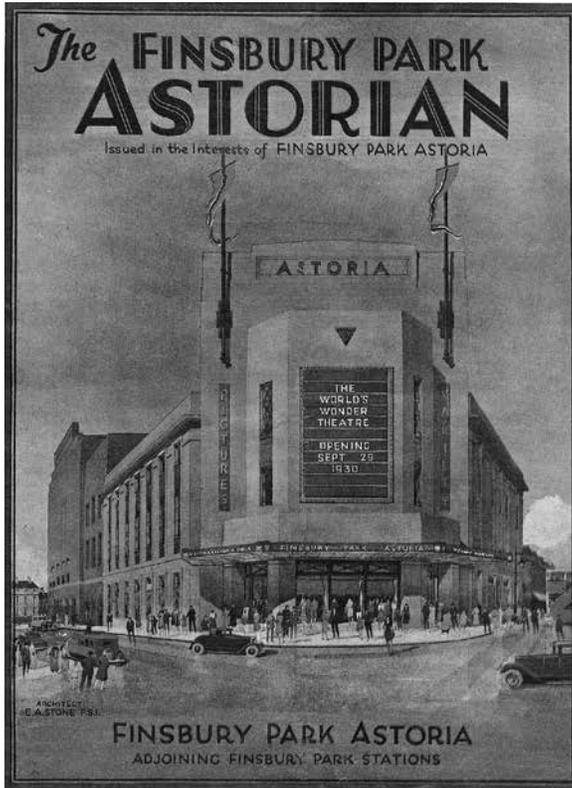


Leisure and Pleasure



A poster advertising the opening of the Astoria cinema in Finsbury Park in August 1930. The 1930s was a decade of cinema building, many of them monumental in scale. In the 1970s it was renamed the Rainbow and became a live music venue, and in 1999 a controversial Brazilian Pentecostal church. It boasted an extraordinary interior of a Moorish city, now completely restored.

Dances were only occasional, and I had to be in by 10 on Saturday night. Once a boy from Fairey Aviation took me home and dumped me crying on the step in front of a locked front door, and I had to ring to get in. Next morning a summons. My stepmother: 'I knew she'd come to no good'.

In the 1930s and 1940s there were three major means of mass entertainment. If you went out it was to the cinema or the dance hall; very few people went out to eat. If you were at home you listened to the radio if you had one. Before the war, although many had radios, most didn't, and those that did were fed a decidedly highbrow diet. John Reith, the BBC's formidable first Director General, set its objectives as 'to inform, educate, and entertain', very much in that order. A typical day's broadcasting even as late as mid-1939 didn't begin until 10.15am, with a religious service, and ended well before midnight. The newspaper industry had lobbied hard at the BBC's inception to restrict news broadcasts, so there was no news before 6pm, and only two brief bulletins after that. Typically over eight hours were given over to classical music – though you could hear dance music during the evening – and apart from that there was hardly any 'entertainment' aimed at working people, and nothing at all designed for children. It was more like Radio 3 today, without the laughs.

In 1930 there were five million radio licence holders in the UK, and by 1935 there were six million, and given the programming it's no surprise that it wasn't a rapid progression. It was the war that really boosted radio listening, with now at last a 7am news bulletin, and more popular programmes like *Workers' Playtime* and the comedy series *ITMA*. By 1940 the listening audience for evening news and variety programmes was larger than it has ever been since. Nevertheless by 1948 there were still under nine million licences, compared with the number of combined TV and radio licences today, over 25 million. Today, of course, many households have more than one television set and several portable radios. Not many pre-war households were like the one in this first extract, with several wireless sets in the house. The 'wireless' of those days did indeed have no wires, powered as we've seen by a massive accumulator battery that had to be recharged in a shop.

The wireless, a large wooden or Bakelite object, was an absolute necessity. We had one in the kitchen for the maid and other occasional servants, one in the day nursery for nanny and me, and an enormous radiogram in the drawing room disguised as an ornate piece of furniture.

During the war the BBC changed the names of its two radio stations from National and Regional to Home and Forces. The Forces programmes tended to include long spells of indifferent music and, in those early days, some less-than-subtle but much-loved comedy series. At that time it seemed to be a pre-requisite that every comedian had his well-known and much-repeated catchphrase. It mattered little whether the comic character was being played by Tommy Handley, Arthur Askey or Clay Keyes. The listener relaxed with the familiar.

We listened to the wireless as a recreation and a favourite programme was *Monday Night at Eight*. Other programmes which delighted my friends, *Old Mother Riley*, and Arthur Askey's, left me cold. Big orchestras with singers were very popular at the time and Geraldo was our favourite. We used to sit with notebooks in order to take down the words of the songs and at school next day we would compare notes and fill in the gaps.