

Life In Brief

WARD THOMAS MEDIA EXECUTIVE

Gwyn "Ward" Thomas, who has died aged 95, was a wartime bomber pilot and later a racing driver who in 1968 helped to found Yorkshire Television and returned to run it again in the 1990s. A grandee within the broadcast industry, he nevertheless maintained a discreet public profile.

He could be prickly, especially with politicians who meddled in broadcasting. But he was unquestionably a maverick, the extent of whose exploits was unknown to many who visited the Leeds studios.

Born in Wimbledon and educated in Banbury, he was studying at Rouen in northern France when the Germans invaded in the spring of 1940. Ignoring advice from the British Consul to get out at once, by way of Bordeaux, he headed instead for Paris, eventually squeezing on to a ferry from St Malo.

Back in England, he had to complete

his schooling, but a week after the end of term, he had become Aircraftsman 2nd Class and by 1944 he was flying Lancasters with 550 Squadron at North Killingholme on the Humber, embarking on 30 missions over key targets on the Rhur and Berlin.

Upon demob, he learned that Swissair was looking for qualified air crew, and within weeks had moved to Zurich as captain of a weekly 22-hour flight to New York.

It was during one of his New York stopovers that he began to take an interest in the emerging world of commercial television. He left his job, paid for a management and business course, and set off for the two-man sales department in Sidney Bernstein's new venture in Manchester, Granada Television.

At end of the 50s, with a wife and daughter to support, he raised

his sights. When the Independent Television Authority invited applications for its newly created Yorkshire franchise, he put together a consortium with a Blackpool TV rental company to form Telefusion Yorkshire. With the contract theirs, construction began on the first building in Europe purpose-built for colour TV, and Yorkshire Television went on air at the end of July, 1968.

Within a year, the Yorkshire weather had brought down the transmission mast on Emley Moor. The storm was weathered, but dark financial clouds on the horizon brought about a partial merger with Tyne-Tees Television, and Thomas became managing director of their holding company, Trident Television.

The regulator ended the arrangement at the next franchise round, and Trident, with Thomas



now chairman, bought Hugh Hefner's Playboy Club and his string of casinos. He retired from the business in 1984 and located to France. In his final act in television, in 1997, he partially realised his goal of combining the ITV companies into a single entity as he oversaw the sale of Yorkshire TV to Granada.

He married twice, first to Patricia Cornelius and then to Janice Topp, and had a son and daughter.

Born 1 August 1923
Died 4 February 2019

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