

Gwyn Edward "Ward" Thomas

War hero, pilot and racing driver who founded Yorkshire Television in the Sixties, built colour studios and turned it into a broadcasting powerhouse

When independent television was first broadcast in 1955 the people of Yorkshire were served by Granada Television on weekdays and ABC Television at weekends. Both were broadcast from Manchester. However, 12 years later the Independent Television Authority decided that the county should have its own service and invited proposals; one of these was led by Ward Thomas, who had established a reputation as a pugnacious managing director of Grampian Television in Scotland.

According to Austin Mitchell, the former television presenter who became the Labour MP for Great Grimsby, Thomas had been commuting from London to Aberdeen because his wife did not want to move north. He reasoned that "Leeds was nearer London than Aberdeen, the money far better and the power far greater".

The bid was successful and Thomas emerged as managing director, later chairman, of Yorkshire Television (YTV). He commissioned the first purpose-built colour broadcasting studios in Europe on Kirkstall Road, Leeds, which became home to shows such as *Emmerdale* and *Calendar*, the regional news magazine.

YTV began broadcasting on July 29, 1968, with live coverage of the England v Australia Test match from Headingley followed by the first edition of *Calendar*, presented by Jonathan Aitken, who would later become a Conservative cabinet minister. Eight months later, the 1,263ft transmission tower at Emley Moor collapsed under the weight of ice, leaving millions of viewers without reception and the station facing what could have been a catastrophic loss of viewers and advertising income.

"Suddenly, our brilliant programmes could not be seen by anyone except us," wrote Mitchell in his memoir, *Calendar Boy*. He recalled how the next day YTV's 700 staff were addressed in a studio by Thomas, adding: "When our floor manager asked deferentially what we, the staff, could do to help and offered a salary cut, Ward's only suggestion was to 'go easy on the expenses'."

Within four days Thomas had found a temporary transmitter and a month later he acquired a larger replacement from Sweden that was installed by a Polish rigging crew. The current iconic tower was finished and began transmitting in 1971. Such resourcefulness was unsurprising: Thomas had a track record for getting things done as an RAF war hero, an airline pilot and a motor-racing champion.

Gwyn Edward Ward Thomas was born in 1923, at Wimbledon, adjacent to the All England Club. He was the only child of William Thomas, who never recovered from life in the trenches during the First World War, and his wife, Constance (née Daborn), who worked with the Red Cross. Thomas was educated at Bloxham School near Banbury in Oxfordshire.



Thomas, front row, second left, with the RAF crew that flew on D-Day

The family took holidays in France and Belgium, and eventually Ward's parents were persuaded to allow him to spend a year at a lycée in Rouen. In May, 1940, he made his own way by train to Saint-Malo, Brittany, after the Nazi invasion and waited on the beach for three weeks before finding a ferry back to Britain, where the family had by then moved to Ealing in west London.

When the family home was damaged in a German bombing raid, Thomas decided to sign up for the war effort. In 1941, at the age of 18, he joined RAF Bomber Command, training as a navigator and pilot in South Africa. He was posted to No 100 Squadron as a Lancaster pilot and later served with No 550 Squadron, flying 36 missions over France and Germany, including the Nuremberg raid of March 30-31, 1944, when Bomber Command lost 105 aircraft in one night. Ward was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross "for upmost fortitude, courage and devotion to duty in air operations".

On June 5, 1944, he was the navigator in a Lancaster known as "Bad Penny II". It was commanded by Kenyon Bowen-Bravery and fired the opening salvo of Operation Overlord, heralding the D-Day landings. It took them just under two hours to reach their target, where they dropped fourteen 1,000lb bombs on a gun battery overlooking the Normandy coast. "When we got there we couldn't find it, it was dark," recalled Thomas. "It wasn't until they made the mistake of shooting at us that we could see them." The seven-man crew was awarded the Croix de Guerre by the French government for "services rendered in this great event in history".

In 1945, while still in uniform, he married Patricia Cornelius after they had met in the listening booth of the LP section of a London department store. The couple had a daughter, Christina, who works in television and survives him. The marriage was dissolved in 1989 and two years later he married Janice Dunn, who also worked in television. She survives him with their son, Guy, who is a venture capitalist.

After leaving the RAF, Thomas joined Swissair, often flying to New York and relishing the "mileage pay" that was then the norm for pilots. Although he left the airline in 1953 he continued to enjoy travelling at speed, albeit now as a racing driver. He won the Prix de la Province de Namur in Belgium in 1952 and the Brands Hatch championship. He was rewarded with honorary membership of the British Racing Drivers' Club.

Yet motor racing in the days before sponsorship was just a hobby; he joined the fledgling Granada Television in 1955, selling airtime to advertisers. Six years later he was part of the consortium that successfully bid for the Grampian Television franchise, becoming sales director and, shortly afterwards,

chief executive. This brought him into conflict with the unions over restructuring and at one point he threatened to close the station.

Having won the YTV bid in 1967, Thomas faced further industrial unrest at the new company and, as not all the studios were ready, some programmes had to be made in a disused trouser factory. Yet he brought in Paul Fox, the former controller of BBC One, as head of programmes and the relatively small company was soon punching above its weight. Its output included gameshows such as *3-2-1* and *Winner Takes All* as well as documentaries such as *Johnny Go Home* (1975), about the plight of homeless youngsters, and *Too Long a Winter* (1973), which told the story of Hannah Hauxwell (obituary, February 2, 2018), who farmed alone in the Pennines.

Although the Yorkshire franchise had been intended to provide more local programming, Ward was keen to consolidate, or, as Mitchell put it, he schemed “remorselessly”. He forged a union with Tyne Tees Television to form Trident Television, but plans to include Anglia Television were vetoed by the broadcasting authority. Trident was forced to divest itself of television companies during franchise renewals in 1980.



Winning the Prix de la Province de Namur in 1952

The company used the proceeds to purchase the Playboy casinos and betting shops from Hugh Hefner, later adding Windsor Safari Park to its eclectic portfolio. Thomas did not see himself as a gambling mogul, however, and in 1984, after the company had posted record profits of £10.3 million (about £34 million today), he retired to the south of France to enjoy his motorboats. Nine years later he was persuaded to come to the rescue of what had become Yorkshire-Tyne Tees Television after it ran into financial difficulties. He oversaw a boardroom clear-out and staff were ordered to accept new contracts.

The improved financial situation coincided with the arrival of Bruce Gyngell, another influential executive who had taken on the unions at TV-am and persuaded Thomas to join him in a moral crusade. Plans to broadcast programmes such as *Carnal Knowledge*, *The Good Sex Guide* and *Hollywood Lovers*, which had segments about the “mile-high club” and plastic surgery for genitalia, were dropped in favour of repeats of *Whicker’s World*, which had been a stalwart of the station’s early years. As Thomas explained in a letter to *The Times* on January 10, 1997: “I believe that independent television, as a service directed at the family audience, should be able to perform without recourse to gratuitous violence, sexual titillation and smut without wit.”

Thomas pursued his ideas for consolidating the independent television sector, insisting that merging the regional franchises into a single entity would improve efficiency. In June 1997 he persuaded Yorkshire-Tyne Tees shareholders to accept a £711 million takeover from Granada led by Gerry Robinson. It was widely expected that Thomas, then aged 74, would be chairman of the new Granada Media Group, but he said he would take a sabbatical. "I am sure I will want to return to the fray before long," he said. In the end he remained on sabbatical, enjoying skiing in Davos and his wildlife photography.

Ward Thomas, CBE, DFC, founder of Yorkshire Television, was born on August 1, 1923. He died on February 4, 2019, aged 95