

Obituary

James Hubert Thomas Fisher

1911-1992

Review of Activities regretfully records the passing of Jim Fisher, a telecommunications researcher who pioneered the introduction and development of television services in Australia. Mr Fisher developed a keen interest in the concept of television soon after commencing engineering studies at the University of Adelaide in 1929. He joined the Postmaster-General's Department (PMG) as a cadet engineer in 1930 and, after qualifying in engineering, moved to Melbourne in 1936 to work in the PMG Research Laboratories – the precursor of Telecom Research Laboratories.

The Research Laboratories imported many technical publications which reported on the early television experiments and trials then underway overseas. Mr Fisher read these avidly, and so began to prepare both himself and his country for the advent of television services twenty years before their introduction.

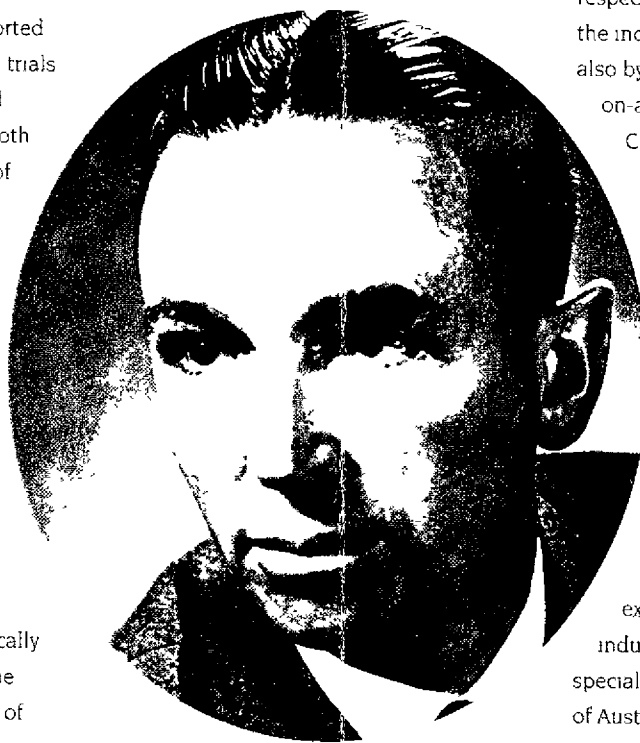
In 1937, to raise awareness of television within the Australian engineering fraternity, he prepared a paper entitled *Recent Developments in Television* which he presented to the Juniors and Students Section of the Institution of Engineers Australia. He illustrated the principles involved by demonstrating a hand-built television system of his own design. Rudimentary though it was, his system was as technically advanced as any in the world at that time.

In 1938, Mr Fisher prepared the first of many reports on television for the Commonwealth Government. This one, entitled *A Study of Overseas Developments in Television, in Relation to Possible Future Services in Australia*, made a comprehensive forecast of the necessary characteristics, and probable costs, of establishing a television service in the Melbourne area.

World War II then interrupted Mr Fisher's television research and he was redeployed to urgent and secret development work on radar. In 1940 he was given responsibility for co-ordinating the design and manufacture of Australia's anti-aircraft Shore Defence Systems, and following this, in 1942, he was assigned to work on radar-guided searchlight

systems. He excelled in both projects.

After the war, there was considerable pressure for Australia to adopt Britain's low definition television picture standard of 405 lines as the basis for future services. However, Mr Fisher disagreed. In a 1948 report entitled *Suggested Picture Definition Standards for Television Broadcasting in Australia*, he concluded that the British system was lagging behind in technical development and he put forward the radical proposal for a higher resolution system of 625 lines. He was the only Australian to take such a stand at this time, and he can be credited with giving Australia the high quality television pictures it received when services eventually commenced.



Jim Fisher circa 1956

Following another report in 1949, this time detailing projected television services for the Sydney area, Mr Fisher travelled to North America and Europe to investigate the provision of television services in other countries. Returning to Australia, he began training people for employment in the future television industry. From 1951 to 1956 he gave evening lectures in television technology and production at what later became the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. Two of his students were Hector and Dorothy Crawford who went on to found

one of Australia's leading television production houses.

Mr Fisher left the PMG in 1954 to become Engineer-Television in the Australian Broadcasting Control Board where he wrote Australia's first formal technical standards for television broadcasting. A year later he left the Board to become the first Chief Engineer of Channel HSV-7 in Melbourne where he managed the design, procurement, construction and operation of all studio, production and transmission facilities.

When television services commenced in 1956, Mr Fisher was at once an old hand in a new industry. His knowledge of television, both as a technology and as a medium of entertainment, was trusted and deeply respected. His advice was sought not only by the industry's engineers and technicians, but also by its station executives, producers and on-air personalities. He remained HSV-7's Chief Engineer until he retired in 1977, but continued his involvement in several major national and international technical forums.

In 1986, the Television Society of Australia presented Mr Fisher with its Colin Bednall Award. The award's citation read in part "No other single person can be credited with contributing so much over so many years to the national and commercial broadcasting structure, and to the technical excellence of Australia's television industry." In 1989 he was awarded a special Paul Marlan Award by the Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations (FACTS) for his pioneering work in television, and for his long and distinguished service on the FACTS Engineering Committee.

Those who worked with Jim Fisher remember him as a polite and genial character whose cultivated sense of humour could discover the lighter side of difficult and complex situations. He was also endowed with a genuine humility, and a keen desire to share his knowledge with others. To many he became known simply as 'Gentleman Jim' – a man who was born for research work and a man who was made for his times.