

The box that changed everything

Television changed people's homes — indeed, it transformed family life for ever.

It is hard to imagine, in these sophisticated times, how exciting the arrival of television to WA must have been. There was, in the words of an advertiser of those magical boxes about to take root in living rooms, no doubt “that there has never been a more wonderful medium of entertainment or education”.

TVW's inaugural general manager — and first employee — was James Cruthers, and he was more circumspect: “You all know the two faces of television. It's either heralded as a miracle and the best thing to have happened in the world in a long time or it's gloomily described as a monster which breeds a race of idiots,” he said shortly before the launch.

In fact, he said, television was nothing more or less than a modern scientific invention “which is now an accepted part of everyday life in many countries and that after the first flush of enthusiasm the average person is well able to ‘make a servant of it’”.

He could have been bolder because in the months leading up to October 16, 1959, Perth was in a fever of anticipation. Afterwards, life was never quite the same. The ABC began its service in Perth in 1960.

Just a few thousand had bought television licences — fee £5 — when TVW started. Only the lucky few could afford their own set and for most, experience of those first flickering pictures was acquired by peering through shop windows, in some cases camping out, with a thermos, a few rounds of ham-and-mustard sandwiches and a blanket.

Retailers had bought vast stocks of sets, anticipating that they would walk out the door. They didn't, and some businesses went bust as a result, despite offers of time payment and the lure of sets with Automatic Picture Control to stop “annoying interference caused by electrical appliances and passing

cars. There's no picture flutter, even when the station signals vary.”

With most sets selling for between £170 and £200, they were simply unaffordable for many people. The average male weekly wage at the time was about £15 to £17.

Advertisements of the time waxed lyrical about “rock-steady, crystal-clear, true-to-life pictures, free from snow, roll-over and electrical interference”. The Healing Series 400, for instance, came with “optically tinted safety glass framed with anodised gold” and was available in walnut, maple and mahogany.

This new piece of furniture posed the problem of just where the set should sit in the room. One interior designer suggested that it should not be allowed to dominate a room and, rather, “incorporated into the setting, just as a painting or even an ornamental ashtray”. Another, battling with the dilemma of placing a television set in a home with antique furniture, sensibly suggested that the chosen set should be “of darker, quieter-toned wood” and if it jarred too much, perhaps building a screen to hide it would be a good idea.

Television opened up a new market for

other items, too — the Televue chair, which “makes looking easier”, while a builder suggested “converting that open veranda into a modern TV room”.

And then there was the question of how best to watch. A dark room was regarded as dangerous because it could cause eye strain, and viewers were warned to sit no closer than 2m from the screen.

The arrival of TV changed family life for ever, spawned the term “TV dinner” and, until the video recorder arrived decades later, households organised themselves around their favourite programs.

When it all began, no one could have imagined the developments which lay ahead — colour, for one thing, live sport and news as it happened. And now, in a new millennium, digital television has arrived in sophisticated sets and video recorders are vanishing. Viewers using mobile phones can oust contestants in dancing competitions and sports fans are so close to the action their screen sweats.

Life was never the same in Perth after October 16, 1959. **7**

Right: A crowd gathers to peer through a shop window when television first came to Perth.

