



Albert John Cura  
1902-1969

## IN THE BEGINNING...

Alberto Giovanni Cura was born at Venn Street, Clapham, on 9 April 1902 to Guiseppe Cura, a London fishmonger, and his wife Emily. As a young man, Cura had an interest in photography, electronics and playing the piano, which he did with great skill. It appears that for some time Cura had his own dance band, and it was in connection with this that he met Emily Judith Watkins. Emily was a singer and had won a competition that had led her to perform with the legendary bandleader, Cab Calloway and his orchestra.



The Cura's residence at 176A Northcote Road,  
Clapham as it appears today

In 1937, Cura married 26-year old Emily Watkins and together, they moved into a flat at 176A Northcote Road, Clapham, the place that would become their home for over 30 years. Alberto took employment with the London Electricity Board, going door-to-door reading household electricity meters, then in September 1939, the Second World War broke out and Cura enlisted into the Royal Air Force as a photographer, anglicising his name into Albert John Cura.

At the start of the hostilities, and less than three years since it had first begun broadcasting, the BBC closed down its television transmissions, believing that the Germans would be able to home in on the signals. The final programme to be shown before the transmitter was shut down was the Disney cartoon, *Mickey's Gala Premiere*.

Following the end of the war in 1945, the 43 year-old John Cura (as he was now more familiarly known), in common with many other forces personnel, was de-mobbed from the RAF and allowed to go back to civilian life. Returning to his home at Northcote Road, Cura began to search for a form of employment that would support both him and his wife.

# John Cura — Photographer of the Lost Archive

In May 1986, one of the most exciting books of that decade on the production of Doctor Who was released in hardcover by WH Allen. Jeremy Bentham's *Doctor Who - The Early Years* was a remarkable journey through the formative years of the programme recorded primarily through the production drawings and personal photographs of former BBC designer, Ray Cusick. Bentham's work boasted an amazing array of previously unseen illustrative material over its 224 pages, but the conclusion of the book held a further surprise - a set of 47 small black and white off-screen photographs taken from the lost opening episode of *The Power of the Daleks*.

Fandom's general awareness of the tele-snaps and the man who had taken them had just begun...

Over the intervening years, literally thousands of other photographs recording many of the episodes currently missing from the BBC Film and Videotape Archive have been traced and published. But what do we actually know of the man behind them and the valuable service he provided? In the BBC's Written Archive Centre at Caversham reside two buff-coloured files under the code numbers T15/3/1 and T15/3/2. These rather innocuous-sounding folders contain letters and documents pertaining to the BBC's involvement with one Albert John Cura, who went on to form a unique alliance with the Corporation for over 20 years.

After nearly a seven-year break, the television service restarted at 3.00pm on Friday 7 June 1946, when pre-war BBC announcer Jasmine Bligh walked towards the camera on the terrace of Alexandra Park and said, "Remember me?" As if to emphasise the BBC's continuity, the first programme to be shown was a repeat of the same Mickey Mouse cartoon that had closed the service at the start of the war. The resumption of the television service had given Cura an idea...

John Cura first wrote to the BBC's Television Service at Alexandra Palace on 11 September 1947,<sup>1</sup> one of several letters he would send to the Corporation over the next two months indicating his plans for taking photographs from the television screen. In a pre-home video age, once a television programme had been broadcast, the work put into it by those involved was effectively lost, especially as many productions were performed live in the studio and never recorded onto either tape or film.<sup>2</sup> Cura's idea was that he would, on paid commission, take photographs direct from the television screen during the transmission of certain programmes so that the actors could have a permanent pictorial record of their television work.



Joan Gilbert

The earliest surviving letter from Cura is dated 26 October 1947, written on his printed "John Cura - Photographer" letterhead to Joan Gilbert, presenter and editor of the BBC's popular magazine programme, *Picture Page*, in which he outlines the gist of these early communications.

Since leaving the RAF, I have made numerous experiments to photograph the images on my television screen, but with very little success. I have now built a camera entirely to my own design and which, I think you will agree, gives pretty good photographs.

John Cura to Joan Gilbert - 26 October 1947

Four days after Cura wrote his initial letter to the BBC, J.A.C. Knott, the Television Administrative Officer who had received the communication, sent a memo to G.C. Robbins, the Director of the BBC's Legal Department requesting his advice on the matter.

<sup>1</sup> Eleven years after the first ever BBC television broadcast in 1936.

<sup>2</sup> Pre-recording and playback of programmes on videotape didn't begin at the BBC until 1 October 1958.