

weekend



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**THE 'SECRET' NORWICH TV
STATION THAT HELPED LAUNCH
FILM DIRECTOR'S CAREER**

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weekend

DO YOU REMEMBER NORWICH'S 'secret' TV channel?

Paul Hayes looks back at Nexus TV

If the past is indeed another country, then the history of television is practically a different planet.

In our modern multi-platform age, it must be almost impossible for some people to believe that the 1970s were a purely three-channel world. BBC One, BBC Two, and ITV. That was it.

Unless, that is, you happened to reside in a very particular part of Norwich.

Because if you lived on Bluebell Road in the late 70s or early 80s, and for whatever reason you were idly tuning your television set around the dial, then it's just possible you might have come across another station. One which was almost a secret, transmitting over a very limited range; and yet a station which existed for decades, making its own arts, entertainment, comedy, documentary, drama and news programmes.

This was Nexus, the campus television station at the University of East Anglia. The station was originally founded not by students but by Malcolm Freegard, the former BBC producer who had arrived at the UEA in 1968 to run the university's Audio-Visual Centre.

Here they had a fully-equipped television studio for making their own educational programmes, but as Freegard explained in an article for the Times Educational Supplement in 1977, he quickly found that the students also wanted to make use of it: "Nexus was started as a measure of self-protection against the stream of aspiring geniuses arriving daily with requests to 'borrow a camera' for the production of the ultimate documentary about 'Life, Sex, The Truth', or whichever of the larger abstractions was currently claiming their attention," he said.

Things really took off for Nexus when they gained their own small studio, above the LCR gig venue, in the new student union building

in the mid-1970s. It was from here that later in the decade they began actually putting out their programmes over-the-air, using a very low-power transmitter to reach the TV viewing rooms at the other end of the building – and some of the nearby halls of residence, in the unlikely event that any of the students living there had their own TVs.

"I'm sure it was all a bit naughty!" admits former student Mike Reddaway. "It was basically a very, very weak experiment, which sort-of worked and I think we were slightly surprised when we heard all the stories of it being seen off-campus!"

Nexus's main method of transmission was via a closed circuit to a television set in the foyer of the union building, where students would gather to watch at lunchtimes. As early 80s member Vince Rogers recalls, their location enabled Nexus to very clearly gauge the audience's views on a programme:

"We could do one thing that no other TV station could do," he explains. "We could actually hear our audience. If our doors were open and all the doors down the corridor were open and something funny was said, you could hear the laughter coming up the corridor! It was the most amazing feedback!"

This was an age when notions of online streaming and catch-up services were little more than science-fiction – if you missed a TV programme, that was it. Nexus took advantage of this, and once again pushed at the fringes of legality by using their equipment to record BBC and ITV shows popular with students, and then showing them during their lunchtime broadcasts to help hook the audience into watching the station.

"Things like Fawlty Towers, for example, we used to re-run at lunchtime," explains Ed Goodridge, who presented Nexus's news programme in the mid-1970s.



"I'm not sure whether I should admit to that! So that used to increase the audience – we'd get a good audience for our news because it was followed by a re-run of Fawlty Towers that went out the night before, or something of that sort!"

Nexus also pushed the boundaries for one of their most famous stunts, when in May 1975 they teamed up with the UEA's Rag Society to cordon-off the village of Horning, pretending to be government scientists investigating diseased coypu. 'The Great Coypu Hoax' is one of the few old Nexus programmes to have escaped into the wild and onto YouTube – in which can be seen a young and frizzy-haired Arthur Smith, long before his days as a well-known comedian on national television.

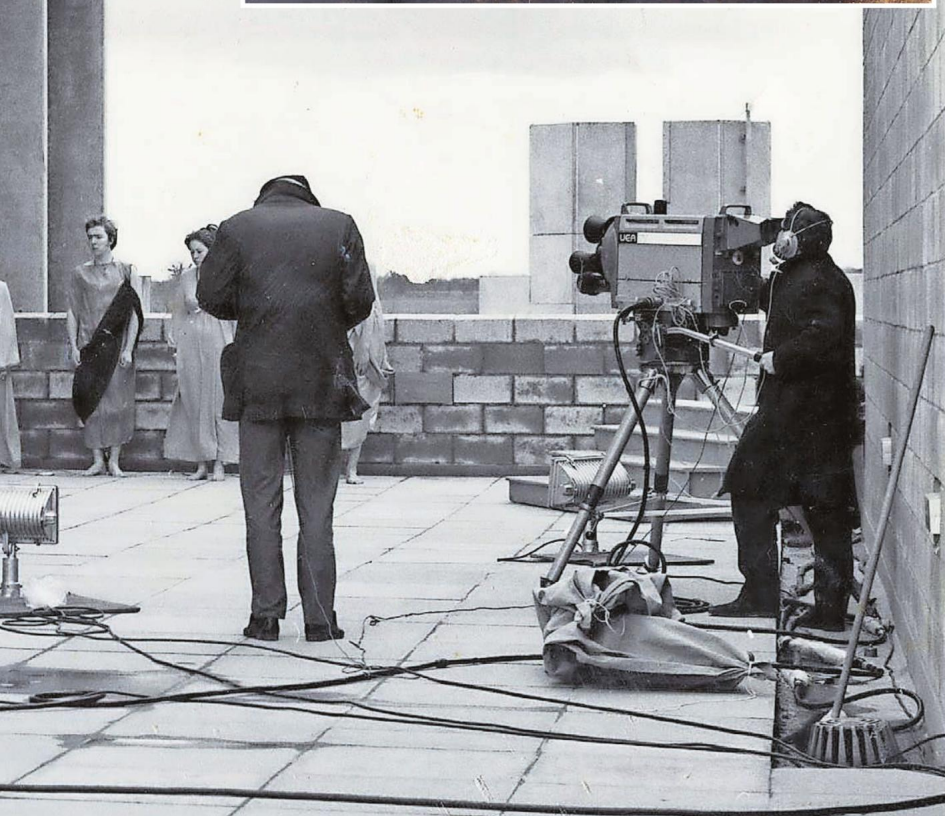
"We apologised dutifully, but I think we all thought it was a massive laugh," he remembers. "These days you could put it in for the Turner Prize maybe! It was great fun doing that kind of thing, and obviously I ended up with a career in showbusiness as well."

Nexus also recorded concerts by

Right, Nexus TV helped launch the career of Bend It Like Beckham's Gurinder Chadha, pictured at UEA after receiving an honorary degree



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Above, a Nexus broadcast in Roman dress, 1970s
Picture: UEATV

Left, Gurinder Chadha presenting Sounds Peculiar in 1981



THE DAMBUSTERS & National Memorial Arboretum

Departing Fri 15 Oct '21

Join us for a reflective break to remember those who gave their lives to fight for our freedom. We discover the story of the 617 Squadron, nicknamed The Dambusters, and visit the International Bomber Command Visitor Centre and the National Memorial Arboretum.

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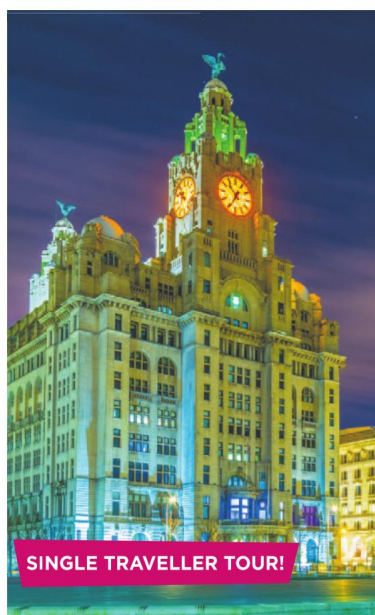
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- ✓ Light entertainment every evening
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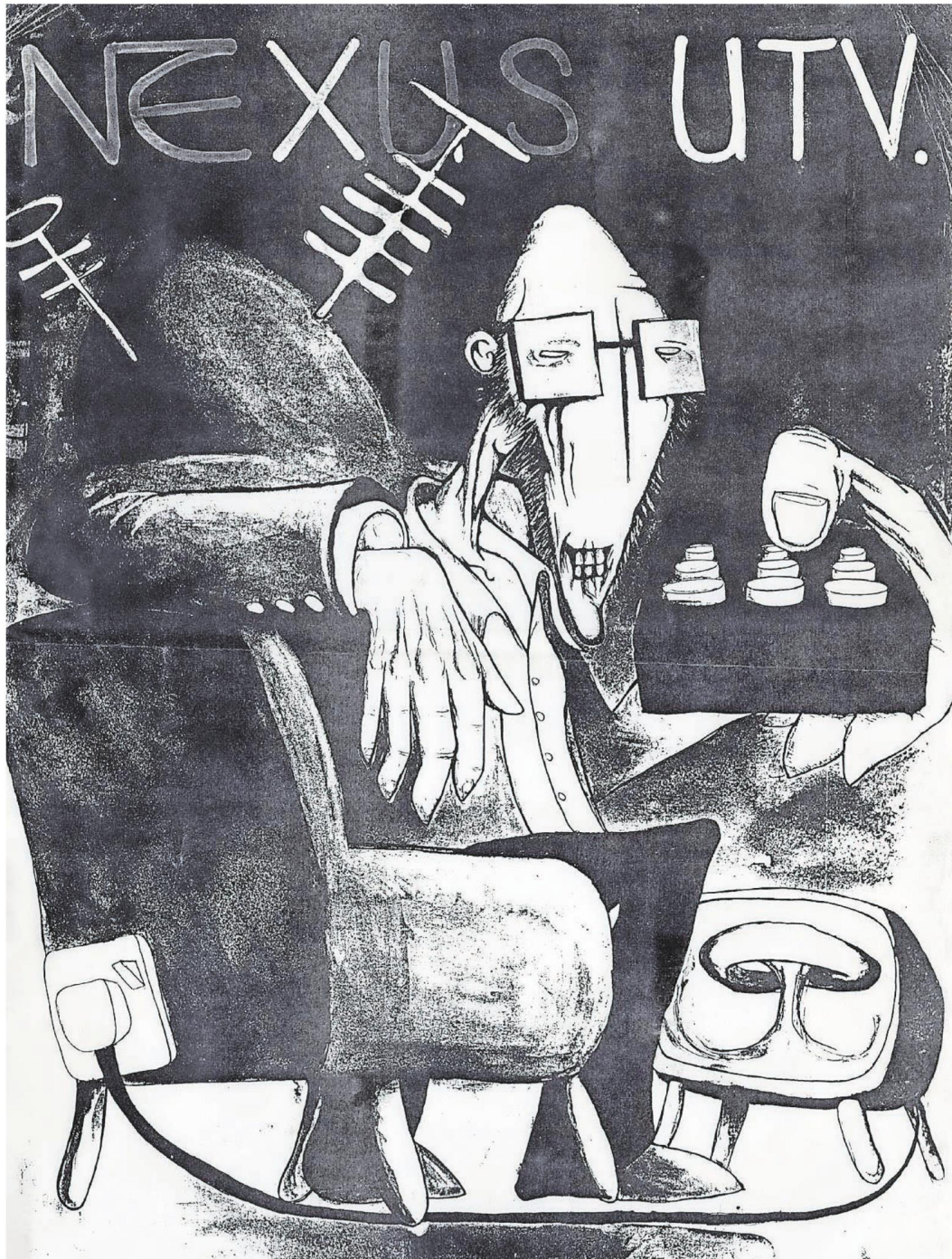
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Nexus - poster, 90s or early 2000s

Picture: UEATV

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many of the bands and artists who played on campus at the UEA, as well as interviewing entertainers performing there or at other venues in the city. The surviving archives are patchy at best, but contain snippets of interviews down the decades with the likes of Morecambe and Wise, Richard Briers, Johnny Marr of The Smiths and members of Radiohead.

Gurinder Chadha, who would later find fame as a Bafta-winning film director with Bend It Like Beckham, was a member of Nexus in the early 1980s, while at the UEA for a degree in development studies. She presented the satirical news programme Vicious Rumours and the station's long-running music programme Sounds Peculiar, and recalls an anarchic encounter with the group Madness.

"It was very hard, because they were these young North London lads who were there really to take the mick out of us students!" she laughs. "Any questions I did have they didn't really want to answer, they were just being quite critical!"

The Nexus name was retired in 2009, and these days the station is known as UEA:TV. Over-the-air and even closed-circuit broadcasts are long gone, in favour of streaming on social media. Interestingly, however, current station manager Rosie Johns believes that they could benefit from a bit of the old-fashioned approach and going back to also broadcasting via a TV in the student union foyer.

"Things just get lost on social media," says Rosie. "And every society has a YouTube channel, every society has Instagram where they post videos, so we aren't really a go-to any more

when you need help promoting yourself."

Whatever its future, it's certainly the case that for some of its past members, being part of Nexus had at least as big an impact on their lives as the actual degrees they were at the UEA to study. As Gurinder Chadha puts it: "I did not feel as if I belonged in TV studios or on TV or in any of that world. But to have our own TV station was really something very special. Nexus broke it all down for me - I wasn't scared of it, and I wasn't intimidated by broadcasting. Straight after UEA I went into journalism and became a presenter, and then of course a film director."

Nexus: Norfolk's Forgotten TV Station is on BBC Radio Norfolk on Bank Holiday Monday at 1pm, or available for 30 days afterwards via bbc.co.uk/radionorfolk or the BBC Sounds app



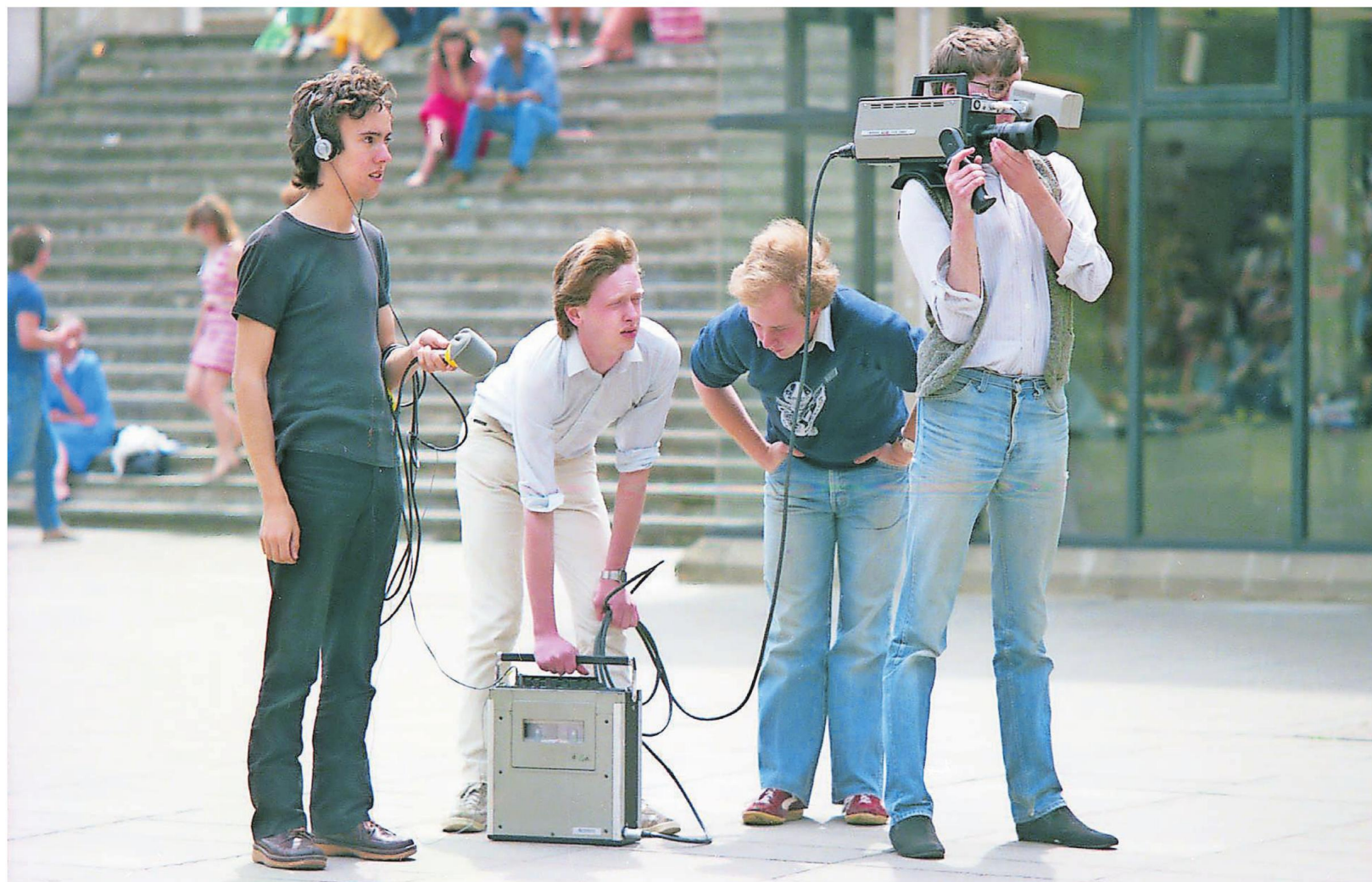
Nexus TV being watched in 1983

Picture: MARK HODGSON



Current UEATV station manager Rosie Johns

Picture: PAUL HAYES



Above, the Nexus control room in the mid-70s
Picture: DAVID MATTHEWSON

Left, Nexus camera crew in 1983
Picture: MARK HODGSON