

CUTTING THE CRACKLE

AFTER three years' planning, the BBC has been given the green light to start on its £3,000,000 plan to provide sound radio without crackle or interference from foreign stations, but with pin-point tuning and better-than-TV reproduction. This will be achieved by a series of very high frequency stations using frequency modulation or "wavelength wobble" at between three and four metres. Nine stations will be operating within two years, 51 are proposed, mostly from TV aerial masts.

How much will it cost to adapt a set for VHF reception? The Postmaster-General admits that the Radio Industry Council has been unable to give a definite answer, but some time ago the Television Advisory Committee estimated that adaptations would cost from £7 to £10. There is doubt about that figure, some of it strongly expressed. However, the opening of the new stations will not mean that listeners in these areas will be unable to use their present long or medium wave sets. Programmes will continue in those wavebands for many years. Some indoor aerials may be less effective. The radio industry expects to have new sets to receive VHF on sale at the autumn radio show for a few pounds more than existing sets, and it plans to have ample supplies within the next two years.

Popularly described as "wavelength wobble," the new system involves minute variations of the wavelength used. Greater fidelity of reproduction is claimed for it. Although recommending its introduction, the Television Advisory Committee says that VHF sound broadcasting is an "unwelcome complication," but the only means of overcoming the present widespread unsatisfactory reception. The Copenhagen Wavelength Plan of 1950 allocated 243 channels, but there are now 368 transmitters, so that nearly all BBC long and medium wave stations are liable to interference. The plan is strongly opposed by one of the most powerful figures in the British radio industry. A minority report to the Government White Paper is signed by C. O. Stanley, chairman of Pye Radio and a director of a company which seeks to operate commercial television.

"Very high frequency broadcasting has been a failure in practically every country into which it has been introduced. I believe that unless it is more carefully planned, and possibly even in that event, it may well be a failure in this country."

Germany was the only exception, asserts Mr. Stanley. It was first tried in the United States 15 years ago, and after the war 800 stations were established; they had persistently failed to fulfil hopes, all but a few were financial liabilities, and the number had fallen to 540. "It is questionably better than medium wave when all kinds of terrain are considered, and it is unquestionably more expensive," says this opponent of VHF.

—J. W. GOODWIN (London)

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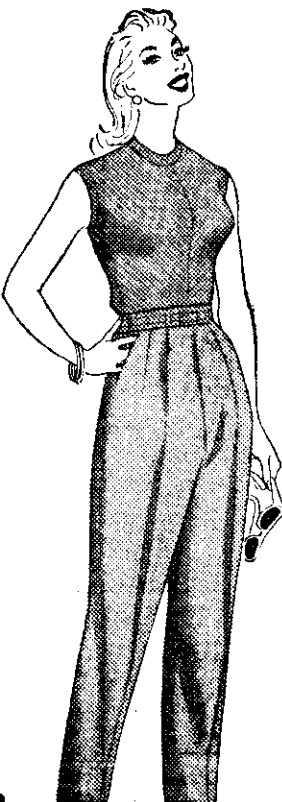
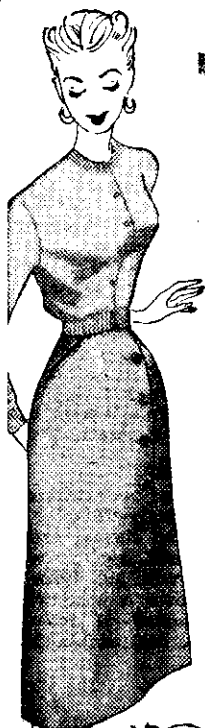
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