

ole played by radio station



June 1988: a British Telecom International publicity picture showing one of Portishead Radio's new aeronautical and gateway services for aircraft and people in remote locations. The original caption said: "Radio Officer Philip Bayley at the aeronautical console at Portishead Radio Station. As we are talking to aircraft - anyone from a Sheikh in his private jet to a commercial aeroplane pilot stranded on a foreign tarmac - Portishead personnel like Philip can also find themselves handling messages from aid workers in the Sudan speaking from a tent in the desert with only a receiver and aerial."



Above: By the 1980s equality was (slowly) arriving in the workplace. In June 1988 Cheryl Potter was one of two female staff at Portishead

Right: When Portishead Radio finally closed, the station cat (named, of course, Sparks) was no longer required. He moved into the home of a human staffer who had also taken early retirement.



Highbridge receiving station, original entrance and main building



Demolition, 2007

consoles at Somerton were brought into service to deal with the increased workload.

Despite these technological advances, traffic levels at the station continued to rise, and despite the addition of another operating wing, it was decided in 1976 to build a new operations building next to the existing station at Highbridge.

This would have the capability to provide extensive operating consoles for all maritime radio services, as well as utilizing a computer-based message delivery system which would improve the

speed of delivery of radiotelegrams worldwide.

In 1979 the transmitting station at Portishead was closed, and transmitters at Rugby, Leafield, Ongar (Essex) and Dorchester were brought into operation, although the name 'Portishead Radio' continued to be used.

The Falklands conflict of 1982 involved the station on a regular basis, especially the radio telex service which was heavily used by merchant vessels contracted to the UK forces.

The new station officially opened in 1983, with new radio receiving

equipment and utilising the receiving aerials at the former point-to-point radio station in Somerton, Somerset. The existing aerials at Highbridge were removed, thereby removing a familiar skyline for local residents.

By now, vessels were upgrading their communications equipment to the new 'Inmarsat' system which allowed them to contact telephone and telex numbers worldwide without the need for radio station involvement. Initial costs were high, however, and many companies preferred to use the conventional radio service.

Because of the possibility of losing business to the satellite system, new services were introduced, most notably the aeronautical service which provided radio links to and from aircraft. Many airlines utilized this new service, and the station became the European hub station for the American Eastern Airlines. The same frequencies were used for the 'Gateway' service which provided radio links for charities and companies based in areas where normal communication links were unreliable or non-existent such as Africa and the Middle East.

Many high-profile celebrities used the station; Sir Richard Branson communicated regularly from his transatlantic speedboat 'Virgin Atlantic Challenger' and his Virgin balloon; Sir Robin Knox-Johnston and Sir Chay Blyth were regular users of the maritime radio service, as was Simon Le Bon of Duran Duran fame, who owned a yacht.

Singer/songwriter Mike Batt owned a yacht called the 'Braemar' and he actually wrote a song called 'Portishead Radio' which featured on his 1980 'Waves' album.

Other high-profile users included Sir Ranulph Fiennes, David Hempelman-Adams, Tracy Edwards, Ellen McArthur and even members of the Royal Family ... One memorable call was placed by HRH Prince Andrew to be connected to Buckingham Palace, only to be told by the radio officer connecting the call to "Speak up son, your Mum's on the line".

In the 1980s and 1990s, the station provided vital links to and from military units located in the Balkans and the Gulf, with calls home from serving personnel being provided.

Sadly, it became inevitable that satellite communications would eventually replace the radio station, and during the late 1980s and early 1990s, traffic levels began to fall dramatically.

Staff who retired were not replaced, and the station building was used for other BT departments as the station contracted. Many staff transferred to these new departments, and on 30th April 2000 the station finally closed. The building itself continued to be used for a short time, but it was finally demolished in 2007 to make way for a housing development called 'Mulholland Park', named after two former station managers, Robert and his son Don Mulholland.

Today, nothing remains of the station whatsoever; not even a plaque or information board to commemorate the fact that it ever existed. There is a network of ex-staff who are actively campaigning to rectify this oversight, and it is hoped that with help from the local council and the local MP for the area, a suitable memorial can be arranged.

This year sees the 90th anniversary of the foundation of 'Portishead Radio' and celebratory local events are taking place, including a staff reunion, a local exhibition of station photographs and artefacts, a special amateur radio event and some talks to local clubs and societies.

In addition, a new website which carries the full history of the station which plenty of photographs, videos and audio files has been created, and can be accessed at www.portisheadradio.co.uk