

in all convict ships the unfortunate prisoners were locked in a space below decks.

At about 2 am on 13 May 1835 the watch on deck sighted breakers ahead. The ship was then at the western end of the Bass Strait, close to King Island, the rocks of which could be dimly discerned. The helm was put over hard to starboard and the ship went about with her head into the wind but she struck a submerged rock and the rudder was carried away. With steering control lost the ship swung broadside onto the main reef. With heavy sea breaking over her and the crew frantically trying to cut the masts away the prison doors below deck burst open and released a panic stricken crowd of female convicts who swarmed on deck. A boat had just been launched and in their terror they jumped into this until it capsized under the succession of falling bodies. A second boat was launched and care was taken to prevent overcrowding but in the darkness she capsized in the surf. All the occupants save the Captain and Mate were drowned. These two managed to swim to the ship which was rapidly breaking up.



The seas carried the wreck back into deep water, taking with it most of the terrified women, some of whom were no longer capable of saving themselves as they had broken into the government stores and had consumed vast quantities of rum. Some died when the poop collapsed with the breaking up of the ship. The *Neva* eventually foundered leaving behind on the rocks 22 persons. Some raft-like debris allowed those survivors to drift towards the shore of King Island and 22 of the ship's total complement made it. The landing site was desolate with little shelter and those survivors huddled under

bushes but by morning only 15 persons were still alive the other seven had died of exposure.

Discipline was restored by Peck and his First Mate, Bennett, and from the debris washed ashore they were able to make a rough shelter and to salvage some undamaged casks of flour and pork. Ninety-five bodies were found and buried in shallow graves but no more survivors were found. A fortnight after the wreck the survivors met two of the crew of another wrecked ship, the *Tatar*, owned by C. Friend of Hobart. The two parties joined forces and a month later, another vessel owned by C. Friend, the *Sarah Ann*, calling at King Island saw the distress signals and brought them to Tasmania.

When the survivors of the *Neva* were taken on board (apart from three who were away hunting) one of the women convicts refused to go and levelled a pistol at the *Sarah Ann's* master. She was overpowered and carried aboard. The *Sarah Ann* arrived at George Town on 26 June and the *Neva* survivors were soon in Launceston. A government cutter was sent to King Island to pick up the three survivors who were hunting when the *Sarah Ann* left.

An enquiry exonerated Captain Peck for the loss of his ship. However, there is considerable doubt where the *Neva* went aground. Press reports at the time said she was wrecked on the Navarine Reefs which lie north-east of Cape Wickham. The enquiry, however, decided it was on the Harbinger Reefs north-west of the Cape and twice as far from it as the Navarine's.

Footnote. The convict ships from Britain and Ireland to destinations in Australasia started in 1787 until 1868, a period of some 80 years (the last convict ship from Ireland was in 1853). During this period some 160,000 convicts were sent to Australia for a minimum of seven years. Many more followed their loved ones as free settlers to a new life in the colony. Of the 160,000 total, 30,000 men and 9,000 women were from Ireland. The main destinations were Sydney, Norfolk Island, Van Dieman's Land (Hobart, Macquarie Harbour, Maria Island and Port Arthur), Moreton Bay, Melville Island and Fremantle. Accompanying the convicts was a Surgeon-Superintendent whose duty it was to protect the convicts from the potential abuses of the time and to render health care as was available in those days. Their influence reduced the mortality of convicts in the early years from one in three to zero by 1860.

Portishead Radio (1928–2000)

©Brian Hill

As I write a modern housing estate, quite typical of its type, is being constructed on the outskirts of the unpretentious Somerset town of Highbridge. The current recession has slowed progress and sales are slow, but no-one doubts it will be completed. Small piles of rubble, handy for hardcore, mark the demolition of a large red-brick, functional building that some hoped

would be saved for posterity. This was once the centrepiece of the largest and most important maritime radio station in the world, Portishead Radio.

The Radio Station took its name from the transmitter site at Portishead, just south of Bristol, and although this closed during the Station's heyday, the name was retained to avoid confusion. Transmitters were, in fact, located at Post Office sites throughout England, mainly Rugby, Bodmin, Dorchester, Ongar in Essex and Leafield in Oxfordshire, with the site at Portishead important only during the early stages of the Station. Additionally, the main site remotely controlled some receivers at Somerton, near Yeovil. The Highbridge site was surrounded by a large aerial field, with an array of directional rhombic aerials and omni-directional search aerials. Once visible for miles, and a useful pointer to finding the Station down the back lanes, nothing now remains of the high masts and wires.

It does seem quite remarkable in an age when data is exchanged at the rate of millions of bits a minute, that only thirty years ago the vast majority of merchant ships, both British and Foreign, conducted their business by exchanging messages in Morse code, generally at speeds no higher than twenty five words a minute, and often much slower. Radiotelephony, although it did expand rapidly, was still something of an adventure for its users, and radiotelex, which subsequently grew with extraordinary rapidity, was in its relative infancy. It does seem to me that these methods of communication were, however, very well suited to the merchant service of the day, when times were more leisurely, and rapid transits by container ships, programmed to arrive by the hour, rather than the day or week, were still some way off. The hub of this truly global communications system was Portishead Radio.



Search position. Searching bands to queue ships for colleagues to work.
Courtesy British Telecom

This article is focused mainly on my own recollection and is not intended to be a history, although some background is obviously essential. Those who wish detailed information will be well rewarded by visiting: www.portisheadradio.co.uk where both information and personal memory of the Station is comprehensive. The site was established in the 1928 as research showed that short-wave (High Frequency-H.F.) radio allowed effective world-wide communication, should conditions be favourable. The service burgeoned, employing sixty Radio Officers by 1936, and played an important role in the Second World War, broadcasting messages to convoys and their escorts. It was in the post war years, however, that Portishead was at its busiest, never more so than in the 1970s, when traffic figures were at their highest. Portishead Radio Officers were required to have the same PMG/MPT certification as their seagoing colleagues and, not surprisingly, most of the staff were ex- Merchant Navy.



HF Wing. Courtesy Ramsay Stuart

My own involvement with the Station began in 1967 when I arrived as a Royal Navy Radio Operator. Warships of the day also used Morse and their generally long coded messages were not popular with the civilian staff. There had been a naval contingent at Portishead since 1943, with four operators led by a Petty Officer on watch at any time. Portishead was much sought after as a shore posting. The work was interesting and discipline extremely relaxed, with naval operators being billeted either in Highbridge or nearby Burnham on Sea. Many live in these towns to this day. A few, like me, undertook the necessary study to return as civilians. The naval presence at Portishead ended in 1972, by which time Morse traffic from warships had virtually disappeared.

In the years up to 1972, British ships and their Radio Officers enjoyed something of an advantage over their colleagues in foreign registered vessels.

An effective system of relay stations covering eight oceanic areas, known as the Area Scheme was introduced in 1946. This allowed British and Commonwealth registered ships to call their nearest maritime radio station rather than Portishead direct, making long-distance communications theoretically both easier and more reliable. Thus a Radio Officer aboard a ship in the South China Sea would have his incoming traffic broadcast by Singapore Radio, and would send his own messages via this station for relay free of charge to Portishead. Good though this system was in theory, it was far from efficient in practice as ships still had to establish communication with the area station to send frequent position reports and acknowledge receipt of broadcast messages, some of which were sent several times unnecessarily. The surprise to many was that such a global system lasted until 1972. The commonwealth countries, few of which had large merchant fleets, gained little from the Area Scheme and as foreign naval bases closed – Singapore for example – the Area Scheme could no longer be sustained.



New Station operating position.

Most Radio Officers welcomed its demise. For one thing it forced the more parsimonious shipping and radio operating companies to fit decent high-powered transmitters and better equipment to their vessels. Reliable radio communication from the far corners of the globe demanded this, and more besides. Radio Officer skills were now tested to the full. In some parts of the world, for example the mid-Pacific, the coastal waters of Japan and New Zealand; the prevailing radio propagation often allowed only a small daily window of opportunity, sometimes as short as an hour or so, to establish communications with Portishead. Selecting the right calling band and time of day were crucial. Although high-powered (a relative term, 1Kw was the norm) transmitters helped, experience and skill were more important.

Working for a good shipping company was a real bonus. In this regard Reardon Smith scored highly. Certainly the vessels I sailed in had excellent radio fits, with quality equipment, provided by a wide range of radio companies, as standard. Furthermore, the company had an efficient relay system of its own. Using the RSL collective callsign, GTZJ, Radio Officers would 'meet' each other at designated times of the day. Useful for exchanging news and crewlists, you could almost always rely on a ship in a 'good' radio area to relay traffic for you, should you be transiting a more difficult part of the world.



Brian Hill broadcasting to shipping.

To facilitate world-wide communication throughout the twenty-four hours Portishead was open on as many as six HF bands, from 4 MHz at the lowest to 22 MHz at the highest, depending on ionospheric conditions. Ships called on fixed frequencies within a dedicated calling band, and a link having been established, both ship and coast station would transfer to working frequencies for the exchange of traffic. On the busier bands, at hectic times of day ships would be queued with as many as thirty waiting to be dealt with. Despite this, delays were generally short. Traffic lists, an alphabetical roll call of ships callsigns were broadcast on the even hour for British ships, and the odd for foreign vessels, a large number of which used the Station.

The vast majority of messages to ships from owners and charterers arrived by telex, with a small proportion phoned in, and others from overseas via the international telegraph networks. Activity centred on the landline room, a wing extension of the old building. Banks of operators sent messages from ships on outgoing telex machines, while an army of 'gummers' attended to

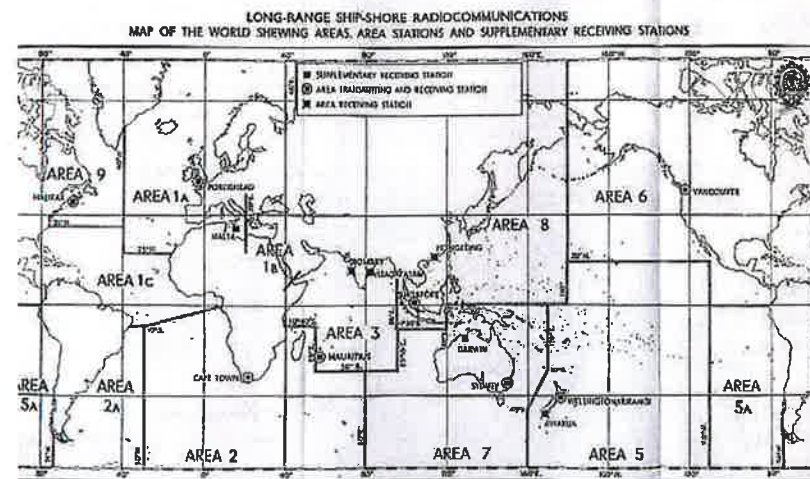
incoming traffic. This arrived on gum-backed tape which was sliced and gummed on to the appropriate message form before being sent down a conveyor belt for routing. One of the most useful pieces of equipment a Radio Officer received on appointment was a small, sharp edged gumming thimble which fitted the forefinger and allowed swift processing of the mountains of tape arriving each minute. From the conveyor, an incoming message went to a central bureau where comprehensive details of most of the world's ships were held, the most important of which was a vessel's radio callsign. The bureau operator appended this and any other useful information and sent the message to a revolving carousel, where the messages were stored in callsign order for broadcast and despatch when the ship made contact. Many large companies used Portishead for preference. Among these were the tanker fleets of Mobil and BP, and foreign shipowners such as Niarchos. These companies had direct, private wires both into and from Portishead which expedited the message handling process. Some special arrangements were also in place for large passenger liners, such as *QE2*.



HF Wing. Courtesy Ramsay Stuart

The whole operation was extraordinarily labour intensive, and unavoidably so, since ship-ship communication was essentially a 1-1 process. At peak times, some forty to fifty Radio Officers would be manning the HF positions exchanging Morse traffic with ships, with as many again engaged in message handling duties and accounting. Radio Officers performed every task on the Station, including administrative duties, and a typical shift of six hours would see you rotate between various message handling tasks and headphone work. Postmen (Portishead was at that time a branch of the GPO) delivered messages to working operators and between the various processing points. By

1974 Radio Officer numbers had almost trebled from a pre-war figure of less than 60, to around 150.



World map showing Area Scheme. Courtesy British Telecom.

Working conditions, always busy, were nevertheless quite relaxed with little close supervision. Supervisors, who had risen through the ranks after passing a small barrier examination, were quaintly named 'overseers', and generally relied on you to do your own job. My memory today is of an environment that could not possibly exist now. Sad to report in these enlightened times Portishead was entirely male dominated. Female Radio Officers arrived late in the Station's history, and in total were extremely few in number. Non-smokers were a rarity, and were in a very literal sense, an endangered species. Ashtrays overflowed and the atmosphere was thick with tobacco smoke. As with other workplaces the pendulum quickly swung the other way, and by the mid-80's the whole site was non-smoking. Tea as thick as porridge was delivered to your working position three times a shift, and as likely as not would be laced with cigarette ash. A background noise of Morse, seeping through the many sets of headphones and a smell of warm electronics and polished linoleum permeated the Morse operating wings, while the landline was a cacophony of noise from chattering printers, probably well above a level that would be tolerated today. Duties generally disliked could be swapped without fuss, and many preferred to spend the whole shift on HF working ships. This could be more varied than it seems. The first ship you work might be a tramp passing a routine position report to owners from the Indian Ocean, the next may be a P & O passenger liner, such as *Orcades* inward bound from Australia with a stack of passenger messages that might take a couple of hours to pass. The best operators would work around six ships an hour, on average. Radio traffic

varied by the hour. From around four in the morning, the Persian Gulf awoke with large numbers of tankers calling as their Radio Officers manned the first watch of the day. Around eight a.m. could be the best opportunity for ships on the Japanese coast to make contact, and late in the evening, the Panama Canal Zone, Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean came to life. A selection of directional aerials gave the best possible reception, but in crowded bands, interference and sometimes weak signals were challenging. Variety, however, was never lacking.



Larry Summers at multi-purpose operating position including radiotelephony

Portishead also broadcast navigational information and weather forecasts for the North Atlantic. There were press broadcasts to subscribing ships, mainly the large passenger liners, and other special services among which was a newspaper facsimile service to the *QE2* from the *Daily Telegraph* in London. Distress watches were the responsibility of the GPO medium range coast stations but Portishead was involved on the periphery and even directly at times. One such example was just before Christmas 1963 when the Radio Officer of the Greek cruise liner *Lakonia* interrupted a string of routine messages with the dramatic news that the ship was on fire. Portishead gave the first alert to rescue services but the ship subsequently sank with large loss of life.

The Station was also closely involved in supporting the early round the world yachtsmen, and gained high praise from such as Robin Knox-Johnson and Clare Francis. Radio Officers at Portishead were also the first to suspect that the 1969 round the world voyage of Donald Crowhurst was not what it seemed, as transmissions from his trimaran *Teignmouth Electron* consistently arrived from the 'wrong' direction. It subsequently turned out that Crowhurst

had never left the Atlantic when his yacht was discovered drifting unmanned in mid-ocean by the British cargo liner *Picardy*. Once again, Portishead was the first to learn of the unfolding tragedy as the *Picardy* reported the grim circumstances.

The 1982 Falklands conflict brought a brief period of excitement to the Station, and the return of some Royal Navy personnel. Special communication arrangements were made with ships taken up from trade, among them regular Portishead customers such as *Canberra* and *QE2*. Throughout the life of the Station, a printer link to MOD Navy in London was maintained and tested, although from around 1970 warships only used the radiotelephony service.

But the bulk of the work was routine shipping business. Traffic figures peaked at around 2,000 incoming a day, with a similar number transmitted. By the late 70's and early 80's radiotelephony and radiotelex were gaining ground. Establishing a radiotelephone link in the early stages of the service was a cumbersome business. Ships first had to call using Morse to make a booking with the GPO Station at Rugby, sometimes for hours ahead and more often than not the radiotelephone link would fail. By the late 70's Portishead had direct control of the service which became more efficient. By this time too the more far sighted shipping companies, Reardon Smith among them, had realised the benefits brought by radiotelex and fitted ships with the necessary equipment. In its early stages this was operator controlled, but within a few years became fully automated. As these services expanded, so the W/T Morse service declined, but this decline was gradual rather than abrupt.

The early 1980's saw the construction of a brand new Station alongside the old. Traffic handling was refined, and a range of new consoles and state of the art receiving equipment installed. By the late 1980's, however, it was clear that the future was limited. Maritime satellite communications were making deep inroads into conventional traffic and the British Merchant fleet was in steep decline. Portishead vigorously sought new markets, and a radiotelephony service to aircraft, which rapidly became popular, was introduced but could only delay the inevitable. The first of a series of voluntary redundancies took place in 1987, and thereafter all the traffic graphs were pointing downwards. It seems remarkable, in hindsight that the Station lasted as long as it did. Through its life, it went through a number of stages of ownership, initially the responsibility of the GPO, and then Post Office Telecommunications as the Post Office and Telephone services were split. With privatisation British Telecom became the final owners. BT brought other services to the site in the 1990's including a call centre with the maritime radio service reduced to a mere rump, but eventually declared the whole unviable. The final broadcast, in Morse, announcing the end of Portishead was made on 30 April 2000. By this time other HF Radio Stations around the world had also closed, and satellite reigned supreme.



Portishead Radio main building.

Happily the relatively slow downturn, natural wastage and other factors meant there were no compulsory redundancies. Many ex-Radio Officers still live locally, some still employed by BT in other roles. Many more are scattered to the four winds, employed in such diverse trades as plumbing and psychiatric nursing, or are like me retired. All regarded the demolition of the site earlier this year with sadness tinged with many happy memories of a good place to work. Some of us, around twenty or so meet up for reunion dinners thrice-yearly, although after dinner conversation these days tends to focus more on arthritis than radio. Should any ex-RSL Radio Officer or indeed any other RSL Seafarer find himself passing through Highbridge on the first Wednesday of March, September or December please come along. You would be made most welcome.

Note: The photographs not attributed are from Brian Hill's collection.



Portishead Radio main building during demolition.

Shipmates



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Portishead Radio Masts. Courtesy of British Telecom

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Portishead Radio (1928-2000)

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