Portishead calling Crucial r

Back before global satellite communications, a local maritime radio station provided a link between British ships and home, sending and receiving messages from the routine to the life-saving. It would also play an important role in some of the greatest episodes in 20th century history. Here, former staff member **Larry Bennett** tells the story of Portishead Radio.

Portishead Radio: Landline area, Highbridge receiving station, c. 1964

ASK anyone who served at sea before 2000 about Portishead Radio and you are sure to receive a misty-eyed and emotional response; for Portishead Radio was the only link to home from ships until the advent of satellite communications at the end of the 1980s.

The Post Office started a long-range maritime radio service in 1920, from converted army huts near Devizes. However, it soon became clear that the capacity of the site was insufficient to handle the demand, and in 1928 new high-powered transmitters and aerials were erected at Portishead Down, on the Bristol Channel coast.

An existing short-range station at Highbridge, near Burnham-on-Sea in Somerset, was expanded to become the receiving centre, where a staff of radio officers would send and receive radiotelegrams to and from ships using Morse code.

The new station was called "Portishead Radio", named after the transmitter site. The site at Devizes continued to operate, undertaking short-wave radio communication experiments but closed in the 1950s.

The station continued to expand during the 1930s, with high levels of traffic being exchanged with the great transatlantic liners of the time, as well as with large flying boats, which carried experienced radio officers to handle their communication links.

The Second World War brought immense changes to the station; traffic to allied merchant ships was broadcast both "blind" and encoded, without acknowledgement of receipt by the intended ship. Allied vessels exercised radio silence, which could only be broken in cases of emergency. A single transmission from a vessel would have been enough to divulge its position to U-boats and enemy monitoring stations.

To cover these high levels of traffic, further transmitters at Rugby were brought into service. The station was also heavily involved in monitoring of transmissions from allied forces overseas, as well as Special Operations Executive (SOE) stations in Europe. Training of radio officers in communications procedures also took place at the station, before they were sent to allied vessels worldwide.

Is the Portishead radio callsign 'gka' in morse code

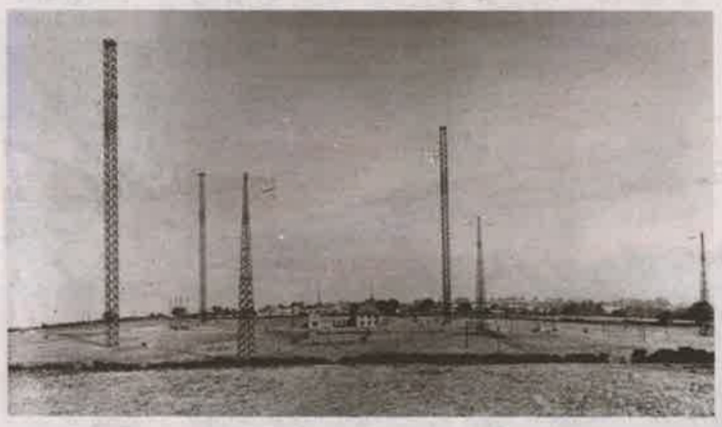
Royal Naval operators were brought in to assist with the processing of traffic, which also brought in the "area scheme" where vessels located in hard-to-reach locations could have their traffic relayed via Admiralty circuits to radio stations such as Bombay, Cape Town, Colombo, Hong Kong and many others worldwide. This scheme was successful and continued until the early 1970s.

At the end of the War, the receiving site at Highbridge was expanded considerably; three new operating wings were constructed as well as a large "control room" which held the Ships Bureau. This held information on current locations of many merchant vessels and which radio stations they were monitoring. Large tin maps on the walls made it easy to plot the positions of high-traffic vessels using magnetic indicators. This "new station" was officially opened in 1948, by the then Postmaster General, Wilfred Paling.

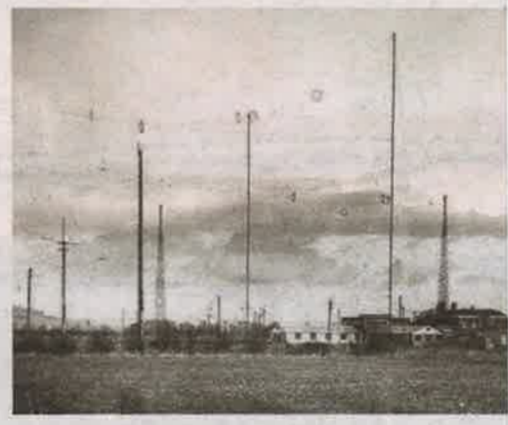
Traffic would continue to be sent and received using Morse code, with incoming and outgoing traffic forwarded by telex to shipping companies and the Post Office telegraph network. However, radiotelephone communications were being developed and these were handled from Post Office radio stations at Brent and Baldock.

The Suez Crisis of 1956 brought unprecedented level of traffic to the station, together with increased staff numbers. The station was honoured by a visit from HM the Queen in 1958, who was brought to the building from Highbridge Railway Station.

During the 1960s, technology was evolving rapidly; new radiotelex systems were being tested with specified vessels, with a dedicated operating area being utilized at the end of one of the operating wings. In addition, early tests with satellite communication systems took place, but these were not commercially used at the time.



The Portishead transmitter site, c. 1933



Highbridge receiving station in about 1948. The m landmark for decades.

The radiotelex system was deemed to be extremely successful, and many ships became equipped with the required equipment; this allowed them to communicate directly with their companies' telex machines without the need for radio officer involvement. Shipping companies could now send telexes directly to their ships once radio contact had been established.

The Daily Telegraph arranged a daily transmission of news to the newly-launched QE2 cruise liner in 1968, which used this new technology to great effect.

The year 1968 also brought one of Portishead Radio's most famous episodes; the Times newspaper had organized a round-the-world yacht race, in which the station was involved. One of the entrants was Donald Crowhurst, whose yacht 'Teignmouth Electron' communicated with the station regularly. It was realised that the position reports transmitted by the yacht bore no resemblance to the aerial bearing of the radio signals, and it became clear that Crowhurst was simply sailing around the South Atlantic and providing false positions. The story is well-documented, and the recent films 'Deep Water' and 'The Mercy' provide an excellent narrative.

> "Speak up son, your Mum's on the line"
>
> **Portishead Radio officer to Prince Andrew**

In 1971, the "area scheme" mentioned earlier was terminated and the Royal Naval presence at the station ceased. In addition, radiotelephone services were relocated to the Highbridge site, although extra