

A Brief History of the Portishead Maritime Radio Service – Paul Hawkins MIET (G4KHU)

This article is not intended to be a full history of the Portishead maritime radio service but is to provide a little more information of how the service was provided by a number of radio stations and their dates of operation. In fact, the radio station at a Portishead ceased to operate in July 1978 and hence the name “Portishead” became a sort of brand name.

Until April 30th 2000, when the service closed, the name “Portishead Radio” was known world-wide amongst maritime radio officers. It was the United Kingdom long distance ship to shore radio service operated by British Telecom (Previously the British Post Office) and was named after the location of its primary transmitting station, Portishead, situated close to the Bristol Channel.

The first long distance, long wave, ship to shore wireless telegraph service was established by the Post Office in 1920 at Devizes in Wiltshire. However, it was soon realised that separate transmitting and receiving stations were required to meet the demands of the service and new stations were constructed, a transmitting station at Portishead and a receiving station at Burnham on Sea, opening circa 1927. Well actually the receiving station was located within the boundary of the adjoining town of Highbridge. With these two stations in operation they were soon fitted with new equipment to operate the newly “discovered” short waves that extended the station’s coverage world-wide. At this time the Portishead service was exclusively wireless telegraphy.

Point to point radio telephone services commenced between London and New York in 1927, using long waves, and this was followed by short wave operation in 1929. A provision was also made around that time to provide a radio telephone service to trans-Atlantic passenger liners and the maritime RT service was operated on similar principals to the point to point service with the transmitters located at Rugby and the receivers located at Baldock. The maritime circuit operation was passed through the radio telephone terminal and international telephone exchange in Faraday Building in London.

This remained the situation until the late 1960’s when rationalisation of the HF point to point services was commenced due to the growing use of submarine cables and satellites for long distance telecommunications. However, this was to the benefit of the long distance ship to shore services, which within a short space of time had a large number of redundant point to point transmitters made available for the still growing maritime services.

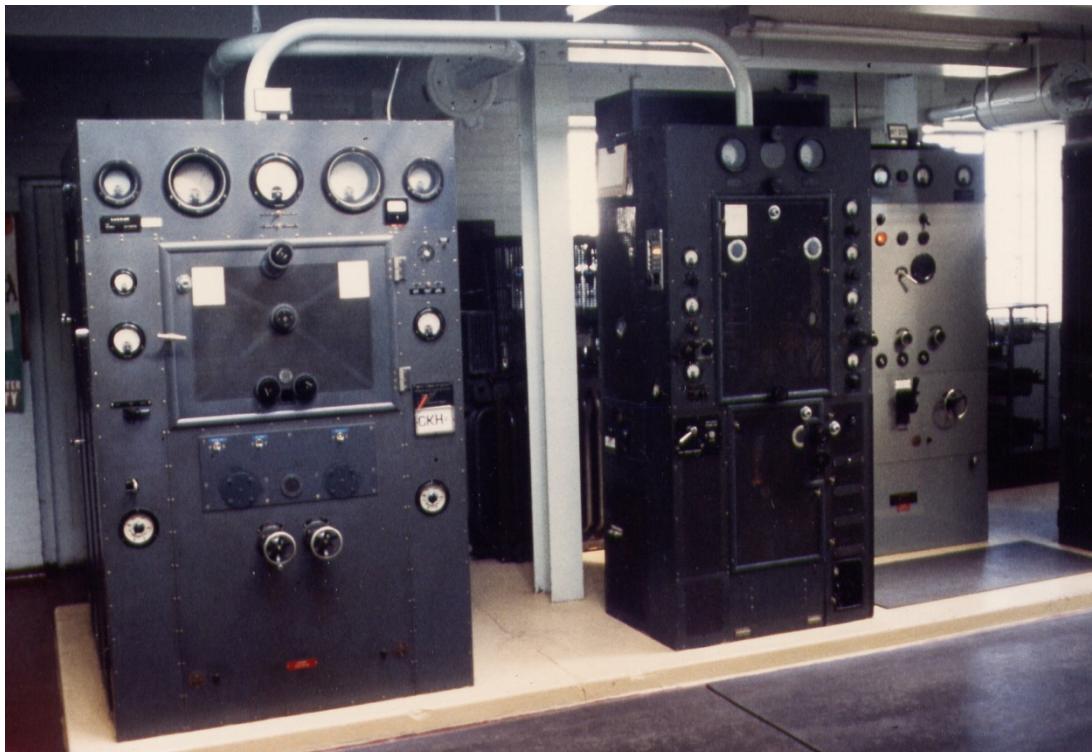
Burnham receiving station, previously modernised in 1948, was now in need of further modernisation and while new building work was underway maritime radio telephone terminals were installed in the HF receiving station at Somerton, 20 miles from Burnham. Encroaching urbanisation and limitations of the antenna site at Highbridge made Somerton a more suitable location. Seeing an opportunity to further rationalise the radio services senior management in the Post Office proposed to close Burnham completely and move the maritime operation to Somerton, where the HF point to point services had greatly diminished and those that remained could have been transferred to another receiving station near Stratford upon Avon. However, concerted action by the staff and unions of Burnham defeated what some might consider weak management and at no small expense the new operational centre was built at Burnham and new receivers and antenna systems were installed at Somerton, remotely controlled from the operators consoles via a microwave link between the two sites.

To supplement the 19 transmitters at Portishead, spare transmitters at Rugby, Ongar, Leafield and Dorchester were brought into operation. In fact, apart from some press broadcast traffic, the operations at Dorchester and Leafield became exclusively maritime. The modern STC “QT” series transmitters at Leafield were used for radio telephone and the older Marconi and STC transmitters at Dorchester were used for Morse telegraphy and teleprinter services. A number of transmitters at Dorchester that had started life in the 1930’s

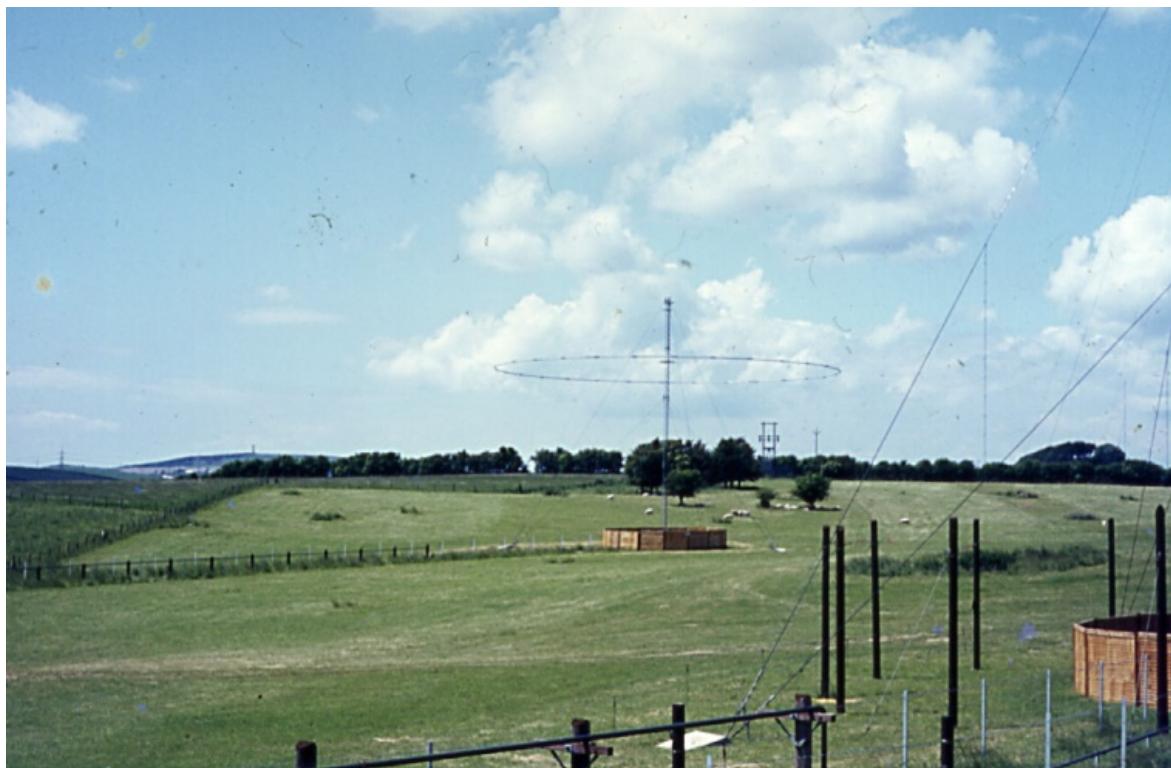
transmitting high speed Morse code and converted to teleprinter and TOR operation in the 1950's had to be converted back to Morse code on/off operation. Many of the Rhombic antennas at these sites were replaced with omni and directional antennas for the maritime sectors.

As the HF point to point services continued to decline it became clear that by the mid 1980's Rugby, always the Post Office premier radio station, would be able to handle all maritime traffic and a process of running down the other stations commenced. Portishead was the first to close in 1978, followed by Dorchester in 1979, then Leafield and Ongar in 1986. With the advent of Inmarsat and automated systems it was inevitable that time was running out for operator based direct radio services and surely enough on April 30th 2000 the system went QRT.

The closures came with some sadness as the Portishead radio service and all of the other radio stations had histories of their own, commencing in the earliest days of Marconi and Post Office wireless operation. But just as sail gave way to steam technological progress proved to be unstoppable.



Dorchester TX No.17 - Marconi SWB8-10
Callsign GKH circa 1975 – Used for GKA, 8545.9kHz, in 1978.



Dorchester – Omni directional “Granger” antenna.

Photos courtesy of A.G. Short