

Account of Purley on Thames

Radio

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Early Days

When broadcasting first started receiving sets were crystal based and mostly home made. They required earphones and had to be continuously tuned. It was difficult to hear very much above the crackle of static and so for effective communication morse code was used rather than speech, a system which was not very intelligible to most people.

By the end of the first world war however commercial crystal sets were coming onto the market and a number of amateur radio enthusiasts were broadcasting to the world.

In 1921 in order to regulate matters, the Post Office began issuing licences. In the first year 4000 receiving and 150 transmitting licences were issued. One of these latter was issued to Marconi and his station 2MT in Chelmsford became the first full time radio station in Britain, going on air on 14th February 1922 (ref a-9)

On 18th October 1922 the British Broadcasting Company was formed, deriving its income from half the license fee of 10/- and a royalty on all receiving sets sold. It received a Royal Charter in 1927 which granted it a monopoly in Britain and it changed its name to the British Broadcasting Corporation. (a-13)

Most early stations used such a large amount of power to transmit that they could be heard over a very wide distance. Purley's strongest signal would have been that of 2LO broadcasting from London although no doubt 5XX at Daventry and Paris would be received quite easily.

Gradually the BBC services evolved into a National service broadcast from 5XX on 1500 metres in the Long Wave and a series of Regional services on Medium wave.

The people of Britain were avid listeners to the radio. Not only did they listen to the BBC but they were eager searchers of the airwaves and especially enjoyed the commercial radio emanating from Radio Luxembourg and Radio Normandy. Most major countries operated an overseas service and broadcast at times in English, mostly over the short wave.

War Time

On the outbreak of war, the regional services merged with the Home Service and an Overseas Service was expanded based upon the pre-war short wave services. A Forces network was established in 1944 as part of General Eisenhower's policy of unifying the forces under his control. It came into action after the Normandy landings and used BBC, American and Canadian material. After the Radio Luxembourg transmitter was liberated in September 1944 this was used to provide the service and the BBC lost effective control even though they provided a lot of technical assistance. They maintained their own Forces services for British troops to provide links with relatives back home through such programmes as Forces Favourites which featured record requests. (a-57)

In the latter years of the war when the Americans were in Britain they set up AFN, the American Forces Network which was very popular although it was broadcast on relatively low power around bases only. It became more popular after the war as more permanent stations were set up, especially in Germany.

The radio was a great source of pleasure and comfort for almost all the population and enjoyed enormous audiences. It was also a great unifying force as everyone heard the same programmes, the same news and the same official announcements.

The airwaves were also used for propaganda purposes and the BBC used its facilities to beam programmes in every European language at the continent. The Germans responded with their own broadcasts for Britain mainly using the Radio Luxembourg transmitters on 1293 metres. One particular individual, William Joyce achieved considerable notoriety as the voice of Germany and was nicknamed Lord Haw Haw. He was particularly popular in Britain and was listened to regularly by nearly 60% of the adult population, but as a source of fun rather than being taken seriously. He had his own news broadcasts and used to make his own acid comments on the BBC reports.

The Post War BBC

After the war the BBC reverted pretty much to its pre-war format with the Home Service breaking back into regions for local news coverage and a few locally produced programmes. Reception was very variable as there was virtually no regulation of the airwaves and foreign broadcasts would interrupt the BBC Medium Wave programmes as soon as it got dark. The Light Programme on the other hand took over from the Forces Network broadcasting from Droitwich on 1500 metres with such an intensity that it could be heard half way across the Atlantic and it attracted quite an audience across western Europe. It carried on the much more relaxed style of broadcasting learned from the Americans and Canadians.

The Third Programme was introduced in the 1950s to provide for minority interests and broadcast a lot of classical music and even more highbrow programmes.

The 1960s saw a total revision of the radio scene as audiences declined drastically after people switched to television. The matter was brought to a head by the Marine Offences Act which enabled the government to shut down the sea based prates. The public demanded a comparable service and Radio 1 was born. It went on the air in September 1967 and immediately attracted a huge audience. (a-134)

At the same time the other services were re-organised. The Regional programmes virtually ceased and the Home Service became Radio 4. The Third Programme became Radio 3 and the Light Programme Radio 2. The General Overseas Service became the World Service with a European service on 648 KC. A great push was made to switch people from AM (medium and long wave) to FM on the VHF band.

The formats of these networks changed gradually over the years and in 1990 Radio 5 was born to take the sports programmes. By this time Radio 4 was virtually all speech, Radio 2 mostly light music, Radio 1 mostly pop and Radio 3 had taken on board other minority interests such as Jazz.

BBC Radio Berkshire went on the air in January 1992. It had been broadcasting test transmissions since November 1991. Originally conceived as one in a chain of BBC local radio stations it fell foul of BBC cuts and it was decided to merge it with the proposed BBC Radio Surrey to be run from Guildford. The impracticality of this soon made itself evident and so it was linked to BBC Radio Oxford from the outset.

When it opened it used two frequencies to cover Berkshire, 104.1 for eastern Berkshire and 95.8 for west Berkshire. But this proved inadequate owing to the peculiar shape of the county and two further frequencies had to be used.

It broadcasts Berkshire items in the mornings and for a brief period in the early evening, together with news broadcasts at regular intervals. However for the most part it re-transmitted BBC Radio Oxford during the day time, BBC Radio 5 on Saturday afternoons and BBC World Service at night. During the evening hours all the local radio stations in the South East broadcast a common service

provided from Northampton. But from November 1992 BBC Radios Oxford, Berkshire and Bedfordshire were due to form their own more local network.

Reception of the BBC in the Purley area is quite good. The two main transmitters are at Wrotham in Kent and at Oxford. Wrotham is the more powerful at 250KW and we get Radio 1 on 98.8, Radio 2 on 89.1, Radio 3 on 91.3 and Radio 4 on 93.5 MHz. Oxford is only a 46 KW station broadcasting Radio 1 on 99.1, Radio 2 on 89.5, Radio 3 on 91.7 and Radio 4 on 93.9.

Radio 4 is also available on 198 KC from the Daventry transmitter but this will shortly be switched to a rolling BBC news service.

Commercial Radio

Radio Luxemburg was for many years Britain's main commercial radio station. There was a second station called Radio Normandy but this never achieved the same success as Luxembourg. Being based in Luxembourg it was outside the jurisdiction of British officials.

It started broadcasting in English on 15th March 1933 on 1191 metres. Initially it used a different language each day of the week and Sundays were used for English (a-19) It provided a vivid contrast from Reith's rather staid BBC which was even more staid on a Sunday. Over the next few years it tried a number of different wavelengths from 1100-1300 and eventually settled on 1293 metres.

The station closed down on 21st September 1939 on the outbreak of war. It started up again in November 1945 with a services for France and Belgium but it was not until 1st July 1946 that it resumed its full English Service using 1293 metres. (a-77)

From July 1951 it gave up using the Long Wave for English and began to broadcast on 208 metres. Reception was distinctly worse in the south of England but paradoxically audiences grew rapidly. It became famous for its 'top twenty' and for re-broadcasting many American serials. Eventually it changed its format and pioneered what we now know as the DJ format and many famous names cut their broadcasting teeth on the station.(a-77)

Radio Caroline was the most successful of the pirate radio stations which took to the air in 1964 broadcasting mostly pop music. Based on a ship outside the three mile limit in the Thames estuary it was a bane to officialdom who tried to suppress it on many occasions.

Many other pirate stations emerged, eg Radio London, but usually they did not last long before they folded. They were killed off eventually by the Marine Offences Act and the birth of Radio 1.

Independent Local Radio was launched by the IBA around 1970 who set up a chain of local commercial stations which soon made great inroads into Radio Luxembourg's audience and took their advertising revenues. The Reading Station was started in 1979 as Radio 210 from its medium wave wavelength. This was sufficiently close to Luxembourg's 208 metres to effectively interfere and blot out its signal in the Reading area.

The main studio is at Calcot and it often uses outside broadcast facilities at local events. It also broadcast on FM on 97.1 MHz and a few years later expanded its area of coverage to include North Hampshire and West Berkshire on 102.9 MHz. It started out as a locally oriented station with a lot of local news but it gradually went the way of most of the local commercial stations and broadcasts almost non-stop pop music with occasional news flashes. It has now linked itself with other broadcasting stations in Swindon and Bournemouth and is one of the most powerful and aggressive of the Local Independent stations with a very sizeable audience.

Digital Radio

With the advent of Digital Radio the number of stations available has multiplied considerably and the quality of reception improved. However, apart from BBC Radio Berkshire none of them are likely to broadcast anything of interest specifically to Purley.

A secondary effect is that as for television the channels are now very diverse. There still are the old transmitted signals but one can also listen to radio on ones television set, mobile phone or tablet or computer.