

## SOME EARLY DAYS REMEMBERED

I became interested in amateur radio following a talk at my boarding school by Harold Leonard (“Uncle Len”) G4UZ. At the weekend, following his visit, I told my parents about it and it turned out that “Uncle Len” was an old family friend. With encouragement from Richard Pavey G3PXM, a physics teacher at school, I and others, including Iain Forbes (G4ACC) formed a school radio (and smoking) club equipped with an Admiralty B40 receiver with a BFO, so we could listen to the increasing number of amateurs who were using SSB rather than AM.



I’m not sure if it was the technical aspect of amateur radio that attracted me or the characters attracted to it. Len G4UZ, Brian the Gas G3ULJ, Brian G3XTS, Reverend John G3RKH, all of whom could be heard daily on the early morning net on 160m as they drove to their respected places of work (except RKH, who lived on the premises). They all drifted around 1.910 MHz. Then there was the old timers net on Sunday on various frequencies. People like Joe G6HN, who also knew my dad, Ken Harvey G5KT, Eric G6GU (who apparently had been severely electrocuted on one occasion). Everyone who knew about this spoke in a sort of hushed reverend tones, glancing over there shoulder and it seemed like he had reached some sort of ultimate accolade in radio. At the end of each over, I think Eric turned his valve heaters off because when it was his over again there would be about a 30 second wait until the swish of his carrier drifted into place. Then there was John G3LYW. The loudest signal on 160m. I seem to remember that he ran the PA valve heater cables around the living room, to obtain the necessary voltage drop to feed the 5 Volt heaters. All these people were kind of special. Sort of celebrities in a way, who I could tune into each day to hear the next installment. They were all members of what seemed like an exclusive kind of global club. The thrill of hearing my first AM W station on 10M during a good sunspot cycle in the late ‘60’s, I’ll always remember. I was hooked.

People actually made things in those days. Serious metal work was involved converting old biscuit tins into the latest Fred Rayer - Practical Wireless 807PA 160m transmitter, with salvaged parts from old radios or from a heavenly shop in Newfoundland Road run by two ancient eccentrics called Helmore and Hunt. And then there was the excitement of Longleat Rally. Len G4UZ would take me in his car the day before the rally and I’d crash sleeping on the trestle tables in the (then) two marquees with a bunch of people all desperately in need of a good bath (including me).

I can still remember my first visit to Shirehampton Amateur Radio club, late in the autumn of 1971. I had visited the Bristol Amateur Radio Club a few times, in Barton Hill but listening to 160m I kept hearing about a recently formed club in Shirehampton, so I decided to pay a visit. I recall only a few other faces at the club that night. Some I knew. Colin G3YHV, Bob G4AEL, Eddie, G3SXY, Bob Manley and the chain smoking Wilf Highgate (later G4CDS – cut down smoking), Chris Short G8GLQ, David, G8FNR and Addy, G4AYB and possibly Tim G4BGO. All made me welcome. The club was equipped with a KW Vanguard (It may have been a Viceroy) and a Heathkit RA1 receiver. The big club project at the time was building the Heathkit HW101 transceiver, which cost about 100 pounds and was raised through donations by members. The HW101 was real ‘state of the art’ technology.

There are very few real characters in the world but on my arrival at the hut at the back of Twyford House on that first visit, I was greeted with a sincere “come on in my boy” by a rotund, jolly man who lived in a cloud of smoke billowing from his well stuffed pipe and who’s appearance, speech and overall smell of his clothing, gave the impression that he had just come straight from the pub (which he undoubtedly had). This was Maurice Wilkins G3YOH. Maurice taught the RAE class and he got good results from those who sat the exam. His other fame was that he claimed to have had a career as a professional singer and his stage name was Maurice Harcourt. I was never actually sure about his claim – I have no real reason to doubt it. He certainly could expertly translate and sing various operas he had lined up on his Akai reel - reel stereo tape recorder or at least it seemed that way to me. He told me many tales of his stage career but perhaps it was an escape from his daily routine at Rolls –Royce. His great joy was to have you go to his house and I frequently paid him a visit. I rarely found him entirely sober, the cause of which could be found in his garden shed, where he had a sort of micro brewery. Once I asked him if they were repairing the sewer near by but he looked blank and handed me a glass of cloudy brown liquid, telling me not to let on to Julie (his wife) that he had been testing the brew since about 7.00 AM. It immediately became clear where the strange smell came from. Indeed not the sewer’s produce - but the brewer’s produce. It was a very strong brew. Once beer testing was over, I’d get hauled along to the nearest pub for more at the end of which I’d be in a bit of a state myself. In 1977, he became very ill but struggled on to the point where he could no longer teach the RAE course or sign his claim form, which I did for him. After surgery, he picked up and although confined to home, we all hoped that he would make a full recovery. It was not to be and when he died in 1978 at the age of 52, I think we lost someone special who gave his time to encourage new comers to amateur radio.

People come and go but I still remember Maurice with great affection after 25 years. A true gentleman and an appalling brewer.

Maurice had some interesting Characters in his RAE class. One story I was told, which I know is true because Mrs. Hedges (the exam invigilator) also told me, was about one candidate (who shall remain nameless, although I know his name), who turned up about a half hour after the exam had commenced. In those days it was a three hour two part written exam and required the ability to draw circuits and explain things rather than multiple choice. So it needed some concentration. The man walks in to the exam room and in a loud-ish voice and broad Bristol accent says...

MAN. “ere I’m sorry I’m late but I ‘ad to work a bit of overtime down the docks”

MRS H. “That’s alright just take a seat and fill in the detail on the front page before you start”

MAN. “fank you very much”. By the way, because I’m late workin’ I haven’t ‘ad time to eat my sandwiches. Do you mind if I ‘ave them whilst I’m doin’ this?”

MRS. H. “Not at all, as long as you can do it quietly”

Some while passes...

MAN. “ere thee must fink I’m a bit rude an that – me eating sandwiches and not offering you one. Can I give you one? They’re fish paste”.

I became licensed on 15<sup>th</sup> February 1973. Soon after, my station was inspected by the GPO inspector, Mr. Hedges and immediately closed down for 14 days for having a louder second harmonic outside the 80 M. band than the intended signal on 160 M.

One of the biggest highlights at the club was the station the club ran for three very wet weeks at the Bristol 600 Exhibition GB3BEX all wonderfully organized by Addy G4AYB, who managed to borrow equipment and a Versatower. His company even made the exhibition stand. The object was to work as many places which had the name Bristol (and there are many in the USA). For each foreign contact we would send a bottle of Harvey’s Bristol Cream sherry and the club got several pieces in the local press in USA.

Friday evenings were sacrosanct to me. The Shire club and then drinks followed by a late meal at a restaurant. Then there were the DF hunts, organized factory tours, coach trips and the annual beer and skittles, HF Field days, MCC (SWL Magazine Club Contest) with Bob G4AEL, who had a KW 1000 transceiver with the KW power supply which came built in a cardboard box. Every time his mother turned on the electric cooker, he drifted about 15 KHz.

There are many stories from those days, I’ve mostly forgotten. Some can be found reported in early minutes of the club meetings. A serious complaint about ‘horseplay’ in the shack I remember. People removed from the committee. It’s all a bit of a fog and I’m starting to sound a bit old (which I’m not).

I remained active on 160m – 2m until about 1986. I had a room full of Yeasu equipment and a teleprinter clanking away and then for some reason I cannot quite remember (perhaps there were



‘other attractions’) I sold the equipment and have rarely appeared on the radio since. But I was looking at the Shirehampton club website the other day and became terribly nostalgic about those days at the club and the good friends I knew then.

I’ve been left behind. The technical side has moved on and I would find it hard to catch up. I think the hobby has changed too. It started with packet radio. It all became a little less personal but that’s probably a minority view. I hope it’s still as exciting to the newcomers as it was to me when I got interested 35 years ago. As I sit here in Singapore, I am about as far away from the Shire club as you can get (I guess Australia and New Zealand are further). But I’m still licensed as G4BWB and get my Radcom each month and I’m sure I will return to the air one day so turn back your RF gain on 160m.

Bob G4BWB.