

### Marconi Apprentices Radio Club (Chelmsford)

I had a number of friends who were training with Marconi Wireless Telegraph (not the Marine company) and I often used to visit their club station and take part in their social get-togethers. At this time I think the leader of the group was Peter Chadwick G3RZP. I hesitate to say he was a president as it was a lot looser organised than that, but he instigated or supported various projects. His rallying phrase of "It has to be modified" in a broad accent, when something did not work as planned, still rings in my ears. The social gatherings mostly took place in the Railway Tavern almost under the railway bridge in Chelmsford, and often long after hours! The Marconi Apprentices Club itself was on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of an old run down building called Dorset House, opposite the railway station and conveniently situated for the local pubs.

We had managed to "obtain" a naval high power synthesised transmitter type NT201. This could easily give 2KW output, but drew so much power from the mains that it made the lights flicker alarmingly when used. It was also very heavy and made the floor sag until we managed to find some reinforced joists to stand it on. We had various other salvaged transmitters and receivers (e.g. an old Marconi Marine Worldspan and a CR150 amongst others), which we repaired and modified for own ends. Some of these were also very big and extremely heavy. I sometimes used to think the old house, despite its ill repair, must have been excellently built to enable it to stand our several tons of communications equipment on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor! Antennas were draped around the building wherever we found a convenient support. Not particularly efficient perhaps, but they did radiate a signal of sorts. At least we had no problems with TV interference, as no one lived nearby. We did however have a couple of reports from local pubs about "strange noises" from their music systems! I seem also to remember something about the Chelmsford Cathedral public address system "hearing" us during a sermon by some prominent churchman or other. It was not far away, so we had to be a little careful when running high power!

Dorset House has long been demolished, but interestingly enough, the building now standing in its place is used by Cable and Wireless Marine division, so the link is not completely broken.

We were known as being a bit of a strange bunch by the Chelmsford police, who were based not far away. Not exactly dangerous, but people who perhaps needed watching. Occasionally we would be paid a visit in the early hours of the morning. They would depart quite happily after a cup of hot coffee and a chat, but their eyes were everywhere!

We could sometimes be found skulking around Chelmsford in the dead of night testing out homemade walkie-talkies or doing field strength measurements of our club station transmissions. For our own security, we always carried a copy of our radio licence with us to ward off any unhappy consequences with our uniformed friends. Once when stopped on my way home at around 2am by the local police patrol, I explained where I had come from. "Oh, you're one of THEM!" was the taciturn reply as the three police officers disappointedly climbed back into their squad car and drove off with squealing tyres.

I also became a member of the official Chelmsford Amateur Radio Society, and through them rubbed shoulders with some quite distinguished people in the field of radio. I visited the house of Louis Varney G5RV, one of the pioneers of radio communication, who lived not far from me. He had a very impressive homemade transmitter, inside a home constructed 6 foot rack standing in his sitting room, which was also his radio "shack". It had some beautiful high power valves glowing brightly behind a glass window, with lots of knobs and meters. The 600 ohm twin feeder antenna leads came in via window feed-through insulators from the garden, then looped direct to an

antenna tuning unit which was a part of the transmitter rack. It all looked very professional. As a young lad, I was suitably impressed.

I also got to know the retired General Manager of Marconi Marine, Ron Ferguson G4VF, who also lived not far from me. I first teamed up with him during a radio amateur field day, and learned a little of how he started as a radio officer at sea. He was a grand old Gentleman, who always used his own polished brass hand Morse key, sending impeccable rhythmic code. He greeted my intent to go to sea with warm enthusiasm, which went a long way to confirming I was on the right road. To me he was just Ron, and he never gave a hint who he was, or some of the more interesting things he had done during his life. I only found that out by accident considerably later.