

## CONNECTING CORNWALL

### MUSEUM EXHIBITION BOOKLET

#### FOREWORD

Cornwall has witnessed more milestones in the history of communications than most other places on earth. From beacons in Falmouth during the sixteenth century to the Satellite Earth Station at Goonhilly in the twentieth, the county is replete with telegraphic heritage. Its far westerly position on the British mainland made it an obvious choice for signalling westwards to North and South America, and eastwards to Africa, Asia, and Australasia. Like other English counties Cornwall saw the arrival, in the mid-nineteenth century, of the railway and accompanying overland electric telegraph. More significant was what happened near the sparsely populated cove of Porthcurno, only three miles from Lands' End. In June 1870 a small telegraph station was built there by the Falmouth, Gibraltar and Malta Telegraph Company for sending messages through undersea cables between Britain and its crucially important colony of India. By 1900 the station had grown enormously. Run by the world's largest commercial cable business, the Eastern Telegraph Company, Porthcurno station was the landing point for five long distance cables, through which thousands of messages passed each day. The once quiet valley now buzzed with the noise of telegraphic apparatus and its operators.

Until 1918 Porthcurno also housed one of the largest telegraphic training schools in the world. Here, hundreds of young men acquired the skills that would give them an exciting and often dangerous career working in remote cable stations as far apart as Shanghai, Cape Town and Buenos Aires. The famous Cornish travel writer Arthur Salmon spoke for many when, in 1910, he lamented that the "romance" of Porthcurno, a place renowned for legends and mysteries, had been partially destroyed by the Eastern Telegraph Company and "about a hundred keen, sport-loving telegraphists". For others, however, the cable station was a blessing. It provided work for generations of local people, it supported the local church of St. Levan, and it gave this remote part of Cornwall a new, high-tech identity.

For many of us, the main reason why Cornwall has a place in the history of telecommunications is radio, not cable telegraphy. The Italian-Irish inventor Guglielmo Marconi shot to fame in 1901 when he sent the first wireless messages across the Atlantic Ocean from a station at Poldhu, only a few miles east of Porthcurno, on the western edge of the Lizard Peninsula. By this time Marconi had already overseen the construction of an experimental wireless station on the southern tip of the Lizard. After Marconi left Cornwall for new radio projects elsewhere, his stations became major centres for international maritime communication. One of Marconi's new projects was short-wave or "beam" radio which, when introduced in 1926, dealt a crippling blow to the cable business. Once again, Cornwall was at the forefront of this technological revolution because it was in Bodmin that Britain's first transatlantic beam radio station started transmitting to Canada in October 1926.

Histories of telecommunications tend to overlook the thousands of people whose skills and knowledge helped maintained the "nerves of empire" in that critical

period in world history from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. They tend to focus on heroic inventors, corporations, and nation states at the expense of the telegraphic clerks, domestic servants, and the colonized people working in or living near remote stations. The exhibition “Connecting Cornwall: Expanding Frontiers, 1870-1918” seeks to reconnect these marginalised peoples to the history of telecommunications. By focusing on the stories of “ordinary” people in often extraordinary circumstances, the exhibition seeks to make the history of telecommunications connect better with a wider audience, all of whom have lived through their own historic changes in telecommunication. These are only some of the ways in which the exhibition is about connecting. It shows how cable and wireless forged a welter of new connections between Cornwall and other places on the local, national and global scales; it elucidates the intimate social and financial links between the cable and wireless businesses; and it links telecommunications to more familiar historical subjects such as empire, war and family life.

#### FURTHER READING

- Hugh G. J. Aitken, *Syntony and Spark: The Origins of Radio* (Princeton, 1976)  
K. C. Baglehole, *A Century of Service: A Brief History of Cable and Wireless Ltd, 1869-1968* (London, 1969)  
W. J. Baker, *A History of the Marconi Company* (London, 1970)  
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Gillian Cookson, *The Cable: The Wire that Changed the World* (Stroud, 2006)  
Kenneth R. Haigh, *Cableships and Submarine Cables* (London, 1968)  
Daniel R. Headrick, *The Invisible Weapon: Telecommunications and International Politics, 1851-1951* (Oxford, 1991)  
Jeffrey L. Kieve, *The Electric Telegraph: A Social and Economic History* (Newton Abbott, 1973)  
John Moyle, *Cornwall's Communications* (Truro, 2009)  
Tom Standage, *The Victorian Internet* (London, 1998)