APRIL AGM MEETING

Guglielmo Marconi

Barry O'Brien

The pioneer of wireless communication Guglielmo Marconi is commemorated in many areas of the UK, from Bayswater in Central London, to Chelmsford, the Isle of Wight, Cornwall and more; perhaps it's time his connections with White Cliffs Country were more celebrated?

Napoleon was able to coordinate his empire and his army by means of an Optical Telegraph system invented by Claude Chappe in the early 1790s. While plans for a similar network of visual telegraphy across Britain had been proposed in 1684 and again some 60 years later, neither proposal was accepted. It was not until 1795 that the British Admiralty approved Rev. Lord George Murray's Shutter Telegraph with the first functioning chain employing fifteen sites which could pass messages from London to Deal in sixty seconds. By 1808 The Admiralty had a total of sixty-five sites active across Britain, although the system was retired in 1836. The site of the Shutter Telegraph in Deal, eventually managed by the Royal Observatory, and a Time Ball was put in situ.

Marconi

Many would argue, most notably among them Samuel Morse, inventor of morse code, that the term telegraph can only apply to systems that both transmit and record messages; such a system was first demonstrated by Francis Ronalds in West London, in 1816, but he was unable to suggest its practical uses. It was the Great Western Railway who first installed telegraph wires from Paddington to West Drayton Station (approx15 miles) creating the world's first commercial telegraph. When this application proved to be such a success more than 60 telegraph companies formed, although less than one third prospered.

Eventually, in 1870, Gladstone's Government nationalised the inland telegraph companies to become part of the General Post Office, prompted in no small part by disagreements regarding the distribution of news, by telegraph, to regional newspapers. Exempt from nationalisation was The Submarine Telegraph Company, which laid the world's first international under water cable in September 1851 between South Foreland, Kent, and Sangatte, France, with the English telegraph station located within a private house in Dover. In October 1831 English physicist Michael Faraday concluded that electricity could be transmitted without the presence of wires.

In 1864 Scottish physicist James Clerk Maxwell predicted that coupled electric and magnetic fields could travel through space as an electromagnetic wave. German physicist Heinrich Hertz, in 1879, successfully proved Maxwell's theory producing and receiving radio in the very high frequency range. In 1889 William Preece, consulting engineer for

the GPO, succeeded in transmitting and receiving morse radio signals across Coniston Water. It was in 1896 that William Preece was introduced to a young Italian, Guglielmo Marconi, newly arrived in London together with his mother, Anna Jameson, Granddaughter of the founder of the Irish Whiskey Distillers that bore her family name.

Whilst attending classes at the Conservatoire in Bologna Annie had formed a relationship with Giuseppe Marconi an Italian aristocrat, banker and landowner some 15 years her elder. On her return to Ireland Anna continued to correspond with Giuseppe and the couple married on 16th April 1864 in Boulogne-Sur-Mer, returning to live in Bologna, Italy. Annie and their two sons, Alfonso and Guglielmo, removed to England for a three year stay in 1877 such that, by the time of their return to Italy, each son was fluent in English. Guglielmo eventually experienced formal education in Florence, something that did not go well for many reasons, among them being his perceived attitude, his apparent inability to mix socially with the other pupils and his strange 'foreign' accent.

Finally, however, he won his father's support when he declared an ambition to join the Royal Italian Navy, unfortunately failing the entrance exam. He also failed the University of Bologna entrance exam, but Annie was able to secure the support of a near neighbour, a lecturer at the University, who also agreed to allow Marconi access to the University library as well as certain of the laboratories within his remit. It was during this time that Marconi began to explore the use of Hertz's electromagnetic waves as a possible means of providing communication over distance by use of a telegraphy that would not rely on the need for wires and by the end of 1895 Marconi was able to transmit across distances of more than one and a half miles.

As Professor Ambrose Fleming, Chairman of Electrical Technology at University College London would later note, the novelty of Marconi's idea "is rather to be measured by its non-obviousness to experts than by the simplicity of the device and its proved utility".

External investment was now clearly necessary and a letter of introduction to the Ambassador of Italy in London caused him to suggest Marconi obtained a suitable patent while also encouraging him to travel to Britain, where, it was believed, he would find it easier to find the necessary funding to put his experiments to practical use.

Marconi and his mother duly travelled to England in February 1896. One fanciful tale has it that on his entry into England, at Dover, a Customs Officer opened Marconi's case only to find experimental apparatus of a previously unknown type at which point he alerted The Admiralty, duly gaining Marconi the interest and support of the GPO.

The more prosaic reality is that Marconi's cousin Henry Jameson-Davis facilitated that introduction through his business contacts; he also had a London office from which he would assist Marconi in obtaining his patent and organise Marconi's first English demonstrations, managing to raise financial backing in the process, such that Jameson-Davis would propose the cousins establish a company together.

On 20th July 1897, the Wireless Telegraph and Signal Company was founded, by which time British Patent number 12039, the first for a radio wave-based communication system, had been applied for and granted to Marconi. A further series of tests soon took place observed by both the Navy and the Army with wireless transmissions eventually reaching over a distance of almost 9 miles.

On receipt of Marconi's written advice that his patents had been assigned exclusively to the new company, Preece and the GPO withdrew all Governmental support until such time as he was able to "determine relations between your company and the government departments who have encouraged and helped you so much." The depth of Preece's emotions was further demonstrated by his decision to undertake his own wireless telegraphy experiments at Fort Burgoyne, Dover from which Marconi was to be excluded. However, newspapers soon carried accounts of the trials, alerting Marconi who advised Preece that he would be obliged to work elsewhere should the GPO not support his experiments.

When the results of the trials proved disappointing, Marconi was duly invited to attend Fort Burgoyne on 6th October 1897. One lasting legacy, however, saw George Kemp, who had served as an electrician and instructor with the Royal Navy before working for Preece at the GPO, moving to join the fledgling Wireless Telegraph and Signal Company where he worked as "first assistant" to Signor Marconi for the next thirty-six years. Marconi's connections with Dover did not end with the conclusion of the Fort Burgoyne tests, as the Corporation of Trinity House, responsible for all lighthouses and lightships, was greatly intrigued by this innovative wireless telegraphy. In December 1898 George Kemp was sent to the East Goodwin Lightship, from where, on Christmas Eve, he successfully made the first ever ship-to-shore radio transmission. Following this success the French government allowed Marconi to install transmission equipment at Wimereux, North of Boulogne.

In September 1899, the annual meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science was held at Dover's Maison Dieu where the Marconi Company exhibited their radio equipment using their wireless telegraphy system to transmit messages across the English Channel including one to the Mayor of Boulogne. Several attendees were, though, uncomfortable with the commercialisation of science: For the historian there is, with Marconi's arrival, the feeling of entering into a different world, the world, not of the scientist but of the engineer and the entrepreneur.

The first Radio Distress Signal was transmitted from the East Goodwin Lightship when the merchant vessel Elbe ran aground on the Goodwin Sands. The signal was received by the radio operator on duty at the South Foreland Lighthouse, who was then able to summon the aid of the Ramsgate lifeboat. On 30th April 1899, the East Goodwin Lightship sent a distress message on her own account after she had been rammed by the SS R. F. Matthews!

The RMS Titanic had been equipped with a Marconi-leased telegraph machine with two young Marconi-employed operators on board, Jack Phillips and Harold Bride. Phillips went down with Titanic, sending distress signals into his last moments. Marconi, his wife Beatrice and their three children had been invited on board Titanic by the Chairman of White Star Line but had sailed for New York three days earlier to attend to urgent business matters.

One further connection with East Kent sees Marconi elected as a member of The Royal Cinque Ports Yacht Club on 30th January 1925. His yacht, 'Elettra', is recorded as being in Dover harbour on 12th May 1925 "preparatory to going across to Calais to carry out some important experiments".

In 1909, Marconi shared the Nobel Prize in Physics with Karl Ferdinand Braun, a founder of Telefunken, for their "contributions to the development of wireless telegraphy" (radio communications).

Colonel H Jameson-Davis died aged 82 on 25th December,1936, at his home, "Estrella" in Woking, Surrey, following two months' illness. Marchese Guglielmo Marconi GCVO FRSA died in Rome July 20th 1937, aged 63.

International Marconi Day is an annual amateur radio event usually held on the Saturday closest to Marconi's birthday. Transmitting from The Maison Dieu in Dover this year we were 1 of 45 officially listed IMD stations, from Long Island and Cape Cod to Sydney and Vienna. This was the 3rd year Dover has marked International Marconi Day and will not be the last.

Further details, corrections, information and enquiries about the self-published Words Without Wires booklet please contact barry@dovertales.co.uk

Annual General Meeting 2025 Update
Alan Lee

At the AGM in April the proposal to increase the annual membership fee was carried. From April 2026 the fee for members with be £10 for an individual and £14 for two people at the same address. The committee is sorry to say that this was inevitable. This is the first increase for thirty years and we still have one of the cheapest, and value for money, membership fees around.

All the people listed to stand for the Executive Committee were elected unopposed. Once again, for this year, our chairman will be Jenny Olpin.