

MARCONI IN CROOKHAVEN

The village of Crookhaven has a distinguished history as the first and last port of call for ships going between Northern European ports and America. Over the centuries ships stocked up with provisions and bunkered fuel here before tackling the Atlantic Ocean. As the boats anchored in or out of the harbour, depending on their size, a flurry of small boats or lighters would swarm out striving to be the first there to get the business. On their arrival from America, ships had to contact their owners to discover which port was their cargoes destination. Pilots travelled from ports in the United Kingdom to vie for the job of piloting the ships from Crookhaven to ports such as Liverpool, Bristol and London.



All the shipping lines had agents here to tell the ships in which port their cargo had been sold. Reuter's and Lloyds' agents had flag-signalling and semaphore equipment up on Brow Head to communicate with the ships as they passed by. At the end of the 19th. Century it was said that you could cross the harbour on the decks of boats. Up to 700 people lived and worked in the village against the 29 permanent residents today.

It was in this context that Sgr. Guglielmo Marconi came to the Mizen peninsula to try to get his first radio message across the Atlantic. He had arrived in England in 1896 and filed the world's first patent application for a system of telegraphy using Hertzian waves. The British patent was granted on June 2nd. In 1897 he established contact across the Bristol Channel and the Solent (from the Isle of Wight to Bournemouth) He formed The Wireless Telegraph and Signal Company.

In 1899 he acquired premises in Chelmsford, Essex and established communication across the English Channel. In 1900 the name of the company was changed to Marconi's Wireless Telegraph Co. Ltd. And the Marconi International Marine Communication Co. Ltd. was formed. The 'four sevens' patent (no. 7777) for tuning was granted.

It was at this stage that, desperate to get a signal across the Atlantic Ocean, he was searching for a suitable site for his masts and he came to Crookhaven. He erected a high mast in the grounds of the presently named Marconi House, but he didn't have any success with it. However, this did not end his connection with Crookhaven.

In 1902 a telegraphic station was established in the village using a coherer receiver. Marconi brought wireless operators from England with him.

In 1904 utilising the network of communications that existed here already, Marconi's Wireless Telegraph Co. Ltd. entered into a contract with the Commissioners of Irish Lights to put telegraphic equipment and aerials on the Fastnet. The telegraphic station was moved up to Brow Head where the signalling equipment had been

used for so long to contact passing ships.

Messages were sent to the Fastnet Rock Lighthouse by signalling methods and then relayed to the Brow Head station by wireless telegraphy for relaying on to the recipients in the U.K. or Northern European owners.

At first, very few ships had telegraphic equipment on board. 50 messages were considered a great feat, but the development in wireless telegraphy was gaining pace so quickly that the operators were never bored. The operators might be in touch with one ship at a time, but by 1904 they were in communication with at least 6 ships at a time.

There were six operators. At first they worked in the wireless telegraphy station in the village but later they had to make the lonely trudge out of the village and up the hill to Brow Head to the former Lloyds station. There were three watches - midnight to 8 am., 8am. to 4pm., and 4pm. to midnight with two operators on each watch.

In 1904 a ship broke a shaft eighty miles out from Crookhaven. She was fitted with Marconi equipment and soon hundreds of messages were streaming back and forth to her as the passengers contacted their families and friends. Assistance was sent immediately and she was back on course without mishap. Marconi's invention had taken much of the fear out of the sea.



After Marconi had conquered the transatlantic message and more shipping lines equipped their fleets with Marconi equipment, it was not necessary to be close to the shipping. It was no longer necessary to man a station in a remote area like West Cork and the station closed.

The role of Crookhaven as a communications and provisioning hub was over and it reverted to a quiet fishing port. However, it has never lost its cosmopolitan appeal.

In 1998 Elletra Marconi, Guglielmo's youngest daughter by his Italian second wife, Maria Cristina Bezzi-Scalli visited Crookhaven to see for herself the place where her father had worked at the beginning of the century.