

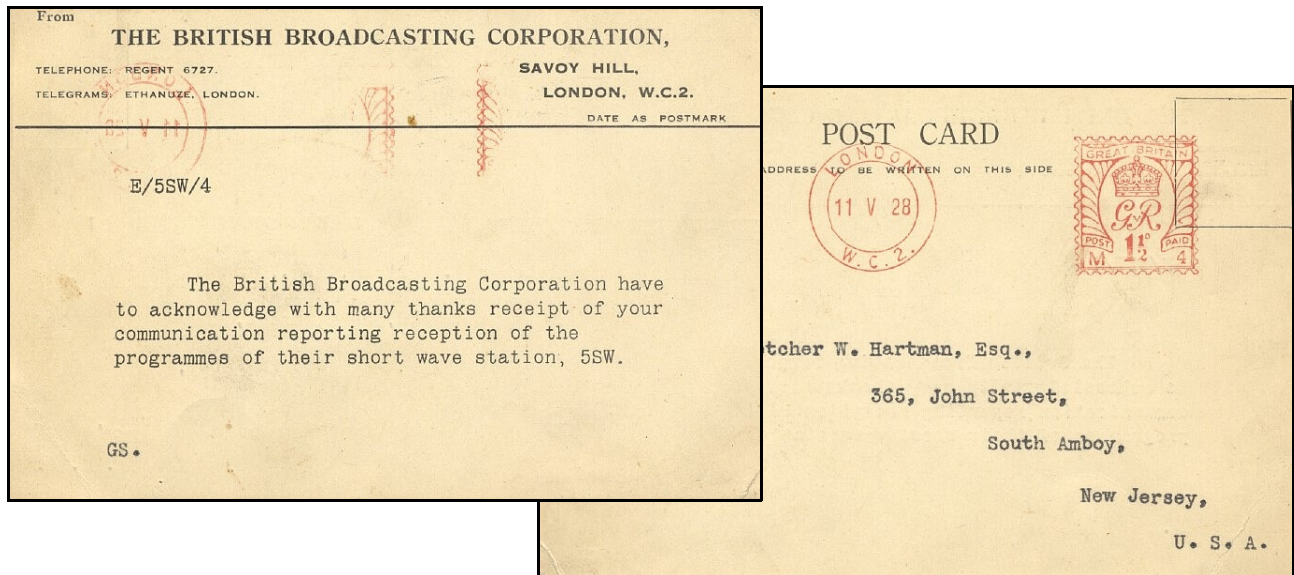
The BBC in QSLs – Part I ¹

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A rule learned by all SWLs when they start QSLing is that the BBC does not verify reception reports of its shortwave transmissions. Like many rules, it is sometimes honored in the breach, and in some circumstances ignored completely. At one time or another the BBC has issued full-data QSLs, no-data QSLs, acknowledgments, thank you's, "probably's," and all manner of other replies. In fact, the BBC has been a reliable correspondent with listeners, often providing detailed letter responses to questions about their programs, stations, transmissions, etc. But the no-QSL policy has survived, at least nominally. This series of three articles looks at how it has been applied over the years.

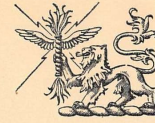
I. QSLing Before World War II

The BBC was founded in 1922, and operated solely on mediumwave and longwave until November 1927 when an experimental shortwave transmitter, 5SW (later G5SW), was put into operation at the Marconi plant in Chelmsford. The BBC had been a reluctant adopter of shortwave, overcoming its concerns about various program-related issues and about the problems of providing a good-quality shortwave signal only after other broadcasters started moving ahead (including one in Britain, amateur Gerald Marcuse, 2NM, who was already providing broadcast programming on shortwave pursuant to authority from the Postmaster General).



The earliest BBC reply to reception reports on its shortwave signals was an "acknowledgment with thanks" card. The one above is from May 1928. The Chelmsford operation limped along until it was replaced by a new shortwave transmitter plant at Daventry for the Empire Service, which was inaugurated in 1932.

Two cards were in use during the 1930s, both thank you cards. The one at right advises that even though its primary service area was the British Empire, the BBC welcomed all reports. This card was often accompanied by an Empire Service transmission schedule. The card below also thanks the listener, and lists on the back the frequencies in use. The last column is interesting. It gives a phonetic reference for the last letter in each frequency's call sign.



The British Broadcasting Corporation thanks you for your report on the reception of the Empire Broadcasting Station transmissions. The Station is being operated principally to serve the British Empire, but the B.B.C. welcomes reception reports from listeners in any part of the world.



Broadcasting House, London
West Front

THE BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION

thanks you for reporting on reception of the
Empire Broadcasting Station at Daventry.

The Empire Broadcasting Station at Daventry transmits simultaneously on any two of the following wavelengths:

Frequency Kilocycles	Wavelength Metres	Call Sign	Announced as
6050	49.59	GSA	'A' for Aerial
9510	31.55	GSB	'B' for Broadcasting
9580	31.32	GSC	'C' for Corporation
11750	25.53	GSD	'D' for Daventry
11860	25.29	GSE	'E' for Empire
15140	19.82	GSF	'F' for Fortune
17790	16.86	GSG	'G' for Greeting
21470	13.97	GSH	'H' for Home
15260	19.66	GSI	'I' for Island
21530	13.93	GSJ	'J' for Justice
6110	49.10	GSL	'L' for Liberty

The working schedule is changed from time to time according to conditions of short wave propagation. A copy of the current schedule is obtainable on application.

The detailed programmes broadcast from the Empire Station are published each week in an Empire Programme Pamphlet which can be obtained free of charge on payment of an annual subscription of Five Shillings (or the equivalent in local currency) in order to cover the cost of postage and despatch, etc.

British Broadcasting Corporation, Broadcasting House,
London, W.1

EM(A2)

The BBC's policy was described as follows in a 1934 letter to a listener.

The information in all reports is being collated, and will be of much assistance to us in endeavouring to achieve success for the Empire Broadcasting Service. ¶We regret that we are unable to comply with your request [for verification], as it is not our practice to verify reception of any of our transmissions. One reason for this policy is that we consider it to be impossible to give specific verifications which have any real value, as the programmes of the British Empire Broadcasting Station are available to listeners in advance of their radiation in the form of a two-leaved pamphlet, which may be obtained direct from our Publishing Department at a cost of 5/- a year to cover postage. Incidentally, this advance publication facilitates the identification by listeners themselves of the British Empire Station's transmissions. ¶A further difficulty arises from the use of two transmitters working simultaneously on two different wavelengths, but transmitting the same programme, thus making it impossible for us to establish definitely from which of them the listener has heard the programme.

Thus, since the BBC could not say for certain that the listener didn't get his program information from the advance schedule, nor could it know absolutely to which frequency he was actually tuned, it could not verify that he actually heard what he reported, on the frequency he reported. Of course, a QSL can never guaranty the honesty of the reporter. At most it can confirm that what he reported matches what was broadcast.

II. Monitored Veries

After making their best case for a true verification, most SWLs took what they could get, and no doubt counted whatever card they received from the BBC as a "verification" of sorts. But some were not satisfied, and set about adopting their own scheme for QSLing the BBC. Enter the monitored verification.

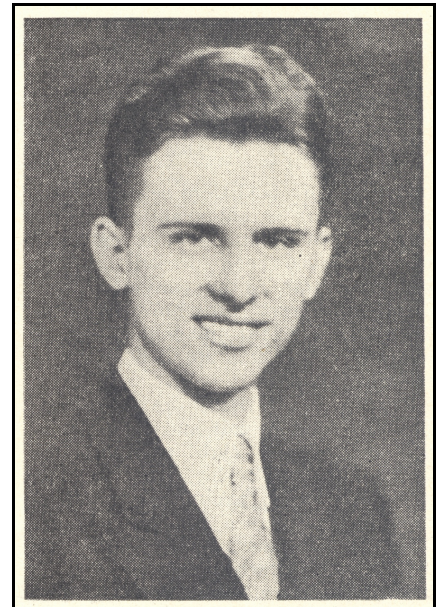
Monitored verifications were not born of the BBC, nor even of shortwave. In 1936, two jointly owned and usually non-verifying stations in Alabama, WJRD in Tuscaloosa and WMFO in Decatur, gave permission to well-known broadcast band DXer (and NNRC vice-president) Art Foerster of Indianapolis to monitor their frequency checks, compare reception reports with the monitoring, and issue verifications for correct reports that included return postage (3¢). Foerster printed up special cards for the job, and demand was high. (He also introduced his own line of verification stamps, known as AFCO stamps, around the same time. The WMFO stamp is shown at the right [note the stylized A-F-C-O in the corners].)



Later in 1936, two NNRCers, Carroll H. Weyrich of Baltimore and Phil Nichols of East Hartford, Connecticut, offered to do essentially the same thing with regard to the BBC – they would monitor broadcasts and “verify” reports with a special card. Their first foray was on December 24 and 31, 1936, when they monitored the powerful Belfast, Northern Ireland transmitter on 977 kc. There were some rules: at least two musical selections (titles or descriptions), and an announcement, with exact time, had to be reported; and reports were to be mailed within 36 hours, with 5¢ return postage enclosed.²



In 1937, Bernard Ahman of Baltimore (right and down) substituted for Phil Nichols as the project expanded to BBC shortwave. Ahman had been designated NNRC publicity director in May 1936. He and Weyrich (right) offered to monitor specific BBC frequencies on specified days and times for periods of at least an hour. Reports would be “carefully checked to ensure the authenticity of the confirmation” (*NNRC Bulletin*, Dec. 7, 1936, pg. 1). In January 1937 they announced the first specific monitoring periods: January 30, 6-8 p.m. on 6050 kc. (GSA) and 9-11 p.m. on 9580 kc. (GSC), and January 31, 6-8 p.m., 9510 kc. (GSB). Reports went to Weyrich. The project was not limited to NNRC members. Information about it was also carried in *DX News*, the bulletin of the National Radio Club, which said that, notwithstanding the no-QSL policy of the BBC, it was “willing to accept these verifications as being authentic,” presumably for statistics and awards purposes. (*DX News*, January 13, 1937, pg. 1).



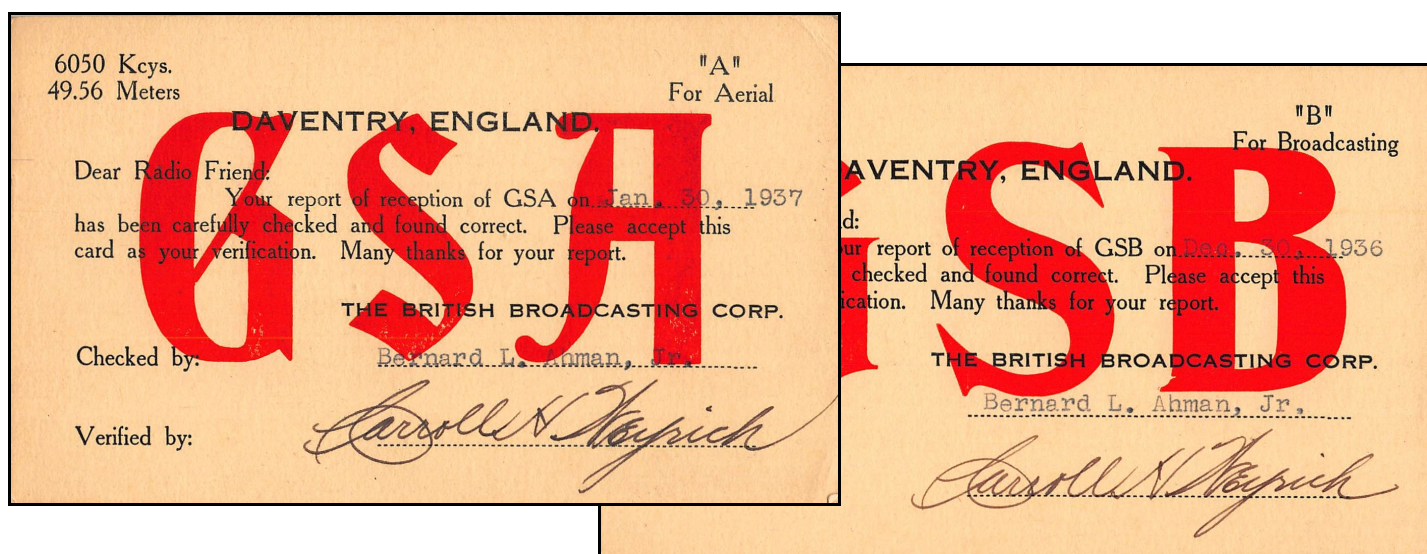
Soon Weyrich and Ahman announced that they would monitor the BBC on the first Saturday and Sunday of each month, usually in specified afternoon and evening hours, and also at 3-4 a.m. on Sunday. And although they expressed some surprise that they weren’t receiving more requests from shortwave fans, by March 1937 they had sent out more than 200 “BBC” cards.



At first the response to the monitored veries project in the DX press was appreciative. Weyrich and Ahman were “rendering a distinct service.” *RADEX* said they “deserved a

lot of credit,” and called it a “splendid job.” The NNRC dedicated the March 22, 1937 issue of the bulletin to Weyrich, who was appointed a club director.

But not everyone agreed, especially the BBC, which insisted that the project be stopped and the unused cards sent to them for destruction. Supporters of the project said that there had been no attempt at deception, and that Weyrich and Ahman had neither claimed any official connection with the BBC nor indicated that they were acting for them. The International Short Wave Club of the U.K. claimed that once DXers took on the verification process for themselves, stations would stop verifying. Others felt the real problem was deficient reports, which alienated stations and would lead them to stop verifying. *RADEX* concluded that regular direct verifying by stations was in no real danger, and expressed surprising frankness in observing, somewhat awkwardly, that “the publication which fails to consider the interests of its readers by condemning such efforts, is surely gnawing the digits which supply cakes and coffee” (November 1937, pg. 31) They were with Weyrich and Ahman.



But soon the worm turned. There was a me-too attempt at monitored veries for ZBW, Hong Kong, and a claim (found to be untrue) that someone else was issuing monitored veries for Central and South American stations. Some became concerned that self-appointed monitors might not always be honest. The Canadian DX Relay (a club) said that it would not accept monitored veries for CDXR contest purposes. The Golden Gate Chapter of the International DXers Alliance, based in California, resolved that no unofficial verification that implied that it was official should be considered genuine, condemning the practice and urging its end. In January 1938, by which time the discussion had gotten a little cosmic (“*Just what is a verie?*”), and with other novel alternatives also under discussion, *RADEX* reported that “a huge majority of listeners are coming forward to condemn the scheme” (pg. 13).

Weyrich apologized to the BBC (but kept issuing the cards for a time). Soon the BBC monitored veries were discontinued, but not before more than 400 cards had been distributed. Art Foerster, of WJRD-WMFO fame, agreed that the practice should be discontinued, even though in his case the stations had clearly authorized his actions. The views of all parties were

presented over months in *RADEX* – home to the long-form DX journalism of the day – in particular the January and February 1938 issues.

Ethics aside, the BBC monitored veries looked good (see pg. 5), and if I had been DXing in those days I would have wanted one. There were many different cards, since the cards carried the call letters of one particular frequency, together with the phonetic letter (“A” for Aerial, “B” for Broadcasting, etc.) assigned to that channel by the BBC (see the back of the “Broadcasting House” card, pg. 2 above).

While Weyrich’s and Ahman’s intentions were laudable, one would be hard pressed to deny that the cards looked official, for after the verification message, where one would expect to see the name of the sender, appeared the words, “THE BRITISH BROADCASTING CORP.” Anyone looking at the cards would take the names and signatures of Weyrich and Ahman to be those of BBC personnel. Had the cards briefly described what the monitoring arrangement was actually all about they probably would have gone unchallenged.

In June 1937, Weyrich extended his monitoring to another non-verifier, HRN in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, which he started monitoring on the second and third Mondays of each month at 9-10 p.m. Even more so than the BBC cards, the HRN card certainly looked like it originated from the station itself – “we verify,” “we hope you continue listening.”

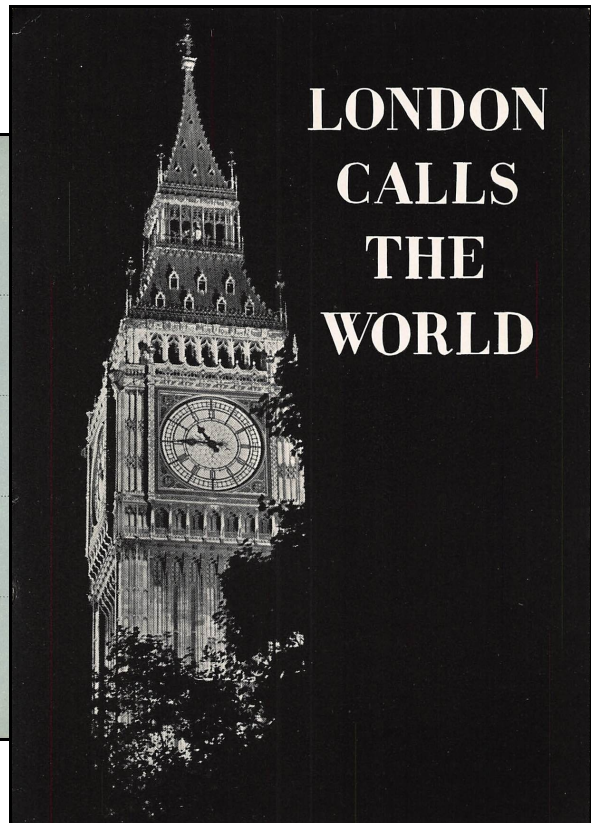
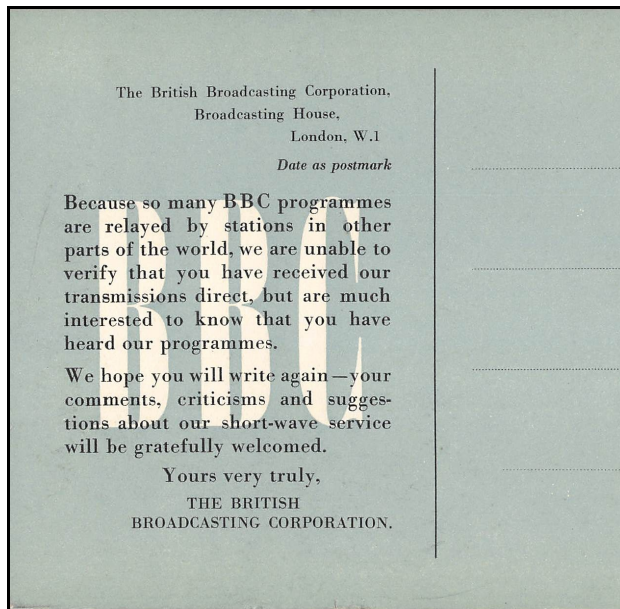


III. The War Years

Germany attacked Poland on September 1, 1939, and two days later England was at war.

A rationale that the BBC often used to defend its policy of not verifying was that, since the BBC was picked up and rebroadcast by many other stations, it could not tell which one the listener had actually heard. This was the reason given in the acknowledgment card shown below (pg. 7), which came into use in the Autumn of 1941. The front of the card shows London’s Clock

Tower, the same image that would appear on BBC cards for much of the 1950s. But the 1941 version, specifically with the back shown below, seems to be a rarity in QSL collections from that era, and may have been used for only a short time. Indeed, in a letter to a listener in 1944 the BBC said that it was not in a position to print cards during wartime, which is understandable enough. Exactly when this wartime no-cards policy began and ended is not known for certain, but it appears that for most of the war no cards were issued. It may be that, to the extent that verifications or acknowledgments were sent out at all during most of the war, they were in the form of letters rather than cards.



IV. Full-Data in the Forties

DXing suffered greatly during the war. Despite the rich variety of interesting wartime targets, such as clandestine stations and broadcasters in countries whose political and military situations were in great flux, the number of active DXers declined considerably, new equipment was virtually impossible to get, and several major clubs and magazines closed (including *RADEX*). So it is a little surprising that it was during the war and soon thereafter that the first full-data BBC QSLs appeared (a card with date, time and frequency is called “full-data”). They materialized in two rather unconventional ways, but from sources directly connected to the BBC.

New York

The first was the New York office of the BBC, which was located at 630 Fifth Avenue.

The BBC also had offices in Chicago, San Francisco and Washington, D.C. To the delight of American DXers, the New York office took on the task of QSLing listener reports on both mediumwave and shortwave, using its own specially-printed cards (below, top), which included full data, and often the location of the particular transmitter or the service that was heard. One of the main duties of the New York office was to provide engineering assistance for the exchange of programs between Europe and America, and so it is understandable that there were technical people there who had an interest in long distance reception. (There was also wartime concern in England about the fate of the BBC in the event of a German invasion, and perhaps that possibility too was in the background of the BBC's American operations.)

VERIFICATION CARD

DATE: 2/25/45

TIME: (E. W. T.) 9.15 p.m.

STATION LEOPOLDBILIK. WEST AFRICA.

FREQUENCY 9.783 kc/s


PROGRAM: British Relay
W. BBC Good American
Service. Mixed Choir etc

FOR
 THE BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION
 630 FIFTH AVENUE
 NEW YORK 20, N. Y.

R. L. Thorp



The person in charge of the QSLing was Robert L. Thorp, a member of the engineering department, which kept charts of reception quality for short-wave frequencies directed toward North America. Thorp seemed to maintain ongoing communication with some DXers about the technical aspects of BBC transmissions, although the exact extent of this part of his work is not known. Some of the New York QSLs were for broadcasts as early as 1943, but some of those cards were actually issued later. QSLs were sent out until around mid-1945, when Thorp advised that henceforth he could only acknowledge reports rather than verify them (left). "This is a policy of our head office in London to which I must adhere" (URDXC *Universalite*, June 1, 1945). So the New York QSLs may have been an under-the-radar effort from the start.



MR DAVID F. THOMAS

PROCTORVILLE, OHIO

The British Broadcasting Corporation,
 being unable to send "Verification Cards" to its correspondents,
 desires to thank you sincerely for your valuable reports.

17th November 1946

R. L. Thorp
 Engineering Department
 630 Fifth Avenue
 New York 20, New York

GSK 26.100 kc/s.

Bletchley

A second vehicle for BBC QSLs was Bryan Hayes of the U.K., who was a BBC Local Representative. He said that he had "all of the BBC records" since 1939, and was willing to verify reports back to then, both mediumwave and shortwave. News of his QSLing activities appeared in various American DX publications. It looks like he started his project circa June 1946 and QSLed for about six months. The arrangement was explained in his own words in the following two clips from Ken Boord's column in *Radio News*, at left the issue of September 1946, at right April 1947.

BBC to Verify!

Good news for both old timers and new DXers comes from Bryan Hayes, Local BBC Representative, 8 Althorpe Crescent, New Bradwell, Bletchley, Bucks, England, that the BBC will now verify. He writes:

"You may care to know that as I am the local BBC representative, I can verify for your readers all s.w. and b.c.b. reports of the BBC's reception. I am now doing this and my only charge is ten cents' worth of stamps (unused, of course); this is to cover cost of verifying and mailing verification back. QSL cards are in the printing, I understand, and I shall be able to issue a verification of all reports. I received some specimen copies from the BBC the other day and I enclose a specimen for you to see. So, if any of your readers wish to have reports verified, just tell them to send them along and I will verify with this card.

Please don't forget the ten cents' worth of unused stamps as these will help me with all costs. I am sure all your readers will want verification cards as this is the first time they have ever been issued."

The BBC is no longer verifying!

From Bryan Hayes, BBC local representative in England, comes this explanation: "The BBC verification plan is now closed owing to permission being withdrawn from the BBC. I therefore regret I shall be unable to verify any more reports on the BBC's behalf. I received notification on December 28 that they could not give me permission to verify reports. I believe this is due to the terrific amount of work involved between BBC Engineering and Monitoring Divisions and the large amount of labor involved in keeping the logs up-to-date."

Hayes does not say just what the remit of a BBC Local Representative was, but it seems odd that it would include verifying reports on international shortwave transmissions. Yet his reference to having received samples of the card from the BBC itself signifies official support at some level. The cards themselves, as shown below, were simple but complete. They were postmarked "Wolverton, Bletchley, Bucks." "M.R.S.G.B." most likely stood for "Member, Radio Society of Great Britain."

THE BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION
LONDON, ENGLAND

1ST OCTOBER - 1946

Your report of reception of the following transmission
has been found to be correct and is hereby verified.

Date 8TH - SEP - 46 Station G.V.U.

Frequency 11,770 Kcs., W. L. 25.49 M., Power 50 K. W.

Program B.B.C. EUROPEAN SERVICE.

B. Hayes M.R.S.G.B.
BBC Local Representative 1726.

END NOTES

1. Many of the illustrations in this series of articles are from QSLs in the author's collection, or the collection of John Herkimer, or from the Committee to Preserve Radio Verifications (Ernie Behr, Gerald Brookman, Richard Davis, Art Hankins, Don Jensen, Ed Prouvencher, Ray LaRocque, Roger Legge, Wally Peters, Dennis Rodway, John Sgrulletta, Al Sizer, James Snow, and Jan Tuner collections). Thanks to Bruce Churchill, Tony Magon and Rich McVicar for permission to post some of their QSLs; to Paul Thomas (Dave Thomas collection); to the Australian Radio DX Club (Hans Kiesinger and Arne Nevback collections); and to John Herkimer, John Ekwall, Mike Barraclough, Dave Kenny and Anker Petersen for contributing to the research.
2. In March 1937, an NNRC member on Staten Island invited those who had verified "NIR" with Weyrich-Nicholson to send him their cards and he would send them on to his uncle in Ireland for re-mailing with a Gaelic postmark. He asked correspondents to "erase" the Baltimore postmark and add "U.S.A." to the address. The cost was 5¢.