

The Forgotten Shortwave Broadcasts of St. Helena

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If you follow shortwave broadcasting you probably know about the Radio St. Helena Day broadcasts of the 1990s. And you might have heard about the shortwave broadcast tests from the St. Helena Government Broadcasting Service (RSH predecessor) to St. Helenians living on Ascension Island in 1973 (and listed in the WRTH for several years thereafter even though the tests began and ended in 1973). Adrian Peterson has chronicled radio on St. Helena in two editions of *Wavescan* (“The St. Helena Story” & “The Radio Scene on St. Helena,” [Wavescan N37](#), November 8, 2009, and “St. Helena on Mediumwave and Shortwave,” [Wavescan N38](#), November 15, 2009). And Jonathan marks interviewed RSH Station Manager Tony Leo back in the 1990s on a Media Network program that is archived in the [Media Network Vintage Vault](#) (go to the bottom of the screen).

But there was also a shortwave event back in 1965, one that was largely missed until Swedish DXer John Ekwall—who, with Jan Tunér, was largely responsible for starting the Radio St. Helena Day shortwave broadcasts—discovered it in the course of listening to a two-hour recording of the final broadcast of Radio St. Helena, which was on December 25, 2012. This was not a Radio St. Helena Day shortwave program, but a studio recording of the final broadcast of RSH on mediumwave. The station had opened on December 25, 1967, and it was closing, for good, exactly 45 years later.

John has posted the recording at <http://joesweden.info/radio/> The first hour is mostly music. The second hour is a talk about the station’s history by Tony Leo, who was RSH Station Manager from 1973 until his retirement in 2002. In his presentation are some comments that will be of interest to students of shortwave history. At 01:29:55 into the recording he says:

After a few months of getting used to the equipment and programs, with a handful of presenters, the official opening of the station was announced. It was to be named the St. Helena Government Broadcasting Station, and it was officially opened by His Excellency Sir Demod Murphy at 0945 hours on the 25th of December, 1967, which is Christmas Day. That recording of the opening speech cannot be located at this time. The official registration consisted of 11 bugle calls—you heard four earlier on [at 01:03:10]—and this was followed by “Life on the Ocean Wave,” and an announcement, which said: “This is the St. Helena Government Broadcasting Service operating in the mediumwave band on a frequency of 1511 kHz., 200 meters.” That text had to be registered with the World Radio & Television Handbook in the U.K., and that could not change without permission from London, and one year’s notice had to be given in advance. However, for that official opening, the following programs took to the air:”

The first mention of the station in the WRTH was in the 1968 Summer Edition.

Tony Leo continued (at 01:32:10):

Prior to the opening of Radio St. Helena on the 25th of December, 1967, or as it was called, the St. Helena Government Broadcasting Service, Cable & Wireless Ltd. also broadcast from their Briars headquarters. They relayed the BBC World Service to the island. In the *St. Helena Wirebird* magazine of the 15th of May, 1965, this is what it says: “Cable & Wireless wish to announce that, subject to transmitter availability, and as an experiment, they are relaying BBC World Service daily during the hours of 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. and from 5:45 p.m. to 8:45 p.m. The broadcast may be heard on 92 meter band shortwave, 3235 kc.” Listeners were invited to send their reports on the program strength and quality, the time and date when the program was heard.

A farewell broadcast by Mr. E. Armstrong, M.P., Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, and Sir Harwood Harrison, M.P., were also broadcast from a Cable & Wireless on Sunday, the 1st of August, at 7:00 p.m. Very soon afterwards, Cable & Wireless ceased this transmission, and was left. And it says it dropped out.

The referenced *St. Helena Wirebird* was a government-funded publication of the 1960s. It closed sometime in 1965 or 1966. The government-funded *St. Helena News Review* also carried the information about the BBC relays, according to the following account, which is reported at the sainthelenaisland.info website, specifically in the “[Radio on St. Helena](#)” section, as shown below (on the webpage look under “3. A Brief History of Radio on St. Helena”).

In May 1965 the island’s telecommunications provider, [Cable & Wireless](#), started relaying the [BBC World Service](#) through local transmitters located in their headquarters at [The Briars](#). Programmes were daily from 11:00h to 14:00h and from 17:45h to 20:45h. Here is an announcement from the [St Helena News Review](#) of 15th May, 1965:

Cable and Wireless Limited, wish to announce that subject to transmitter availability and as an experiment, they are relaying the B.B.C. World Service during the hours 11am to 2pm and 5:45pm to 8:45pm daily. The broadcast may be heard in the 92 meter band at a frequency of 3235 kc/s. Listeners are invited to send in reports on programme strength and quality stating their address and time and date when programme heard.

Because these transmissions were on a frequency of 3235KHz, which was not available on many imported UK radios, few people could receive the transmissions. This service continued only until the end of 1965.

I have been unsuccessful in locating the *Wirebird* issue, but John Turner, Site Editor for sainthelenaisland.info, provided me with a copy of the four-page *St. Helena News Review* of May 15, 1965, in its original form, which contained the notice quoted in green

above. You can see it [here](#), with the relevant text in a box (page 4).

John Turner also sent a copy of the *News Review* for July 24, 1965, where there is a reference to the second Cable & Wireless broadcast mentioned by Tony Leo—the broadcast by the two visiting British officials. It is [here](#), with the two relevant portions of the text in boxes. On page 1 there is a reference to the visit by the officials, and on page 3 (“Farewell Broadcast”) there is an alert for the then-upcoming Cable & Wireless broadcast of August 1, 1965, on the same channel as the BBC relays, 3235 kHz—conveniently identified as the “same [frequency] as Lourenco Marques.” (The choice of 3235 may have had its own interesting history, as Tony Leo explains in his recounting [below] of some informal St. Helena shortwave broadcasting on 92 metres in the early 1950s.)

I have seen no reports of loggings of the 1973 shortwave broadcasts from St. Helena. The 1965 broadcasts would have been, if anything, even less likely to be heard outside the island, considering that they were intended for local reception, and thus would have required very little power. But wherever they might have been heard, they appear to have been bona fide shortwave “broadcasts,” intended for reception by the general public, thus putting St. Helena on the SWBC map earlier than heretofore thought.

The May 1965 and August 1, 1965 transmissions remind us that while the Cable & Wireless worldwide shortwave capabilities were mainly point-to-point, the company could, and sometimes did, also provide broadcasting services to stations in out-of-the-way Empire locations (see [“Philately and Cable & Wireless”](#)).

Thanks to John Ekwall for uncovering this interesting corner of DX history, and to him, John Turner and Tony Leo for helping with this article. For more on radio on St. Helena, check out the [sainthelenaisland.info](#) website, in particular [“Radio St. Helena”](#) (which includes coverage of Radio St. Helena Day); [“Diplomatic Wireless Station”](#); and the [St. Helena](#) website (click on “Radio St. Helena”).

And here’s more from Tony Leo:

“There was another station, ZD7SD [an amateur station]. It was operated by a man named William Stevens of Half Tree Hollow. He was working with the Royal Engineers stationed at Ladder Hill Barracks during the time of the Second World War. He had very little education, but he watched, and he collected the bits and pieces that were left over from the operations when the war ended, and he made himself a shortwave transmitter. He set up aerials, and he also made a receiver, or partly made one, for reception. Not only that, but he had enough parts to make and sell receivers to the public. In those days radio receivers were very hard to get on the island, as there were only a few. However, his receivers had to use a wet car battery, and the frequency available was on 92 metres SW.

“William was a ham radio operator for years, and during that time operated a radio station broadcasting from his home to the island and further afield. He had a request programme on a Sunday afternoon from 1400 to 1600 hours, and on a Thursday evening from 1900 to 2100. Everyone who had a SW radio tuned in to hear this radio station. He used a record player, and placed the microphone in front of the speaker after he made the

announcement who the record was for and in which part of the island. In comparison to what can be heard today it sounded as though it was coming from an empty beer can at a distance. Nevertheless, this was the only local radio station on St. Helena. To have a request played, one had to place a three penny piece (a Tickie) in an envelope and address it to W. R. Stevens, Ladder Hill.

“This radio station operated for a few years in the very early 1950s. During 1965/66, the Diplomatic Wireless Relay Station came to St. Helena and set up a relay service transmitting diplomatic traffic for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to Africa and South America. The technical engineers wanted to assist William with his homemade transmitter and radio station, but he would not hear of it. He told them that he made it himself and he would continue transmitting as he wished.

“There were about 22 British families on island that were working for the DWRS, and the wives became very bored on a daily basis. There was no fresh milk on island, no daily newspapers, no TV, and no radio station. They were left at home with nothing to do. These folks grew friendly with the Chief Secretary in government at the time, and the question was put to the Chief Secretary, George Lawrence, after a round of golf at the Golf Club over a few drinks on a Saturday afternoon: “Do you think the islanders and the St. Helena Government would appreciate a radio station of a much better quality that you have now?” The answer was most certainly yes, but I am not sure what happened afterwards because it was during 1966 that many tests were carried out to find the most appropriate area for the equipment and station to be built. The funding for the construction was given from the Colonial Development and Welfare Fund. The area chosen was at Pounceys, on high ground, with no interference from any other structure. Tests were carried out at certain times of the day. The frequency was 1511 kHz., 200 metres. It was named the St. Helena Government Broadcasting Service, and it was officially opened on 25th December 1967. The rest is now history.”

