



## The London to Yarmouth Telegraph System 1808 – 1814

The name 'telegraph' crops up with some frequency in certain areas of the country and in a number of locations on, or close to, the Icknield Way, for example 'Telegraph Hill' at Lilley Hoo and 'Telegraph Road' at Icklingham – the 'hedge-bounded drove' 300 yards east of All Saints Church.

These are clues to the existence of another line of communication of a quite different variety, less ancient than the Way but nonetheless now long disappeared. The names reveal the former locations of some of the 18 telegraph stations which formed a chain running from London to Yarmouth. The system was invented by Lord George Murray and was used to improve communications between the Admiralty and the fleets based at ports on the east and south coasts during the Napoleonic wars.

The career of the 'shutter' telegraphs began with the setting up of an experimental station on the hills above Portsmouth in 1795 and the first lines to Deal and Portsmouth were in operation by the end of 1796. The system used a series of relay-stations located on hill tops that were usually about 7 to 10 miles (11.2 to 16 Km) apart. The signalling mechanism was housed in a large wooden frame fixed to the roof of the station and consisted of six shutters arranged in pairs. Ropes were attached to each shutter so that it could be turned from a closed vertical position to an open horizontal one. It was thus possible to have a considerable variety of combinations which could be seen and copied by the crew of the next station along the line. There were usually either three or four men based at each telegraph with a minimum of two on watch throughout the day, their telescopes trained on the next station in each direction.

The major responsibility for the development and control of the system was in the hands of George Roebuck, Surveyor of Telegraphs to the Admiralty. In 1801, he had been asked to make an initial survey for a line from London to Yarmouth but this was then suspended and attention turned to the establishment of a line to Plymouth, branching out of the Portsmouth one, which was opened in 1806.

In December 1807 Roebuck wrote to London: "I request that you will be pleased to acquaint the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty that the Telegraphs between London and Yarmouth are being fixed up and I hope in a short time to have them ready for practising the men". The stations of the Yarmouth line located closest to the Icknield Way were at Dunstable, Lilley Hoo, Baldock, Gog Magog Hills, Newmarket, Icklingham and Barnham.

By 25<sup>th</sup> June 1808, Roebuck was able to inform the Admiralty that the construction of the Yarmouth line had been completed and the "the practising messages I send and receive are passed correct". The local press reported that a message had been sent from London to Yarmouth in 17 minutes.

The construction of the line coincided with another development. "I must have weekly journals from each station" Roebuck wrote, "giving an account of the delays and mistakes in each message". Two of the log books, which were kept at the Gog Magog Hills telegraph station near Cambridge, are still in existence and in the care of the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich. The leather-bound volumes contain entries made between October 1810 and April 1814. They record which members of the team were on duty and a description of the weather on each day. The operational record includes the number of messages transmitted, the time when they were passed and by whom and also, in code, a reference to the type of signal concerned. It appears that as each station passed on a signal, it reported its success or failure in doing so back down the line to the place of origin.

Copies of the code instructions have also survived. There were sufficient available combinations to allow for one of each letter of the alphabet, as well as several others which had special significance.

A typical telegraph house was built of wood and had two rooms, one for operations and the other for general living purposes. There was normally also a coal shed and a small garden area alongside. The shutter frame stood about 20 feet (6m) high and was constructed of timbers which were supported on large baulks set in the ground on both sides of the hut.

It does not need a great deal of imagination to appreciate some of the operational problems to which the system was subject. The journals show just how often signalling was held up by poor visibility, normally because of fog. The log for December 1813 and January 1814 showed that this prevented transmission of any messages at all on more than half the days in those two months.

The shutter telegraphs came, effectively, to the end of their usefulness with the signing of the peace treaty in May 1814. Things then moved remarkably swiftly and the stations of the Yarmouth line were put up for sale within a matter of days – the whole lot realising the sum of £817.

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