

A look at SIX METRES

With an amateur frequency allocation at 50MHz likely, Jack Hum G5UM reviews the operating prospects.

The postcard said simply '6 metres. Go ahead. Licence to follow!' It was one of perhaps a couple of dozen such postcards received by a small number of British amateur radio licensees three and a half decades ago from the headquarters of their national organisation, the Radio Society of Great Britain, to tell them that a new VHF band was about to become available to them. (An indication of the age of this prized relic in the G5UM collection of electronic memorabilia is revealed by the worth of the stamp on its back — tuppence.)

Yet little time remained to explore the delights of this new found 6m band on the part of the few who were granted these special permits to do so back in the late Forties. Already the video writing was on the wall: the spread of television nationwide was promised in order to extend BBC coverage beyond the confines of the south-east of England. The single modest 405-line transmitter sitting on its hilltop at the Alexandra Palace in north London was the harbinger — though hardly the prototype at 17kW peak white —

of things to come. Its frequency of 45Mc/s (yes, 'Mc/s': the 'megahertz' did not come in until much later) was uncomfortably close to 50Mc/s.

There was little time; it was not wasted time. Already the potential of the 50MHz band had become evident to the handful of British radio amateurs who had taken the trouble to build receiving equipment for it. Their objective was to determine whether or not signals at 'six' could be received from across the Atlantic, for in the US just two years after the war the band was in active use by the amateur service.

British amateurs had good reason for their optimism. They had noted that at a time of exceptional sunspot activity the MUF (maximum usable frequency) was 'going very high' and might even reach 50MHz to produce Transatlantic communication by multi-path propagation. There did indeed seem to be a strong case to put to the Licensing Authority that 'Six' was a band capable of great development, and that it could be made available to the British radio amateur before time ran out and television arrived.

Intensive lobbying by the national society of the Licensing Authority bore fruit. The 'go ahead' postcard dropped through a couple of dozen VHF aficionados' letter-boxes in the weeks before Christmas of 1947, and the licences followed a few days afterwards.

History was made within a matter of days: G6DH, the station of Denis Heightman at Clacton, on England's east coast, succeeded in working W1HDQ, the station of the famed Ed Tilton in New England (he was the metre-wave columnist of the American amateurs' magazine QST). This success was quickly followed by several other transcontinental contacts on '50Mc/s' from the stations of the few UK transmitting enthusiasts who were allowed to use the band and had had time to build equipment for it (generally a telegraphy transmitter with facilities for emitting amplitude modulated telephony when circumstances were propitious).

If not 'Six' then 'Four'

But as has been said earlier, the electronic writing was on the wall. Within little more than a year after the epoch making events of November, 1947, both the newly acquired 6m band and its longer-established companion at 5m had been withdrawn as BBC television was poised to extend its coverage. Parenthetically, it is worth recalling that a 'Grand Goodnight' was organised for March 31, 1949, when nearly every one of the 5m users in the Greater London area — about seventeen of them! — met on the band for the last time before the clock came up to midnight to signal that 'Five' was no more.

Meanwhile, although 144Mc/s (as it was still known) began to attract adherents its shorter haul propensities by contrast with 5m and even more with 6m became very evident to those VHF workers who had enjoyed their operating on the two now withdrawn lower frequency bands. Would it not, they thought, be possible for Authority to find them an allocation somewhere in the lower reaches of the metre-waved spectrum? Where to find such an allocation with television dominating the lower part of that spectrum was not an easy question to answer.

The quest was not abortive: in