

RADIO YESTERDAY

by Andy Emmerson, G8PTH

What's in a call sign

A radio callsign can in fact speak for itself, telling you about the class of station it refers to and the date when it was issued. The history and lore of callsigns has fascinated me for some time, particularly since this subject has not attracted a lot of attention in books and magazines. This, then, is a distillation of the facts concerning British callsigns, based on random references found in print and heard on the air.

Right from the earliest days of experimental radio, callsigns appear to have been harmonised by international agreement and took the form of a number followed by two (or three) letters. No differentiation was made, in Britain at any rate, between amateur, industrial and broadcast stations, probably since they were all classed as experimental. Thus 2LO (BBC, London) and 2MT (Marconi's Wireless Telegraph Company, Chelmsford) appear deep in the midst of the list of mainly amateur calls, and it is clear that callsigns were issued 'out of sequence' to anyone who desired a memorable combination of letters. National prefixes were not used and complications started once international DX became possible. For the amateurs this problem was solved in a very practical fashion, and the early DX workers just added a single letter prefix to indicate their country. This was generally written as a small letter on QSL cards and the like, since it was not part of the official callsign. British amateurs used 'g' (for Great Britain), France had 'f', and Americans used 'y' (Yankee), 'a' (America) and 'u' (United States). In due course the matter was regularised with internationally agreed prefixes issued to amateurs. Some of those letters have since changed — originally Germany was D and the Netherlands EN.

