The Birth of a Radio Station.

By Peter Mason

In November 1967, the BBC opened Radio Leicester, its first local radio station. One week later came Sheffield. These plus six others would form a two year experiment in this type of broadcasting. Radio Sheffield was unusual because it was in a suburban residence rather than a city centre commercial building. Ashdell Grove, as it was called, had the offices on the ground floor and above them were the studios. Studio one and its operations cubicle both had control desks allowing the choice of self operation or the conventional producer operation whilst studio two had just the one desk in the operation cubicle.

Ashdell Grove

There were two engineers on the staff, Ken Beard and me. We did not have the luxury of a SCPD installation, this was a DIY job. So we arrived in August to start the task. One problem was evident from the start. The rooms were too small for comfort. When the desks arrived, it was clear that they had only been drawn freehand on the plans and not to scale. They were considerably larger than expected. Somehow, we squeezed them in but access to the studio desk was very restricted and one of the bays in the ops cubicle had to be mounted at 45 degrees. We were promised there and then that if the experiment were successful, we would be immediately relocated. There would be no question of us carrying on in this building.
The equipment was a Peto Scott modular system. The studio 2 desk had six channels (2 mics, 2 grams and 2 tapes) whilst the two studio one desks had three extra channels for radio car, rebroadcast source and a pluggable spare (normally the telephone). Three Leak tuners provided Radios 2, 3 and 4 and a programme line from Manchester Control Room provided Radio 1. This facility was never used as intended. Instead, it became a news contribution line so that we could assemble our own national news bulletins.
Design problems became evident. The main modules needed an upgrade of their line output transformers and the level controls on the channel modules all had to be replaced with inverse logarithmic components. Also, the talkback system had an inherent fault whereby the whole thing could go into howlround. Ken was being increasingly deployed in recording a schools quiz ready for transmission in the opening weeks and I was finding it difficult to keep to the installation schedule. Fortunately, a couple of weeks before our first transmission, the cavalry arrived in the shape of Brian Lock and Simon Penfold, recently appointed engineers for the future Radio Stoke, and gave valuable assistance.

We successfully got on the air on 15th November as planned but further problems became apparent. The Philips tape machines in Studio 1 performed well but Studio 2 was equipped with domestic Revox machines which soon wilted under the workload. Tapes on cine spools had to be ‘back loaded’ to prevent slippage, a problem which increased with use as tape friction caused a groove to be worn on the capstan spindle. The radio car, a Cortina estate, although successful at other stations, proved to be a white elephant. Despite its telescopic mast, its range was severely limited by Sheffield geography using the studio as a pick up point. Later, the receiver was moved to the Sheffield relay transmitter site at Crosspool to get decent coverage of the city. However, it suffered from interference from the transmitters there and it was only when it was moved again to Shirecliffe College that we achieved a satisfactory result.
Having got on the air, we were able to exploit some positive features of the building. At the back was a large derelict billiard room. We acquired a large curtain from a cinema which was being demolished and hung it along the main wall. We progressively covered two other walls with egg boxes which provided a reasonable acoustic. A multi cable was thrown over the roof providing tie lines to the back of studio 2 desk. We now had a third studio which could be used for music and audience shows, achieved for virtually no cost. Similarly, we ran tie lines to a basement room equipped with a redundant LSU/10 and an apple and biscuit microphone which worked well as an echo chamber.

There was some discussion about whether we would be allowed to have the key to our transmitter. Holme Moss reluctantly agreed to this and it proved invaluable so that we could provide rapid maintenance. The 50 watt Redifon device, installed at the local Crosspool relay site, had been used for maritime communications successfully but being on full transmit all day proved to be a disaster. Every few weeks, the output valve would overheat and implode. Worse still, the aerial tuning capacitor was mounted directly above it and the heat generated would fuse the vanes together. One Easter weekend, the damage caused by one of these incidents was so bad that I had to dash to Holme Moss at midnight to get a replacement transmitter and install it just in time for the morning programme. One day of high drama occurred when a local resident reported smoke was coming out of the building. I grabbed the keys and set straight off cursing the Redifon and arrived at the same time as the fire engine. I opened the building and the fire crew rushed into the smoke filled hall to deal with the blaze. However, the Redifon was innocent on this occasion. It was the recently installed BBC2 transmitter which had caught fire and was a total write off.

The staff endured all these problems well throughout the two year experiment in addition to the lone late newsroom shift being periodically harassed by the distraction of a previous resident of the building making her presence felt (allegedly!). At the end of the experiment, we were judged as successful and could carry on. In accordance with the promise that was made when we first arrived, we said farewell to Ashdell Grove and moved to somewhere more suitable in the city centre – 28 years later!