In the middle of Winter when most people were keeping warm in their homes, a Daventry rigger was hanging from a BBC mast chipping off the ice from the aerials, writes Amanda Ballham.

Charles Hancock, now 78 years old, is the only surviving original rigger who worked at the BBC station looking after the masts and aerials many years ago.

He first arrived at the site when he was employed to help strengthen railway bridges to enable heavy loads to be transported to the Borough Hill site before the masts were built, and then worked for Marconi, who manufactured aerial equipment.

Charles later took up a job as a rigger, and the fearless pensioner remembers swinging in his bosun’s chair to remove the ice from the wires to keep the connections open.

He worked day and night to keep the aerials in working order in all weathers, however dangerous.

“It was quite frightening at times,” said Charles. “During the war a plane crashed into the masts because of the fog and I was called out in the night to help repair them,” he added.

Charles now lives at Brownlands Nursing Home, his brother Horace was also a rigger at the BBC’s Borough Hill site, but unfortunately three of the four original riggers, including Charles’ brother have since died.
The end of an era

The closure of the BBC's Short Wave operation in Daventry in the end of an historical era for the town and the broadcasting company itself, wrote Amanda Betham. The masts which tower over Borough Hill have been a well known landmark since 1923 when the BBC opened its first transmitting station in the country. After April 1992 the masts, which played such an important part during the war, will come down leaving a noticeable gap on the skyline.

The BBC chose the 50 acres Borough Hill site for its central position in the country and for its height of 650 ft above sea level. A light railway was built on the top of the hill to transport the building materials and work began on a T-shaped mast suspended by two stayed masts 500 ft high.

The call sign for the station was 3XK and the long wave national programme began (later the station was renumbered to D15D). The Empire Service was born on December 19, 1932 and on Christmas Day, King George V was heard in a special broadcast which reached listeners outside the country for the first time. Directional aerials were added on the hill to enable British people living in Australia, India, South Africa, West Africa and Canada to hear the World Service programmes, and with further improvements the broadcasting overseas became successful.

In 1933 Hitler seized power and Germany increased its broadcasting coverage on short waves and was transmitting propaganda material, in particular to countries in Africa and South America.

To meet the competition, the BBC extended the Daventry site to accommodate a new aerial system and new transmitters, and during the war secret messages were sent over the airwaves in code of espionage.

Until 1937 programmes in the Empire Service had been broadcast in English, but the Government then persuaded to allow broadcasts in foreign languages which began in Spanish and Portuguese for South America and in Arabic for the Middle East.

The total transmitter complement at Daventry was finally brought up to 11 by June 1940 and in December that year, Winston Churchill's wife, Clementine visited the Daventry station. Using aerial equipment at DODD, Sir Robert Watson conducted the first ever radar experiments in 1938 and in 1939 a studio programme (later to be known as Radio 3) was taken over by transmitters feeding DODD mast radiators.

In 1918 the Radio 3 transmitter was withdrawn and the DODD mast was later scrapped in 1984. Although the station will now close and the masts will disappear, the BBC will continue to use the Borough Hill site as a maintenance base servicing its domestic radio and television transmitting stations in the area.

And the memory of the masts will live on in Daventry - as they are featured on the Daventry and District Scout badges.
Ian Calvert works on the high-tech local transmitter control system.

More BBC history on p6

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