

40th LONGLEAT AMATEUR RADIO RALLY

Founding Committee Member Ted Halliday G3JMY and Present Rally Manager Shaun O'Sullivan G8VPG look back on 40 years of this popular event and provides an insight into the planning work "behind the scenes"

This year marks the 40th Anniversary of the first Longleat Rally. It is remarkable to think that many of the people who organise and attend this event - present Manager included - were not even born when it started ! From modest beginnings it has grown into one of the largest annual Amateur Radio events in the South of England, and is a regular date in many peoples diaries each year.

The event has always been planned by the RSGB City of Bristol Group. Bristol is infact some 30 miles from Longleat and so the connection between the two is not always made. Back in the late 1950's, what was originally planned was termed a "Mobile Rally". Essentially, it was a pleasant summers day outing for Radio Amateurs who used to operate /Mobile from their cars. In those days, this usually meant top band, and early photographs of the event show the large aerials which are necessary for this band. Over the years, mobile operation has moved almost entirely to VHF & UHF, and it is now quite rare to see people arrive with mobile HF aerials.

The size of the attendance at the early Longleat Rallies was not great, 50 or 60 to start with. Attendance during recent years always exceeds 5,000. A shower of rain at one early Rally forced everyone to shelter in the only tent on site - the flysheet of Ted's frame tent ! The Raffle table was in there too !

We had a splendid aerial for our top-band talk-in one year. It was a half-wave of aircraft dinghy aerial attached to a 4' met balloon. When it came time to pack up, Vic, G3CHW, swiftly unhitched the wire from the ATU. I was outside the tent at the time, about to reel in the wire. To my amazement, and the hilarious incredulity of the surrounding onlookers, it was snatched from my fingers by the met balloon, which swiftly disappeared in the direction of Frome !

We used to run a Concours D'Elegance for those mobile operators with pride in their rigs. Vehicles of all types from bikes and motor scooters to Jags and Bentleys were presented. Marks were awarded for originality, appearance, neat arrangement of gear (few, if any visible wires etc.), ergonomics of controls and a few more which escape me. Some really impressive mobile rigs were entered. The proud winner received his prize in the late afternoon, when Raffle and other prizes were presented.

There was, at first, a prize awarded for the amateur travelling the furthest to attend the Rally. It started quite modestly with the Midlands, then Scotland. It seemed to peter out when it was seen that amateurs from say, Canada etc. had clearly not travelled that far to attend the Rally. However, there has always been a recognition of the attendance of amateurs from distant places.

Some very enterprising amateurs turned up with unusual aerial systems. One in particular I remember was that of Chris, G8GYQ, Harry's (G6GN.) son-in law. It was a stacked omni cloverleaf for 2m, based on a QST design - very eye-catching. Some of the loaded whips for top band were auto-tuned, using motor-driven, sliding contacts on the huge loading coils. There was evidence of painstaking work at a time when craftsmanship was the driving force.

There were games for the children to play and things for them to do at many of the rallies. There was an Electronic Maze, a corkscrew of copper wire and a metal loop that had not to touch as it was guided along the corkscrew. There was a "Treasure Hunt" - put a peg in the ground inside a marked-out rectangle. The "Balloon Race", with small hydrogen-filled balloons, was always popular. One balloon landed in France, with a prize awarded to launcher and finder.

In the early Rallies, Raffle prizes were mainly donated by firms in the Bristol area. Lord Bath assisted at those relatively informal Rallies by presenting the prizes at the close of the Rally. It was all very laid back.

When the time came to cope with really big attendances, the Committee had to devise a more satisfactory method for distributing the tickets for the Raffle prizes, which by then had greatly increased in number and value. Some 10000 tickets were necessary. Eventually the present system was introduced. It involved every Committee member (G4UZ, "uncle Len", was Chairman) in some hours of fitting 5 unrelated tickets into each envelope. The "winning numbers" had to be "invented" after all the envelopes were sealed.

It was realised early on that a separate Raffle was required for the ladies. One such Raffle resulted in a lady winning a somewhat flimsy nether garment. When the ticket was drawn the undaunted Vic offered to fit the garment ! Decorum was satisfied by a polite refusal.

The top of the hill by the main entrance to Longleat (Heavens Gate) has been the site for many of the Rally Talk-in stations .On the topic of talk-in stations, I remember one year when I ran an 80m talk-in from my caravan. The aerial was a quarter-wave vertical in the shape of a 50' Telomast with a 17' whip (derived from an Army field aerial) on the top. It was, without doubt, a very satisfactory aerial. The wire fence around the Hippo pen was used as an untuned ground-plane !

There was always plenty to interest everyone at the Longleat Rallies. I remember when Lord Bath first introduced the Lions, with the attendant "white hunters". He was on the gate, taking the money, when we went through. Then there were the Morris Dancers on the side lawn, near the lake. The House was a focus of a lot of attention - that was where the only toilets were located for one thing !

Among the competitions I remember was the Top-band Aerial Field Strength Competition. This was devised and run by G3CHW. The contesting station would radiate from Heaven's Gate, having been entered for the contest via the talk-in. Vic would be down on the site, with suitable equipment to measure the field strength of the signal. When the winner was announced it resulted in a rush of amateurs to view the loaded vertical on the winner's vehicle. I did wonder on a few occasions how many watts of power had actually been generated to produce some of the amazingly strong signals !

The trade show at the original Rally was very small and was not intended to be the main attraction. As time progressed, the trade show has increased enormously in size and scope, and the event is now termed an Amateur Radio Rally. However, the original intention of providing a pleasant summers day out for Radio Amateurs and their families has never been forgotten. Longleat is a wonderful venue for a family expedition, with its pioneering and now famous Safari Park - something which the Rally predates by several years. It is notable how many

people attend the Rally every year, and take pride in recounting how they "haven't missed it for 20 years or more". Many of the local B&B establishments take repeat bookings years in advance, assisted by the fact that the event is held consistently on the last Sunday in June each year.

Another popular facet of the Rally is the camping and caravanning facilities. It is fortunate that visitors are able to set up camp immediately adjacent to the Rally for the entire weekend. On Friday night, the makings of a small mobile village begins to assemble, and many a barbecue and party is held by old friends who meet on the camp site each year.

Like most (but by no means all) Rallies, Longleat is organised by a voluntary group of Radio Amateurs for the benefit of their fellows. The proceeds of the event help to finance the activities of the RSGB Bristol Group, including their increasingly successful Contest Group. However, much assistance is obtained from the many Clubs in and around the Bristol area, and some of the proceeds are distributed to these. Other Groups, such as Repeater and Beacon keepers, RAIBC and the St.Johns Ambulance Brigade (who provide the first aid) have also received grants.

The work of planning the event begins in the Autumn. Having confirmed dates and the format of the event with Lord Baths Agent, the organising committee arrange contracts for the major items of equipment to be hired. These includes marquees, mobile toilets, tables, chairs, public address system, crowd barriers, generator etc. These represent the major cost of organising the Rally and need to be fixed before exhibition and admission fees are set. The major income to cover the costs comes from exhibition fees paid by traders, but smaller amounts are also derived from visitors admission fees, commission from the Bring & Buy stand, on-site caterers etc. Running a large event is no small undertaking, with costs running well into fives figures, and hence the financial arrangements need to be carefully considered.

In January, a large mail shot is sent to the traders. We canvas about four times as many traders as usually attend. This work is undertaken by someone who will be well known to many visitors, the Bookings Manager Gordon Lindsay G0KGL, assisted very capably by XYL Maureen. Prior to Gordon, I undertook this role for some years and I inturn succeeded Brian Goddard G4FRG, who for 11 years was known as "Mr.Longleat" ! Arranging a large Rally is a demanding task, which requires a considerable commitment of your personal time. The number of telephone calls received can easily exceed 20 a day, and despite all our pleas, these are not always at very sociable hours. The record for lateness is 11.30 pm, and for earliness 6.20 am !

Many visitors to Rallies comment on the amount of computer equipment now being sold. It is interesting to see how the development of computers has been mirrored by their use in managing the event. In the early 1980's, an attempt was made to use the simple Sinclair Spectrum computers then popular. Despite using a large amount of the expensive little rolls of specially coated paper that the primitive Sinclair printers demanded, the task was beyond the machine. In the late 80's, the task was successfully implemented on my Amstrad PCW machine. This worked well, and saved an enormous amount of manual addressing and writing of letters. When Gordon took on the task of arranging bookings, the application was transferred to a PC (we are lucky to number a Computer Professional amongst our committee members). This provides many of the features of a professional marketing system, with smartly produced letters and the ability to provide the committee with regular reports. Traders booking late can be sent reminders at intervals. Although the Rally is arranged by volunteers who might be correctly

described as Amateurs in some respects, we cannot afford to be anything but professional in our management of the event.

As far as computers at Rallies are concerned, their presence simply reflects a demand which is present. Many Radio Amateurs have enthusiastically embraced computers as an extension of their hobby and Radio orientated computing is a significant sector of the home computer market. However, there are still many companies selling "pure" Radio products. In the early days of the event, these dominated the trade show. The 50's and 60's were the era of Government surplus equipment, and many traders sold ex-MOD equipment for a fraction of its original cost. This formed the heart of most Amateurs stations. These days, such equipment is quite rare, and its collection and restoration has become a specialist interest of the hobby. For some years now, the Rally has been pleased to host an exhibition from the well known Journeaux Collection of historic radio equipment.

Throughout the 1960's, the growth of SSB produced a new range of equipment that was less suited to home construction and modification of Government surplus equipment. The original dominance of British and American manufacturers was replaced by the Japanese names that we are now all so familiar with. Alongside these, the large national dealers developed and these companies usually have the largest stands at most Rallies.

However, the largest stand at Longleat is always the Bring & Buy. One large marquee is devoted to this, and the sea of faces pressed up against the crowd barriers around it testify to its popularity. For those volunteers that run the stand, it is a very high pressure task and many of them are so completely absorbed that they miss the Rally altogether. Large queues build up as soon as it opens, with all manner of equipment being booked in for sale. The stand operates on a commission basis, with 10% being deducted from goods sold. Over recent years, about 400 items are sold from the stand, with a total value in the region of £12,000.

Although the Rally can be planned by a handful of people, a much larger number are needed over the weekend on which it is held. Saturday is preparation day. During the previous four days, contractors will have erected the marquees and delivered the equipment. In one day, we now have to set up the traders tables, fence the site, erect signs and position the large number of outside traders. Besides the Radio Rally, we also now feature a Craft Fair, an attraction that has provide particularly popular with Radio Amateurs families.

We are fortunate that many of the Amateur Radio clubs in our area are loyal and enthusiastic supporters of the Rally. Without their help, it would be impossible to organise the event. In return for their help, a proportion of the proceeds from the Rally is donated to Clubs, in proportion to the help received from them.

We have no doubt that everyone who has attended will have their own memories of that Rally of Rallies Longleat Mobile Rally ! If you have yet been to Longleat, why not pay us a visit this year ? We look forward to seeing friend old and new at the 40th Longleat Amateur Radio Rally to be held on Sunday 29th June 1997. The show opens at 9.30 am - Don't be late !