The Caversham Story

Every day, all round the clock, the polyglot experts of the BBC's Monitoring Service record news and comment broadcast by radio stations throughout the world. ALAN HUNTER visited Caversham Park recently and in this special article gives listeners an insight into the workings of what must be the world's greatest listening station. Its reports not only provide much material for BBC news broadcasts but serve the needs of the Government, foreign embassies, and the Press.

I WANT to tell you something about a BBC department which is still so comparatively new that you would search your dictionary in vain for a hint, must less a real definition, of its operative verb: the verb 'to monitor.' It was rather as a reporter in search of a definition that I found myself one morning being driven from Reading station to nearby Caversham Park, where the BBC Monitoring Service has its polyglot being.

The Head of the Service, Malcolm Frost, warned me it would take all day at least to see Caversham's works—and he was right. Even then, after patient guides had handed me back to Mr. Frost, I had a feeling—which he soon confirmed—that I did not know the half of it.

But let me try a definition: to monitor, in the Caversham sense, is to listen to, to hear, to translate, to record, and to pass on what the world's wireless waves are saying. That, perhaps, is the least of it, because, the mechanics of the process apart, the 'monitoring mind' has to be a very specialised mind, at one moment revealing the balanced judgment of a historian and the next an aptitude for seizing upon a story the moment that, in newsroom parlance, it 'breaks.'

Monitoring has become, willy-nilly, a major source of foreign news to the compilers of the BBC's Home, European, and Overseas news broadcasts, and, as well, it provides departments of H.M. Government with information from abroad that, by any other means, might take weeks to acquire.

You may still be puzzled why the BBC, as a broadcasting authority, should take this trouble at all. The short answer is that some form of monitoring became inevitable the moment the Corporation began to broadcast in foreign languages—to catch the ear of listeners outside what might be called its own territorial waters.

(please turn overleaf)
A Beverage aerial in the deer park of Caversham. These aerials are used for picking up the faintest of long-distance signals

The remote reception centre at Caversham Park

Those responsible for BBC foreign broadcasts had to know what the peoples of these countries were being told by their own and other sources of news, had to know the political signals into which broadcasts from Britain were to be injected. And as BBC foreign broadcasts have extended, so has the monitoring service.

At this point, recalling how chancy at times is reception of foreign stations on even a large radio set, you may well ask: 'How does the BBC manage to pick up all these signals from all over the world at all times of the day and night?' The answer was given to me by C. J. W. Hill, Engineer-in-Charge at Caversham, and the secret, summed up in a word, is 'aerials.'

I was taken out to the terrace of Caversham Park, and there, not far away, I could see the criss-cross of wires forming some—though by no means all—of the aerials on which the monitors rely for their extraordinarily good reception. These omni-directional aerials—so called because they are designed to pick up signals equally well from all directions—hang from 100-foot tubular-steel masts in a flat field of ten acres, as far away as is practicable from the various electrical disturbances having their source in the building itself.

Amplified Aerial System

To bring these relatively noise-free signals to the monitors’ receivers, BBC engineers have designed what they call the amplified aerial system: the signals are boosted near the actual aerial wires by wide-band amplifiers and carried by a buried, interference-free screened cable to a distributing network in the main building, giving the equivalent of up to one hundred and twenty separate aerial 'feeds.'

The engineers are rather proud of this amplified aerial system, as well they may be: there is nothing in the world quite like it—or as good. It means that with a fairly small number of aerials a large number of different signals can be picked up at one and the same time under electrically 'quiet' conditions, then fed without loss of strength to receivers placed conveniently for the monitors to operate.

But there are signals so weak or difficult to pick up that something better even than Caversham is needed, and for such signals the BBC Monitoring Service draws upon the remarkable resources of a sub-reception area at nearby Caversham Park. As one of the engineers drove me through the three or four miles of streets that lead to Caversham he explained that, in the two hundred and fifty acres of what is still a deer park, they have an aerial system specially designed to resolve the very weak signals, but for the most stringent precautions, would never rise above what we ordinary listeners know as 'background noise.'

At Caversham, unlike Caversham, the aerials are uni-directional, not omni-directional, using both Rhombics and Beverage aerials. The Beverage aerial consists of a wire running out in the direction of the source of the wanted signal, nine hundred to three thousand feet long, suspended on poles about ten feet above the ground.

I stood under the forty-degree Beverage, beam, as it were, on Scandinavia, north Siberia, Japan, and the Far East. From that point, there is a Beverage every twenty degrees, covering Europe, Asia, the Far East, Australia, the Middle East, North Africa, and South America. The twelve Beverage aerials are used mostly for medium and long waves and the five Rhombics for short-wave signals. The wires of all the aerials come into a central gantry, as it is called, and from there are led into the specially designed interception rooms.

Inside the building at Caversham Park I saw just what can be done in miracles of reception when all outside interference is suppressed: all the main supplies go underground a mile away, and even the car that took me there had suppressors on its ignition system to prevent any chance of electrical 'noise' to compete with the faint signals vibrating the aerials.

There are some thirty first-class communications-type receivers, and any set can be switched to an aerial without delay. The operators at Caversham are engineers, not monitors, and they work to a carefully prepared schedule. While I was there, for example, they were due to tune-in Damascus, Delhi, Moscow, Bucharest, Belgrade, Prague, Budapest, Berlin, Vienna, Rome, Helsinki, and Sofia. The engineer in charge of shifts gave me a very impressive sample of Caversham's wares: in quick succession, I was offered extraordinarily clear, daylight reception of Algeria, Damascus, Rome, Vienna, and Moscow.

The peak number of signals they normally handle at once is twenty-two, the average throughout the twenty-four hours being twelve. At all times a senior engineer is acting as liaison between the operators of the Caversham Park receivers and the monitors at Caversham, who can ask for any signal they cannot receive direct.

Well, so far, the engineers have given the monitors a good signal—or as good as a signal ionospheric conditions will allow. The rest depends on the dexterity of the monitor. In the bright, spacious, high-ceilinged Main Listening Room at Caversham I saw monitors of all nationalities sitting at one or other of the forty-odd receiving points.

Consulting the Schedule

Watch a monitor take up his position. First, he checks his schedule, which had worked out for him before he comes on duty. Then he clamps on his headphones, puts them in, and either switches in the wanted signal as picked up and tuned for him by Caversham Park or tunes it in for himself on his receiver connected to one or other of the Caversham aerials.

When the monitor wishes to record, he has only to turn a switch, a lamp lights up, and the reel starts to turn. At the end of the broadcast the monitor takes his cylinders to a little room where he can transcribe them at leisure, slowing down or repeating over and over again any doubtful passages. The monitor translates the original message and either types or dictates his 'copy' for the output departments.

During the whole twenty-four hours, the monitors between them handle some four hundred foreign news broadcasts in thirty different languages.

As well as all the foreign news picked up by the monitors in the Main Listening Room, there are highly expert morse monitors—many of them retired Royal Navy types—who pick up and transcribe morse-code signals.

Engineers at Caversham operating some of the thirty communications-type receivers. These sets are especially sensitive and with their specially designed uni-directional aerials can receive signals that would probably pass unnoticed by even the expert monitors at Caversham Park.
January 27, 1950

Radio Times

Editors preparing the daily report on the political developments throughout the world. Other editors prepare reports for BBC news broadcasts.

Some of these signals carry east-European news-agency 'copy' from the other side of the Iron Curtain: Tito, for example, uses Transjurg for his main assaults on the U.S.S.R. Then there is the news from the New China agency at Peking, and the Arab News Agency.

Still another source of foreign broadcast news—all of which is grist to the Caversham mill—comes over the Heilschreiber system, a stream of paper tape giving facsimile messages that need only to be translated. I saw one such message originating in the western zone of Germany. It is a German system, actually devised before the war to serve the German Press.

The output from these various sources of foreign news takes the form of a neat, flimsy-papery typescript—one copy going to the Editorial Department, another to the News Bureau. These two departments, between them, give expert attention to the raw material, providing, and distribute the results of their labours either to other BBC departments or to Government departments.

The News Bureau at Caversham is one of the most attractive newsrooms I have ever seen, but the journalists there have little time to admire the view of the park outside: their main task—and it is an almost endless one—is to provide the BBC news departments in London with a file of foreign and Commonwealth news. They average an output of from 20,000 to 25,000 words a week, rising to a possible peak of some 40,000 words.

The monitor, with a daily directive to work to, does his own initial sifting of the news he receives, and he has direct access, if in doubt, to the Copy-Taster. A 'news flash' is given priority in translation and transcription, and when really big news is 'breaking' the monitor can feed the Copy-Taster with 'snaps' on the headphones. The Copy-Taster, in his turn, briefs his sub-editors on the way the story is to be written up.

Many a 'world beat' in BBC news broadcasts originates at Caversham, where the whole system is geared to cope in a matter of seconds with any news of world interest that may come at any moment into the waiting, watching, listening monitors' headphones.

The efforts of the other main output department—the Editorial Department—are hardly more leisurely than that of the News Bureau, though it works to a daily 'dead-line' for reports, and once or twice weekly for summaries.

The Monitoring Report, as it is called, is a daily précis of the trends of world news, used by the BBC and Government departments. It is, in fact, a masterly boiling down to between 5,000 and 6,000 words of all the hundreds of thousands of words the monitors have picked up, sifted, selected, translated, and typed out in the course of the preceding twenty-four hours. This report is published five days a week. But, in addition to that, the Editorial Department produces what is called the Summary of World Broadcasts. This summary is produced in nine parts, once or twice a week, and although produced mainly for Government departments, the documents are available to the Press, to Embassies, and even to interested private individuals on an annual subscription basis.

It is also the task of the Editorial Department to keep the main archives, going back to 1939, and containing first-hand verbal 'tapes' or notes that the world's radio was saying during the war and has been saying ever since it ended: what a gold-mine, I thought, for the future historian!

And there, I fear, we must leave this fascinating preserve of 'Radio'. And, then, indeed, to those diligent monitors who, equally in the still watches of the night and at high noon, listen and learn.

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Here Be All New Delights

STEPHEN WILLIAMS writes about Fletcher's pastoral tragicomedy, 'The Faithful Shepherdess' which will be broadcast in the Third Programme on Monday and Friday.

Ben Jonson, in an outburst of loyal indignation, reviled the 'wise and many-headed bench that sits upon the fire and death of plays' for having damned 'The Faithful Shepherdess' before they saw it half. He spoke of Fletcher's 'murdered poem' and predicted that it would be glorified in future ages 'when fire or moths shall eat what all the fools admire.'

There is ample evidence that 'The Faithful Shepherdess' was a sorry failure on its first production (probably about 1608) and both Jonson and Chapman attributed this to the flowery delicacy of its verse and the fact that it did not pander to the Elizabethan groundlings' taste for vicious scenes and bloody catastrophes; that it was, in fact, 'above their heads.' It was one of the few occasions on which Fletcher did not so pander. Usually he was only too willing to blunt his vicious scenes with bloody catastrophes, even when nature did not call for them. And it is ironical, though not surprising, that the one work he wrote to please himself should have pleased hardly anyone else.

In 'The Faithful Shepherdess' he seems to have followed his own felicitous poetic fancy without any striving or straining after theatrical effect. The result was no theatrical effect at all. He dismembered the groundlings and the groundlings in turn disdained him.

Jonson was right, however: the play was revived in 1634 before the King and Queen; and the third quarto edition (1656) tells us that it was acted 'divers times with great applause at the Private House in Black-Friars.' Since then it has been honoured and treasured, by all who honour and treasure great poetry, as one of the three most beautiful pastoral poets in the language. Jonson's 'The Sad Shepherdess' occasionally equals it in word-magic, but Jonson's scene is, characteristically, more homely and bucolic. Milton's 'Comus' surpasses it in splendour of imagery, but there is a certain rigidity, a lack of well human naturalness in the characters. Fletcher's shepherds and shepherdesses, for all their sylph-like delicacy, are recognizable human beings.

The scene is 'Tressley.' But (although Fletcher was influenced by Tasso's 'Aminta' and Guarini's 'Il Pastor Fido'), just as Shakespeare's 'wood near Athens' is really a wood near Stratford, so there is more than a hint in this 'fragrant' verse of the sounds and sources of English woods and meadows, and Fletcher's benevolent Satyr is a kind of serious-minded Puck. It is a poem in praise of chastity. Those whose hearts and lives are pure even the protection of Pan and the service of his Satyr. Those who succumb to 'hot flashes bred from wanton heat and ease' are punished and brought to repentance.

The Faithful Shepherdess is Clorin, who lives in chaste seclusion tending the grave of her dead lover, the trust man that ever fed his flocks by the for the plains of fruitful Tressley.' Thenot is in love with her, or rather with the abstract idea of her devotion:

for when she offers to renounce that devotion in his favour he declares that she has killed him devotion for her. This, says Hazlitt, 'is spurious logic, not genuine passion, which had stung him with his fastest arrow. Clorin is indeed the one of the least sympathetic and least estimable characters in which we cannot sincerely believe. Aretous and Artazer are in love with Perigal and feeding a ambition of Clorin's dream she tries, with the help of the Sullen Shepherd, to wreck their happiness. Cloe, the 'wanton shepherdess,' is in love with anyone who will be a 'wanton shepherd,' and although her presence deeply shocked Charles Lamb (an 'ugly deformity') he called her there is a certain very humour in the inevitability with which her worst-laid schemes misfire—despite the fact that, as she herself says in one of the most understated sentences ever made, no one can justly lay 'too strict a censure' on her charge. In any case, the poem is in praise of chastity; and chastity cannot exist except in contrast with its opposite.

Also—anticipating John Wesley's complaint that the devil had all the best tunes—Cloe has some of the best lines in the play:

Here be woods as green
At any; as likewise as fresh and sweet
At whose smooth Zephyrus plays on the fleet
Face of the curled streams; with flowers as many
As the young spring givus, and as choice as any;
Here be all new delights, and streams and wells
Arbours overgrown with woodbines, caves, and dells...