

# Radio Normandy - the station that shook the BBC

by Eric Westman (with grateful acknowledgements to Monsieur J. P Durand-Chédru of Fécamp)

Its name appears only on the dials of radios built in the 1930s and its transmissions to Britain lasted barely ten years, yet Radio Normandy changed the whole tenor of broadcasting in this country - to the fury of the BBC's dictator Sir John Reith.

Radio Normandy owed its success to two remarkable men: the visionary Frenchman, Fernand Le Grand, who founded the station in the 1920s, and the eccentric Englishman, Leonard Plugge, who adapted it into a thriving commercial alternative to the BBC in the 1930s.



Far left: Monsieur Fernand Le Grand, the founder of Radio-Normandie.

Left: The chateau of Fernand Le Grand, the original home of Radio-Fécamp, 1926.

Above: The power source for station EF81C in a cellar directly under the transmitter in Fernand's salon.

## The French Story

Fernand Le Grand was the grandson of the founder of the Benedictine liqueur distillery at Fécamp, a seaside town in Normandy opposite the south coast of England. Before the First World War (1914-1918), while studying Law at the Catholic Faculty in Paris, he often 'bunked off' to the laboratory on the next storey of Professor Edouard Branly, whom the French regard as the 'Father of Wireless' for having invented the iron-filings coherer in the nineteenth century. This device enabled wireless telegraph signals to be detected, and Marconi later modified it for his own original receivers. The Professor befriended the young man, who soon became "hooked" on wireless but had reluctantly to postpone any active participation in the new science until he had completed his Law studies.

It was not until he was 29 years old that Fernand was able to devote himself to his true vocation, wireless. He gathered together a group of would-be wireless enthusiasts, and on the evening of December 23rd 1923 assembled them at the home of a prominent local tradesman. There they were excited by the novelty of hearing the programme from Radio Paris playing at good volume from a horn loudspeaker,

a thrill even eclipsed when the famous announcer suddenly declared: "At this moment, in Fécamp, at the home of one of the town's best grocers, the Radio-Club of Fécamp is being formed." Fernand had persuaded the most powerful station in France to help at the birth of his venture.

But despite its auspicious beginning, the Club gained only two members during its first year of existence. Fernand put the lack of interest down to the bother of travelling across town to the weekly meetings in the rue Georges Cuvier, particularly in bad weather. To whip up enthusiasm, he gave each member a good quality wireless receiver. But this made matters worse, for the slothful members now rarely turned up at all, preferring to stay comfortably at home listening to their free radios.

Since the members would not come to the Club, he decided to take the Club to them - by transmitting. In 1925 he built and installed in his salon a small wireless telephony transmitter with power fed from a cellar below and with an aerial stretched above his roof. He was granted permission to broadcast matters of a technical nature over its range of three kilometres, and the station was allotted the callsign EF81C. Such was

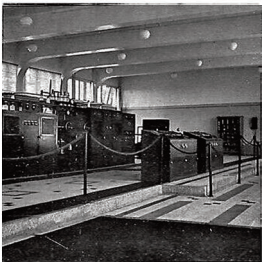


the humble beginning of what was to become the renowned Radio Normandie.

At first the station operated irregularly on its allotted wavelength of 200 metres, then Fernand increased its power to 50 watts and began to transmit gramophone records and local news and announcements. As the number of listeners grew, he took to announcing his station as 'Radio Fécamp' and broadcasting the sound of the distillery's hooter as an identification signal. Noticing the station's growing audience, local businessmen signed contracts with him to advertise their goods, which helped cover his expenses; he had put a lot of his own money into the Club. This success stimulated him into installing a new transmitter in 1928, thereby extending the range to 100 kilometres and covering several major towns. The new transmitter was installed in his glass conservatory, while his salon was transformed into an auditorium. The little station increased in status and received subsidies from the town of Fécamp and from the Chamber of Commerce. In 1929 two aerial masts 50 metres high were erected

on a nearby hill dominating the town, and the Radio-Club's former meeting-place in the rue Georges Cuvier converted into a small studio. Between the aerial masts a small building housed the apparatus, now removed from Fernand's salon and cellar. At the same time, the station became officially accredited as one of France's twelve private stations; and in acknowledgement of the district in which its transmissions were so widely received, Fernand honoured it with a new name: Radio-Normandie.

The station was now so busy that Fernand took on a teenage shorthand typist, Francine Lemaitre, to take down Press messages telephoned from Paris. Two months later, when Fernand was delayed, she had to take his place at the microphone and so achieved the distinction of becoming the first woman announcer in France and the youngest in Europe. An amateur actor with a warm voice, Roland Violette, was also taken on as an announcer, and together they became Aunt Francine and Uncle Roland to the radio's Children's Club, which eventually had 30,000 juvenile members

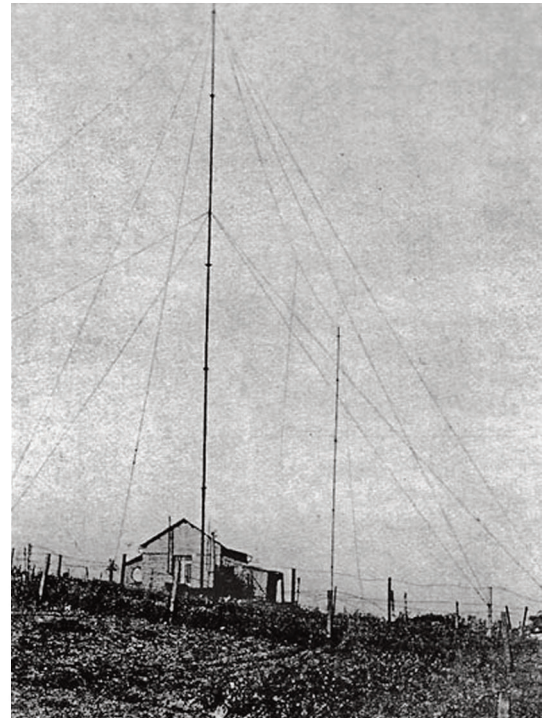
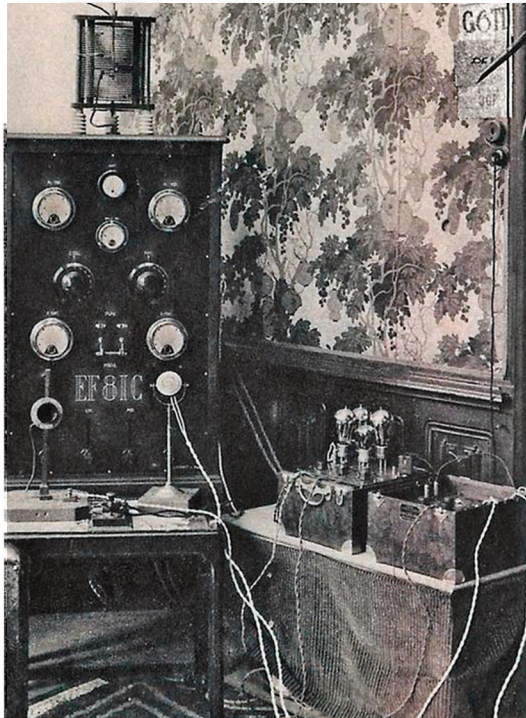


Above: The transmitter and the control console of the first Radio Normandie at Louvetot.

Right: Fernand Le Grand's original transmitter EF81C in the salon of his chateau at Fécamp, 1926.

Far right: The hill-top 50 metre aerial of Radio-Fécamp, 1929.

Below: Radio Fécamp's first two announcers, Francine Lemaitre and Roland Violette. (Aunt Francine and Uncle Roland).





and at least as many adult ones.

From now on, Radio Normandie was on the ascendant. Although operating only four days each week, the station gradually opened studios in other important towns and fitted a van with equipment to relay outside broadcasts. In 1931 Fernand signed a contract with the Englishman, Leonard Plugge, who rented the transmitter at certain hours to broadcast advertising programmes to England: more of that later.

By 1933 the station's growing importance necessitated the erection of two aerial pylons 100 and 113 metres high, which greatly extended the range and increased the station's audience in Britain. But misfortune struck in 1934, when the new Lucerne Plan of wavelength allocations came into force. Normandie was relegated to the common wavelength - the lowest - of 200 metres and its 25-kilowatt output severely reduced. Fortunately, the station was reprieved when it was permitted to operate on the unused 206-metre wavelength of the Eiffel Tower.

Radio Normandie, by now an important European station, had outgrown its cramped quarters in Fécamp even with the addition of two large studios in the new Maison de la Radio. Also, the powerful signal from its aerial so near the town interfered with the reception of other stations by local listeners. Fernand dealt with the matter in his accustomed visionary manner, and in August 1935 a Government Decree was passed allowing the station to relocate several miles inland to two sites, at Caudebec-en-Caux and at Louvetot. In keeping with the station's name and its location in Normandy, the architecture would be in classical Norman style.

At Caudebec, Fernand acquired a fine Napoleon III chateau set in a spacious park on the bank of the Seine and converted it into prestigious administrative headquarters for both the French and the British services. Its ground floor became a reception centre and bar-restaurant for the many visitors and artistes, while the first floor and part of the second were fitted out as offices, discotheques and studios. Accommodation for the staff occupied the upper floors, and at the bottom of the park stood emergency recording studios.

Six kilometres farther north, on a high plateau at Louvetot, Fernand sited his state-of-the-art transmitting station. The main building, four storeys high and 53 metres long, was built over huge cellars and cisterns. On the ground floor, a modern engine-room and a large workshop for maintaining the plant; on the first floor, the transmitter room, accumulator room, laboratory and emergency studio. Comfortable accommodation for the staff occupied the second floor; and crowning all, a huge loft. An adjoining tower housed the Station Manager's office, while lower down the terrain an electrical power station containing two diesel generators provided power for the transmitter.

Centrally on the site, the antenna, a triangular Blow-Knox pylon system 170 metres high, stood on its point, stayed by three thick cables. Access to the terrain was through an imposing gateway flanked by two buildings also in classical Norman style. A six-kilometre underground cable connected Louvetot to Caudubec.

With these two sites, Fernand Le Grand had created an acclaimed model transmitting complex of which the sixteen original members of the Radio-Club of Fécamp could never have dreamed. Large groups of British visitors, brought by the paddle-steamer *Brighton Belle* during the summer of 1935, came to pay honour to their favourite station.

After prolonged testing, the new station came into regular service in December 1938, broadcasting on 274 metres nonstop from 6.30a.m. until 2a.m. the following morning. On the 4th of June 1939 the new Radio Normandie received its official opening; three months later, on 7th September, it closed - the



Second World War had begun. The station was taken over as a relay in the national chain, and in June 1940 it was taken over by the occupying Germans.

When the war ended, Fernand was unable to regain his station. He then considered moving to Jersey and opening a new one, but it was not to be. Fernand Le Grand, the creator of much-loved Radio Normandie, died in 1953.

### The English Story

The great impact of the little transmitter among English listeners came as a direct result of the general dissatisfaction in Britain with the programmes provided by the British Broadcasting Corporation, the sole organisation permitted to broadcast entertainment in this country. Ruled dictatorially by its Director General, John Reith, a Scotsman with strict religious views, the BBC transmitted mainly very sober fare, and Sunday in particular was for listeners a day of nonstop gloom. People yearned for brighter programmes, and above all they wanted dance music, but Reith forbade the broadcasting of such music on Sundays.

But one man determined that British listeners should have their dance music, even on Sundays, and he would be the one to supply it, as well as making himself wealthy in the process. This was Captain Leonard Frank Plugge - his military title derived from his service as a Scientific Researcher with the Royal Air Force - a dynamic eccentric and inventor. The first volunteer to drive a London Underground train during the General Strike of 1926, he later became the Conservative Member of Parliament for Chatham with the topical slogan 'Plug in with Plugge.'

Since no competition with the BBC was allowed in Britain, Plugge decided to rent time on a foreign station and broadcast his dance music from there. Accordingly, he set off on a tour of the Continent to compare the strengths of various stations. His large car was equipped with a radio - a rarity at that time - powered by 25 kilogrammes of batteries welded to the car's chassis and operating a loudspeaker hanging from the roof like a lampshade. The vehicle had already caused him trouble in London when he ostentatiously parked it in the West End with the radio playing loudly. So many people crowded round that Plugge was arrested, taken to court, and fined for causing an obstruction.

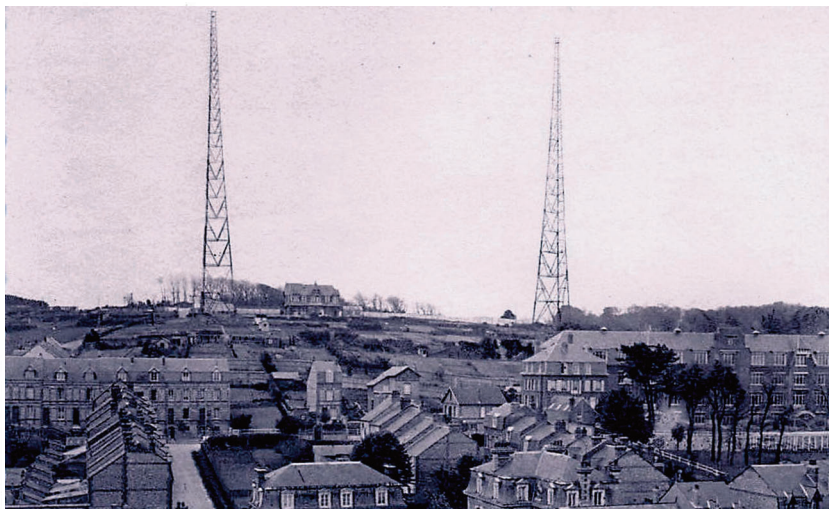
It is recounted that Plugge was driving along the coast of Normandy around 1930 and stopped for refreshment at Fécamp, where he was intrigued by a programme of music and chat on the cafe radio. He asked the *patron* what station it was: Radio Fécamp, he was told, and it belonged to Monsieur Le Grand, the manufacturer of Benedictine liqueur, who lived in the nearby big chateau. Plugge called on M. Le Grand and was shown the radio station in the owner's salon. Le

Above: The administration chateau in its park at Caudebec, 1935.

Right: Fécamp - the two masts 100 and 113 metres high that replace the original aerial.

Since no competition with the BBC was allowed in Britain, Plugge decided to rent time on a foreign station and broadcast his dance music from there.





Plugge called on M. Le Grand and was shown the radio station in the owner's salon. Le Grand told Plugge that it was his custom to broadcast continuous music and to intersperse it every half hour with talk. He related how he had one day mentioned on the air the name of a shoemaker in Le Havre and what good shoes he made, and that straight away the shoemaker's trade had increased enormously.

Grand told Plugge that it was his custom to broadcast continuous music and to intersperse it every half hour with talk. He related how he had one day mentioned on the air the name of a shoemaker in Le Havre and what good shoes he made, and that straight away the shoemaker's trade had increased enormously.

This anecdote impressed Plugge immensely. It was just what he had in mind: commercial radio. After making arrangements with M. Legrand, he drove into Le Havre to buy a pile of popular records (78 rpm in those days, 25.4 centimetres diameter). On the way he stopped at the National Provincial Bank to draw the necessary money and asked the teller, a young Englishman named William Evelyn Kingwell, if he knew anyone who would go to Fécamp on Sunday evenings and play a few records over the radio. Kingwell, who owned a motorcycle, said he would do it and so became the original disc jockey for Radio Normandy's English Service. He filled this part-time post for several weeks until the first regular presenter, Major Max Staniforth, arrived from England.

Staniforth, unemployed during the Great Depression and desperate for a job, had read Plugge's advertisement in the Daily Telegraph, applied personally, and obtained the post of running Radio Normandie (as it was at first). Plugge told him to take a box of records to Fécamp and announce each one over the microphone before playing it. In particular, at the start of every session he was to say: 'This is IBC starting its transmission for England.' IBC (International Broadcasting Company) was the name of the company Plugge had formed to operate the service. To bring the station to the notice of the British public, Plugge tried to advertise it in newspapers, but not wanting competition in this lucrative advertising field they refused his announcements. One, the Sunday Referee sporting newspaper, did briefly carry his advertisements in October 1931, but threats of punitive measures by the Newspaper Proprietors Association forced them to be stopped. But word had got around and Radio Normandy soon amassed a sizeable audience on 246 metres medium wave, especially on Sundays when the BBC opposition was negligible.

Having proved that the station could be heard in England and that he had an audience - sometimes greater than the BBC's - Plugge's next move was to find out if he could sell listeners anything 'over the air.' As an experiment, he and his co-director George Shanks made some face cream from a simple formula they had read in a household encyclopedia. In the kitchen of Shanks's mother, they mixed the ingredients in a saucepan and poured them into little black pots bearing the label 'Renus Skin Food.' These were sent to Max Staniforth with orders to advertise them over Radio Normandy. Staniforth produced an excellent sales pitch and promised all listeners who sent two

shillings and three pence (about 11p in modern money) in stamps or by cheque to an imposing sounding address in London, that they would receive 'a delightful jar of Renus Skin Food.' So much money poured in that Plugge and his partner had to employ an industrial chemist to produce enough face cream to satisfy the demand. Plugge now knew with certainty that he could sell through this radio station.

To popularize the station and increase his audience, Plugge started a club - motto 'Better and Brighter Radio' - for keen listeners to Radio Normandy. On 12 June 1932 the Sunday Referee newspaper announced that 50,000 applications for membership had been received since the club's formation a week previously. The next night the station began regular midnight broadcasts of dance music until 3 a.m. and by April 1933 Radio Normandy was broadcasting English programmes twelve hours on Sundays and six and a half hours on weekdays and Plugge began publishing a weekly IBC Programme Sheet. The popular Radio Pictorial magazine carried the station's schedule from 31 August 1934, for the station was by then a major attraction to British listeners.

Plugge's success with Radio Normandy infuriated the BBC's Director General who did not think radio should be used commercially any more than it should broadcast dance music on Sundays. Reith regarded himself as the arbiter of what the British public should be permitted to listen to on their radios, but as no law was being broken there was nothing he could legally do about it, even though it was suggested that he should jam Radio Normandy. In the end, he too was forced to broadcast light dance music on Sundays and to generally brighten the tone of the solemn Sabbath programmes. To add to Reith's fury, Plugge cheekily sited the headquarters of his International Broadcasting Company in London's Portland Place, right by the BBC's imposing Broadcasting House. The rival BBC and IBC staffs engaged in slanging matches in local pubs.

As Radio Normandy evolved, it changed its wavelength to 1304 metres long wave to give much better reception to a larger audience. Listeners to Plugge's programmes soon enjoyed music supposedly played by 'IBC orchestras' in 'IBC studios', but in reality neither the orchestras nor the studios existed: they were part of an image created by Plugge to impress his listeners. He equipped a mobile recording van to visit circuses and music halls, and his radio audiences were thrilled when the programme presenter announced: 'We take you now to such-and-such theatre where the show is just beginning'. What they really heard was not a live performance but a recording made some time before. Occasionally, this deception misfired, as when he unwittingly transmitted a 'live' show two weeks after the theatre had burned down!

As time passed and the station continued to thrive, Plugge aspired to broadcast genuine live dance-band music from famous ballrooms as the BBC were now doing, but the Post Office refused to rent him the high-quality telephone lines that he needed. Plugge overcame this setback in his own inimitable manner: he bought some 35-millimetre cinematograph cameras and recorded the bands on the sound tracks. The resulting quality was so amazingly realistic that his announcer easily persuaded the radio audience that they were listening to live broadcasts of the world's finest dance bands. Even the BBC were fooled and could not understand how it was done.

Plugge, aware of Reith's hostility and fearing that a 'dirty tricks department' operated by a hostile BBC, Customs and Post Office triumvirate would waylay his programme recordings, made intricate arrangements to avert any such sabotage. Instead of sending them direct to Fécamp, he included them in despatches to a record shop in Paris, where a clerk in his pay surreptitiously extracted the parcels and took them to



the French station, Poste Parisien, one of a chain in which Plugge now had an interest. The French station took out its own records and put the rest on the train to Fécamp. The programmes always got through.

Radio Normandy's move in 1935 to larger premises at Louvetot, with a 170 metres high pylon antenna fed by a 25-kilowatt transmitter, greatly increased the range and consequently the number of listeners in Britain.

The format eventually adopted by Plugge was to sell air time, usually 15 or 30 minutes, to individual advertisers who supplied their own recorded programme to be broadcast at a stipulated time. Directed at different sections of the British public, these programmes were designed to appeal to prospective purchasers of the advertised products. Thus, the manufacturers of a famous brand of working men's overalls broadcast 15 minutes of stirring march music deemed to suit the taste of manual workers. Palmolive toilet soap presented half an hour of modern music and Yankee-style cross-talk to attract a young audience, and a well-known brand of cigarette papers broadcast sporting news as being appropriate to 'own-rollers.' The programmes were extremely popular and many featured top entertainers of the era.

The time of day at which the advertisements went out was also important. On Sunday mornings the makers of a famous gravy powder aired a programme aimed at Mothers preparing the special Sunday dinner, whilst in the afternoon the makers of stomach powders targeted those who had partaken too well of the dinner.

Children were the objective of many programmes such as the Post Toasties Radio Corner featuring the serialised adventures of the twins Teena and Tony, plus the thrilling possibility of winning a half-crown (twelve and a half pence) prize; or Uncle Cough drop telling them exciting stories through the interested generosity of Pineate Honey Syrup Children's Cough Mixture. Cutey Cream Caramels aimed higher and presented The Story of Little Black Sambo, a popular classic.

Homemakers alone in the house all day enjoyed such programmes as Leisure at Eleven, with fluff-brained Mrs Feather, presented by Goblin Vacuum Cleaners during the morning tea break; Cookery Nook (clever play on words) 'a teatime rendezvous with a cookery expert' from MacDougall's self-raising flour; popular cinema organist Harold Ramsey playing by courtesy of Mansion Polish; Your Old Friend Dan (homespun Canadian philosophy and songs) from the rival Johnson's Wax Polish; and the Potted Show with Potted Facts and Puzzles from Senior's Potted Meats. Heart-wrenching daily soap operas wrung tears of sympathy from tender-hearted British housewives.

Health products made up a large number of sponsors: The Record Spinners, popular discs from Bismag Bisurated Magnesia; Thrilling Dramas from Cystex 'guaranteed cure for kidney troubles'; Teaser Time, a quiz set by Genozo Toothpaste; and Radio Normandy Calling, a half-hour show from Maclean's Toothpaste and Stomach Powder. Gypsy Petulengro told fortunes on behalf of Skol Antiseptic, whilst a rival disinfectant presented the Milton Singing Sisters (all unrelated), an imitation of the celebrated Viennese Seven Singing Sisters, one of whom incredibly sang basso profundo!

Keep Fit exercises to piano music, courtesy of Freezone Corn Remover, animated the early morning, and time-signals from Ingersoll Watches punctuated the day. Talent-spotting competitions challenged those who fancied their performing abilities. Stanelli and His Hornchestra (composed entirely of motor horns) entertained on behalf of Symington's Powdered Soup, and Philco presented a Slumber Hour of dance music - as well as the Philco Symphony Orchestra. And at the end of transmission, the haunting Close Down song 'Goodnight, Sweetheart, Goodnight' was crooned romantically by Ted Lewis. Most of the



artistes and the styles of programme were peculiar to that era and will be recalled with more than affection by older listeners, as will the single gong stroke that preceded all announcements.

Having achieved his objective of supplying British listeners with the lighter programmes they craved, and moreover forcing the BBC to do the same, Plugge simultaneously fulfilled his second ambition - to make himself wealthy. His enterprise brought him in £1000 a week (£50,000 a year; over US \$200,000 in those days) considered big money and he spent freely. His family lived in a house in London's fashionable Hyde Park tended by 15 servants including gardeners and chauffeurs, and he owned a private 50-seat cinema with professional projecting staff and a bar, as well as a yacht he kept at Cannes.

A social climber keen to cultivate the acquaintance of important people, Plugge threw lavish parties whose guests included foreign kings and queens. He ignored lesser people, and although the French government had awarded him an honour, he always considered he merited a higher title than that of *Chevalier* and should have been upgraded to *Commandeur*. Like Reith, he envisaged himself as eventually running this country and not merely a chain of radio stations, but he never came as close to attaining this goal as Reith did.

Radio Normandy's existence as a private station came to an end at the start of World War II, when it was taken over by the State. Its very last broadcast, ending at 1a.m. on Thursday 7th September 1939, was 30 minutes of English dance music in one of Plugge's programmes. Radio Normandy had had a most eventful life, and its invigorating effect upon the output of the BBC won it the heartfelt thanks of millions of British listeners. Many well-known radio and television personalities had begun their careers

Top: Louvetot - the main entrance, an archway flanked by two classical Norman buildings.

Above: Louvetot - the main building and base of the 170 metres high aerial pylon, 1935.

Radio Normandy's existence as a private station came to an end at the start of World War II, when it was taken over by the State. Its very last broadcast, ending at 1a.m. on Thursday 7th September 1939, was 30 minutes of English dance music in one of Plugge's programmes.



at Radio Normandy.

During the 1930s the British government had sided with Reith in trying to have broadcasts in English from foreign stations suppressed. They persuaded the International Union to agree that no nation should, as a general practice, broadcast in languages other than its own. Yet the BBC was among the first to break this rule with its propaganda broadcasts made after the Munich Conference. And from 1937 onwards a government-supported political organisation, the Joint Broadcasting Committee, hired time on Radio Normandy and other British-owned commercial broadcasting stations to transmit propaganda programmes, in German, to Germany. Plugge cooperated in this, and his multilingual engineer/disc jockey during 1938 and 1939 was attached to War Office Intelligence. Owing to the international agreement, such broadcasting had to be done circumspectly.

In 1945, with the war in Europe ended, Plugge lost his seat as a Member of Parliament during the General Election. He was not able to resurrect his association with Radio Normandy or any of the other stations in the chain he had created, and gradually faded from public view. The only prewar commercial station that recommenced transmissions to Britain was

Normandy's great rival, Radio Luxembourg, which continued for some years.

Plugge died in California in 1980, eccentric to the last; he was 92. Sadly, there is no monument to this remarkable entrepreneur or to his great partner, Radio Normandy, either in England or in France. The cafe in which Plugge conceived his great idea survives, though it now bears a different name, as does the square in which it is situated. But of the station that put the name of the little French town on millions of British radio dials there is no trace; even the building that housed the original transmitter no longer exists.

But in recent times there has been a resurgence of interest in Radio Normandy and its great impact on broadcasting in Europe. A citizen of Fécamp, Jean Lemaitre, has written a booklet "Allo! Allo! Ici Radio Normandie," Plugge has an English biographer, while the BBC itself has broadcast a brief history of its old adversary, with evocative recorded excerpts from the prewar programmes. Yet Radio Normandy does have its memorial - in the countless independent radio stations that today entertain the British public. From the outlawed Radio Caroline to popular Talk Sport, the spirit of Captain Plugge and Femand Le Grand lives on.

---