

# In search of Marconi – radio heritage in Cornwall

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My wife called it a “geek’s weekend”. I can’t see the local tourist board adopting the title, but if you’ve ever been interested in technology and wondered how it developed, Cornwall is a great place to visit and find out.

Not only is this south-west corner of England the home of radio and satellite communications, but it’s also where the original world wide web was developed – back in the late 1800s.

A good starting point is the Lizard – the most southerly tip of Great Britain. This was home to many of Marconi’s experiments and the National Trust now owns his original Lizard Wireless Station at Bass Point, which was used to receive signals from the Isle of Wight. This proved that signals could be received over the horizon and silenced Marconi’s critics.

Bass Point lies on the rocky South Coast path, just a short, blustery walk from the Lizard Point lighthouse. The re-created wireless station is open regularly throughout the year, but do check its website for times.

If Bass Point whets your appetite it was the tiny hamlet of Poldhu on the west coast of the Lizard that really put Cornwall on the map.

On December 12 1901, on a cold, windy hill overlooking St John’s, Newfoundland, Guglielmo Marconi received the faint “dot-dot-dot” of the Morse code letter “S” from his massive transmitter in Poldhu.



Marconi had chosen Poldhu for his famous experiment as it was as close as he could get to North America with a clear path over the 1,800-plus miles of Atlantic Ocean. The site in Cornwall was also chosen for its remoteness to keep the project out of the public eye and the newspapers.

Poldhu is now home to a purpose-built Marconi centre, which is run by very enthusiastic radio hams who are very keen to tell you about the history of radio and the part that Cornwall has played.

In addition to an audio-visual presentation and museum, you can also watch as the museum’s radio operators contact other enthusiasts around the world using the same techniques Marconi used more than 100 years ago.

The centre is open throughout the year, but the opening hours do vary.

The remains of Marconi’s long-defunct Poldhu Wireless Station are still visible if you look around the nearby field that sits high above the cliffs. And a granite monument to



Marconi's achievements stands proud on the South West Coast Path that runs between the popular Poldhu Cove and picturesque Mullion.

But Marconi wasn't the first to exploit Cornwall's geographical position in his quest for worldwide communications – and he wasn't the last either.

On the valley leading to Porthcurno beach, just south of Land's End, stands an innocuous little beach hut. Peer through the doorway though and

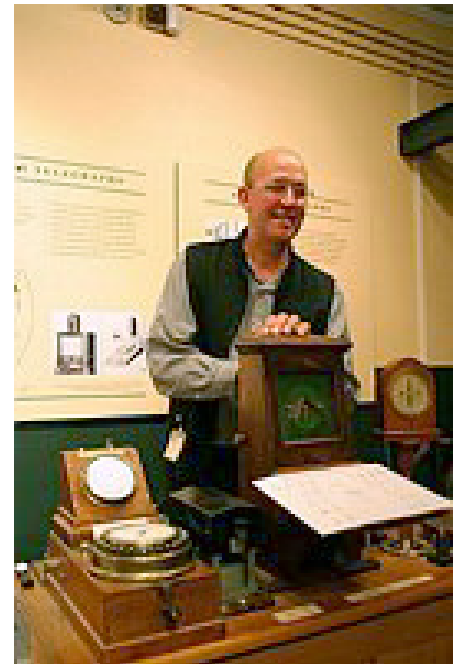
you'll see gutta-percha coated cables sprouting out of the ground, labelled with exotic names like Bilbao, Gibraltar, Lisbon, St Helena and Bombay.

The hut is the terminus, if you like, for a myriad of Victorian undersea cables that snaked out under Porthcurno beach to destinations around the British Empire.

The first cable was laid to Bombay (Mumbai) in 1870. It should have been terminated at Falmouth, but it was feared that ship's anchors might pull it up so the landing point was moved to the quiet sandy bay at Porthcurno.

By 1872 the cable had been extended to Australia, and Porthcurno, with 14 cables now running up the beach, became England's telecommunications gateway to the world – the hub of a Victorian internet if you like. This was how Great Britain really ran its empire.

During World War Two the site was deemed so important that tunnels with blast proof doors were built into the hillside to protect the station from German bombs. The tunnels are now home to the Porthcurno Telegraph Museum, just down the hill from the famous Minack open air theatre.



The museum houses a fascinating collection of early communications equipment, including a working replica of the radio transmitter used on the ill-fated Titanic. The staff give talks and demonstrations as to how rich and well-heeled Victorians sent telegrams across the world for ridiculously high prices. Upstairs, the kids can dress up as Victorians, build their own Morse decoder or do what they do best – "colouring in" at the well-stocked children's area.

Walk down the valley from the museum and cables can still be seen snaking up the rocks that back the white sands of Porthcurno beach, one of the finest in southern Cornwall and perfect for a family picnic.

But if you are still on the telecommunications trail there's still more to explore.

Marconi chose Cornwall as he wanted to be close to North America, and Porthcurno became the telegraph nerve centre of the British Empire due to its easy access to the

Atlantic. But British Telecom moved onto the Lizard in the early 1960s for a very different reason.

BT's Goonhilly Satellite Earth Station, lies just south of Helston. In the middle of a nature reserve, the site is home to 60 satellite dishes, the biggest named after characters from the legends of King Arthur. These include the Grade II-listed 25.9 metre Arthur, which received the first signals from the Telstar satellite in 1962.

Goonhilly was chosen due to its clear atmosphere and lack of electromagnetic interference. The solid serpentine rock also provided a sturdy base for the 1100-ton Arthur, which needed a clear 180-degree horizon to track satellites over both the Atlantic and Indian oceans.



It was Goonhilly that broadcast the 1985 Live Aid concert to more than two billion people in 100 countries.

Nowadays, it is home to a very hi-tech visitors' centre where you can guide your own satellite dish, try Morse code, video conference with someone thousands of miles away or take a guided shuttle bus tour.

You can even don a hard hat for a guided tour around the mammoth Arthur. When the kids get bored, which is unlikely to happen, there is also a well-stocked play area.

A geek's weekend it may be, but Cornwall has a lot to offer if you get fed up buckets, spades and ice creams. Where else can you find so much telecommunications history in one place?

## **Websites:**

**The Marconi Centre, Poldhu**

<http://gb2gm.org.uk/>

**Lizard Wireless Station (Bass Point)**

<http://www.lizardwireless.org>

**Porthcurno Telegraph Museum**

<http://www.porthcurno.org.uk>

**Goonhilly Satellite Earth Station**

<http://www.goonhilly.bt.com/>

**South West Coast Path Association**

<http://www.swcp.org.uk>