

Fort Regent Signal Station: A new era

Doug Ford describes how the 200-year-old tradition of weather and shipping signals at Fort Regent has been revived by a team from the Jersey Heritage.



In December 2004 the Island lost a little piece of its unique heritage when budget constraints meant that the signal station at Fort Regent would cease to operate. After three centuries, the last manned signal station in the British Isles closed down.

It had been operated and funded jointly by the States of Jersey Education, Sport and Culture Committee and Jersey Harbours. New technologies meant that the bulk of the information given out by the station was more readily accessible to the Island population through other media. The strong wind warnings issued by the Jersey Met Office were broadcast by both local radio stations, they featured on the local television news and weather reports and could be accessed by teletext.

The arrival by plane of the newspapers and the mail in the Island was announced on local radio; the mailboats no longer ran. Shipping movements in the port of St Helier had reduced to such a low number that they appeared on teletext and in the daily newspaper. It seemed that the one o'clock Fort flag was redundant.

The most obvious feature that could not be replaced was the dressing of the signal mast overall for special occasions, and so the Jersey Heritage stepped in and took over this responsibility, while Jersey Harbours continued to operate the strong-wind warning lights (although this service ceased at the end of 2005). Aware that, despite the modern technologies, many Islanders still felt the loss of the signal station, Jersey Heritage set about organising a new approach to operating the signal mast as part of their public programme.

The Signal Station photographed in 1965 by Jersey Evening Post



The Signal Station dressed overall

Using a small team from the Maritime Museum boatshop, a new set of signals was worked up to ensure that the tradition was not lost. In November 2006, once the mast was floodlit, a Jersey flag was flown from the masthead, and at the end of December the message 'Season's Greetings' was spelled out in code flags for the twelve days of Christmas, while the traditional Christmas star was hoisted from the north yard.

In January 2007 the flying of the T-flag for tides over 38ft (11.6m) and hoisting the strong wind/gale warning during the day and the lights at night was reintroduced. While it is no longer possible to fly the house flags of vessels in port, the team – continuing one of the station's original roles – will be flying the relevant national flags to advise of visiting warships. They will also be marking Veterans' Day, Merchant Navy Day and Trafalgar Day with the flying of relevant flags or ensigns, and the illuminated Easter Cross will be hoisted in the week before Easter.

Commenting on the increased service, Trust Director Jonathan Carter said: 'This is about a living tradition. After the Napoleonic Wars, it was Jersey's merchants who kept the signal station, so it's one of the strongest symbols of the commercial traditions of the harbour, and in a wider sense of Jersey's entrepreneurial spirit. This was the last manned signal station in the British Isles and it is a unique and special tradition.'

Military use

Sited on the highest point of Mont de la Ville, the signal station was reputed to be one of three built in 1708 to warn Islanders against the threat of invasion. A view of the Town Hill published in 1757 by J Heath shows a mast on the site of the present signal station, and this is supported by another print made from a drawing by J Bastide and C Lemprière in 1738. However, the mast's purpose cannot be deduced from the images.

The need for an efficient signalling system was brought to the attention of the authorities in the 1780s after the French launched two invasion attempts on the Island, one in 1779, which was repulsed in St Ouen's Bay, and the other in 1781, which resulted in the Battle of Jersey and the lesser known action at Platte Rocque. These attacks created such a climate of uncertainty within Jersey that the idea grew that there should be an early-warning system put in place to warn Islanders of impending danger. It was also recognised that such a system could also have a commercial benefit in that it could be used to signal the approach of the Royal Navy, merchant vessels and mail packets.

The newly re-formed Chamber of Commerce have been given the credit for raising the idea and for encouraging the Lieutenant-Governor, Major-General Andrew Gordon, to present the scheme to the Island's Defence Committee. In a report submitted to the States of Jersey on 18 January 1792 it was proposed that a chain of ten signal stations should be erected on high points around the coast. The sites selected were at La Moye, Noirmont Point, Mont de la Ville (later the site of Fort Regent), Herket (Mont Ubé), Verclut, Mont Orgueil, St Martin, Le Bouley, Mont Mado and Grosnez.

The report argued that such a system would not only ensure a more effective defence of the Island, but would also benefit and protect commerce. The States decided in favour and work began on construction. Most of the land required for these stations was given by the States and each building cost between £156 and £229.

The stations were manned by naval personnel rather than the military because the Royal Navy were used to signalling in code, using flags and pennants. At night, cannon and fire beacons were used. Each station was manned by a lieutenant, a midshipman and two seamen.

When Philippe d'Auvergne was given command of the Royal Navy flotilla in the Island later in 1792, he had another signal

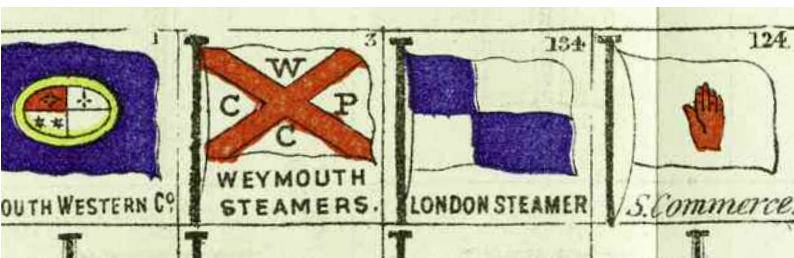
mast erected at his property at La Hougue Bie. Unlike the other sites, this was inland and, whereas the other stations were only visible to their immediate neighbours, a lookout on the roof of the Prince's Tower could see the entire Island system. As such, d'Auvergne regarded La Hougue Bie as the centre of the Island-wide signalling process.

When the French Revolutionary Wars ended and the Treaty of Amiens was signed in March 1802, the States, in an effort to reduce costs, tried to get rid of the stations. Contents were sold and even the station buildings were put up for sale. The unsatisfactory peace did not last for long, and as war again looked imminent, the States realised that they had been too hasty in their desire to save money. Instructions were given that the stations should be re-established, but James Pipon, the occupant of the Noirmont station, refused to surrender the property, and so extra land had to be purchased and a new station quickly built.

In France, a system of semaphore had been invented by Claude Chappe. It used two arms on a connecting cross arm which could be pivoted to pass messages over long distances. Chappe's system offered a potential 196-combination code and proved to be the world's first effective telecommunication system. Other countries copied it, with the first ones appearing in England in 1795. Peter Archer Mulgrave, described as 'a commercial gentleman of ingenious mechanical ability', is credited with the introduction of the new system into Jersey in 1810, but there are no illustrations from the time showing this type of semaphore in the Island.

Using semaphore, messages could be passed from Jersey to the other islands and could pass on information to similar stations in Guernsey, Sark and Alderney. The stations at Grosnez in Jersey, Jerbourg in Guernsey, Sark and Alderney had their telegraph arms made extra large to make them more identifiable across the sea.

In 1811, the Lieutenant-Governor, General Don, repeated his instruction that if the Island was threatened by invasion, then a red flag would be hoisted to the top of the mast at Mont de la Ville (Fort Regent), two black balls placed at the west yardarm and then two cannon shots fired. If the attack took place at night, the beacon would be lit and three cannon shots fired. The alarm would be taken up over the Island and the parish church bells would be rung to alert the regular troops and militia.



Detail: 1878 Jersey Signals

Commercial use

While it has been stated that each station had one main mast and two yardarms – the four points of the two yardarms representing direction, the top East and West and the lower one North and South – this may simply refer to the military signal stations. However, as yet none of the historic images of Fort Regent in the Jersey Heritage collection has confirmed this, and the signal cards included in the various almanacs since the early 1840s consistently show one yardarm.

Throughout the Napoleonic Wars the system gave excellent service, but once hostilities war ended in 1814¹ and peace was concluded with France, the signal stations lost their military role and became superfluous. On 16 May 1814 several merchants from St Helier held discussions with General Don requesting that the signal stations from La Moye Hill to Fort Regent be kept for commercial reasons. The Chamber of Commerce agreed to an annual contribution towards the running cost of £12, but on the strict understanding that this would stop as soon as the British Government required them for a military purpose. Responsibility for the maintenance and repair of the stations rested with the Admiralty, although from time to time the States made additional payments and gradually assumed more and more responsibility.

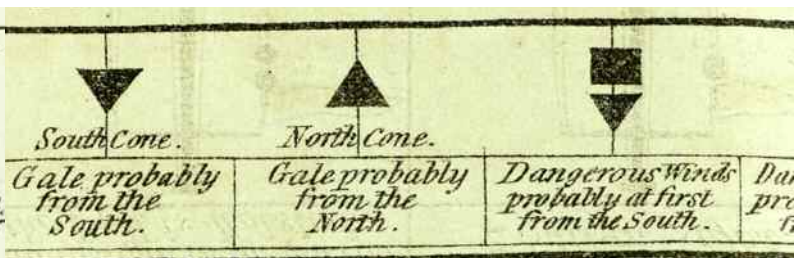
Between 1868 and 1878 the States paid out between £30 and £70 annually for the upkeep of the Fort Regent station, while the War Department paid out £5 a year for the maintenance of the instruments, flags, ropes, balls, etc, and the Jersey Harbourmaster provided the coals.²

Over the years different signals have been made to convey information to the merchants and port authorities, and these were printed in the trade almanacs that were published annually. These generally involved hoisting the house flag of whichever company the approaching vessel belonged, and then a box and pennant to indicate direction. In the 1860s a simple code using two flags, two pennants and a ball, to represent the numerals 1 to 5 was devised and each shipping merchant was allocated a number. These Corresponding Signals allowed messages to be passed along the coast from La Moye to St Helier.

In 1885 the signal stations at La Moye and Noirmont were transferred to the States, although on the understanding that if they ceased to be operated as signal stations then the property would be handed back.

The introduction of the electric telegraph from Corbière lighthouse to Fort Regent in 1888 meant that the station at Noirmont was redundant and the system of numeral pennants was scrapped. The Fort Regent signal station remained under the ownership of the War Department until 1958, when the States of Jersey bought the entire Fort (excluding South Hill) for £14,500. In 1967, when the Fort Regent Development Committee came into being, the signal station was placed under the administration of the Harbours Department.

In recent years the most frequent commercial harbour activity has been in the hands of the ferry operators, and as they run to a timetable, the hoisting of house flags has had limited information value.



Detail: 1877 Jersey Signals weather

Weather warnings

In 1859 a terrific storm that caused havoc across the British Isles led Admiral Robert FitzRoy³ to develop a system of forecasting weather by using a synoptic chart. With this in view he set up a series of land stations, which would telegraph their weather at certain hours to a collection point in London on a daily basis. As the Post Office had laid its telegraph cable to Jersey in 1858, Fort Regent was included as one of these stations.

These forecasts were of great benefit to seamen and have proved of inestimable value to shipping, especially since 1861, when FitzRoy introduced the storm cone. A black triangle was hoisted when a gale (Beaufort force 8 and above) was to be expected. Initially, a black cylinder was hoisted with the triangle in the case of 'dangerous winds', although this seems to have been discontinued in the late 1870s.

Known locally as the 'dread signal', the cone was hoisted on telegraphic instructions to the Harbourmaster from the British Meteorological Office, which was originally based at the Board of Trade and then in South Kensington, before they later moved to Dunstable Weather Centre. A second telegram ordered its lowering. In 1969, responsibility for gale warnings was passed to the States Meteorological Office. It was at about this time, as yachting grew in popularity in the Island, that a ball was hoisted beneath the cone if a wind of force 6 or 7 was expected. The first time it was noted in the *Evening Post Almanac* was in 1971.

Today Jersey Heritage receive weather warnings by fax, the duty signalman is then notified and the relevant warning hoisted, while at night the lights – three red lights for the triangle and a white light above a green light for the ball – operated by Port Control, have been reinstated.

Despite being unmanned, once again the signal station is playing its part in the daily life of St Helier.

Further reading

W Davis, *Fort Regent* (1971).

A Gibb, *A Conservation Report for Fort Regent Jersey* (2006).

MB Kavanagh, 'Signal Stations in Jersey' in *Annual Bulletin of the Société Jersiaise*, Vol XX, pt 2 (1970).

Rev. P Manton, *Jersey Weather and Tides* (1995).

J Stead, *A Picture of Jersey, or Stranger's Companion Through That Island* (1809).

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¹ The crisis caused by the return of Napoleon in 1815 did not generate the type of panic that had been the case in 1803. There was no clamour to reinstate the station network.

² A. Gibb (2006): *A Conservation Report for Fort Regent Jersey*, p 26.

³ Robert FitzRoy (1805-1865) was in command of HMS *Beagle* during its voyage of exploration (1831-36) on which Charles Darwin was naturalist. He retired from active duty in 1850 and in 1854 he was appointed Meteorological Statistician by the Board of Trade.