

A History of Red Sands Army Fort

Red Sands Radio will commemorate 40 years since the closure of most of the UK's offshore radio stations with an RSL broadcast on 1278 kHz between 14th & 23rd July 2007 from one of the WWII Thames Estuary forts used by the 1960's offshore "pirates" - Red Sands Army Fort.

Red Sands was one of three Army forts positioned in the Thames Estuary in 1943 to protect the coast and Port of London from enemy attack. (The Nore and Shivering Sand were the other two Army forts). The previous year, 1942, had seen four Naval sea forts (which differed in design from the Army forts) placed in position in the estuary - Roughs Tower, Sunk Head, Tongue Sands and Knock John.

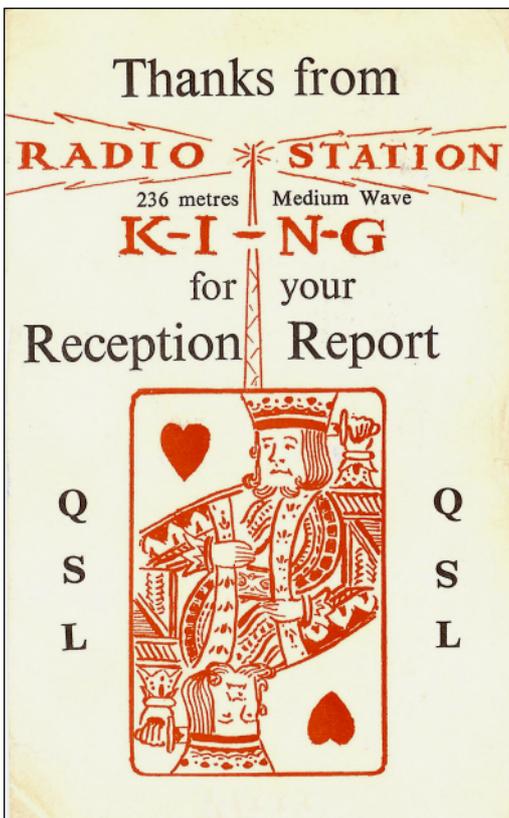
The Red Sands Army Fort was positioned at co-ordinates 51.28.62 North, 0.59.60 East, about six miles off Minster, Isle of Sheppey (about 8.5 miles off Whitstable) over the period July 23rd to September 3rd 1943. The Army forts consisted of five anti-aircraft gun towers surrounding a central control & radar tower. A seventh searchlight tower completed the fort. The towers were connected by walkways. Each tower was 95 feet high with an eight-sided steel building atop four concrete legs. At the end of the war in Europe, the forts were still maintained for a period, with civilian watch keepers on board, until they were finally abandoned to the elements in 1956.

The first fort to be occupied by one of the sixties pirate stations was the Shivering Sands Army fort - occupied by "Screaming Lord Sutch's" **Radio Sutch** from May 27th 1964. The Red Sands Army fort off Whitstable was used by Radio Invicta (July 1964 to February 1965), King Radio (February 1965 to September 1965) and Radio 390 (25th September 1965 until 28th July 1967).

Radio Invicta started broadcasts on July 17th 1964 on 306 metres (985 kHz) from 6am to 6pm. It was low-powered and only had a range of around 75 miles. The station was run by Tom Pepper (actually a tug skipper from Folkestone - Harry Featherbee). The station was notorious for the number of times it called out the emergency services due to injured staff or running out of drinking water etc. On December 17th 1964 tragedy struck when Tom Pepper was drowned,

together with 21 year-old DJ Simon Ashley and 18 year-old engineer Martin Shaw (neither of whom could swim) when their boat "David" sank en route to Faversham from Red Sands Fort. Tom Pepper's body was washed ashore near Whitstable. Some time later an unidentified body was washed ashore on the coast of Spain with a 3-inch spool of tape. When the tape was dried and played, it was part of a Radio Invicta programme. Tom Pepper's wife and journalist John Thompson ran Radio Invicta for a couple of months following the tragedy until Invicta closed in February 1965.

On 25th February 1965, Red Sands fort started beaming out the programmes of **King Radio**. Regular programmes started on 24th March on 236 metres (1268 khz). The station was run by John Thompson and five other Kent businessmen. The station broadcast "good music" with artists such as Frank Sinatra & Ella Fitzgerald but only had an estimated audience of 20,000. Ted Allbeury was called in to improve the station and King Radio closed on 22nd September 1965, broadcasting a message in its final days to retune to its replacement, Radio 390.



left: KING Radio QSL card from Paul Walton's collection

The most successful station to broadcast from the Red Sands fort was **Radio 390** which launched on September 25th 1965 on 390 metres (773 kHz). Managed by Ted Allbeury, the station had offices in Folkestone and London, and broadcast from 6.30am to midnight, covering a large part of Southern England, the East coast and the Midlands with its easy-listening format, aimed especially at housewives. Its success was largely due to its strong signal, from a new 35 kW transmitter and a 297-foot aerial on top of one of the 95 foot towers. Its audience was claimed to be 6 million. In some places the signal was reported to be better than that of the BBC's Light programme. Programmes included "Continental Cabaret", "Serenade", "Music from the Shows" and even an Australian soap, "Dr Paul", competing with the BBC Light programme's "Mrs Dale's Diary" (thanks to Paul Walton for newspaper cutting above).

Yo-ho-ho! Pirate tackles the Dales

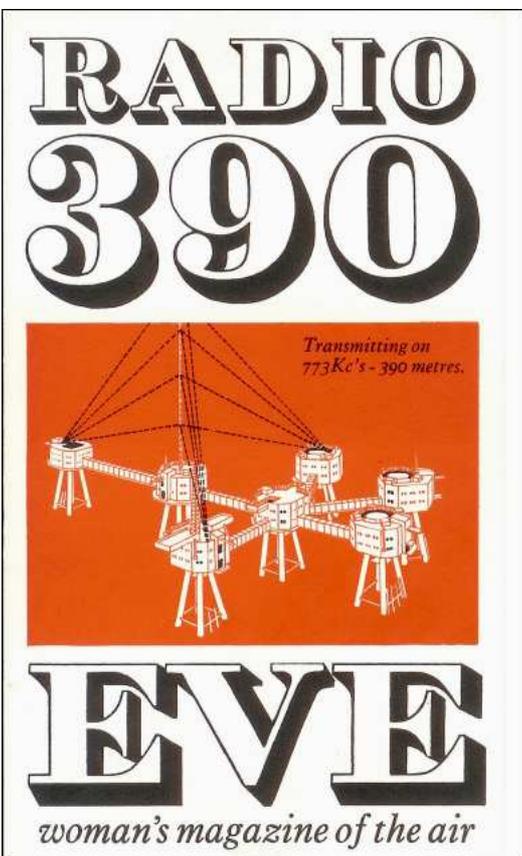
A "PIRATE" radio is to broadcast a serial about a doctor's family at the same time as the BBC puts out its own programme about a doctor's family—"The Dales."

Radio 390, which operates from a disused fort off Whitstable, Kent, will broadcast "Dr. Paul," a fifteen-minute programme, every morning starting next Monday.

A 390 official said yester-

day: "We have deliberately fixed the time so that it coincides with 'The Dales'—and we feel sure we will capture listeners."

"Dr. Paul" has been bought from overseas. It has been pre-recorded and is already heard in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.



But in November 1966 Radio 390 was fined £100 for broadcasting within UK territorial waters. The exposure of Middle Sands bank in the Thames estuary meant UK waters extended to cover the Red Sands fort and so it was subject to the 1949 Wireless Telegraphy Act according to the UK authorities. Radio 390 closed on 25th November following the ruling and appealed unsuccessfully. But after consulting an expert who said Middle Sands was no longer uncovered at low water, Radio 390 started transmitting again on 31st December 1966. As a result, the station's directors received a summons in February 1967 and the station was fined £200 at Rochford Magistrates Court. The court did not accept the station's expert's opinion. Ted Allbeury then resigned and started ship-borne Radio 355. Radio 390 however continued to broadcast until closing on 28th July 1967, ahead of the Marine Offences Bill became law on August 15th 1967. In the 1970s, the catwalks between the towers were removed to prevent trespassing. Project Redsand has now been set up to try and preserve this fort (see www.project-redsand.com). (AP)

left: Radio 390 card (Paul Walton)

Compiled by **Alan Pennington** from information in Frank R. Turner's booklets: "The Radio Pirates aboard the Offshore Forts in the Thames Estuary" (ISBN 01-901132-06-4) & "The Maunsell Sea Forts" (ISBN 01-901132-08-0). Also Keith Skues' excellent "Pop went the Pirates" and Gerry Bishop's "Offshore Radio".

This article by Alan Pennington is from the July 2007 edition of "Communication"

Communication is the official monthly bulletin of the British DX Club © 2008

Articles and photographs may only be reproduced with permission. Please contact the General Editor with any enquiries editor [at] bdx.org.uk