

Numismatic Graffiti - End the BBC Monopoly – Fight for Free Radio

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The acquisition of two unrecognised bronze pennies at the bottom of a numismatic junk-box brought back vague recollections from my childhood about offshore radio stations, which hadn't properly registered at the time. The coins are shown below (125%).

Obv. END / THE B.B.C. / MONOPOLY / F

Rev. FIGHT / FOR / FREE F / RADIO

Notes. Message written in white block capitals across the obverse and reverse of a normal 1966 penny.



Obv. END / THE / B.B.C. / MONOPOLY / F

Rev. No modifications.

Notes. Message written in white block capitals across the reverse of a normal 1916 penny.



X-ray analysis of the top of the reverse of the first piece, where the white has most coverage reveals 1.9% titanium amongst the 93.8% copper and 2.4% tin. This is likely the titanium oxide (titanium white) that is the main colouring component of 'liquid paper'. This was an opaque white correction fluid sold under various trade names such as 'Tipp-Ex' or 'Snopake' in the UK or 'Cover-It' or 'White Out' by BIC in the US. The fluid was used to correct typing errors on paper when using mechanical typewriters. The fluid was applied using a small brush attached to the bottle lid, which would explain the style of the writing.

The messages added to the coins are clearly political in nature.

The British Broadcasting Company Ltd was founded in 1922 as a private corporation limited to British manufacturers.⁽¹⁾ On 1 January 1927 Parliament liquidated the company and created the British Broadcasting Corporation. The original charter for the BBC gave the company a monopoly over all types of television and radio broadcasting. The passing of the Television Act of 1954 ended the television monopoly and allowed the creation of a commercial channel operated by the Independent Television Authority in 1955.

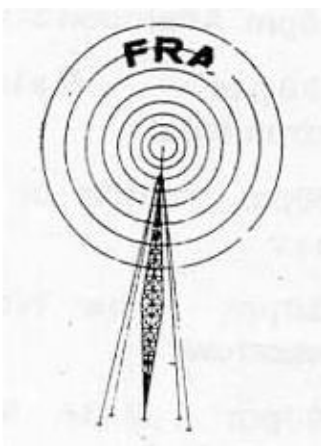
The monopoly on radio transmissions would continue until legislation in 1972 and the first transmissions from LBC in London on 8 October 1973. However, the BBC monopoly did not preclude radio transmissions from offshore stations. Thus commercial radio stations appeared with transmitters based on ships in the North Sea and English Channel. Funded by advertising these stations reached out to a younger and more progressive audience than the old guard at the BBC. And it wasn't just Britain with outfits such as Radio Caroline and Radio 270, the Netherlands had Radio Veronica and Radio North Sea International. These also transmitted towards Britain along with several other offshore 'pirate' radio stations.⁽²⁾ The larger stations could boast listening audiences in the millions, hence the advertising revenue and the establishments' attempts to suppress uncontrolled transmissions and messages.⁽³⁾

In December 1966 a white paper from the British government revealed plans to create a National Pop Station (to become BBC Radio 1) along with nine local stations. However, alongside this came the Marine Offences Bill which would make illegal and bring to an end the broadcasting from ships offshore. Organisations were formed to fight the changes including the Commercial Radio Listeners Association (29 January 1967), and the

Free Radio Supporters Association (19 February 1967).⁽²⁾ Shortly after a meeting on 19 February, they would all combine to form the Free Radio Association (FRA) with a headquarters at 239 Eastwood Road, Rayleigh, Essex.⁽⁴⁾ This was well organised with a large, mostly volunteer, staff and had Sir Ian Mactaggart as president.⁽²⁾ A petition was started with the following message.

The "Free Radio Association" is fighting for free speech, free enterprise and free choice. The government is trying to crush all competition over the air by silencing the commercial stations — thereby preserving the monopoly of the BBC and depriving us of the freedom to listen to the stations of our choice. This is a step towards dictatorship. If the Marine Broadcasting Bill becomes law in its present form, free speech will be suppressed, and the "Free Radio Association" will be partially silenced. We have pledged that we will fight until we win.

This is more than a petition. It's a declaration that we, the British people, will fight for freedom of the air as we have fought before when our freedom has been threatened. It is a declaration that we, the undersigned, support the "Free Radio Association" in its fight for the right of the public to listen to the independent radio stations. And it is a declaration that we the undersigned will use our votes to remove this government from power at the first opportunity, and replace it with a government which believes in free speech, free enterprise and free choice



Several other events took place to raise awareness of the issues. On 28 May 1967, about 2,000 people marched from Trafalgar Square to Fleet Street in support of their favourite radio stations. Later in the summer of 1967 the 'Free Radio Ball' was held and in August 1968, the first of what would become an annual meeting was held to commemorate the end of offshore radio. From 10-17 June 1969, the Free Radio Week was held, culminating in a protest in Trafalgar square, attended by about 4,000 people.

The Free Radio Association had its own logo (pictured left⁽²⁾) and much merchandise was produced to help fund the activity, including posters and T-shirts with the main message 'fight for FREE RADIO' (pictured below⁽²⁾).

Throughout the whole of this, the Government and Post Office carried out a campaign of transmitting jamming signals on the frequencies of the offshore stations. When the stations changed their frequency, the jamming followed.

Whilst leader of the opposition, Harold Wilson had bought a T-shirt from the FRA, commenting that the design should have been in red!⁽²⁾ However when the Labour government came to power the jamming signals continued and an even more powerful jamming transmitter was turned on, which also interfered with official radio and TV transmissions in the southeast. An official response from the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications, went as follows.



Following the recent change of Government the Minister has carefully considered the problems of pirate broadcasting and has stated that the Government must abide by its international obligations in combating the illicit use of wavelengths. In order to force a pirate radio station, Radio Northsea International, off the air a transmitter has been activated, but not before its interference potential was tested. Tests with ordinary domestic receivers show no interference to Radio One beyond the immediate vicinity of the transmitter.

Our action in opposing the pirate stations has been fully accepted by the International Frequency Registration Board of the International Telecommunications Union, which is the international authority on interference and the control of frequencies. If in maintaining our stand in defence of law and order we have caused interference to the reception of Radio One to a very small number of listeners it cannot be compared with the number of listeners who are receiving interference from the pirate by his own deliberate act. I am extremely sorry for any interference you are experiencing from our transmitter. But I am sure you would agree that it is essential to maintain law and order in the field of broadcasting and in the use of scarce radio frequencies and that is the sole aim of our action.

Pirate radio transmissions continued until 19 August 1989 when a combined force from the British and Dutch Navies raided ships in the North Sea and confiscated the equipment. What couldn't be removed was broken. Eighteen months later when a European court ruled that the raid and confiscation of the equipment was illegal, the equipment was returned. However the intended damage had been done and pirate radio had come to an end.

Conclusions

Thus it is likely that the messages were added to the pennies at some time between the formation of the Free Radio Association in late February 1967 and Decimalisation Day on the 15 February 1971, when the old pennies ceased to circulate, but most likely sometime in 1967. All of the added designs include an extra symbol, similar to a letter 'F' with a tail, possibly a 'JF' monogram. The exact meaning of this has not yet been determined and no one with the initials JF has been found working for the FRA.⁽³⁾

The difficulty and tedium of creating these pieces would have meant that they were not made in large numbers and when in circulation, the message would quickly be worn away.

The pieces fit into the class of political statements added to coins to advertise the protest. These range from Thomas Spence's 'NO LANDLORDS' countermarks of the 1790s, to the 'VOTES FOR WOMEN' countermarks from just before the First World War, and the CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament) stickers applied to coins in the 1970s.

References and Acknowledgements

- (1) <https://www.britannica.com/topic/British-Broadcasting-Corporation>
- (2) https://www.icce.rug.nl/~soundscapes/VOLUME06/Fight_free_radio.shtml
- (3) www.campaignforindependentbroadcasting.co.uk
- (4) http://www.bookamook.com/kaleidoscope/profiles/geoffrey-pearl/?fbclid=IwAR3i5s_HFMnvVPeQF8diuik1iwhQIDrbFf9rYjMthOtV3hL1xihV5YP-OTk

