



Private Telegraph Companies

Introduction

The development of the telegraph system in the United Kingdom closely followed the growth of the railways with telegraph offices often being located at stations. A close relationship also existed between the two sets of companies with a great deal of crossover of names in the lists of shareholders and directors. The Government allowed the network to develop under private ownership and did not intervene significantly in its running. This was in sharp contrast to the telegraph system on the Continent which had been under state ownership since its inception.

By 1868 there were five major telegraph companies operating the inland network, all of which were open to criticism regarding errors, delays and high prices. Frank Ives Scudamore campaigned on behalf of the Post Office for them to be nationalised citing how unfavourably they compared with those on the Continent. Despite protestations from the companies a series of Acts of Parliament were passed and the telegraph system came under control of the Post Office in 1870.

The first successful submarine (under sea) telegraph cable was laid in 1851 between England and France. Following this the number of submarine cables operated by private companies grew. BT Archives holds the records of the companies which were subsequently taken over by the Post Office, while those that went on to form Cable & Wireless are held at Porthcurno Telegraph Museum.

These records were transferred to BT Archives from the Post Office in 1992. They were previously catalogued as part of POST 81, but have been re-catalogued to reflect the provenance of these companies and improve access to these collections. Each company now has its own reference code.

Inland private telegraph companies

The telegraph has been referred to as the 'Victorian internet' and from 1840s until 1860s it was a boom industry just like the early years of the internet. During this period many telegraph companies were formed in the UK, not all of them were operational. It was common for them to merge with other companies and subsequently change their names. A summary of the main inland companies, whose records are held by BT Archives, is given below, and a chart showing relationships between the companies can be found on page 6.

Electric Telegraph Company (1846-55) BT Archives ref: TGA

The Electric Telegraph Company (ETC), the first electric telegraph company in Britain, was established by an Act of Parliament in 1846. It was set up by William Fothergill Cooke and Joseph Lewis Ricardo using Cooke and Charles Wheatstone's patents. The ETC's major growth period coincided with the expansion of the railways in the 1840s by providing electric communication to the railways' signal operators. The company grew rapidly with the realisation of the electric telegraph's potential for the transmission of news. In 1852



Electric Telegraph Company, main hall, c1848 (ARC 76)

arrangements between the ETC, the Astronomer Royal and the South Eastern Railway Company were made for transmitting Greenwich Mean Time signals.

International Telegraph Company (1853-55) BT Archives ref: TGC

The International Telegraph Company was formed by the Electric Telegraph Company in 1852. The ETC obtained a concession from the Dutch Government in 1852 to lay wires from Orfordness, on the east coast of England, to Scheveningham in Holland and then to The Hague. However, the Dutch Government objected to the Holland line of new submarine telegraph cable being made by the ETC, and so the International Telegraph Company was formed to work with the Dutch Government. This new company was managed by the ETC using ETC staff and laid two cables in 1853 and 1854 from Orfordness to Scheveningham.

Electric and International Telegraph Company (1855-70) BT Archives ref: TGE

In July 1855 the Electric Telegraph Consolidation Act enabled the ETC and ITC to formally merge, becoming the Electric and International Telegraph Company (EITC). By 1868 it was the largest telegraph company in the country. The company was against nationalisation, however, the Telegraph Acts were passed and in 1870 it was taken over by the Post Office.

In 1858 and 1859 independent companies were established by the EITC to lay submarine cables from Weymouth to the Channel Islands and from Cumberland to the Isle of Man. The Channel Islands Telegraph Company (CITC) actively operated as a subsidiary of the EITC until 1862 when repeated technical problems with the cable placed a strain on the CITC's resources and it was ultimately unable to raise the funds to undertake the necessary repairs. However, the CITC continued to exist as an operating company until it was taken over by the Post Office in 1870.

British Electric Telegraph Company (1850-53) BT Archives ref: TGB

The British Electric Telegraph Company was formed by Act of Parliament in 1850, and used the patents of Henry and Edward Highton. It was intended to rival the monopoly of the Electric Telegraph Company and had the opportunity to do so due to the expanding railway system.

British Telegraph Company (1853-57) BT Archives ref: TGL

In 1853 the British Electric Telegraph Company merged with the European and American Electric Printing Telegraph Company (1851-54) to form the British Telegraph Company. Its purpose was to lay down submarine and other telegraph cables to link London and Dublin and major towns in Great Britain, Ireland and Europe.

English and Irish Magnetic Telegraph Company (1852-57) BT Archives ref: TGN

The English and Irish Magnetic Telegraph Company was founded by Royal Charter in 1852 to work the patents of William Thomas Henley and David George Foster. It was previously known as the Magnetic Telegraph Company (1851-52).

British and Irish Magnetic Telegraph Company (1857-70) BT Archives ref: TGF

In April 1857 the British Telegraph Company merged with the English and Irish Magnetic Telegraph Company to form the British and Irish Magnetic Telegraph Company. It was subsequently taken over by the Post Office in 1870.

United Kingdom Electric Telegraph Company (1851-70) BT Archives ref: TGH

The United Kingdom Electric Telegraph Company (UKETC) was established by Act of Parliament in 1851, but did not start active operation until July 1860. Its intention was to introduce a system based on the penny post to convey messages at a uniform rate of one shilling per message of twenty words. By the time it started operating other telegraph companies were well established and it would have been difficult for a new company to compete at their rates. The use of the one shilling rate was crucial to the survival of the

UKETC and the company was successful despite attempts to hinder it by the already established companies. It was taken over by the Post Office in 1870.

London District Telegraph Company, also known as the London and Provincial Telegraph Company (1859-70) BT Archives ref: TGG

The London District Telegraph Company (LDTC) was established in 1859, to develop telegraphic communication within a radius of four miles from Charing Cross (London), with provision to extend to 20 miles. It employed a roof-to-roof wiring system, instead of installing underground cables. For a short time in 1867 it became the London and Provincial Telegraph Company and was taken over by the Post Office in 1870. The impact of the LDTC and the UKETC was to increase competition on the network. This led to lower tariffs which in turn created greater demand for telegraphic facilities.

Universal Private Telegraph Company (1861-70) BT Archives ref: TGJ

The Universal Private Telegraph Company (UPTC) was established by an Act of Parliament in June 1861, but did not become fully operational until 1863. It undertook to construct and maintain lines of private wire between places of business or between residences and businesses. Initially nationalisation plans did not consider private wires, but before the 1868 Select Committee the UPTC successfully argued that its business would be seriously damaged by being in competition with a nationalised industry. It was subsequently taken over by the Post Office in 1870.

The road to nationalisation

The Telegraph Act 1864 gave the Postmaster General certain wayleave rights over public roads and streets, and started more active state involvement in the telegraph network. Wayleave payments were made to railways, canals and turnpike trusts for the right of way for telegraph lines.

1866 was a turning point in the development of the telegraph system. A great storm in January caused widespread damage to the network. This year also saw the start of consolidation rather than expansion as the intention of the Post Office to purchase the lines became known, reducing the incentive for the private companies to expand.

In 1868 a Bill was introduced with the intention of bringing the telegraph system under the control of the Post Office. By this time the network consisted of over 91,000 miles of wire, transmitting 6 million inland messages annually. The telegraph companies were leading opponents to the Bill who saw the strong railway interest in Parliament as their best chance of getting the bill rejected. The Bill itself showed little understanding of the importance of the railway interest, but the Government was determined to proceed with it. The press were generally in favour of the Bill because they disliked the monopoly that the telegraph companies exercised over news collection.

The Bill was passed and became law on 31 July 1868. The Telegraph Act 1868 gave the Postmaster General the right to acquire and operate the inland telegraph systems in the UK, installed and operated by independent telegraph and railway companies. It was decided that the companies would be paid a sum equal to twenty years' net profits for the year ended 30 June 1868. This system of calculating compensation was later criticised, because the figure was not yet known and open to abuse.

The Telegraph Act 1869, which gained Royal Assent on 9 August, was passed before the 1868 Act could take effect. It conferred on the Postmaster General a monopoly in telegraphic communication in the UK. Under this Act, the use of all private wires except those 'maintained for the private use of a corporation, company or person' became the monopoly of the Postmaster General. Overseas telegraphs, ie not the inland private

telegraph companies, did not fall within the monopoly. The scheduled date of transfer was 1 January 1870 with the actual transfer taking place on 5 February. Following nationalisation of the telegraph service in 1870, the Post Office went on to rapidly expand the UK telegraph network, particularly in more rural areas which had previously not been commercially attractive to the telegraph companies.

The Isle of Man Telegraph Company was nationalised in 1870 under the Telegraph Acts Extension Act. In 1876-77 the Orkneys and Shetland Telegraph Company was brought under Post Office control with the Scilly Islands Telegraph Company following in 1879-80.

International private telegraph companies

BT Archives holds the records for the following companies which operated overseas telegraph services. Other companies also existed, but their records are not held by BT Archives.

Submarine Telegraph Company (1851-89) BT Archives ref: TGD

The Submarine Telegraph Company was founded in 1851 and granted an exclusive concession by the French government to lay a cable from England to France under the English Channel. The first cable was completed on 28 August 1850, but failed days later. A second cable was completed on 25 September 1851. From 1 February 1870, the General Post Office shared revenues with the company and took over operation of some of its cables including those in the North Sea. On 31 March 1889 the Submarine Telegraph Company went into voluntary liquidation and the Post Office took over its property on 1 April 1889.



Agamemnon laying the first successful Atlantic cable, 1858 (ARC 1373)

Irish Submarine Telegraph Company (1852) BT Archives ref: TGM

The Irish Submarine Telegraph Company was founded in 1852 by Royal Charter to establish electric telegraph communications between Britain and Ireland, but it is unclear whether this company actually became operational.

Anglo-American Telegraph Company Limited (1865-c1930) BT Archives ref: TGP

The Anglo-American Telegraph Company Limited operated four transatlantic cables from Ireland and France to Canada and the USA, laid in 1869, 1873, 1874 and 1880.

Eastern Telegraph Company (1872-1929) BT Archives ref: TGK

The Eastern Telegraph Company was founded in 1872 as an amalgamation of several smaller telegraph companies. It operated transatlantic cables to North and South America, as well as cables to Europe, Africa, the Middle and Far East, and Australasia. It subsequently merged with other international companies in 1929 and eventually became known as Cable & Wireless.

Further information

BT Archives also holds a range of library material (HIC 002/003) which provides a more detailed account of the development of the telegraph system. The records of other telegraph companies can be found within the UK at the Guildhall Library manuscripts section and Porthcurno Telegraph Museum.

Private telegraph companies - timeline

- 1837 On 25 July Cook and Wheatstone demonstrated their telegraph to the directors of the London and Birmingham Railway between Euston and Camden Town
- 1845 The first public telegraph line was opened in February between London and Gosport
- 1846 The Electric Telegraph Company was formed, the first telegraph company in Britain
- 1850 The British Electric Telegraph Company was formed by an Act of Parliament, a rival to the monopoly of the Electric Telegraph Company

The United Kingdom Electric Telegraph Company was formed, but did not become operational until 1860
- 1851 The Submarine Telegraph Company was formed to operate cables to France
- 1852 The English and Irish Magnetic Telegraph Company was granted a Royal Charter in April to provide links between England and Ireland
- 1853 The British Telegraph Company was formed through the merger of the European and American Electric Printing Company and the British Electric Telegraph Company
- 1855 The Electric and International Telegraph Company was formed through the merger of the Electric Telegraph Company and the International Telegraph Company in July
- 1857 The British and Irish Magnetic Telegraph Company was formed through the merger of the English and Irish Magnetic Telegraph Company and the British Electric Telegraph Company
- 1859 The London and District Telegraph Company was established to provide cheap telegraph communication for the capital
- 1861 The Universal Private Telegraph Company was formed, but did not become operational until 1863
- 1865 The Anglo-American Telegraph Company was formed to operate transatlantic cables
- 1868 The Telegraph Act of this year gave Her Majesty's Postmaster General the right to acquire and operate the inland telegraph systems in the UK, installed and operated by independent telegraph and railway companies
- 1869 The Telegraph Act of this year conferred on the Postmaster General a monopoly in telegraphic communication in the UK
- 1870 The inland telegraph system was transferred to the State on 5 February except for private wires, which owing to the pressure of work were transferred in July
- 1872 The Eastern Telegraph Company was formed as an amalgamation of several smaller international telegraph companies
- 1889 The Submarine Telegraph Company went into voluntary liquidation and its assets were transferred to the Post Office
- 1929 Cable and Wireless Ltd was registered on 1 April to merge British wireless and cable interests overseas

Chart of private inland telegraph companies

