

RadioCentre celebrating 40 years of commercial radio

The story of the people who have shaped the success of the industry

The origins of UK commercial radio are the sixties' pirate radio stations such as Ronan O'Rahilly's Radio Caroline, which were so successful that the government closed them down and established Radio 1. But it was **Philip Birch**'s Radio London which provided Radio 1 with the greatest programming inspiration (with presenters like Kenny Everett, Tony Blackburn and John Peel) and set the template for commercial radio's business model. Birch went on to establish Piccadilly Radio in Manchester, the fifth commercial station.



Philip Birch



Tim Blackmore and Richard Attenborough



John Whitney

If pirate radio was the historical context for commercial radio, then it owes its current place to two Johns. **John Whitney** founded The Local Radio Association and successfully lobbied government to launch the sector. With no operators to consult, the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA), the media regulator of the day, hired **John Thompson** to set things up, including negotiating with the unions. The first stations came on air in October 1973: London Broadcasting (LBC), designated "news and information", and Capital Radio, a "general entertainment" station.

Capital's output was shaped by Whitney with the late Michael Bukht and Aidan Day, soon bringing in talent like producer **Tim Blackmore** from Radio 1. But it would have been nothing without Capital's founding chairman Sir (now Lord) **Richard Attenborough** who even put his art collection into Coutts bank to underwrite the first month's payroll. LBC spawned many of British media's finest journalists, including Jon Snow, Peter Allen, and the late Douglas Cameron, perhaps its greatest broadcaster.

Today LBC continues to voice London's news and conversation thanks to skilled broadcasters like **Nick Ferrari**.

The fledgling commercial radio industry would be unrecognisable today: the IBA held the licences with operators simply contracted to provide the programming and advertising. Stations paid around 25% of their revenues to the regulator in fees, regulations required a wide range of shows including children's programmes and religious output and, since the 'needletime' arrangement with the Musicians Union only allowed nine hours of records a day, stations hired live musicians and some even employed their own orchestras to fill the gaps. Despite these restrictions, stations launched in Glasgow, Birmingham and Manchester, and over the next three years the sector grew to 19 stations.

Many of these first stations launched the careers of people who have become legends of our industry. Radio Clyde's first MD was **Jimmy** (now Lord) **Gordon**. Amongst his hires was **Richard Park** who, as well as building the foundations for his long and successful career in music radio, developed new approaches to sport on radio including phone-ins. This was, of course, taken a stage further at Capital in the 80s by **Jonathan Pearce**, whose passionate commentary excited listeners and managers (and now the BBC!).



Lord Jimmy Gordon



John Perkins

At the helm of Liverpool's Radio City from its launch was **Terry Smith**. City was the first UK station to float on the stock market and Smith went on to chair EMAP radio, City's new parent company, as it grew to 41 stations before its eventual sale to Bauer Media in 2008 where it is run today by the doyenne of radio sales, **Dee Ford**. Smith has also chaired Independent Radio News for 17 years and, with long-serving Managing Editor **John Perkins**, transformed it into an important revenue generator for the industry. It was City which also produced the first woman programme controller, **Gillian Reynolds**, who still writes passionately about radio for the Daily Telegraph.

Although commercial radio won audiences, high fees and poor revenues took their toll and, in 1984, the Association of Independent Radio Contractors (AIRC - as RadioCentre was then known), chaired by

Richard Findlay from Radio Forth, lobbied successfully to reduce fees, relax regulation and update legislation. Such determination drove the industry forward again in the next industry body incarnation, the Commercial Radio Companies Association (CRCA), where former broadcaster and regulator **Paul Brown** became the industry's greatest ever ambassador.

'Frequency splitting', which saw stations putting their younger services on FM and Gold stations on AM, was imposed in the late 80s. The more targeted style of broadcasting made names of many of radio's greatest presenters: **Les Ross** became the voice of the Midlands on the BRMB breakfast show and **Chris Tarrant** and **Neil Fox** dominated either end of the day at Capital with Fox going on to lead (and win) commercial radio's chart show battle with the BBC. Stations developed deep roots with their audiences, with news teams led by brilliant journalists such as Key 103's **John Pickford** bringing local news to air quickly, and local identity was captured by speech broadcasters such as **Alan Robson**, who has given local people a voice on Metro Radio's Night Owls for 30 years.



Chris Tarrant



Alan Robson

More stations launched, this time the 'incrementals', which were designed to bring new blood into the industry. In 1988 London still had just two commercial stations (Capital and LBC); two years later it had 12. The outstanding success story was Asian station Sunrise, led by **Avtar Lit**, an early example of commercial radio's strength in reaching underserved demographics. Other notable additions to the waveband included Gordon Mac's Kiss FM, and Jazz FM where presenter **Helen Mayhew** pioneered a new mood-based style of broadcasting.

The 1990 Broadcasting Act introduced The Radio Authority which advertised over 30 new local licences in its first three years, including the first five regional licences. These big stations were a big risk but in radio's original 'big man', **John Myers** (and a team which included John Simons) the industry found someone who made a success first of Century and later the Real and Smooth networks.

But perhaps the most decade-defining act was the licensing of national commercial radio. The first, Classic FM, went on air on 7 September 1992, snapping up the only FM licence on offer. **Ralph Bernard** had, with programmer Steve Orchard, built GWR from a local station in the West Country to the UK's first proper radio group and Bernard then championed Classic's creation amongst investors and industry folk alike. He eventually led it as CEO and then Chairman, handing over the reins to Darren Henley, the station's MD.

Virgin 1215am and Talk Radio UK launched soon after and introduced many of our most colourful characters. **Chris Evans** famously loved Virgin so much that he bought the station, and when he sold it in 2000 to SMG, became the man who had made the greatest personal fortune from the sector. Later, following a change of ownership, Virgin became Absolute, but always remained at the cutting edge of technology and creativity thanks to visionaries such as James Cridland and Clive Dickens. Today it is the home of Russ Williams, in the same slot for over 20 years, as well as commercial radio's most award-laden presenter, **Christian O'Connell**, who boasts no fewer than 10 Sony Gold awards.



Christian O'Connell



Moz Dee

Talk Radio's launch line-up included **Moz Dee** who went on to programme Five Live and later returned to TalkSport, leading its programmes to record audiences. The reformat from Talk to Sport had been led by Kelvin Mackenzie, who brought attention and energy to the sector, as well as some of its most costly legal bills, in his personal battle about research methodologies.

Continuing 'growth' in the late 90s came principally through the launch of new small stations. Inspired by the small-station model developed by Chris Carnegy at Spire FM, many have gone on to be very successful including those built through the portfolios of owners such as Robert Stiby (an original investor in Capital Radio), Sir Ray Tindle, Richard Wheatly and William Rogers. Indeed, the 1990s were undoubtedly a golden decade. The industry joined with BBC to develop RAJAR, using a diary methodology which had first been introduced to commercial radio by **Deanna Hallett** in the 70s. The



creation of the Radio Advertising Bureau (RAB) in 1992, by the late Neil Robinson and led by **Douglas McArthur**, helped national advertisers and agencies understand and capitalise on radio's growing success. Amongst the most visionary was **Charles Dunstone** (*pictured left*) who used radio brilliantly to launch The Carphone Warehouse, recognising the medium's role both in building a brand and delivering tactical campaigns. This was also the era when radio sales houses flourished, making names of experts like **Stan Park** who has spent more than 30 years bringing revenue to radio. The industry also garnered trust through the establishment of the Radio Advertising Clearance Centre led then, as now, by Yvonne Kintoff. Audience,

revenues and share prices rose, commercial radio flourished and, by the turn of the millennium, there were over 400 services.

The 90s also saw the first digital radio transmissions, pioneered by **Quentin Howard** at GWR, who had introduced CDs to radio, and been instrumental in the establishment of Classic FM. However, it is only today, 20 years later, that serious consideration is being given to a switchover, thanks to the 2010 Digital Economy Act, championed for radio (and the industry's long-standing transmission provider Arqiva) by Lisa Kerr. It is the commercial sector's ambition that the migration will finally deliver it spectrum parity with BBC, give listeners greater choice and allow radio to integrate broadcast and interactive technologies.

The industry's most recent decade has been overseen by its third regulator, Ofcom, and shaped by a hugely competitive multi-media landscape as well as an economic downturn. This led to a strong need to deregulate, helping the sector adapt to turbulent times. Under the chairmanship of **Linda Smith**, a previous Sales Director at Capital Radio and CEO at media agency StarCom, the RAB has sharpened commercial best practices with the radio groups and, as a result, radio has grown market share and absolute revenues in each of the last three years.

Today, it's RadioCentre which represents commercial radio, formed as a result of a merger of the RAB with the CRCA in 2006. This merger mirrored consolidation within the industry itself: GWR and Capital became GCap, which then merged with Chrysalis under the ownership of Global; Bauer now encompasses the former EMAP and SRH stations, UTV purchased Wireless Group and MNA and UKRD absorbed The Local Radio Company. Although such mergers inevitably mean changes at the top, it's testament to radio's magnetic qualities that two of the most charismatic CEOs, **David Mansfield** and



Phil Riley, formerly of Capital and Chrysalis respectively, now have new roles in radio as chairman of RAJAR and CEO of Orion Media. Today, led by Andrew Harrison, RadioCentre's board represents an industry comprising groups and independents, digital and analogue stations and it is only **Michael Betton**, (*picture above left*) of Lincs

FM, who has been an ever present director through AIRC, CRCA and RadioCentre.

Collaboration was perhaps never more strongly evident than when, in January 2005, leading programmer **Mark Story** chaired UK Radio Aid and brought the industry together for a day of joint broadcasting which raised over £3m for victims of the Asian Tsunami and delivered the largest audience for a single programme in the history of radio in the UK and even brought Chris Evans back into radio.

As this Roll of Honour illustrates, commercial radio's first 40 years have been shaped not just by economics, regulation and legislation, but by people who have lived, breathed and shared our passion for a creative and dynamic industry. They might run commercial radio's biggest group, like Global Radio, founded by self-confessed radio obsessive, **Ashley Tabor**, or they might share the the passion and commitment of those running tiny stations, like Inga and **Ian Anderson** whose SIBC in Shetland may be small in size but is big in local importance.

So the future, like the past, rests in the hands of those who love the medium and are willing to take risks with content, technology and commercial models. Innovators such as Matt Deegan and Nick Piggott are playing important roles, and others like **Simon Cole**, one of the industry's leading independent producers, are finding new platforms for radio like AudioBoo.

Commercial radio as a lifeline, as a passion and as a great listen for forty years and for many more – that's something we can all celebrate.