

THE OLD SEMIAPHORE LINES

Mr. Hilaire Belloc has given us realistic visions of the Roman roads and "Pilgrims' Way", mostly reconstructed from personal explorations of the routes. I have often felt that something of the same sort describing the old telegraph lines in England would be of interest; but in the case of the earlier systems hardly a vestige of any survival is likely to be found to furnish a connected story. With regard to the buildings belonging to the original shutter-telegraph of Lord George Murray of 1796-1814, this lack of evidence is not hard to understand when we learn that they are nothing more substantial than the merest cottage or shack, long since abandoned and dilapidated or demolished.

Examination of the telegraph sites in some instances, such as Cabbage Hill, Ashted, would reveal a rectangular plot of land demarcated by a plantation of hawthorn or other trees, put in originally as a low hedge round the station but now grown into a high screen. Beyond that, probably nothing could be found. It would need a truly devoted explorer to visit and examine the fifty-odd telegraph sites in England, not only in the southern home districts, but also in the counties of Hertford, Bedford, Cambridge, Suffolk, Norfolk, Hampshire, Dorset and Devon, including an excursion into the wilds of Dartmoor, on the off-chance of finding something more practical. The Admiralty telegraph lines on Murray's principle ran, indeed, to Portsmouth, Chatham, Sheerness, Deal, Yarmouth and Plymouth. It is agreed that they were entirely a temporary wartime measure, and at the Peace of 1814 all were abandoned and the land on which they stood was returned to its owners.

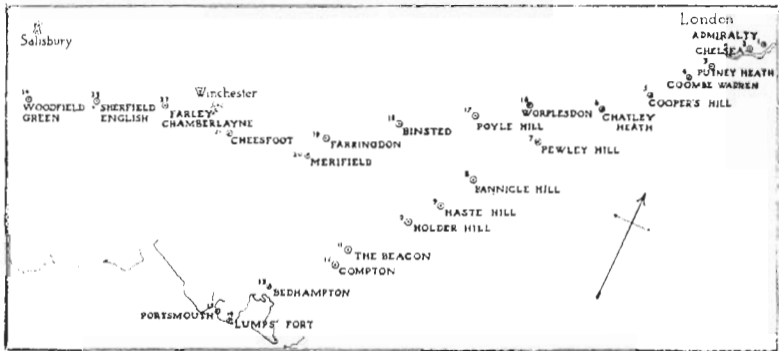


Diagram of the Semaphore Lines from London to Portsmouth and London to Woodfield Green on the way to Plymouth

Not long afterwards, however the Admiralty decided to build telegraph lines of permanent utility, so that communication could be kept up with a naval dockyard port even in times of peace. The scheme was slow in maturing, but the line from London to Portsmouth was finished by 1823 and was in daily working order, except when interrupted by fog, from 1824 until the last day of 1847, when the system was given up in favour of the electric telegraph. The later optical telegraph took the form of a semaphore, the invention of Sir Home Popham, its principal features being a tall upright post with two movable arms. This was a notable advance on the primitive shutter-telegraph; the machinery was scientifically worked and the stations well planned and solidly built.

An examination of the semaphore as opposed to the older shutter-telegraph system affords at once an easier and more profitable exercise. To begin with, there were only two semaphore lines, comprising twenty-four stations of a permanent nature; the one from London to Portsmouth via Chatley Heath was a going concern, as already stated; while the other, planned to run to Plymouth, also via Chatley Heath, was begun, but did not get beyond Hampshire, and so was never in operation. The exploration of the semaphore sites can therefore be limited to the counties of Surrey, Sussex and Hampshire.

The stations were as follows: (1) The Admiralty, Whitehall; on the roof above main entrance. (2) Duke of York's School, sometimes referred to as the Royal Military Asylum, Chelsea, on the roof near centre of building. (3) Putney Heath; nothing remaining, but Telegraph Inn near the site. (4) Coombe Warren, Kingston Hill; site occupied by a modern building, Telegraph Cottage. (5) Cooper's Hill, Esher; surviving, the property of the Urban District Council. (6) Chatley Heath, Cobham; surviving and occupied. This outstanding building is additionally remarkable on account of the original machinery still remaining there as it was ninety years ago. (7) Pewley Hill, Guildford;



River Hill, Binsted, near Alton.

surviving as Semaphore House, Semaphore Road; most conspicuous (8) Bannicle Hill, Witley; now known as Banacle Hill; no trace. (9) Haste Hill; nothing to be seen, though its site and history are well known in Haslemere. (10) Holder Hill, Midhurst; surviving. (11) "Beacon Hill", Harting, known locally as The Beacon; the semaphore station survives, rebuilt, as Telegraph House. (12) Compton; surviving as a ruined farm, (13) Camp Down, Bedhampton. (14) Lumps Fort, Southsea. (15) High Street, Portsmouth, afterwards removed to the dockyard.

Then, branching from Chatley Heath westwards: (16) Worplesdon "Glebe", demolished, but known to have been next to the church. (17) Poyle Hill; no trace, but site now occupied by Hog's Back Hotel. (18) River Hill, Binstead; surviving and used as a farmhouse. (19) Farringdon "Common", near Four Marks; surviving, and in use as a farm. (20) Merifield, West Tisted; no trace. (21) Cheesfoot, Chilcomb Down, Winchester; tree-surrounded site, but no other trace. (22) Farley Chamberlayne; surviving. (23) Sherfield English; no trace. (24) Woodfield Green, no trace at Woodgreen.

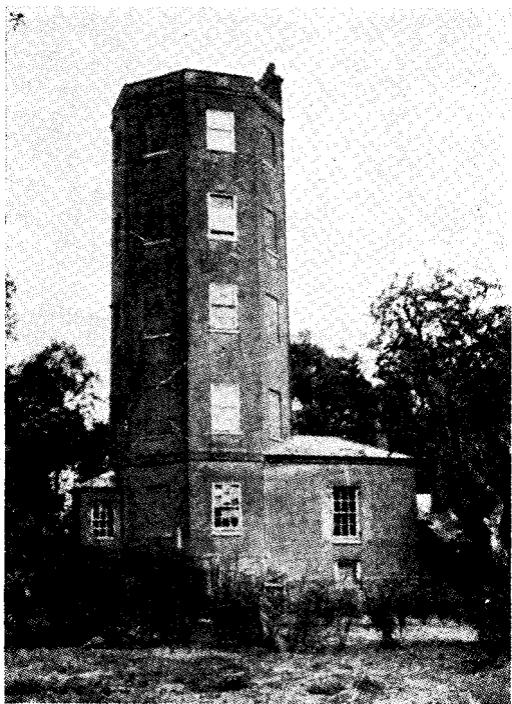
The popular one-inch Ordnance maps show certain telegraph sites clearly marked, and these set me off on the right track in the first place. The



Pewley Hill, Guildford.

six-inch Surveys provided better information and, once the approximate position was located, it was usually found that a semaphore building or site was indicated on the larger map. In nearly every case they were surrounded by high trees or thick scrub. From their outline it was obvious that they had been originally planted as a hedge round the premises, or that the fruit trees formed part of the garden. At Holder Hill the crew had evidently put in some Spanish chestnut seedlings as a little avenue from the wicker-gate to the front of the station, and these have now grown to immense trees, which add to others in surrounding and hiding the house completely.

People are sometimes dubious as to the identity



Chatley Heath, Cobham.

of the sites because of such dense foliage around them, but it has to be realised that in ninety years a tree can easily spring from a sapling to full growth and habit.

My exploration established that the semaphore buildings were of three types, a fact which can easily be seen from the illustrations. The most remarkable is the lofty tower structure at Chatley Heath; but, with the possible exceptions of Bannicle Hill and Worplesdon, there were apparently no others of this multiple-storey, tower type. A second design was the two-storey building, seen still existing at Cooper's Hill, Pewley Hill and Binstead. The third type was a one-storey bungalow, survivals of

which are now standing at Holder Hill, Compton, Farringdon, and Farley Chamberlayne. The reason for the different heights of the buildings was the necessity of having the lower arm of the semaphore well clear of horizontal obstructions. On such high eminences as Holder Hill and Farringdon Common there was no need to raise the semaphore post much above ground level.

In the bungalow type of station, the semaphore mast sprang from the centre of an operating room rather to one side of the living quarters, from which it was separated by a short passage. In the other types of building the mast was erected on the main roof. Every one of the stations is built of brick covered with the same unmistakable brownish stucco; the bungalow roofs are all of slate.

The average distance between points was a little under five miles on the Portsmouth line, and slightly over seven miles on the Plymouth extension. The greatest distance between any two stations was the 8.4 miles from Merifield to Cheesfoot, made possible, no doubt, by the conspicuous situation of Chilcomb Down. The shortest distance, apart from the town stations in London and Portsmouth, was the 2.4 miles between The Beacon and Compton.

The semaphore crew consisted of one Lieutenant, Royal Navy, and one hand, generally an old seaman of the officer's choice, preferably "a good glass man"—that is, a reliable man with a telescope. At "Beacon Hill" we learn that the officer had a family of eight children so that the man (who had lost a leg in battle) was obliged to lodge out.

Upon the stations being given up, the Naval and Military Gazette of January 1st, 1848, remarked:

The semaphore has been the home of many a veteran lieutenant, the last berth to be given, the very last to be asked or accepted as long as a spark of hope remained of obtaining anything better, but now even this resource is no longer available.

Nevertheless, whatever their discomforts, the crews of these stations led a leisured, if not sedentary, life, and were able to find plenty of spare time to attend to their gardens.