

# THE HISTORY & ORIGINS OF THE NDB LIST

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With the NDB List having just reached the age of 22, it seemed like a good idea to put down on record just how it came into being and what its origins were and some of its history, especially as many of those who founded the group back in 1998 are starting to get a bit long in the tooth now (me included), and I thought it was important to do this while we are still around, or at least can still remember that far back.

## Early beginnings:

The hobby of NDB listening has probably been around as long as the NDBs themselves, which in many cases, and as far as I have been able to ascertain, is somewhere just slightly over 100 years as I write this. In some cases the earlier systems would have been of the 'Radio Range' type, though with no Internet back then, and many early publications long out of print, much of what we know has been gathered from obscure articles, or in the case of the Radio Range systems, from some of our now sadly departed 'senior' members, who had worked on such things back in the 1940s and 1950s. Probably the earliest reference that I've found was from an old article about Lighthouses on the '**US National Park Service**' website, which had stated that in 1917 the first experimental radiobeacon was installed in a lighthouse, with the first automatic radiobeacon coming into service in the United States in 1928. Another interesting source was the '**Commissioners of Irish Lights**', the body responsible for marine nav aids in the Irish Republic, which noted on its website that they had been providing a Marine Radiobeacon service since the first one was established at Mizen Head in 1931, and these had continued until the radiobeacon service was closed down on the 1st February 1999, and was then replaced by the DGPS service which continues to this day (though which sadly will also close in 2022). I am sure there are many other instances out there, I just wish that I could find them, as it is important that we ensure they are not forgotten, especially as the vast majority of Marine beacons are now long gone, and a number of Aero beacons are starting to be closed down in favour of GPS and satellite-based systems.

That was how the Beacons themselves started, and as we all know, if there is something that can be heard you can bet that there will be radio enthusiasts out there trying to receive as many of these things as possible, after all, that is just the way many of us are, and 'hunting and gathering' things is in our DNA.

## Enter the NDB List:

To go back to how the NDB List started I need to first explain just how different things had been for NDB listeners before the Internet became popular, and without the many ways and means we have at our disposal to share information nowadays, it was usually a question of finding radio clubs that had a column covering this subject, and that was not always so easy with something that had long been very much a 'niche' hobby. The one specialist club that covered the Lower frequencies (and still does) was the **Longwave Club of America**, and there were numerous other clubs around Europe which often had a small section covering NDBs, and this would often be within some sort of dedicated 'Utility' column.

Probably one of the most difficult things for NDB enthusiasts back then, apart from being able to contact other NDB enthusiasts, was finding sources of data such as frequency and callsign lists showing where the various beacons were located. In the case of the Marine Beacons the 'Nautical Almanacs' produced for sailors proved to be an extremely useful source for us, and not only were these published annually but when a new edition appeared many of the local bookshops would often sell off the previous editions very cheaply, which was just as well, because they were often expensive when new. Amongst the many titles I picked up back then were the '**McMillan & Silk Cut Nautical Almanac**', '**Reed's Nautical Almanac**' and the smaller and more manageable '**Browns Nautical Almanac**' which is still in print to this day. The 'Holy Grail' of nautical publications though was the '**Admiralty List of Radio Signals Volume 2**', which contained pretty much all the Marine NDB information for the whole world, plus maps of the various marine beacon chains that were commonly in use at that time, and they even produced a very handy book of charts as well.

That was quite an expensive publication though and the nearest place that sold them was in Liverpool some 40 miles away. Thankfully, I eventually found a copy in the Manchester Central Library and must have spent a small fortune on their photocopier making copies of all the relevant bits. Even better, they also had a subscription to the 'Weekly Notices to Mariners' which corrected and updated this publication, and I used and copied these until they eventually started appearing for free in .pdf format on the UK Hydrographic Office's website every week. Even now I still check these each week and have done this continually for the past 20 years or so that they have been appearing in this format. Of course, what was really needed was some sort of dedicated publication made just for enthusiasts and at a reasonable price, and thankfully I

eventually found such an item in the form of an A4 spiral bound book called not surprisingly the '**Longwave Beacon Handbook**' by **Michiel Schaay** in the Netherlands. This was just what I needed as it not only listed all the Marine & Aero NDBs in Europe but also included many NDB QSL addresses as well. I still have my copy and it shows in it that my edition was published in 1983. Later I also found several other useful enthusiast publications by both German and French authors, and all these things added to the idea that there may be a lot more of us out there than we had originally suspected.

Over the years I found many other publications that had proved useful, and amongst these were the 'recent' copies of the old British Airways '**AERAD**' publications that were used by the pilots themselves, and it was a similar case with other charts and publications by the **Jeppesen** company, and the RAF, who produced their own range of publications for military pilots. It was possible to pick up recent and even unused copies of these from the many aviation enthusiast shops around the country, and I often visited the one at Manchester International Airport run by 'The Aviation Society' (still going but now located at the Aviation Viewing Park there), along with various other airways charts and aerodrome booklets. In 1985 I had become a member of the '**Longwave Club of America**', which to this day is still the only club on the planet that is dedicated just to the LF frequencies, and coincidentally, not only am I still a member but have also been a columnist with them since 2007. In 2019 the club started producing a e-version of their newsletter 'The Lowdown', so nowadays it is a great option for listeners all over the world, and you can find contact details for this at the end of this article. Now another reason why I mention this is because one of their members back in those early days was called **Ken Stryker** and he also produced a very impressive publication called the '**Aero Marine Beacon Guide**' and this not only covered the Americas but also many other parts of the world as well and included beacon power levels in many cases. Another well-known LWCA member was **Sheldon Remington**, who produced a highly informative and legendary publication called '**On the Art of NDB Dxing**', and this has proved to be a great asset to many NDB enthusiasts thanks to its many insights into the hobby such as audio filtering etc. Such was life back in the pre-Internet days.

### **We are getting there, please bear with me a little longer.....**

Now we move forward to 1995, and as well as being an NDB fan I was also a keen Medium Wave DXer at that time and had been a member of the '**Medium Wave Circle**' group for quite a few years, and they had also had a NDB column from time to time as well under various guises. It was in that year that the current editor had decided to stand down, and so I did what they tell people in the army never to do and stepped forward and volunteered to edit the column. I suspect that only a small number of people in the club were NDB or Utility enthusiasts, and in many ways, it often felt a bit like being the support act at a rock concert, as we were consistently the least liked column in many of the annual listener polls, but the small group of enthusiasts that were interested were very loyal and supportive of the column, and it was this group that eventually went on to become the founding members of the NDB List.

I had first got my own home internet connection in 1995, and before that listener logs and contributions had mainly been sent to me by snail mail, and I had typed up the logs on my old Amstrad word processor which was always a lot of hard work. Thanks to most of us getting on the internet and e-mail though, eventually most logs started to be received electronically and that allowed me to 'copy and paste' logs into the column. Not only was it logs that were arriving that way though, but we were also able to discuss various things such as Unidentified Beacons which had been heard, and this allowed us to swap DF bearings and things like that, which proved particularly useful in tracking down the source of some of these unlisted beacons. It did start to become noticeable that most of what appeared in the columns was stuff that we had already discussed via e-mail up to a month before it appeared in print and was being read by people who had already discussed or shared most of the information via e-mail. It started to seem a bit irrelevant to do things that way, especially as it was hard work swapping mails with a group of different people individually. It was UK member **Tracey Gardener** that suggested that we should start some sort of mailing list (so he's the one to thank or blame not me), and which I must admit was something I'd never thought about, in spite of the fact that the very thing that had got me on the Internet in the first place was the **WUN** (World Utility Network) group, which not only produced an e-newsletter every month (that also contained a column called '**Surfing the Longwaves**'), but also had a mailing list as well - hosted at QTH.net if memory serves me right. I had travelled to the nearest internet café (Cyberia) in the city of Manchester just to have a look at the WUN website and it proved to be all the inspiration that I needed to get online from home as soon as possible. I am pleased to say that the WUN list continues but under its new name of the **UDXF** and I am still a member after all these 25 years.

Following Tracey's suggestion, I decided to see if I could find a way of setting up a mailing list and found a basic group at a site called '**Listbot**' and our very first post took place on the 11<sup>th</sup> of November 1998. The initial membership consisted of just about every NDB enthusiasts I could find, or who was in my address book, but it quickly proved to be very useful, and a great way of doing things, in real time rather than with a one month delay while it went to print, and it was also great that at long last we had a group of people who were 100% dedicated to NDB DXing rather than a sort of unwelcome or tolerated 'splinter' group. I

discontinued the MWC column shortly after that as there did not really seem to be any point in doing it anymore, and at last we finally had a home of our very own.

We had always thought that NDB Dxing was such a 'niche' minority interest that if we ever got 50 members it would be something of a minor miracle, yet here we are 22 years later as I write this and now with over 1,000 members in some 45 countries. We also run several other offshoot groups as well covering the DGPS, NAVTEX and DSC modes, and while it would have been nice to continue covering all these modes on one list, for those members who were only interested in the offshoot modes, having to plough through hundreds of NDB posts every week was not very practical, so our use of separate groups helps to get around this problem. Some of our biggest successes though have been the creation of the **Rxx Online Database**, which building on an idea originally started by **Andy Robins**, was developed into its current unique format by web wizard **Martin Francis** in Canada, and now provides a fantastic reference for all enthusiasts. Martin has a great team who harvest all the logs posted and upload them to the database, which ensures that it is an accurate list of what beacons are being heard, rather than which are theoretically on the air. You can find a list of the great folks who maintain this database on the site, which is listed below in the reference section. Amongst our other great developments are the unique monthly Co-ordinated Listening Events (CLEs), which grew out of an idea suggested by members, and taken on by **Brian Keyte** back in 2001. As I write this is in February 2021, we are just preparing to hold our 265th monthly event, on what is the 20<sup>th</sup> birthday of the CLEs – quite an amazing achievement. One other thing now well established, and again first created by Andy Robins, was our NDB Awards Scheme, which is now managed by our Awards Co-ordinator **Joe Miller**, it offers lots of interesting challenges for members, who are rewarded with very impressive electronic certificates.

Over the years we have been blessed by having a number of members who started to produce their own NDB publications, and notable amongst these are **Michael Oexner** from Germany, who produces the **European NDB Handbook** (ENDBH), the **North American NDB Handbook** (NANDBH), and specially for the growing numbers of WebSDR listeners, the **Global NDB Handbook** (GNDBH), and **Robert Connolly, G17IVX** who produces a publication called **Non Directional Beacons of Europe (NDBE)**, and also edits the '**NDB Dxing**' column in the UK radio publication '**Radio User**'. Both Michael and Robert are founder members of the group and are still with us after all these years I am pleased to say.

Who would have imagined just how things would develop over the years, and even better, I am very pleased that we still have a lot of our original members with us. Sadly, we lost a few of the more senior members, who went 'silent key' during that period, and all of these were good friends who are still greatly missed by many of us and without who the group would not have flourished in the way that it did back then.

When we started out in back in November of 1998, we were with Listbot, but on the 27<sup>th</sup> of December 1998 we had moved the group to a far better service hosted by a company called '**Onelist**', which later changed its name to '**eGroups**', before being bought out by Yahoo, who then renamed it as '**Yahogroups**'. We stayed with them until the service started to decline after it was bought out by Verizon in 2018, after which we switched all our groups over to the new '**Groups.io**' service, which ironically is run by the same person who had originally run the Onelist and eGroups setup, so it looks like things have now come full circle. Many NDBs are currently being closed and dismantled in favour of satellite based systems, so it looks like their numbers will continue to decline in the coming years, but on the bright side this does open up a few gaps in the band to hear more distant ones, so as long as the beacons are still there I'm sure that many of us will still be there chasing them, and for the same reasons that we did all those years ago, because we love them, love the challenge, and love hunting for them.

The group also has its own website, where you can find links to all our groups, the monthly CLEs, the Rxx Online Database, and all the various publications of interest on there: <https://ndblist.info>

#### References:

Andy Robins: <http://andyrobinsradio.com/>  
LWCA: <https://www.lwca.net/>  
MWC: <http://www.mwcircle.org/>  
NDBE: <https://www.kilkeel.org.uk/publicat.htm>  
NDB Publications: <https://www.ndblist.info/beacons/NDBpublications2020.pdf>  
Radio User: <https://www.radioenthusiast.co.uk/>  
Rxx Database: <https://rxx.classaxe.com/>  
The Aviation Society: <https://www.tasmanchester.com/>  
UDXF: <http://www.udxf.nl/>