

Arthur McClay - NZ

Arthur McClay of Auckland, New Zealand, commenced radio listening in 1911 when it was illegal to operate a receiver. Recently he related to "Electronics Australia" the story of his activities both as a radio listener and later, as a pioneer broadcaster.

Today we take it for granted that our participation in many radio hobbies may be carried on without any restrictions, but in 1911 there was a fine of £500 for any New Zealander found operating a radio receiver. At that time, only an officer of the New Zealand Post & Telegraph Department was allowed to use receiving and/or receiving-transmitting equipment. In 1903 the NZPO had established a complete monopoly on both radio transmitting and receiving and there was no encouragement for any person in New Zealand to engage in the radio listening hobby.

New Zealand hobbyists were disappointed when, in 1911, citizens in other parts of the world were able to get a permit from their Post Office and take up radio listening experiments. The courage, vision, and determination of three young Wellington residents finally accomplished this listening facility for all New Zealanders.

At 85, Arthur McClay still vividly recalls his listening days in 1911, when he lived in the suburb of Newtown, Wellington.

He had always had an interest in electricity and then learned of the possibility of transmitting and receiving. He had a two-roomed cottage attached to their home at 13 Gordon Place, Wellington where he began his hobby and this was used up to 1914 when radio operations were suspended during the war. Then, in 1922 through to 1925, the same site was the home of broadcasting station 2YK Wellington.

As a student of Wellington Boys' College in 1911, Arthur McClay was interested in press reports on advancements being made in Marconi telegraphic equipment and radio communications. He made up his mind he would learn all he could about this new marvel of science.

Pursuing the hobby in 1911 presented major difficulties, as it was not possible to legally purchase equipment or obtain books on the fascinating subject of wireless communication. Although wireless telegraphy was in its infancy, there were sufficient ships coming to New Zealand to encourage radio listening, but this was an offence at that time.

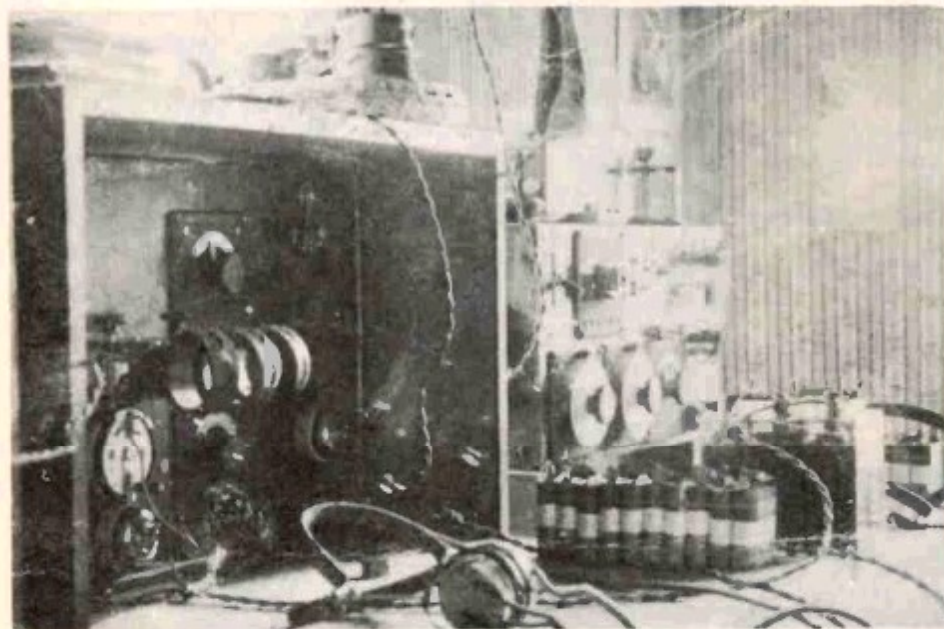


Arthur McClay began his career in radio in 1911 - when listening to radio was illegal.

The Post Office operated low powered transmitters in Auckland and Wellington and receiving and transmitting sites at Aranui in the North Island and at Awarua in the South Island. These two stations had remarkably good coverage, world wide. The ships coming to New Zealand used either Marconi or Telefunken radio-telegraphy systems.

Early in June 1911, while walking down a Wellington street at dusk, Arthur McClay saw a young man pulling up an aerial between two trees, with the lead-in wire running into the basement of a house. He was overcome with amazement, for here was a fellow enthusiast like himself. This resulted in his meeting with Brian Robinson who turned out to be a qualified electrician employed by Turnbull & Jones, electrical engineers of Wellington. He had built a receiver which was a perfect replica of the Telefunken shipboard receiving unit.

In the course of his work, Brian Robinson visited many of the overseas ships which were in port, where he met many ship's officers who, over the months, had supplied a great deal of equipment to him. One friend was Harry Tuson, who was a wireless operator on the "SS Ulimaroa", a Huddart Parker vessel sail-



Honeycomb coil receiver at 2YK, New Zealand's first radio station.

radio pioneer



Bob Apperley (left) and Hugh Simpson, co-founders of 2YK Wellington.



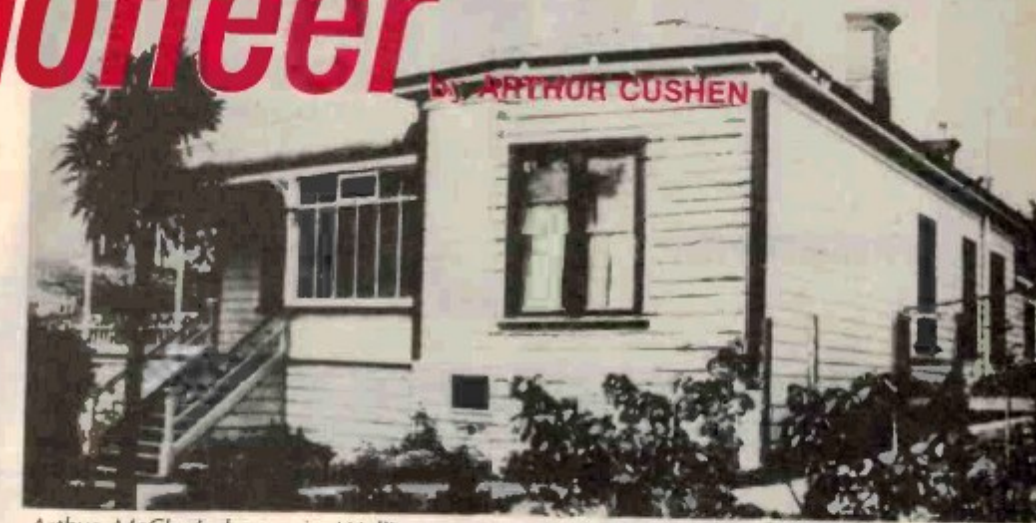
Brian Robinson was one of the first radio enthusiasts in New Zealand.

ing between Wellington and Sydney, and he procured anything the two enthusiasts required for their hobby.

Arthur McClay soon acquired a similar receiver and transmitter and became proficient in Morse sending and receiving but, aware of the severe penalties facing them, they never transmitted on the ship-to-shore frequencies. Utmost care was taken to keep the aerials out of sight in daylight hours and nightly transmissions in Morse were conducted between the two enthusiasts.

Early in 1912, another potential listener made himself known to Arthur McClay; Guy Tinney, employed by the Post Office as a landline telegraphist. The three enthusiasts began meeting on a weekly basis, chatting over what they had heard and comparing entries in their log books.

One severe stormy night in July 1912 Arthur McClay was awakened at midnight by his friend Guy Tinney, who was very agitated. He had been listening and had heard a vessel in distress, drifting towards the reef in Wellington Harbour.



Arthur McClay's home in Wellington, New Zealand, was the site of many early experiments, and in 1922 the location of the first broadcast station.

It was obvious that the gale had put out the Wellington Post Office receiving station and the distress messages had not been heard.

A decision had to be made, knowing that radio enthusiasts faced prosecution for possessing and using a radio receiving set. They decided that the vessel in distress was more important than any subsequent charges of illegal operation of radio equipment, and so the Post Office was informed. The ship and crew were safely brought into Wellington Harbour, following the action of the radio listeners.

The Minister of Justice was made aware of the fact that the law had been broken and a fine of £500 and confiscation of their equipment was possible, but he was convinced that such drastic measures were not justified and the listeners were exonerated. The three listeners were then issued with official radio receiving licences which had to be renewed each year and this brought about the introduction of radio listening on a recognised legal basis in New Zealand. In 1914 when World War I broke out, the Post Office requested that the equipment be dismantled and aerials taken down. Transmissions were silenced during those four years.

Plans for a post-war broadcasting network

After the war, Arthur McClay returned to Wellington and renewed his interest in radio. While on war service, Arthur became involved in radio transmission and when he returned to civilian life, was well prepared to continue his dream of operating a broadcasting station. He quickly visualised what radio broadcasting could do for New Zealand and its people as a means of communication and entertainment.

The New Zealand Post Office had drawn up plans for a national network and were looking for promoters to operate a monopoly type of broadcasting service with a 10 year contract. It was also envisaged that commercial broadcasting would be allowed as a secondary means of obtaining extra operational revenue.

Arthur McClay then applied for a broadcasting licence for three years so that experimental broadcasts could be undertaken. With a power of 15W, on 1090kHz, he felt he should reach the greater part of New Zealand during night time. The first broadcasts were to be four nights per week from 7.00-11.00pm and, in addition, the station could be used to transmit any special announcements as required.

At the same time, Professor Jack in Dunedin was experimenting with radio broadcasting and the signals from that station were also heard in Wellington. The Dunedin station subsequently became the responsibility of the Otago Radio Association, which still broadcasts a non-commercial program in Dunedin on 1431kHz, and recently celebrated 60 years of broadcasting with its slogan "Pioneer Radio".

Soon a band of enthusiasts gathered around Arthur McClay in preparation to launch 2YK Wellington. The station was given its licence and a United States company, the Federal Telephone and Electric Company, provided some of the vital equipment which was unable to be made in New Zealand. 2YK took the air in mid-July, 1922 as promised and the nightly transmissions were heard all over New Zealand. During the three years from 1922-25 a trio of enthusiasts, Bob Apperley, Hugh Simpson and Arthur McClay, gave up all their spare time and much of their finance to keep the station operating.