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OF RADIO AND TELEVISION  
ROBERTS RADIO LIMITED.



BY APPOINTMENT  
H.M. QUEEN ELIZABETH  
THE QUEEN MOTHER  
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BY APPOINTMENT  
H.R.H. THE PRINCE OF WALES  
MANUFACTURERS & SUPPLIERS  
OF RADIO RECEIVERS  
ROBERTS RADIO LIMITED.

*The History of*  
**ROBERTS RADIO**

**70<sup>th</sup>**  
*Anniversary Edition*

**KEITH GEDDES &  
GORDON BUSSEY**



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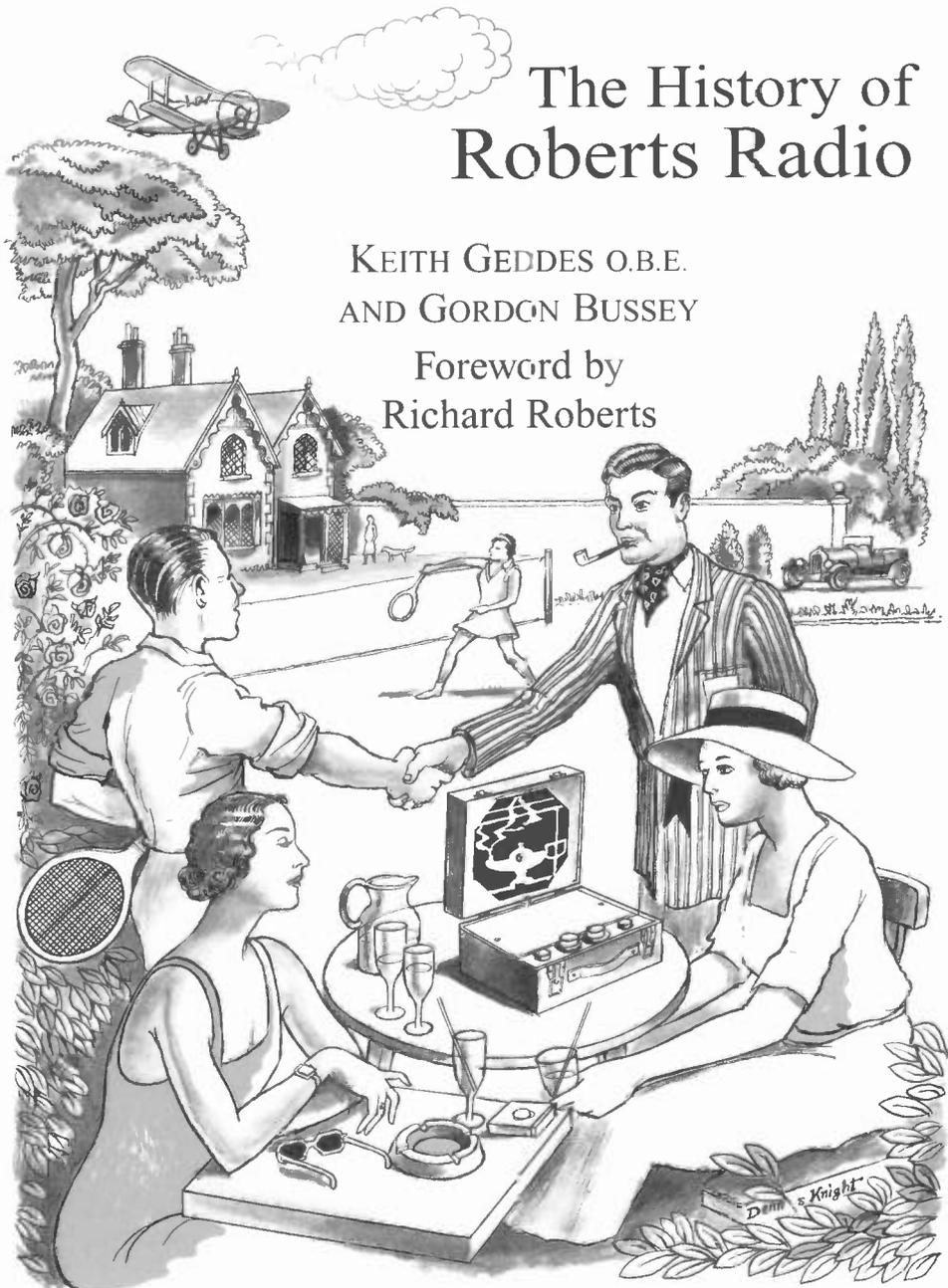
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# The History of Roberts Radio

# The History of Roberts Radio

KEITH GEDDES O.B.E.  
AND GORDON BUSSEY

Foreword by  
Richard Roberts



A Roberts Radio Publication

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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K. G. & G. B.

'Changes and a New Millennium'  
Jean Miller, 2001

*Illustration on previous page:  
An early Roberts' portable in a setting typical of the period  
(Dennis Knight, 1987)*

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*Rathbone Place, London W1, in September 1938  
(Inset: Enlargement of nameplate)*

## FOREWORD

In 1932 my father, Harry Roberts, founded the Roberts Radio Company in partnership with Leslie Bidmead, and they quickly established an excellent reputation for their high-quality portables. Financed entirely from earnings, the Company's growth has been steady rather than spectacular, yet today in almost two thousand radio shops and department stores you will find Roberts portables prominently displayed, and discreetly showing one of their three Royal Warrants.

My father never went in much for conventional advertising – in the early days he simply couldn't afford to, but even when he could have done so he much preferred to do something that was sufficiently newsworthy to earn him publicity free. To promote the idea that a portable radio could express its owner's taste and discrimination, he produced a number of "specials". Some were unashamed stunts, like the one with the solid-gold case, which appeared in newspapers all over the world. More down to earth, but a highly cost-effective exercise in publicity, were a few sets covered in shades of leather-cloth that we didn't normally use (and that would have looked more appropriate on deck chairs), sold through Harrods at standard price as a limited edition.

But best of all was the publicity that came simply from demonstrating how good the product was. I can recall my father's enthusiasm when, in May 1959, a letter arrived from St John's College, Cambridge, asking whether we could provide a compact, battery-powered short-wave set for the Cambridge Colombian Expedition, sailing in a little over a fortnight's time; a mention in the expedition's general report was offered in lieu of payment. An RT1 transistor set was hurriedly modified to include short waves, and won high praise by performing impeccably throughout the expedition despite being buffeted about on a pack-mule and exposed to extremes of altitude, temperature and humidity.

The story of this small, family-run business is straightforward enough. I think it is nevertheless worth recounting, both as an evocation of the heyday of Britain's broadcast-receiver industry, and as the case-history of a company that thankfully survived the industry's subsequent decimation. There is no doubt in my mind that it was primarily my father's prudent financial philosophy of growth from profit, to which we still adhere today, that enabled us to weather the storm. Another important factor in our favour has been that we are very lean operation, with a loyal and stable work force. We are undeniably fortunate in having specialised from the outset in a product for which there has been a steadily increasing demand; nevertheless we have in recent years thought it prudent to diversify a little, with encouraging results.

My father was a man of unusual warmth and integrity, and although it is now eighteen years since he died I know that he is widely remembered with respect and affection. I am happy to publish this little book as a tribute to him and to my mother, who is happily still with us, and whose contribution to the firm went far beyond winding all those frame aerials.



*Richard Roberts, Chairman and Managing Director, Roberts Radio Co. Ltd.  
(1969 - 1991)*



*Harry Roberts*

## A LAD OF GOOD ABILITY

Harry Roberts was born on 20 May 1910 in Mile End, London, the youngest of his parents' six children. The family had originally been moderately affluent, but had become casualties of the rough-and-tumble of Edwardian commerce, and though they never knew outright poverty it was a constant struggle to maintain standards. Harry had to go to the local Board School, which was not where middle-class people sent their children from choice, but he always went there respectably dressed, and the family must have derived real satisfaction from the report that the headmaster gave him when he left, at fourteen.

His brother Charles, eldest in the family and twenty years his senior, had found success as a transport manager, and Harry would have liked to follow his example. The first step would have been to buy a second-hand lorry, but he could not raise the necessary £40, nor was he old enough to drive. Instead, he went to work for the Rees Mace Manufacturing Company, on Cannon Street – one of the many small manufacturers catering for the buoyant market in wireless sets that had built up since broadcasting had begun, in November 1922.

Rees mace specialised in "portables". Such sets were more properly termed *transportable*, being too bulky and heavy to encourage frequent movement, but they had the great advantage of being self-contained, at a time when other types of receiver often had external batteries, usually had separate loudspeakers, and



*Harry Roberts at school, c. 1923*

CM 24081)

If the Memo is in reply to a communication from the Education Officer, please state here the reference number and number of communication.

London County Council.

The correspondence of all departments of the School should be retained in one envelope, addressed to the Education Officer. Special envelopes are supplied for this purpose.

It is particularly requested that, as far as possible, each Memo may be confined to one subject.



[STAMP HERE NAME OF SCHOOL.]

Canal Road Boys'

[SUBJECT.]

23<sup>rd</sup> July 1924.

Harry Roberts has been a pupil at the above school since infancy and was working in Standard VII. when he left.

He has always attended regularly and punctually, and I have proved him to be an industrious, persevering and thoroughly trustworthy boy.

He is a lad of good ability, and is very good at woodwork. He also holds certificates in swimming and Life Saving.

He is very polite and well behaved and I feel certain he will get on well wherever he may go, and wish him every success.

S. J. Jackson  
Head Master

S. J.

always had to be connected either to an outdoor aerial or to a separate "frame" aerial, typically three foot square. Few people in central London had space to erect an aerial, but a good proportion of them were wealthy enough to disregard the relatively high price of a portable, which needed additional valves to offset the poor performance of its internal frame-aerial.

Portables were thus a promising line, and when in the spring of 1925 Harry Roberts moved on to this second job it was with another firm in the same field: Pell, Cahill & Company Ltd, of Newman Street W1, who derived from that name their trade mark, "Pelican". Here, "his work included the adjustment of wireless sets and rectification of faults in sets in service", to quote the highly favourable testimonial given to him by the Managing Director, M.R.Cahill, in October 1927 – on notepaper bearing the words "In Liquidation".

Telephone Museum 9236-7

Telegrams Pelcard Usado London



MEMBERS OF THE NATIONAL WIRELESS MANUFACTURERS' ASSOCIATION



CAHILL & COMPANY LTD  
*Manufacturers of Radio Apparatus*  
64 NEWMAN STREET  
LONDON W.1



Directors  
M.R. CAHILL  
H.W.F. HUNTER ARUNDELL  
J.C.F. McCONNEL  
F.W. McCONNEL

27th October 1927.

IN LIQUIDATION.

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN.

This is to certify that Mr. H. Roberts was employed by this Company for a period of 2 years 7 months. His work included the adjustment of wireless sets and rectification of faults in sets in service.

His work and conduct were to our entire satisfaction at all times and we consider that he is a very capable man in the class of work in which he was with this Company employed.

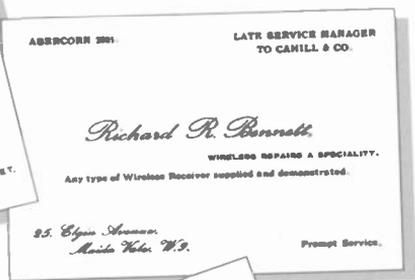
M.R. Cahill.

Managing Director.

MHC/SJ.

The failure rate among small-scale manufacturers at this time was high; the industry was easy to enter, and some of the people it attracted lacked the necessary abilities. However, the small manufacturer did enjoy some advantages over the major companies such as Marconi, BTH and GEC, who had initiated British broadcasting with a view to profiting from the resulting demand for receivers. He could use circuits culled from the technical press or from valve manufacturers' data as a basis for "kitchen table" assembly with correspondingly low overheads, and could adapt quickly to changing fashions. Output was small enough to be absorbed locally, in part through freelance salesmen, who would demonstrate sets from a variety of manufacturers in the prospect's home.

One such freelance was Richard R. Bennett, who had been Cahill's Service Manager, and it was he who gave Harry Robert his next job: collecting receivers from suppliers and demonstrating them, thus leaving Bennett free to concentrate on contacting prospective customers. Among Bennett's suppliers was a young man who was to play a major role in the founding of Roberts Radio.



Trade cards of the late 1920's

## A PARTNERSHIP IN THE MAKING

Leslie Bidmead, five years older than Harry Roberts, had been actively interested in radio since his schooldays. One night in September 1923, using a home-built two-valve receiver (“detector and note-magnifier”), he scanned the broadcast waveband after European transmitters had closed down, and picked up an American station, WGY. Reception was loud enough to be audible 40 feet from the loudspeaker, and clear enough to enable him to send a detailed account of the programmes to the General Electric Company in Schenectady so that they could confirm the feat and confound his doubting friends, which they duly did.

In about 1926 he designed a battery eliminator, interested a radio shop in Praed Street, Paddington in handling it, and took a job with them. A year later, in partnership with one Vincent Vittles, he established a receiver manufacturing company, Lonsdale Radio, in Lonsdale Road, Kilburn. Bidmead produced the sets while Vittles looked after the commercial side, and initially the company prospered, building up to a workforce of around ten. But then two circumstances arose that were together to destroy it. One was a succession of substantial orders from an entrepreneur (later to become rich and famous) who systematically withheld payment, though with such skill that the company never quite found it worth while to cut its losses. The other was an illicit sideline by Vittles, which Bidmead discovered only when it was too late. Valve manufacturers supplied setmakers at prices well below wholesale, and Vittles devoted more effort to supplying unscrupulous retailers with cut-price valves than he did to selling Lonsdale receivers.

Their landlord was a Major Barnett – a tall, military-looking gentleman who lived in The Boltons, Kensington, owned a good deal of property, and ran The Electrical Devices Company, whose mainstay was clips for connecting ignition leads to sparking plugs. On learning of the failure of the Lonsdale venture, he asked Bidmead what he proposed to do next and, more specifically, how he proposed to pay off his arrears of rent. Bidmead said that he knew a man called Harry Roberts who had a flair for selling and would, he thought, come into partnership with him; he was aware that Roberts was disillusioned with Richard R. Bennett, who was leaving him to do most of the work while himself spending much of the day in public houses. Seeing a business opportunity, Barnett offered to write off the rent arrears and provide Bidmead and Roberts with the necessary capital and accommodation, at his premises off Theobald’s Road, if they would produce receivers for his own company and sell them on commission under its trade mark “Eldeco”. The two young men decided to accept the offer. The commission was not over-generous, but they calculated that if they worked hard it would yield a living wage. And work they did, to such good effect that within a year or two they were earning more than Major Barnett thought proper.

He told Roberts that he proposed to change their remuneration. “Would that be upwards or downwards, Major Barnett?” Roberts asked innocently. “Don’t be silly!” was the reply. “In that case, we shall be leaving today”, he said, and left the office. An hour later, Barnett was ready to negotiate. “I’m sorry”, he began, “I’ve made a mistake”, “Yes you have”, Roberts agreed.

make the visit even more profitable by purchasing on their host's behalf a new refrigerator and a new set of large accumulators for his lighting plant.

On 18 November 1932 the partners changed their company's name from "Roberts and Bidmead" to the more euphonious "Roberts Radio Company", and subsequently persuaded two younger sisters to change *their* names from "Hayward" to "Roberts" and "Bidmead"; Harry and Doris were married in 1933, Leslie and Elsie in 1935. Nor did the Hayward family's involvement end there. The girl's elder brother Percy acted as the Company's accountant for over thirty years, and the husband of a third sister designed the distinctive "Aladdin's Lamp" loudspeaker-grille used in many of the pre-war models.

Doris worked for a firm that produced stationery and advertising matter for Rolls Royce, and soon "Roberts Radio" too was being die-stamped onto parchment, though the Company was still very small; turnover for 1935 was only about £3,400, which did not afford its owners much scope for high living. After her day's work, Doris would sometimes go into the factory and wind frame aerials – that way she at least saw something of Harry in the evenings. Elsie Bidmead owned a sewing machine, and was given the job of making webbing loops, one of which was supplied with each set to enable the snugly fitting HT battery to be withdrawn from the cabinet.

Production during 1935 averaged about eight receivers per week, which was approaching the maximum attainable at the Hills Place premises. Sales were still confined to the London area, so there was clearly potential for expansion by moving into larger premises and distributing nationwide, and in March 1936 the Company moved a few hundred yards to Rathbone Place, where they occupied



*Elsie Hayward, Leslie Bidmead, Doris Roberts and Harry Roberts, c. 1933*

**SPECIAL  
FEATURES**

**ROBERTS RADIO**

ALL BRITISH

THE FINEST MADE

**SPECIAL  
FEATURES**

SIX VALVE SUPERHETERODYNE  
MOVING COIL LOUD SPEAKER  
SUPERB REPRODUCTION  
\* SINGLE CONTROL TUNING  
KEEN SELECTIVITY  
GREAT RANGE  
ENTIRELY SELF-CONTAINED  
NO EXTERNAL AERIAL OR EARTH  
HANDSOME WALNUT CABINET

**C6 CABINET MODEL**    **A5 PORTABLE MODEL**  
20 Gns.                      15 Gns

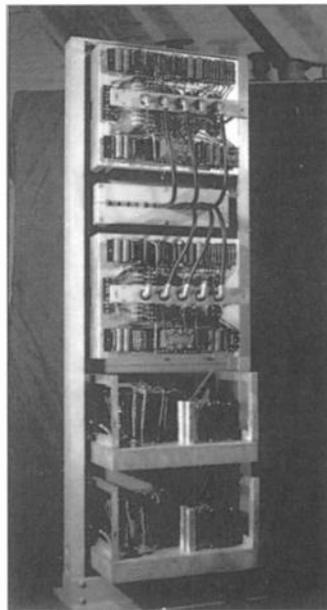
FIVE VALVE  
SUPERHETERODYNE  
AMAZING SELECTIVITY  
LONG RANGE  
SIMPLE CONTROL  
EXTREMELY COMPACT



*From a 1933 brochure. The C6 was self-contained and was one of the Company's only table models until recent times; the A5 was one of its few pre-war superhets*

three rooms on each of two floors. The year brought another event of significance when, on 2 July, Doris Roberts gave birth to a son, Richard, destined to succeed his father as Chairman and Managing Director.

The Company still undertook the occasional "one-off" job, as when Roberts and Bidmead were invited by a rich "city" man with the memorable name of E. Beddington Behrens, to visit him and discuss an unspecified commission. When they arrived at his palatial apartment he asked them to sit down, then went to the piano and, to their bewilderment, began to play and sing "You, you're driving me crazy". After several choruses, a radio was turned on very loudly in the next flat; explaining that this often happened without provocation, Behrens announced "Your job, gentlemen, is to beat that!". The challenge was accepted, and Roberts Radio duly supplied him with an instrument incorporating a high-power amplifier and a large loudspeaker. The experience gained no doubt came in useful when the Company subsequently designed and manufactured a rack-mounted amplifier/receiver for the Royal Surrey County Hospital, c. 1936



*Amplifier/receiver; manufactured for the Royal Surrey County Hospital, c. 1936*



The  
**ROBERTS'**  
 MIDGET PORTABLE.

Although under one foot square it houses a complete four-valve screened grid receiver incorporating "Class B" output, driving a high class moving coil loud-speaker. In addition to this, space has been found for a full size H.T. battery of standard type, obtainable anywhere, and a 20 actual ampere hour accumulator.

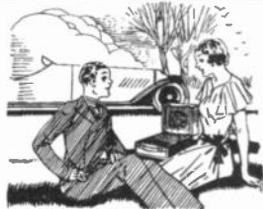
The M. 4. B. leaves nothing to be desired, the reproduction being comparable with a full size mains set. All the principal European stations can be received at good strength.

The tuning scale is calibrated in wavelengths, and also station names. By this means rapid and easy tuning is ensured. A printed card is supplied with each receiver giving full working instructions, together with a guarantee covering a period of six Calendar months.

**IDEAL FOR**



**THE HOME**



**THE CAR**



**PICNICS**



**HOLIDAYS**



**NURSING HOMES**

*From a 1936 brochure*



*Model M4Q, from a 1937 brochure. Of similar appearance were the M5A mains model (1939) and the M4D (1940-45). An M4D was sold to the Queen in 1939, and limited production continued during the war for the RAF Comforts Fund.*

By 1936 the Company was promoting its receivers as “the finest of all portables”. They were not yet reviewed in the technical press, so this claim cannot be judged against an independent assessment, but it was probably well founded. Because they refused to cast the portable in the role of poor relation within the radio family, Roberts and Bidmead were prepared to put into their sets the quantity and quality of components necessary to ensure good performance, and because the circuit techniques involved were fairly straightforward this philosophy may well have outweighed the greater technological resources of larger companies.

Early Roberts receivers were mostly in the traditional “suitcase” format, with loudspeaker and frame aerial in the lid. This was well-suited to the moving-iron loudspeakers commonly used in the early 1930s, and when these were superseded by moving-coil speakers of smaller cone-diameter the size of the cabinet was

scaled down, in models such as the M4 (1934). However, for the M4Q, launched in 1937, the Company went over to an "upright" format, which was to be used in numerous models over the next twenty years. As well as taking up less space when in use than a suitcase model of the same nominal size, it was also cheaper to construct, avoided movement of connecting wires, and was easier to provide with a turntable for exploiting the directivity of the frame aerial.

The Company's faith in its potential for expansion proved to be fully justified. During the first year at Rathbone Place (1936/37) turnover almost doubled, to almost £6400. To achieve this, production had to be more than doubled, since competition and technical progress combined to reduce the average retail price of a Roberts receiver from 11gns to 9gns. Three companies were appointed to distribute outside the south-east, each on a different basis: the Midlands and North of England were covered by J D Morrison of Manchester, acting as Manufacturers' Agents; the Scottish distributors, Caldwell Young, were contracted to handle no other make of radio; and the West of England was covered by a radio wholesaler, Silcocks Brothers (Bristol) Ltd. These connections endured for some thirty years, being terminated only when a direct sales force was appointed. On 23 April 1937 Roberts Radio became a Private Limited Company, with Roberts and Bidmead as directors and a capital of £3,000, of which £1,000 was paid up. Turnover for 1937/38 was up by about 15%, at £7,400, and 1938/39 saw a spectacular increase to £13,500.



An M.4.Q. Battery Portable being delivered to the first of the fleet of Y.M.C.A. Overseas Canteens.

**Roberts'**  
**Battery Portables supplied to**  
**Y.M.C.A. Overseas**  
**Canteens**

**W**E are proud that the M.4.Q. was chosen to supply the entertainment in the first of the Y.M.C.A. Overseas Canteens commissioned for service. This fine battery portable represents a definite advance in the design of portable receivers in design, appearance and utility. It will receive all worthwhile stations, even under difficult conditions, whilst volume and quality reproduction are worthy of the best types of mains receivers. Its appearance is outstanding for its quiet dignity. For carrying purposes the controls are covered by a hinged lid and the loudspeaker aperture is reinforced by concealed metal mesh to protect the cone.

*Part of an advertisement from the early months of the war*

## THE WAR YEARS

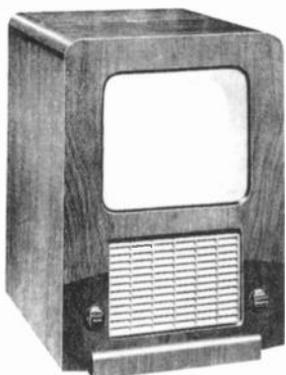
Business continued to boom during the final months of peace, and with the demand for portable radios stimulated rather than depressed by the domestic upheavals of the ensuing “phoney war”, turnover for 1939/40 reached £20,000. Harry Roberts was only 29 when war broke out, and was soon required to register for military service. When he requested a week or two’s deferment to close down his factory, he was asked what it produced, and was then told “We don’t close down radio factories”. Any expectation of “business as usual”, however, was shattered when the British Radio Valve Manufacturers’ Association announced that once existing supplies were exhausted there would be no more valves for domestic radio production. Thus gratification must have been tempered by frustration when, in December 1940, Harry Roberts received a letter from his contact at Harrods informing him that “I personally had the pleasure of selling Her Majesty The Queen, when in our radio department yesterday, one of your Model M4D for her personal use.” This was, in fact, the Queen’s second purchase of a Roberts receiver, for in 1939 she had bought one at the Army and Navy Stores as a present for Princess Elizabeth.

In 1941, perceiving that the West End was a needlessly hazardous location, Harry Roberts began looking for premises in outer London and settled on a large Thames-side boathouse in Creek Road, East Molesey, quite near to his home. Before the end of the year, Rathbone Place was indeed bombed, but by that time everything had been moved to Creek Road except the Company’s stock of cardboard boxes.

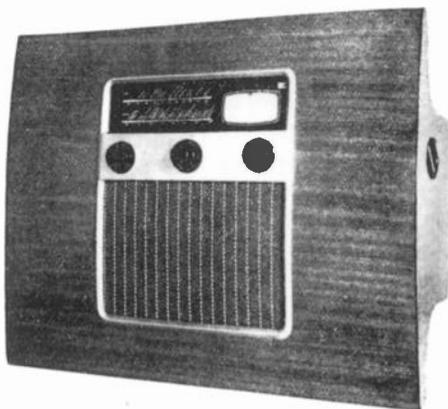


*The boathouse at Creek road, to which the Company moved in 1941, showing the heavy traffic congestion that prevailed there latterly*

## “Britain Can Make It”

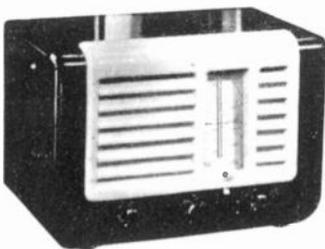


Representative Radar and Television Receivers to be seen at the 'Britain Can Make It' Exhibition held at The Victoria and Albert Museum, Kensington, London, on September 24-October 30.

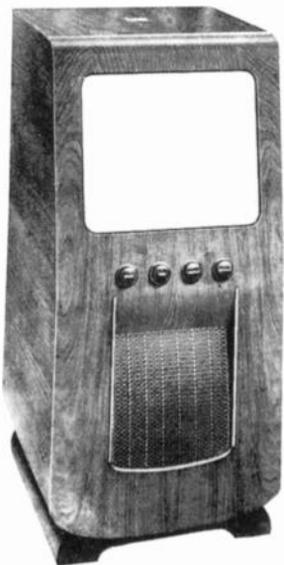


Top (left). Marconiphone VT.58A Television Receiver incorporating 18-inch tube in walnut cabinet. Release at end of October. Price 49 guineas plus tax.

Top (right). Murphy Radio A.104 mahogany cabinet of novel design in which the front panel acts as a baffle. Full wave coverage. In production. Price £25 plus tax.



Centre. Ekco cable model Universal Receiver Type U29. In black plastic (and other colours) with Ivory Escutcheon. In production. Price 13 guineas plus tax.



Left. H.M.V. Television Receiver. Model 1803 with 15-inch Emitscope in walnut cabinet. Release date not given.

Right. Roberts Radio portable receiver. Type P.A.D. in blue, brown or black resin case. Three wave bands. In production. Price 14 guineas complete plus tax.



*In 1946, Roberts was the least well-known of these marques; to-day, the others are largely forgotten*

Some valves were released to set-manufacturers to allow them to make broadcast receivers for purchase by the RAF Comforts Fund, and Roberts Radio made some 2,500 sets under this arrangement, but most of its war-work was more overtly military. Morse-key and plug assemblies, aerial coupling boxes, and aerial switching units for radar were turned out in quantity for the Ministry of Aircraft Production, this work incidentally furnishing the company with machine tools supplied by the United States under "lease-lend". There were also a number of commissions from RAE Farnborough to produce "one-off" items, sometimes so secret that drawings would be brought into the factory, shown briefly to the relevant worker, then taken away again.

Their last commission, undertaken at the end of the war, was not secret at all. Roberts were to build for public exhibition a simulation of H2S airborne radar, using ultrasonic waves in a tank of water to reproduce on a cathode-ray tube the features of a relief map immersed in the tank; the ultrasonic transducers were mounted on a trolley, which also carried a model aircraft, and as this trundled across the tank the display changed correspondingly. This elaborate device absorbed most of the Company's resources for the best part of a year, so cannot be accounted very cost-effective. But by helping people to understand how radar worked, the project gave depth to their pride in its development, and was certainly more useful than continuing to produce irrelevant war material. Meanwhile, the pent-up demand for new domestic receivers was waiting to be satisfied.



*In post-war Britain, firms were allocated scarce materials only if they achieved a satisfactory export performance*

## THE BRAND LEADER

Nineteen forty-six saw the Company back in civilian production, consolidating the pre-eminence in its field that it had established before the war. Leslie Bidmead's designers at this time were Pat Murphy, who was later to emigrate to Canada, and the present Chief Development Engineer, John Hance, who had joined the Company in 1938. In May, Harrods congratulated Harry Roberts on the excellence of his new P4D receiver ("It undoubtedly beats anything of the transportable type which has yet been placed on the market") and pleaded for a larger allocation ("We are right up against it for stocks"). A more public commendation came in the autumn, when the P4D was one of the twenty radio receivers selected by the Council of Industrial Design for its prestigious exhibition "Britain Can Make It", at the Victoria & Albert Museum.

Roberts Radio made its Radiolympia debut at the first post-war show, in October 1947, when it showed an all-wave model in both battery and mains versions, weighing in at 19½lb and 17½lb respectively. However, the "Junior" model, introduced in 1948, weighed only 10½lb. Its designers exploited miniature valves, developed during the war, to reduce size without sacrificing performance, and maintained adequate battery life by using a layer-built HT battery, rather more expensive than the normal type but with greater capacity for a given size. Here at last was a quality portable that people could realistically be expected to carry about with them. To encourage them to do so, the set was sold complete with a weatherproof carrying bag, which soon began to be noticed among the hand luggage of affluent travellers.



*The Company's stand at Radiolympia in October 1947 showed evidence of post-war austerity*



*A still from the film "Heir to the Throne". H.F.H. Princess Elizabeth switches on her Roberts portable on 21 April 1944, and hears a news item on how she is spending her eighteenth birthday*



*From a silver-wedding feature in Illustrated London News, 1948. the caption reads: A distraction which Their Majesties enjoy as greatly as the majority of their subjects: The King turns on the wireless*

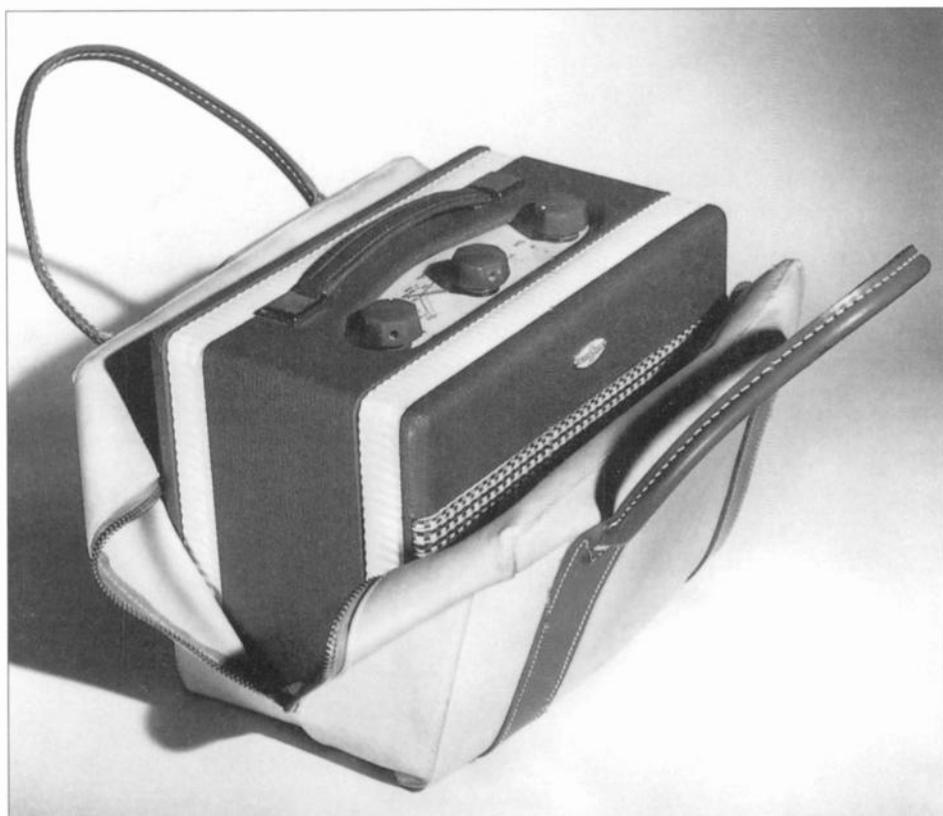


*A few RMB and RP4 sets were hand-painted with nursery-rhyme characters*

By the autumn of 1947 Harry Roberts knew that at least half a dozen of his sets had been supplied to the Royal Household, and decided to apply for that most prized of endorsements, a Royal Warrant. He duly submitted a letter listing the sets supplied, and pointing out that a Warrant would make a considerable difference to the firm's export business, particularly to the United States and other hard-currency areas. Notwithstanding this potent argument, his application was refused, though it was stated that there was no reason why a renewed request should not be made in the future.

Receivers supplied over the next few years included children's models hand-painted with nursery-rhyme characters by the well-known artist W E Narraway. Since these were gifts they were ineligible for consideration, but no doubt contributed to the Household's awareness of the company's products, and Roberts was able, in a letter dated 31 December 1951, to list no fewer than thirteen sets actually purchased since his previous application. He had intended to send the letter some months previously, but had held it back until there was news of some improvement in the King's health following his serious illness. The delay caused by this courteous gesture was particularly unfortunate, as the letter missed the annual meeting at which applications were considered, and when the King died, in February 1952, all pending applications became void. Roberts had to be content with the assurance that if orders in sufficient quantities continued to be placed during the three years following the accession of the Queen, he would be eligible to apply again.

In February 1955 a third letter was sent, referring to a specially adapted model provided for the Royal Tour of 1953/4 and listing receivers supplied over a period of more than fifteen years. This time the application was successful, and in the London Gazette of 15 July 1955 Messrs Roberts Radio Co. Ltd were listed as "Radio Manufacturers to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II". A pleasant reminder that the Warrant was no mere formality came in January 1957, when young Richard Roberts was requested to take to Buckingham Palace samples of the current range of portables in the various colour options for demonstration to Prince Charles and Princess Anne. It transpired that these were required to mark a special occasion. He was shown into the nursery and subsequently joined by the Prince and Princess, who had apparently interrupted their studies to make their selection.



*The 'Junior', in its carrying bag, on the cover of the Design Council's journal in 1948*

## TRANSITION TO TRANSISTORS

Portable radios made great strides in the 1950s, mainly but not exclusively due to the advent of the transistor. Early in the decade, ferrite-rod aerials had allowed the size of valve receivers to be further reduced without sacrificing electrical performance, so that Roberts Radio's R66 mains/battery model, introduced in 1956, was as small as was deemed compatible with good sound quality. And although the explosive growth in television viewing took away radio's evening audience, greatly reducing the market for full-size receivers, portables were ideally adapted to radio's residual but expanding role as a provider of "background" entertainment.



*The RMB of 1951 was the Company's first mains/battery receiver. Battery model RP4 was identical in appearance*



*Personalities from the world of broadcasting were fêted by Radio show exhibitors. Gilbert Harding at the Roberts Radio stand in 1953, with Leslie Bidmead and Richard Roberts*



*Jack Train (ITMA's Colonel Chinstrap) drawing the crowds at Earls Court in 1956*



*The R66, launched in 1956, represented a breakthrough in styling. Even today it would not look out of place in a retailer's display.*

*Press photographers frequently showed "top people" with Roberts receivers:*



*The Earl of Dalkeith and his wife, 1953*



*Peter Sellers, 1966*



*Harold Wilson, with David Frost, 1969*



*Roy Jenkins, 1968*



*Daughters of the Hon.  
Anthony & Mrs Cayzer, 1958*



*An RT1 is one of the desirable objects featured in this birthday card of 1958*



*The leather-cased R77 was one of the Company's most stylish models, but as a valve set introduced in 1957 soon became obsolete*

The Roberts RT1, released in April 1958, was not Britain's first transistor portable, but its pedigree ensured that it was awaited with interest within the trade, whilst its launch was of crucial importance to the Company, for sales of valve receivers were already declining. Would the RT1 live up to Roberts Radio's reputation? The highly-respected John Gilbert, writing in the *Music Trades Review*, had no doubts:

*This set continues the long line of outstanding receivers from this manufacturer, who holds a unique position in the radio industry. One is tempted to consider how such a receiver could be improved, or what will be the design to follow this one.*

In first-generation transistor receivers battery economy was a prime selling point, and the Roberts engineers exploited this to the full by fitting the massive Ever Ready PP8. With average use this lasted at least two years, and a number of sets returned as faulty four or five years after purchase were found merely to need replacement of the original battery. Less output power was available from transistors than from valves, so to maintain adequate volume without distortion the RT1 was given a loudspeaker having the unusually high density of 13,000 Gauss.

Strictly speaking, Roberts Radio's first transistor model was not the RT1, but a "personal" receiver accepted by H.M. The Queen in March 1958 as a gift from the Radio Industry Council, who had commissioned the Company to design and make it. The set was carefully designed to achieve the best performance attainable for its size, and Leslie Bidmead spent many hours fashioning for it a casing that would be worthy of the occasion. This remained an isolated



*Although this "one-off" model presented to the Queen in 1958 was at the time considered a masterpiece of miniaturization, it was in fact 6 1/2 inches long*

venture, however; Harry Roberts judged that because of the inherent limitations of personal radios there would be little demand for high-quality models.

Early in 1960, the Company was re-organised, and its two present Directors joined Harry Roberts and Leslie Bidmead on the Board. Harry's son Richard was to handle marketing and sales, while Geoffrey Dixon-Nuttall, who had joined the Company in 1948, was to take charge of production.

The Company had grown considerably since moving to the Creek Road boathouse in 1941, and although neighbouring premises had been added during and just after the war the resulting complex of five units with a major road running through it was an obstacle to efficient production, let alone further expansion. There was no



*A Roberts RTI in Moscow for the 1961 British Trade Fair, photographed outside St Basil's church*



*A mink-coated RTI, c. 1959; other coverings included pony-skin, leopard-skin, and jewel-encrusted suede. By encasing receivers in exotic materials, the company projected the portable radio as a glamorous accessory*



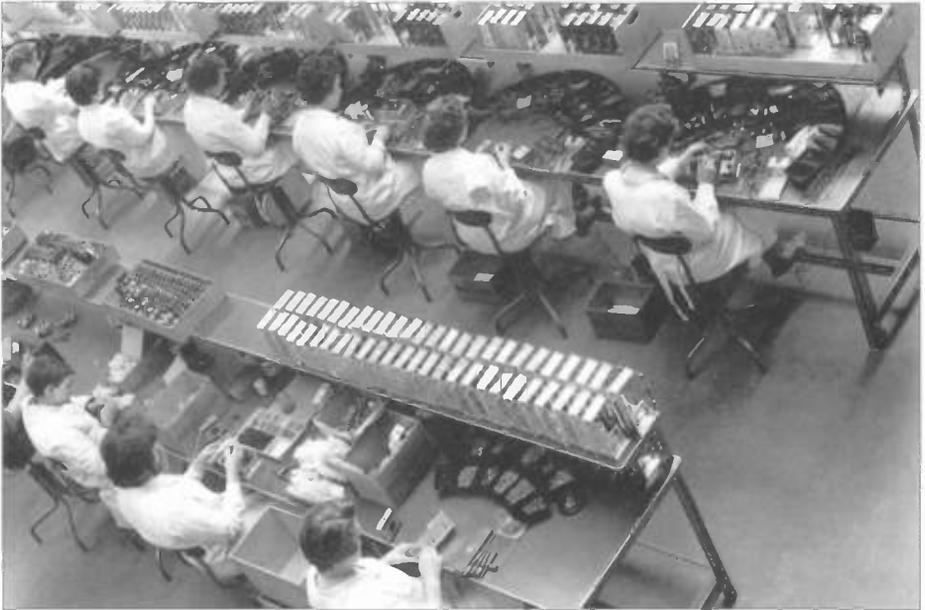
*Lord Boothby at the 1961 Radio Show with an R200 in a solid-gold case. This receiver, priced at 2000gns + battery 3/6d, attracted much attention, and received world-wide publicity when it was finally stolen from a department store. At today's prices, the gold sheet would cost £26,000*

area large enough for a conveyor-belt assembly line, hand-trucks were constantly having to be taken across the road, and some operations had to be contracted out. Inevitably, the factory's presence in a shopping and residential area marred the environment and aggravated traffic congestion. It was clearly time for another move. The company was already authorised by the Board of Trade to remain in the London area, but the Directors were determined to retain their key personnel and their network of local suppliers, and chose a site on a new industrial estate within two miles of Creek Road. When their application to the local council for planning permission was rejected, they instructed a leading barrister, Mr J Ramsay Willis, QC, to prepare the submission for an appeal.

The Council was spared no detail, from the embarrassing location of the ladies' toilets at Creek Road to the necessity of retaining a 23-year-old service engineer who had been with the Company only a year but had taken two years to find. Providing additional jobs in the area was evidently not encouraged, for though the area of the new factory was to be more than twice that of the old, it was stressed that the work force, currently numbering 57, would only be increased by fifteen. The Company's forceful presentation of its case carried the day, and the building of the new factory in Molesey Avenue, West Molesey, went ahead. The move was made in April 1962, ownership of Creek Road being retained. After thirty years, Harry Roberts at last had a custom-built factory, and one of which he could justifiably be proud.



*The newly-completed Molesey Avenue factory, 1962*



*Chassis being hand wired in the factory, 1962. Conveyor-belt assembly was later used for printed circuits*



*The RIC1, of 1968, was the first British integrated-circuit receiver. Its semiconductor complement was the Mullard TAD100, a diode, and a pair of output transistors*

In 1967 Roberts Radio collaborated with Mullard Limited to pioneer a radical advance. Mullards had developed a linear integrated-circuit, the TAD100, which incorporated eleven transistors and was designed to perform all the active functions of an a.m. receiver except that of power output stage. Anxious to see it exploited commercially, they approached Roberts Radio. The Company had not lost its appetite for the challenging assignment, and set to work building a suitable receiver, which was launched in 1968 and designated RIC1. It looked no different from contemporary models using discrete components, but its novelty was effectively publicised by providing dealers with cards bearing reject specimens of the TAD100's microchip. The RIC1 was a good performer competitively priced, and the Company's readiness to experiment was rewarded with a production run of 77,967.

Sadly, this was to be Harry Roberts's last venture. For some years he had suffered heart trouble, and on 14 June 1969 he died, aged 59. His personal standing within the industry was out of all proportion to the size of his company, and the family was deluged with letters that were studded with phrases betokening genuine regard: "one of the gentlemen of the Radio trade..."; "...genial manner, fair dealing and a man of his word"...; "...tolerant and understanding..."; "You bear a proud name." But perhaps the most telling sentiment was that expressed in one of the letters from family friends: "Harry had that lovely gift of making one feel nicer than one really was, just for being with him!"



*The premises at Creek road, almost back to being a boathouse during the floods of September 1968. In the road, the water was 18" deep*



*West Molesey factory was flooded to depths between 9" and 18" during the 1968 floods. The water receded after 2-3 days, but it was a month before the factory was back to normal*

## FORWARD WITH VISION

Richard Roberts succeeded his father as Chairman and Managing Director, and under his leadership the Company has judiciously broadened its range of products. Around 1973 it became evident to him that Britain's television manufacturers, still fully occupied with satisfying the mass demand for colour receivers created by the transition to a full colour service in November 1969, were not fully exploiting the upper end of the market. Though by this time many receivers were giving excellent pictures, under the pressure of competition they tended to be fitted with cheap loudspeakers and housed in run-of-the-mill cabinets. Imported luxury models were available, but their cabinets were not always to the taste of British buyers, nor were their circuits always satisfactorily modified to British transmission characteristics. Here, then, was an opportunity for the Company to apply to a new field the marketing philosophy that had served it so well for radio.

Planning throughout 1974 led to the formation in May 1975 of a new company, Roberts Video Ltd, also led by Richard Roberts. Two receivers were launched in September, using the Philips G8 and G9 chassis with a number of extra features: remote control, twin loudspeakers and tone controls; the cabinets were veneered in real teak and fitted with sliding tambour doors.

Dealerships were offered to all Roberts Radio franchised dealers, initially on the same terms as applied to portable radios: a discount of 30% on the recommended retail price (RRP), with no additional discount for quantity. The following year, however, with the Price Commission investigating the cost of



*A table-model can be as compact as a portable, and is more attractive in a room setting. The RM40 was marketed from 1972-76*



*H.R.H. Princess Margaret and Viscount Linley visiting roberts Radio, 17 April 1975*

small electrical goods, the Radio Electrical and Television Retailers Association (RETRA) withdrew its approval of RRP. Roberts Video was the first manufacturer to respond, dropping RRP and offering modest quantity-discounts. This was an astute move, for it won the Company honourable mentions in *The Times* and in the trade press.

Roberts Video showed steady growth from its first year of trading, when 2,500 receivers were sold, and it was against this background of successful diversification that Roberts Radio acquired Dynatron Radio Ltd from Philips in January 1981. Established by the Hacker brothers, Ron and Arthur, in 1927, Dynatron had arrived in the Philips fold via the takeover chain Dynatron-Ekco-Pye-Philips. Its name had long been associated with high-quality television and audio, making it an ideal complement to the Roberts Radio marque, and the Roberts Video brand was subsequently replaced by Dynatron. Using the same marketing and sales organisation as Roberts, Dynatron continues to sell full-specification television receivers in a variety of reproduction and modern styles through approximately 700 retail outlets in the UK.

Roberts Radio has also acquired the firm of A E Kevern Ltd which has made its cabinets ever since 1932. Originally in London's Goswell Road, Kevern's moved to Haverhill, Suffolk in the 1960s under a government re-location scheme. There had long been an understanding between the two companies that, should Kevern's ever wish to sell out, Roberts Radio would have first refusal, and in 1977 this offer was made and accepted. Administered from East Molesey, Kevern's nevertheless retains considerable autonomy, and devotes around 25% of

its effort to contracts for other firms. Shortly after this acquisition the group's total workforce rose to over 300.

Of recent years, Royal Warrants have again figured prominently in the Company's affairs. In 1978/9 Richard Roberts had the distinction of serving as President of the Royal Warrant Holders Association, while the Roberts Radio Company has been granted two further Warrants, in

1982 and 1985 respectively, as manufacturers and suppliers of radio receivers to H M Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother and to HRH The Prince of Wales. In 1981, the Warrant granted to Dynatron Radio Ltd in 1963 as suppliers of televisions and radio-gramophones to H M The Queen was transferred to that company's new owners.

One Roberts' dealer invokes a quite different link with the monarchy to promote a battery-only mw/lw model: "A very high quality receiver. Ideal for HMP". It is indeed. In Her Majesty's Prisons, only radios without vhf, telescopic aerials or mains lead are allowed, while the dearth of other entertainment puts a premium on good performance. However, any suspicion that the set was aimed at this market is dispelled by its name: Rambler 2.

Selling only through accredited dealers has become something of a rarity in the age of the discount warehouse, but works well for Roberts Radio, whose prospective customer is likely to be less concerned with shopping around for the lowest price than with knowing that should the set ever go wrong he will have no difficulty in having it put right. The dealer is assured of his fair profit and knows that his accreditation enhances the shop's prestige, while the Company secures prominent display of its products at the point of sale.

Roberts Radio's uncompromising insistence on quality has endured, though it has had to be adapted to current conditions. Thus plastic-cased receivers and personal cassette players are imported from the far east, but are built to specifications meeting the Company's standards of performance, styling and finish. However, wooden-cased receivers still predominate, and these continue to be made at East Molesey. The latest of them is a synthesizer model with channel storage, giving perfect tuning at a touch. It exemplifies the judicious blending of tradition and innovation that has always characterized Roberts Radio, and that augurs well for its future.



By Appointment to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II  
Manufacturers of  
Televisions and Radiogramophones  
Dynatron Radio Ltd



*Richard Roberts (died 1991) the Company's  
Chairman and Managing Director from 1969 - 1991*



*Co-founder Leslie Bidmead (retired 1985) and  
Director Geoffrey Dixon-Nuttall (retired 1987)*

## CHANGES AND A NEW MILLENNIUM

Change in a family run company is always inevitable and in the case of Roberts was hastened by tragedy when in 1990, Chairman and Managing Director Richard Roberts was diagnosed as suffering from cancer. By this time co-founder Leslie Bidmead and director Geoffrey Dixon-Nuttall had retired leaving the future of the company quite vulnerable. To prepare for the future as best he could, Richard Roberts appointed old friends Michael Milling as Financial Adviser and former Comet managing director David Hewitt as a director.

Richard Roberts' death on 25th November 1991 was marked by a Memorial service in St. Martin's-in-the-Fields in January 1992 to which one of his many friends attending described as "Dick's last party".

At this juncture, Richard's widow Denise and her son-in-law Jeremy Cama, were appointed to the Board. It was now appreciated that the market for traditional styled Roberts' products was constant but not large and there was a need to generate further sales. To this end the product range was widened to include the 'Lifetime' series of lower priced radios which were manufactured in the Far East and also to the specialised short wave series of 'World Radio' receivers. Alongside, high quality cabinets for TV and Hi-Fi systems were manufactured and sold under the Dynatron brand.



*The Revival 250 series – fifties style 3-band radio. Re-launched in 1993 in the original red leathercloth and extended to sixteen different fashionable colours by the year 2000*

Another area of success at this time was the 'Revival' range that sparked interest after being featured in a TV advertisement for Martini. Offered in a range of colours this could possibly be seen as part of the inspiration behind the interest in retro styled products that prevailed in the late 1990's and 2000.

The need for product diversification had been done largely without a long term strategy and the company was badly undercapitalised to fund any major expansion. Efforts by a syndicate formed by Jeremy Cama failed to achieve the necessary backing and a sale became the only viable way forward.

Attracting an appropriate buyer took longer than had been envisaged but in November 1994, the business was transferred to the Glen Dimplex organisation. This privately owned group already had Morphy Richards within its stable of well known brands, with experience in the radio industry, albeit concentrating on the cheaper end of the market.

The new owners were sensitive to the value in maintaining the established heritage of this aspirational brand and appointed Leslie Burrage, an experienced and respected figure in the consumer electronics industry, as chief executive, to further success of the company and integrate the established culture. Production and company headquarters was moved from West Molesey to Mexborough in South Yorkshire, but a number of key personnel including most of the sales team were retained.

Under the new management a new strategy was defined aiming to use the Roberts Radio heritage to widen the appeal of the brand to encompass a younger audience that would in turn help preserve loyalty and sales for the future. This has



*HRH The Prince of Wales greets Leslie Burrage, Chief Executive, Roberts Radio, at a Royal Warrant Holders' day at The Orchard Room, Highgrove, July 2000*



*Revival 550 – Jaguar limited edition hand finished in green leather*



*Classic 928 – with simple pre-set controls, launched in 2001*



*World R9914 – ideal for the BBC WORLD SERVICE*



*Sports 984 – the world's first personal stereo radio with MW, FM and LW*

been achieved through continued product innovation being applied to 'anything that is radio orientated' using design, style and technical advances that have made the Roberts' slogan "Sound for Generations" timeless.

Attention to design is epitomised by the 2000 range of fifties styled 'Revival' 3 band models offered in a range of 10 bold colours and 6 pastel shades. This styling is also found on exclusive models bearing the prestigious Jaguar and Mulberry marques. Appropriate for a company proudly holding three Royal Warrants, a special edition 'Revival' was presented to HM Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother to mark the occasion of her 100th birthday.

For the export market and discerning traveller, the 'World' range offers digital presets and a range of shortwave bands. Roberts is the only brand granted

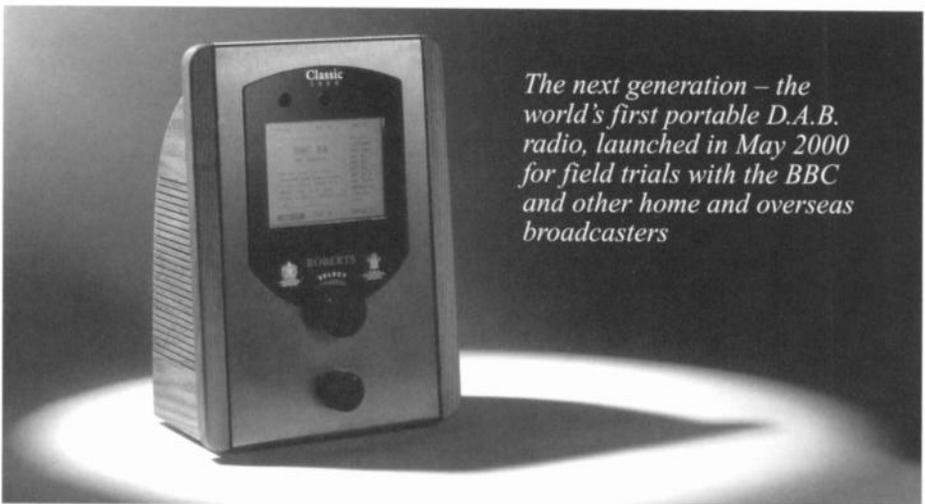
permission to engrave BBC WORLD SERVICE on their products and each model includes a BBC WORLD SERVICE frequency guide.

In more contemporary styling among the range of clock radios and CD cube is included a model with a 'PillowTalk' remote speaker for listening without disturbing others. Meanwhile to satisfy keen cricket listeners Roberts launched the 'Sports 984' radio, the world's first 3-band personal stereo which will pick up Test Match Special, broadcast on Long Wave.

Innovation in technology however is the most likely aspect to safeguard the continued success of Roberts in the early years of the 21st century. The 'Classic 2000' is the world's first portable Digital Audio Broadcasting radio. Launched in November 1999, digital radio or DAB is the first major change in radio broadcasting since its inception in 1922. The prime benefits for listeners are much clearer interference free sound from a constant frequency source. Digital transmission of signals is a more efficient use of the radio spectrum, allowing for many more stations together with the transmission of data through the same frequency. This enables additional information to be shown in text accompanying the sound to indicate the station name and artist being broadcast while weather and news reports are also shown in text.

Establishing digital radio as a mass market will take time, just as the move from 405 lines to 625 lines in television, the development of cellular phones and digital TV took time to become mainstream. The challenge for both broadcasters and manufacturers involved in digital radio is indeed perhaps greater as there are no line rentals, subscriptions and little licence fee money to support the development of the necessary coverage to in turn encourage user demand.

Roberts Radio are confident that their launch of the world's first portable DAB radio, the 'Classic 2000', will give the company the appropriate opportunity to confirm Roberts Radio's position as the leader in radio products in time for 2002 when the company can celebrate 70 years of offering "Sound for Generations".



*The next generation – the world's first portable D.A.B. radio, launched in May 2000 for field trials with the BBC and other home and overseas broadcasters*

# THE ROBERTS RADIO TEAM 2001



*Production Team*



*Administration Team*



*After-Care Team*



*Sales and Marketing Team*

