

BBC Beginnings in Northern Ireland

2BE became the ninth station of the fledgling British Broadcasting Company on 15 September, 1924. The BBC's arrival in Belfast owed much to the enthusiastic lobbying of Captain Norman Inglis (of the well-known family bakers Inglis and Company) and the Northern Radio Association (Ireland). Preparations for the station's opening had begun in earnest in late Spring and included the identification of a transmitter site and studio space. **The first floor of a converted linen warehouse at 31 Linen Hall Street became home to the BBC's operations in Belfast.** And E. Godfrey Brown, head of music at Methodist College, was appointed as the first member of staff. He was soon joined by a small group of colleagues, many of them musicians in the station's orchestra. Another early appointee was Tyrone Guthrie (who went on to enjoy an international career in theatre and broadcasting) and it was his voice that listeners heard as 2BE went on air for the first time. **2BE's beginnings were modest.** Godfrey Brown had to pay for some of the station's furniture "as no cashier had yet arrived in Belfast" and **the station's premises had something of an improvisational feel.** Guthrie later described them as being located "up a dark little stair – a series of poky offices, just cubby holes, leading off a dark passage, that, in its turn, led to The Studio." But the sense of excitement associated with broadcasting was intense. All of those involved, BBC listeners included, were radio pioneers. In an article published on the day 2BE went on-air, Captain Inglis suggested that "the wonder of it, to the thinking mind, will never cease." **The BBC's Belfast station was part of a developing UK-wide network. Its schedule was intended to complement the programmes that were available from other BBC stations – reflecting local talent and diversity, whilst remaining sensitive to the particular circumstances that the BBC faced in Northern Ireland.** Advertising and politics were to be avoided, news bulletins were restricted due to concerns about competition from newspaper proprietors and the BBC team in Belfast was given the following advice from Arthur Burrows, the BBC's Director of Programmes: "Your task... will be to provide a light type of entertainment, without departing from a high moral tone and good musical standard... Nothing must be transmitted by wireless that will offend sensitive folk..."

2BE's first broadcast attracted considerable press and community reaction. Despite an initial "technical hitch" (similar problems, including a few scheduling challenges, would follow as a result of an inadequate submarine cable connecting Belfast to the BBC network) the evening's programming was largely well-received. The station's Director, Major Walter Montagu Douglas Scott, said that the BBC's ambition was to provide listeners with "only the best" and he offered reassurances that the recent wet weather was not (as had been suggested) "the result of a disturbance of the atmosphere by wireless waves." **The number of BBC listeners in what The Irish News described as "the magic circle of the Belfast Broadcasting Station" grew quickly.** And by the time of the station's official opening five weeks later on 24 October, 1924 over 5,000 licences had been issued. The Ulster Hall was packed for this glittering occasion. Music, including a specially commissioned arrangement of Irish folk tunes by E. Norman Hay, combined with a news report, weather bulletin and speeches from local and visiting dignitaries. **The BBC Chairman imagined a future in which "... by means of their wireless system international misunderstandings might be removed. And the supreme cause of peace might be promoted throughout the world."** Belfast's Lord Mayor said that "... travel anywhere in these days in the vicinity of Belfast and little else is talked of but wireless". And Dr Livingstone, the Vice-Chancellor of Queen's University, caught the wider significance of the broadcasting experiment that had now begun, suggesting that it might prove to be "one of the momentous inventions of a hundred years of invention."