

A wrist chronograph, a radio amateur and a handful of wichety grubs

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On Sunday 7 June 1981, the Chalkpits Museum at Amberley in West Sussex held its second Wireless Communications Day. Many members of the Radio Society of Great Britain (RSGB) were present and I had a special reason for wanting to contact their members

My admiration of the part played by radio amateurs in the first couple of decades of the twentieth century in persuading the government to allow public broadcasting was exemplified in a letter sent by Frank Hope-Jones to the Secretary of the Post Office. He was at that time Chairman of the Wireless Society of London and he referred to

the preposterous proposal of the Postmaster General to levy a tax or royalty on those who desire to listen to the International Service of Time Signals of the World from the Eiffel Tower in Paris.

So when in the 1970s I found a broken wrist chronograph in a street market, I bought it for the single reason that it had the letters RSGB together with its owner's call sign, G.3i.PM, engraved on its back. The movement was dead and the corroded metal of the case and hands suggested life in a tropical climate. It was priced at two pounds which was not much to pay for a restoration challenge. Moreover, it was possible that with a bit of luck I could discover its radio connection via the engraved call sign.

That anyway was the plan. The movement was a calibre 48 Landeron for which parts were readily available and after restoration the watch stayed in a drawer for some years whilst I waited for the opportunity to meet a large group of RSGB members on a single occasion. The Chalkpits Museum provided that opportunity and I made a point of



The call sign engraved on the back of the wrist chronograph allowed the original owner to be traced.

taking the wrist chronograph so that whenever someone wearing an RSGB badge passed by I could show the watch with its call sign and try to trace its original owner. Nevertheless, in spite of speaking to every RSGB member I saw, I continued to draw a blank and by the middle of the afternoon my hopes were beginning to fade. Perhaps, sadly, G.3i.PM had joined the ranks of the 'silent keys'.

Then at last a group of three elderly radio amateurs with experience going back very many years approached and, miraculously, one of them named Mick said:

That is Bob Field's call sign, I know him well and I'm having tea with him tomorrow, and yes, he's getting on a bit but still going strong.

I could hardly believe my luck as I explained the finding of the watch, my interest in its RSGB connection, and offered to return it if it had been stolen or mislaid. 'Don't worry', he said, 'I'll explain it all to Bob tomorrow over tea.'

About a week later I got a letter which was so extraordinary that I will quote the relevant part of its contents verbatim. Bob explained that some years beforehand he had travelled to Papua New Guinea as a communications engineer in connection with the installation of a system of radio telephones in the interior of the country



Actua Watch Co. Genève. Fitted with Landeron cal.48 chronograph movement.
Circa 1960s.

where land lines were not a practical proposition. He was wearing the watch at the time. He wrote to me as follows:

I have learned from Mick about the watch that has come into your possession. You may be interested to know that it has quite a history. I was once offered two wives, a goat and two handfuls of Wichety grubs for it by an old Chief in New Guinea. It was a beautiful timekeeper, however, it suffered a broken mainspring but it was messed about by several so

called watchmakers. My son eventually lost it. I hope you succeed in getting it going, and I hope it will serve you well.

It has indeed served me well and is keeping the correct time as I write. Unfortunately I have not received any extraordinary offers for it, but perhaps like Bob I would be nervous about taking two wives in exchange; that would, after all, make three.

As for wichety grubs as a delicacy, that is a cultural difference too far. A goat might be nice though!