

Just 'a handful' heard New Zealand's first radio broadcast 100 years ago

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TOITU/SUPPLIED

The radio equipment of University of Otago physics professor Robert Jack, who completed the first radio broadcast in the country 100 years ago, on the evening of November 17, 1921.

Music remains a major draw for radio listeners but only a handful of Kiwis tuned in when [New Zealand's first radio programme was broadcast out of Dunedin 100 years ago](#).

Otago University physics Professor Robert Jack became the first local public radio show presenter

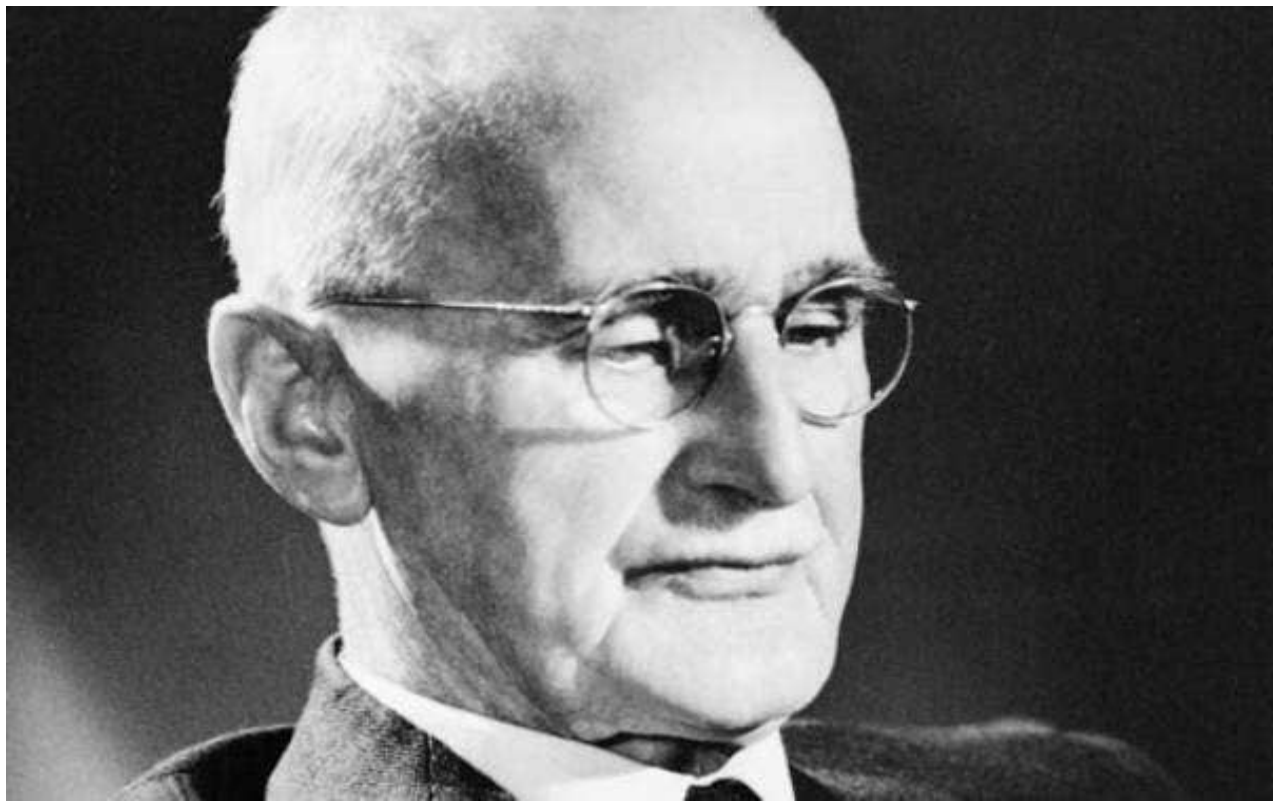
and DJ when he hit the airwaves and played the song Hello My Dearie on the evening of November 17, 1921.

“The interesting thing is that it wasn't this big momentous event,” explained radio history researcher Sarah Johnston.

“The general public – it probably would have passed them by without notice.

“People who are really into radio will say, ‘Oh, radio had existed for years’. But this was the first transmission of voice and music. That's the distinction.”

Far from the everyday household appliance that it would become, radio as it existed in New Zealand in 1921 was a very niche hobby for those with a technical mind and knowledge of electronics. There wasn't much to listen to in the early post-war years, especially for the untrained ear, with the only broadcasts being government communications in Morse code.



NZ HISTORY/SUPPLIED

Otago University's Physics Professor Robert Jack made New Zealand's first radio broadcast out of Dunedin 100 years ago on the evening of November 17, 1921.

Inspired by the potential for radio to connect people and help bridge the gap of New Zealand's isolation, Jack claimed "the whole life of the community will be broadened and educated by being brought into more effective touch with the life of the whole world".

The Scottish-born radio pioneer used state-of-the-art equipment sourced from Britain, and together with the help of his physics department colleagues, built a small transmitter. That historic device is now owned by the University of Otago and on loan to the Toitū Otago Settlers Museum.

"You had to know Morse to make any sense of it. Then you had to build your own receiver, your own radio, your own wireless set," explained Johnston.

“You had to submit plans for it to the Post and Telegraph Office and get sign-off from them, because they were not very keen on amateurs accessing this new technology. It was only a couple of years on from World War One, so they were quite jumpy about that.

“Of course, everyone had to have a licence too. You had to pay some money to get a licence to have a radio.”

SUPPLIED

New Zealand radio history researcher Sarah Johnston says only a handful of Kiwis were tuned in to Professor Robert Jack’s first radio broadcast out of Dunedin in 1921.

Jack was unaware how big an audience he was reaching, but already had the attention of two fellow radio enthusiasts from the wider Dunedin area, while his initial broadcast was heard as far away as Auckland.

The highlight of the programme, which began around 8.30pm, was the hit song Hello My Dearie by Cicely Debenham and Bertram Wallis, known from a popular London stage show.

“It was literally probably a handful of people. We know that the brother and sister Frank and Brenda Bell, who lived on a farm in-land from Palmerston, called Shag Valley, had picked it up,” said Johnston.

“They were very keen on radio, and had been in contact with Professor Jack, they knew about his experiments. And so they were listening out on the night of the 17th.

“Brenda Bell, wrote in her diary, ‘we heard Professor Jack, and we heard him play this song Hello My Dearie’.

“That's how we know - at least we have evidence - that that was the first song played on radio in New Zealand.”

Jack continued making his experimental broadcasts twice a week until Christmas of 1921, after gaining permission from the Post and Telegraph Department.

Within a year, he had established the public station known today as Radio Dunedin - the fifth public radio station in the world to start broadcasting, and the oldest outside the US - while the number of Kiwis who owned a radio also soared.

“By the end of 1922 something like 750 New Zealanders had a radio licence,” said Johnston.

“You started to get enthusiasts setting up radio clubs, transmitting a couple of hours a week. And you also had people who owned music shops, stores that sold gramophone records, realise that this was a great way to promote their business, so they started setting up.

PAPERS PAST

Newspaper advertisements throughout the 1920s helped the growth in popularity of radio around New Zealand.

“In Wellington, the first radio station was on the roof of a shop that sold radio parts. So if you're

selling the parts to make the wireless that would make sense to give people something to listen to.”

Radio’s popularity continued to grow and by the early 1930s there were more than 100,000 radio licences in New Zealand.

The radio was now a must-have household item, and a main source of information and entertainment.

Commercial production meant you could now buy a radio instead of having to build your own, while the addition of a loudspeaker led to the birth of the shared listening experience, as people began gathering to enjoy music, dramas, soap operas and serials.

“By 1925 you start to see advertisements saying ‘your home is not complete without a radio’, ‘every family needs one’, or ‘your family is missing out’,” said Johnston.

“So suddenly a family could sit around and listen together, and the radio became the entertainment hub of the house. That starts the real heyday of radio, which was right through until 1950 when television started here.”

SUPPLIED

The radio revolution was promoted on the cover of the August 1928 issue of Radio Record magazine.

Echoing Jack’s early vision, Johnston believes New Zealand’s position at the bottom of the world

contributed to radio's rapid rise in popularity around the country.

Throughout the early 1920s there was very little electrical interference, with so few people using electrical appliances, making it easy for Kiwis to tune in to foreign broadcasts from the other side of the world.

“This was something that really changed the game for New Zealand in terms of being able to hear what was going on in the rest of the world.

“You could pick up radio stations from America and from Europe in New Zealand quite easily, because there was very little interference.

“That was pretty huge for New Zealand in the 1920s, to be able to do that.”

<https://www.stuff.co.nz/entertainment/tv-radio/300456650/just-a-handful-heard-new-zealands-first-radio-broadcast-100-years-ago>