

Raggedy, rugged and richly rewarding Collected QSLs reveal history of amateur radio and the march of technology

Michael Goode VK3BDL



The old saying was "please send me some more wallpaper..." Where did the term 'QSL' come from? Q codes were formally adopted by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) in 1912 and amateurs were allocated the block QRA to QTR. Each code was a question and an answer. QSL means 'can you acknowledge receipt?', the response being 'I acknowledge receipt'.

About 10 years ago, a friend handed me a box of old QSL cards that had belonged to Ted Ironmonger VK3WU, ex-G3PO (SK). I have been collecting QSLs ever since! My aim with this article is to give a very brief historical background and let the cards speak for themselves. These cards primarily cover the period 1920-1930.

Where did it all begin, this acknowledging of contacts on paper? The first published mention was in QST in 1916 (my comments in *italics*):

"I am enclosing a postal (*a QSL card*) from W T Fraser of Buffalo NY (8VX) on which he states my signals were heard in Buffalo clear and strong. This is a distance of over 400 miles (*probably on about 200 metres wavelength, 1.5 MHz*) and I naturally felt somewhat elated as it was accomplished with 1.4 KW Chambers open core transformer. . . When one goes to the trouble of having a postal printed in order to inform those signals that he hears, it seems to me that a long stride has been taken . . . I would urge . . . the members of the ARRL . . . to notify by postal . . . by the very next day the owner of the station whose signals they hear. *To my knowledge none of these postals survive.*

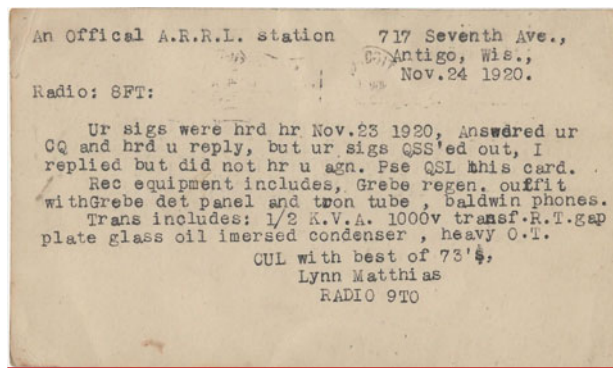
then, sometime in 1919, amateurs were allowed back on the air. In August 1919, another mention appears in QST:

"Here's an idea. Run a suggestion that fellows with long distance receiving sets make up themselves a form for postcards and send it each time a new long distance station is heard . . . Fellows receiving them would keep them on file . . . *or put them on a wall! The rest is history!*

It seems that VE3NM, in the above card, took the suggestion literally!

Amateurs in the USA returned to the bands in 1919. Two of the oldest cards that I have access to are dated 1920.

From the collection of Patrick Rigg.



From the collection of Patrick Rigg.

The first is dated 11 August 1920, for a reception report from 6BN in California, who heard 6LC, also in California. Note that 6LC is using a "one step" regen (regenerative) receiver on an approximate wavelength of 200m, or 1500 kHz. The second is another reception report, from 9TO to 8FT (an unsuccessful QSO), on 24 November 1920. Read carefully, you can see that 9TO was using a spark transmitter running 500 watts and a regen receiver. I suspect the wavelength, again, is 200m.

Meanwhile, in Australia

What was happening here? In September 1920, war restrictions on wireless experimenters were removed. In early 1921, the authorities changed back to the pre-war call sign system of X2AA, etc. Some 'transmitters', as they were called, requested specific call signs. So, for example, one leading transmitter, Charles D. Maclurcan, a prominent early radio pioneer, obtained X2CM. From 1922, many new licenses were issued, but with no X prefix. I have no QSLs for these X callsigns.

"Give them 200m and higher, they won't get out of their back garden" (anon)...the rest is history...

This early Australian QSL card, from 15 November 1924, provides rather a lot of information.

He is copying PICM (in the Philippines) on 95 metres. His transmitter operates on 120 metres. Although this card is not confirming a QSO, many early

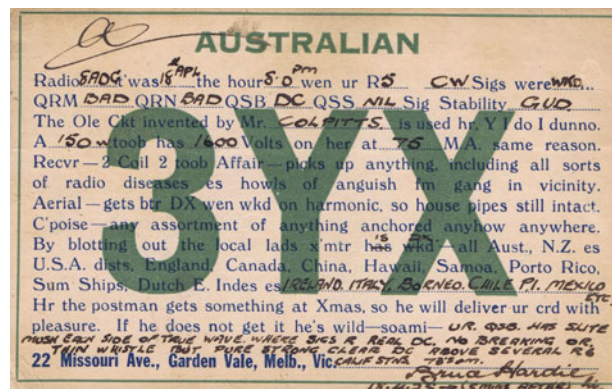


From the collection of Patrick Rigg.

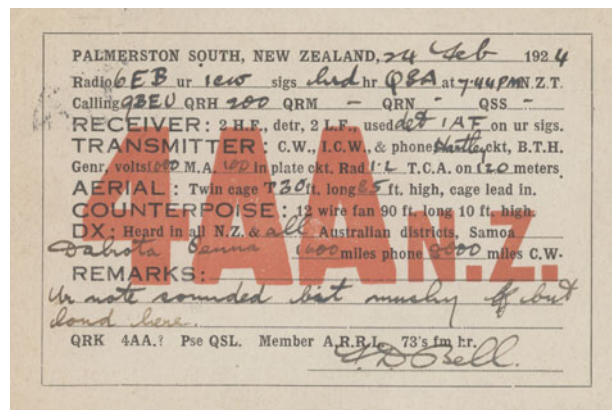
QSOs were crossband because of different government regulations and heavy QRM.

As with many of these earlier cards, 3AZ states what he's worked and what he has heard. In this case, the operator has worked Australia and New Zealand and heard USA and Holland. There is no GMT time, just local Melbourne time. Like this one, many older cards are stained with nicotine smoke as they were pinned on shack walls.

There were no nominated prefixes for countries, so one either put the word 'Australian', or the letter 'A' to signify it. New Zealanders used the words 'New Zealand', or the letter 'Z', while the United States used the letter 'U'.



This contact between US station 8ADG and Australian station 3YX was in 1926 (from the postmark on the other side of the card). There is no mention of the band that was used. Interestingly, 8ADG is in New York state.



From the collection of VK3BDL.

This is a report of reception of a QSO on 200 metres, between 6EB in California and 9BEU, that 4AA overheard in New Zealand. 4AA's achievements are listed on the card; 1600 miles (2575 km) on phone and 8000 miles (12,875 km) on CW. His transmitter operates on 120 metres.

Spark dies out as choose-a-prefix rules

RADIO **8FT** Van Wert, Ohio, Jan 1, 1923
 Spark **8FT** A.M.
 Your C W signals heard here. Time **7:45** P.M. Date **Dec 1, 22**
 Phone
 Audibility **2-A** Character **Very** Tone Wave
 Receiving equipment used here: **Homemade short wave regenerative tuner-detector and one step. Brandes phones.**
 Transmitting equipment: **Spark coil set, & 5 watt CW. Rad. 5 A.**
 Antenna: **4 wire 785 ft. long, 40 ft. high.**
 Ground: **Buried plates and pipes with counterpoise.**
 Remarks: **Sparks to work, 4 1/2 hrs. did not get my phone on.**
 Please QSL-QRK? **CUL Best 73's Leo Farman, Opr.**
520 N. Jefferson St.

From the collection of VK3BDL.

This US card above, from 1923, is for a contact between two American stations; presumably the '8' call area is mid-west. It is interesting to note that the "Spark coil set" equipment option has been crossed out. There are few spark cards after 1923. Below is probably one of the last, a diehard headed "Spark Forever", dated November 1923.

SPARK FOREVER
 Kansas City, Mo., 9-21-23
 Radio **9CA** Ur. **Spk** Sigs **Wkd** Hr. at **12:30** A.M. CST **11-21-23**
 Character **not at time** Tone **sure** Wve **2-4** Conditions **2-4**
 Receiver: **Var. H. C. Reinartz 2-Step, A. F. Baldies 1-Step used.**
 Transmitter: **Nr. 1, 1KW Spk, Acme Trans., Glass Plate Oil Immersed Cond. 12 Tooth 1750 R.P.M. Gap. Split Primary Type O.T. Rad. 5 T.C.A. 2-4 KW Used.**
 Dx. Wkd **4-37** U.S. Can. Dists **26** States **100** Miles **4rd**
 U. S. Can. Dists States Miles
 Nr. 2 **1-5** Watt Tubes **10** V. **110** Ckt. Rad. **160** T.C.A.
 Dx. Wkd All U.S. **3-49** Can. Dists **43** States **110** Miles **4rd** States Miles
 Nr. 3 **1-5** Watt Tubes **10** V. **110** Ckt. Rad. **160** T.C.A.
 Dx. Wkd U.S. **4-3** Can. Dists States Miles **4rd** States Miles
 Total Dx. Wkd **4-3** States Miles **4rd** States Miles
 Aerial: **7 Wire 20 Ft. L. 10 by 2 Ft. High, Cage Lead, 1 Wire 10 C.P. 6 Ft. L. 10 Ft. High.**
 Remarks: **Gld to work. U. Om. 1/2 hr. in am. 1/2 hr. in pm. 1/2 hr. in eve. 1/2 hr. in morn. 1/2 hr. in eve. 1/2 hr. in morn.**
PSE QSL GLD to QSR, QRK, QRH, QSB, 9ACX? CUL es 73's Om.
 Member **A. R. L. O.R.S.** **GEORGE N. SCHAFER**

From the collection of G4UZN

George N. Schafer was running a "1KW" spark transmitter in Kansas City, Missouri. Note that this is a spark-to-spark QSO with 9CA.

Here are some more cards exemplifying the use of single-letter prefixes: A for Australia, Z for New Zealand and U for the United States, etc.

H. T. SIMMONS
 75 Nicholson Road, Subiaco, Western Australia.
 I always reply to QSL's., DO YOU?
 To **U9CK** Your **cw sigs wkd** Here
 Sth **4R** Qrh **40** At **2045** Perth M.T. on **25/3/26**
 Qrm **Nil** Qrn **Nil** Qss **Nil** Qsb **DC**
 Receiver **Zenith Reinartz** on audios **one**
 Transmitter **10 watt L.C. Hartley** Circuit
 Aerial **Vertical Single Wire 15ft 1g**
 Counterpoise **Single wire 20ft 1g 8ft high**
 Type of Transmitting Value **Z11b** Plate Volts **750**
 Plate Current **35 ma** Rad T.C. **1** Amps on **35** Metres
 Best 73's O.M. **D.S.O. All Aust. N.Z. From H.T. Simmons**
India, Java, Philippines, etc. Java

From the collection of VK3BDL.

He has worked U9CK on 40 metres. Like most cards of this era, very specific details are given of the transmitting tube type, plate voltage and current; he's also quoted 0.7 amps of antenna current.

WORLD'S FURTHEST SOUTH DX STATION
 Long 178° 29' 16" E. Lat 45° 54' 10" S. New Zealand Mean Time 11hrs 30 min fast of G.M.T.
 Radio **GBCL** ur **CW** received here on **Jan** at **G.M.T.**
 Crd worked **U** were calling **N.Z.M.T.**
 Audiby Qrn Qrm Qss Qsb Qrb on u.
RECEIVER: NO LOSS. Modified 1BGF. Det & 2 Audio. Used on u.
TRANSMITTER: 2 50 watt C.W. ICW. & Fong. Modified 4 Coil Meissner. 30-90 METERS
 Modulation. Plate Supplies. 1000 v Esco M.O. 400 v Storage Battery.
 & 3000v R.A.C. Plate 195 Mils. Grid Mils. Rad. 2 Amps. On 85 Meters.
 DX. Wkd. N.Z. Ausst. Cape Horn, U.S.A. England, France, Mesopotamia, All US dists
 Hrd in N.Z. Ausst. Argentina, Honolulu, Cape Horn, U.S.A. England, France, Chile, Patna, Ireland.
 Heard: Ausst. Argentina, Philippines, Cape Horn, Honolulu, Mexico, U.S.A. Can. England, France, Spain, W.P.
 Heard in **Porto-Rico, India, Indo-China, Mex & Alaska,**
Worlds CW record, Wkd f8AB 13,000 miles.
 Tnx for crd on report checks OK w/ log
 Qrk? **r4AK** Pse. Qsl. Crd. Pd. Cul. 73's fm **D. Schiel** op.
 Qra. C/o P.O. Box 519, Dunedin, N.Z. Cables: "COSLEHS, N.Z."
"x4's THE DX'ERS. Our Sigs. cover the Earth."

From the collection of VK3BDL.

This is interesting card from New Zealand, sent in response to a report from a British Broadcast Listener, boasting he's "The world's furthest south DX station." The operator notes that his receiver covers 37-101.5 metres (roughly 8.1 MHz to 2.9 MHz) and transmitter covers "50-90m" (roughly 6-3.3 MHz) and holds the "World's CW record," working F8AB for a distance of 13,000 miles (20,922 km).

Continuing his scoreboard, he notes being heard in places such as Indo-China (Vietnam today) and Mesopotamia (now Iraq). See the note that New Zealand is 11.5 hours in front of GMT, not 12!

Radio **G2NM** U-2BY 7 Oneida St., Schenectady, N. Y.
 Your C W signals heard **and** **1923** **15** **Only** **A.M.** **E. S. T.**
RECEIVER: Low Loss Reinartz, Deane Steps A. F., and Baldies.
TRANSMITTER: 1000 Watts C. W., coupled Hartley circuit, Kenotron rectified A. C. on plate, 3000 volts at 400 milli. amperes **750 watt 300 miles on 24 hrs!**
ANTENNA: 6 wire conical cage, 6 ft. x 2 ft. dia. 50 ft. long, 65 ft. - 40 ft. high, 30 ft. slanting lead-in, composed of 6 wire cage 8 in. in dia.
COUNTERPOISE: 6 wire rectangle, 40 ft. wide - 40 ft. long - 8 ft. high, glazed porcelain insulation is used in entire system, lead-in-bushings, antenna, counterpoise, etc.
 DX here **8** States, all Can. provinces, France, England, Holland, Cuba, Porto Rico, Mexico, Panama, Alaska, Greenland, Bermuda, Chile, Argentina, Hawaii, New Zealand, Australia, Spain, Czechoslovakia, Gibraltar, Sweden, Ireland, Wales, Germany, Belgium, Scotland, Finland, Italy, Costa Rica, W.N.P. Brazil, Malta
 REMARKS: **Longest transmission 84-14M for 100 miles on 24 hrs.**
QSA from South Island 84-14M for 100 miles on 24 hrs.
 Dx. QSL crd and QRK? **O. R. S.** 73's De. **8** Oper: **C.F. W.F. A.V. R.G.**
 Many Thanks for Ur Crd.
HUDSON DIVISION
I don't hear WJ Sami more after our the broke up camp.

From the collection of VK3BDL.

G2NM was Gerald Marcuse, a very well know British ham who established Empire Broadcasting. He was the British rep to the International Amateur Radio Union (IARU) in 1923 and chairman of the RSGB over 1929-1930.

Changes to amateur bands

During the period 1925 to 1926, the regulatory authority here, the Postmaster General (PMG), made several changes to the bands amateurs could use. On 28 July 1925, they advised amateurs could use the 20-36 metre

band (15 MHz to 8.3 MHz). On 23 June 1926, it was further varied, the PMG offering the 125-250m, 85-95m, 32-37m, 21-23m and 8-10m bands.

In 1927, another international radio conference decreed that Australia should use the prefix OA, effective from 1 February 1927, so we then had calls such as OA3GR and OZ3CM; 'O' was for Oceania, and 'A' for Australia, with 'Z' for New Zealand. Elsewhere, 'E' became the prefix for Europe and 'B' for Belgium etc, resulting in calls such as EB4EW.

From the collection of VK3BDL.

Here, OA3GR worked NU-1CMP (band not recorded) in the United States in November 1927. Later, OZ3CM in New Zealand works W6JG on '41 metres'.

From the collection of VK3BDL.

Note that he has worked OA (Australia), NU (North America – United States), NA (Alaska), OH (Oceania – Hawaii), OO (Oceania – Polynesia), and EF (Europe – France).

This card is from Belgium EB-4EW (Europe – Belgium). He has worked EW-EM in Hungary. Technology has advanced apparently, as he adds “filament current AC”.

Only a couple of years later, yet another international agreement saw calls changed to the current VK plus a number prefix; for example, VK5BY below. That change came into force at midnight on 31 December 1928.

Another ‘chatty’ card, still using local times but stipulating the time difference to GMT, which seemed to be the common practice. He boasts Worked All Continents (WAC) and 43 countries. Note the list of memberships across the bottom.

Also on the same date, the following bands were made available: 1200 to 1715 kHz (250m band), 1715 to 1990 kHz (150m band), 7000 to 7300 kHz (40m band), 14,000 to 14,400 kHz (20m band), 28,000 to 30,000 kHz (10m band), and 56,000 to 60,000 kHz (5m band), the 40m, 20m, and 10m bands we still have today.

Max Howden A3BQ, OA3BQ, VK3BQ

One cannot consider the early halcyon days of radio without mentioning Max Howden. He was first to contact North America and England from Australia.

<h1 style="text-align: center;">ROYAL V. HOWARD</h1> <p style="text-align: center;">312 BLAIR BLVD., EUGENE, ORE.</p>			
RADIO, <u>Ans 332</u>		<u>August 31st</u>	
UR <u>CW</u>	SIGS. <u>hrd</u>	HERE <u>no</u>	yet <u>AT</u>
U WERE <u>QRK</u>	ORN	QSS	ORH
TRANS. NO.: <u>No 1</u> <u>100 Watts</u> ^{A.W.} <u>CW</u> HARTLEY CIRCUIT <u>1250</u> VOLTS <u>6</u> AMPs		<h1 style="font-size: 4em;">7LR</h1>	
<u>No 5 watts-2.5 amps</u>			
RECK. NO. <u>No 1</u> <u>Variable</u> <u>SHORT</u>			
WAVE SET <u>two</u> STEP <u>No hc & det</u>			
ANTENNA <u>75</u> AND <u>40</u> FOOT HIGH, <u>6-WIRE</u> CAGE, <u>13-WIRE</u> COUNTERPOISE.			
REMARKS <u>What wave do u use-2se send data on the gang</u>			
DX: ALL DISTRICTS <u>44</u> STATES <u>8000</u> MILES			
7LR OFFICIAL RELAY STN. <u>QRK 721</u> GPR <u>Royce Howard</u> (1939)			

But, on 2 November 1924 Max worked 6AHP in California, bridging the Pacific for the first time. A3BQ worked on 86 metres, running a power input of 120 watts. The American station used a wavelength of 75 metres (4 MHz). The occasion was reported in the *Herald* newspaper of 4 November 1924. The card below was sent in November 1924 recognising a number of contacts (“often”).

From the collection of VK1DXA.

CUD HEAD U 20 FEET FAN FINES ON 2 STEPS!!!!

OFFICIAL A.R.R.L. RELAY STATION
58 Frederica Street Atlanta, Georgia USA

RADIO AM **3BQ C.W.** Sign Who H **27 Nov 24** **455** A.M. C.S.T.
QRY **YVY QSA** Characters **STEADY SWG SYMS** QRH **88** Conditions **GRM**
TRANSMITTER - **50** Watt CW in Coupled Harley Circuit using Panake Inductances.
Plate Voltage **1500** into Chemical Rectifier. Space Current **140** Mils.
Antenna Current **1.2** TCA on **79** Meters.

RECEIVERS - 4 or 200 Meters Low Loss and Honeycomb or Spiderweb. Detector and "I" step used on your regenerative circuit. Reconn. Element.

ANTENNA SYSTEM - 6 Wire Flat-top, 35 ft. long, 7 1/2 ft. high, 2 to 6 inch taper cage lead-in thru glass plate in roof of shack. Counterpoise - 20 Wire Fan, 30 ft. long, 30 ft. wide, 8 ft. high. Ground-Fan, clearing 10 ft. above shack. Single wire antenna, 30 ft. long, 30 ft. high, used for receiving. Break In - **SURE COBALT** **CR-55** **SYMPLE**

WONDERFUL HA-FBW C-MORATORY! HERE CUARDOM

REMARKS:
UR GST will be appreciated. K.E. Agos 73%
Jim Morris
HY HDU ASBY AT TINY.
U Jack, VERNIE, VERNIE RN, CLN DUBOIR NIG.
Spark gone but forgotten
ZL WED PM: FRANK BRESLIN, NZ, AUSTRALIA
J. S. MORRIS, 410

SPAD U ENR HD IN POC 1955. JMS

The next challenge was England and Europe. Below is a card from 8AB, Leon Deloy in France, dated 10 May 1924, looking to work Australia. Deloy was the first to work across the Atlantic to North America on 17 November 1923, contacting 1MO and 1XAM in the USA.

Then, on 13 November 1924, A3BQ worked G2OD in England on CW!

Then, a contact was made on phone on 9 February of 1925 – **both world firsts!** The November 1924 QSO was the first contact between Australia and the UK (and Europe), while the February 1925 contact was the first by voice.

Interestingly, below is the “Commeration (sic) Card” commemorating a QSO with G2DX in November 1924,

G **2DX** 13 A38Q Rosedale,
Camberley,
Surrey,
England.

IN COMMERATION OF OUR
GETTING IN TOUCH
BY RADIO
Nov 26. 1924.

To the Advancement of Amateur Radio
and to the Glory of the British Empire.

Sgd., W. Kenneth Afford
G2DX

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characterised as "... for the glory of the British Empire." (*Of interest is the fact that Ken Alford was licensed in 1912, worked for the Marconi Company, and did research on thermionic valves – Ed.*)

Finally, let's finish with two interesting cards – one from VK2NS and one from VK4DO, both giving personal historical backgrounds and both who operated pre-WWI.

He "fooled" (experimented) with spark in 1914 as XAZ (from an old callbook), gained Worked all Continents (WAC) on the "old 9 MC band" (probably 32-37m) and was President of the VK RCC (Rag Chewers' Club).

Interesting to note that Harold transmitted on 240 metres (1250 kHz) before broadcasting began in Australia; 4DO was established in 1921, he heard American broadcasting on 312m (960 kHz) and worked into the US in June 1926 "with 140 volts on the receiving valve" and "heard in New Zealand using loop modulated 'fone' and 90 volts on the receiving valve."

It was Isaac Newton who said: "*If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.*"

Resources

- An excellent site with thousands of QSL cards from all current and deleted countries, 1920 to the present: <http://hamgallery.com/qsl/>
- 1914 amateur callbook (my grandfather is listed there as XLK): www.raotc.org.au/earlycbook.htm
- An excellent article by Max Howden, on the WIA website: <https://tinyurl.com/3rbfen47>
- An excellent interview with Max Howden by the National Library of Australia: <http://nla.gov.au/nla.oh-vn2239852>



The way we were: AR, October 1933

Amateur Radio

The keying in the HT neg. lead is quite satisfactory and very clean with good active crystals but one or two have been tried that would not respond fast enough and for them it was necessary to key the space charge grid by inserting the key and filter at X. A very nice noise is created when the key is used in this position with 1000 volts on an active crystal, but it is difficult to copy on account of the strong backwave caused by the tube still oscillating feebly. At 400-600 volts this back wave is hardly noticeable and the keying excellent. For these relatively low powers all the key filter need consist of is a small inductance such as the secondary of an audio transformer and a half mike condenser across both key and choke together with a .1 mfd. condenser across the key itself. For higher powers about double values should be used with anything up to 30 henries in the choke and a 400 ohm. resistor in series with the small condenser if the arcing at the key is bad. The voltage divider used to break the space charge grid voltage down to a reasonable value is not at all critical but it seems to be advisable to use a high value in this position rather than a normal resistance and higher bias on the control grid. The reason for this is that the space charge grid is not capable of handling much power and is likely to be melted if too much pressure is applied to it.

Using it in conjunction with a straight SG detector and penthode all AC receiver, stations up to within 100

KC of the crystal in use, can be heard with the key down and of course with the key up there is no blanketing at all. Several good break-in QSO's have been held with interstate stations with no trouble at all while local work can be carried on indefinitely.

One word of warning to those who think that anything is near enough. It will be noticed that the aerial coil is coupled to the filament end of the tank coil and that the live end is the furthest from the tank and this should be followed. With other methods keying will be sluggish and very wide spacing will be necessary before the crystal will oscillate at all.

Nothing has been said so far concerning push-pull because it was not intended to make this transmitter any more complicated than necessary and little if anything could be gained except by those who are lucky enough to possess a couple of QC 2/75's or something even bigger in the way of screen grid valves. These should work well in push pull with even half a kilo-watt input without damage to the crystal provided that the aerial is coupled and tuned before the full power is applied. Several years ago two 210's were tried in push-pull at 3BQ with 40 watts input on the 40 metre band. Many Yanks were worked and the crystal, a forty metre fundamental slab, is still intact.

Heissing modulation has been tested on the present outfit and is quite satisfactory provided that the crystal is not worked too near the cut-off point.

