

The Irish Hurdy Gurdy Vintage Radio Museum

A visit to the ancestral home of Irish communications since 1852.

David Dary, W5ZAX

It is a steep climb up the path to the top of the hill to reach the old Martello Tower at Howth, located northeast of Dublin, Ireland. The tower overlooks Howth Harbor and the Irish Sea beyond. Near the top of the path is a sign that lets visitors know the tower is the home of “Ye Olde Hurdy Gurdy Museum of Vintage Radio.” The sign, however, does not indicate that it also houses the Amateur Radio station EIØMAR, nor does it hint at the tower’s history in early Irish communications, beginning in 1852.

History of the Martello Tower at Howth

Constructed of stone in 1805, the Martello Tower was the second of many castle-like defensive structures the British built along the Irish coast early in the Napoleonic Wars. Each round tower, standing about 40 feet high, had a military officer and a garrison of 15 to 25 men with a single piece of movable heavy artillery on the roof that could fire on any invading French ships — but the invasion never came.

After the invasion threat ended in 1815, the tower was used for other purposes. In 1852, it housed the first telegraphy station used to connect Ireland to Great Britain. An underwater cable was laid between the two countries. Later, in 1903, Lee de Forest, who was born 30 years earlier in Council Bluffs, Iowa, demonstrated his wireless telegraphy system from the tower using a tall antenna with many wires (see Figure 1). De Forest successfully exchanged radio signals with another station at South Stack Lighthouse, about 60 miles across the Irish Sea, in Wales. Two years later, in 1905, the tower was used as a Marconi receiving station in ship-to-shore telegraphy experiments carried out with the British ship HMS *Monarch*.

It wasn’t until 2003 that the tower’s early radio history was emphasized, after the local Fingal County Council refurbished the structure and told Pat Herbert, a lifelong collector of vintage radios, that he could display

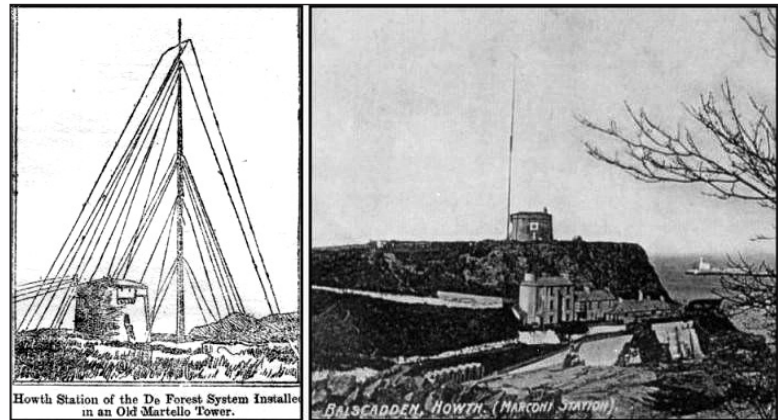


Figure 1 — On the left, a drawing clipped from an unidentified publication showing Lee de Forest’s antenna erected at the Howth Martello Tower in 1903. On the right, a 1905 photo when a Marconi receiving station was in operation in the Howth Martello Tower.



Figure 2 — The museum contains a wide selection of tubes, or “valves.”

his large collection of early radios — and radio-related items, including tubes (see Figure 2) — in the tower. The museum was born, and Pat became the curator.

The Museum

The museum’s name was derived from a comment made years earlier by the late Sean Lemass, an Irish political leader, who, when hearing an Irish radio orchestra tuning up, compared the sound to that of a hurdy

gurdy, a stringed instrument that produces sound by a crank-turned, rosined wheel that rubs against the strings like a violin bow. Lemass asked local radio buffs if they made noise like that.

Most of the items displayed at the museum were collected by Pat Herbert over the last 40 years (see Figure 3). Other items have been added to the collection since the museum opened.



Figure 3 — Some of the radios in the museum, including a D-104 microphone (top left) that has been made into a lamp.

Originally, soldiers had to climb a ladder to the second level to enter. In an emergency, the ladder could be pulled up to keep others out. Today, metal stairs have replaced the ladder and are used by visitors to enter the tower. There is a small admission charge.

The museum is filled with many early British, European, and a few early American radio receivers, some transmitting equipment, and radio memorabilia. One area on the second level houses Irish amateur station EIØMAR (see Figure 4), staffed on most weekends by volunteers from the Howth Martello Radio Group, coordinated by Tony Breathnach, EI5EM. Atop the tower are amateur antennas for VHF and a vertical for HF. On the bottom floor are many more radios and pieces of equipment.

Visitors, especially amateurs and shortwave listeners, enjoy touring the museum. Curator Pat Herbert spends much time watching over his fine collection and is happy to answer questions about the museum.

The museum is open daily from 11 am until 4 pm between May and October, but open only on Saturday and Sunday between November and April. Volunteers can operate amateur station EIØMAR most Sundays, and occasionally on other days. More information can be found on the museum's website, at <https://hurdygurdyradio-museum.wordpress.com/>.

“Hurdy Gurdy Man,” a short film by Stuart Duff that includes interviews with Pat Herbert and shows the interior of the museum, can be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/121019017>.

David Dary, W5ZAX, has been an amateur since 1952 and has held other calls, including WØQDG and W4ZAX. He is a retired journalism professor who, during the 1960s, was with CBS News and NBC News in Washington, DC. He visited the museum in May 2015. He can be reached at ddary@cox.net.



Figure 4 — The author (left) watches Joe Guilfoyle, EI2JZ, (center) operate CW at the museum's amateur station, EIØMAR, beside Pat Herbert, the curator (right).

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