



Paris Branch

Newsletter

N° 32 – January 2025



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Chairman's introduction to the January 2025 RBL Paris Newsletter.

Welcome and a very Happy New year to all our members.

Sadly not a good start to the New Year; as you will no doubt have heard, one of our long standing members, Noreen Riols, MBE, passed away on the 2nd of January. Please see Janet's and my tribute in the newsletter. Janet, and I will also be the official branch representatives at Noreen's funeral which will take place on Monday 13 January at Holy Trinity Church: 15 avenue Carnot, 78600, Maisons-Laffitte, at 11.00 a.m. for those of you able to attend. Bill Beauclerk will be attending as the official representative of the Libre Resistance SOE section F. Our deepest condolences go out to Noreen's family. All who knew Noreen will certainly miss her.

I learnt yesterday that Didier Dumont's mother passed away the other day. Deepest condolences to you Didier.

I regret to inform you that there will not be a lunch this month. We certainly hope that we shall be able to have one in February. However, this depends on whether we can persuade someone, hopefully one or more of you, to volunteer to prepare a lunch. If we are to continue to have monthly lunches, then we do need volunteers to help. We all enjoy the lunches. They are an excellent opportunity to socialise, to meet each other and are invariably appreciated by those who attend. Please consider offering to lend a hand and let me know if you can, or if, indeed, you have any suggestions as to how to maintain this excellent tradition.

This year we also intend to have more social evenings. Be they themed nights, cocktail parties or quiz nights, occasions to get together for snacks, drinks at the bar and a bit of fun. The first of these will be a 1960s theme evening which will take place on Thursday 20th February at 6.00 p.m. Please be sure to let either Mark, Janet or I know if you wish to attend.

Finally, just a reminder to committee members we have our first meeting of the year on the 20th January at 17.30.

Best,

Richard.

JANUARY QUIZ 2025

1. Which famous diarist started with a first entry on 1st January 1660?
2. In January 1877 Queen Victoria was proclaimed as Empress of where?
3. In 1959 Castro came to power in Cuba in a revolution that overthrew which dictator?
4. The currency of the Euro came into being in which year?
5. Born in January 1735, who is known for his ride warning the Americans of the British plans to raid Lexington and Concord?
6. In 1502, explorers landed at a place they called River of January in South America. What nationality were they?
7. 1892 saw the start of a system whereby 20 million people entered the USA via which island before it closed in 1954?
8. Previously known as the Daily Universal Register, which newspaper began publishing in 1788?
9. Which commonwealth nation was founded in 1901 with Edmund Barton as the first Prime Minister?
10. After the end of French rule in 1804, which country became the first black republic and second independent country in North America?



Answers on last page

OBITUARY

Noreen Riols May 1926 – January 2025

Many things have been written about Noreen Riols and those of us who knew her will have fond memories of the lady she was.

She was born in Malta, where her father was stationed in May 1926. Noreen was educated at the Lycée Français in Knightsbridge, London. She wanted to join the Wrens, because she told me that she liked the hat! She was recruited at 17 to join Special Operations Executive (SOE) French (F) Section due to her excellent French. She was a secretary under the command of Colonel Buckmaster, “Buck” to those who worked for him. Noreen also worked with Vera Atkins, a formidable lady who was always referred to as Miss Atkins never by her Christian name.

When I asked Noreen if she could tell me of her work with 'F' Section, she said she was 'Mata Hari'. She would be asked to frequent pub outings or cocktails held for the young men who had just been trained as agents. Her task was to get them into conversation and see if they would 'spill the beans' about what they had been trained to do. A few did indeed succumb to the wiles of a pretty young girl and started talking after a few beers. In that case, the next day the young men in question would be summoned to Buckmaster's office. Usually, when accused by Buckmaster of having talked about his task, they would deny it but then the ace in the pack was behind the door sitting on a chair. Buckmaster would ask Noreen to repeat the conversation of the previous evening. Not having a leg to stand on, they were summarily dismissed. One such man, turned to Noreen and as he left the office his parting word to her was 'Bitch'.

Noreen knew the agents who were in 'F' Section, one of which was her good friend Bob Maloubier. They formed a great friendship right up until Bob's death in 2015. Noreen always had a good word to say about Bob.

After the war, Noreen went onto become a nurse at St. Thomas' Hospital in London and also worked for the BBC. She met her beloved Jacques and they had 5 children together. Noreen wrote many books, both fiction and about her time in 'F' Section - once it was allowed to write about the SOE,.

Noreen had a great wit and was always willing to go into schools to speak to the younger generation about her life and times during World War 2. She was asked to speak at many seminars and always loved to go to the Royal British Legion's events at the British Ambassador's Residence. The last time was in November after the Remembrance Day Service. She was speaking to the Chelsea Pensioners who came over and I could hear a lot of laughter coming from where they were sitting. They were clearly having a great time talking. Noreen was at the D-Day Commemorations in 2024, meeting, amongst others, H.R.H the Prince of Wales, Prince William.

Farewell Noreen, we will miss you, a glass of Ginger Beer will be on the bar in your memory at our next lunch. You are now reunited with your beloved Jacques.

Janet Warby & Richard Neave

Noreen Riols – a sidelight

Noreen was a regular supporter of the RBL Paris branch's activities and could often be found chatting to members at our monthly lunches. Her death will be regretted by many here - see Richard and Janet's account above - and all our sympathy goes to her family. Hearing of her death I recalled meeting another member of the SOE who had known Noreen.

It was getting on for 30 years ago that, having decided to buy a place in the country not too far from Paris, we were looking at some properties for sale. The agent who was showing us around some possibilities near Gournay en Bray, having picked up on my accent, said, "I may have something for you."

We drove around until we reached a cottage which was nicely labelled with a bit of bent wire, "Rose Cottage" – an unlikely name for an unfashionable hamlet in the Bray hills. We liked the place which had something of an Agatha Christie feel about it and I eventually found myself negotiating the price with the English owner, a certain Cowburn, who had named the cottage. I only met him a couple of times, but he was a personable character – and a hard bargainer – he even spoke with a Lancashire accent and – since mine is more Yorkshire...

Later, I made the acquaintance of a couple of sisters, members of a farming family nearby who had known Cowburn since the fifties. From them I learned that he had been a British Agent during the war. He had, they said, been parachuted into France four times – a record - and had set up a resistance network somewhere near Troyes. Helen, one of the two farmer ladies, told me that one of his stories concerned the importance of maintaining reasonably good relations with the occupying Germans. One evening, it seems, he was interrupted by a knocking on the door. It was a group of German soldiers, one of them an officer with whom he was familiar. "Oh, come in." he said - They would have come in anyway, especially if not invited as they were doing a door-to-door check. - "So what have you been up to this evening?" asked the officer in charge. "Oh. Just building a bomb in the other room." They all laughed a bit together, drank a little wine and the soldiers left. Cowburn returned to his activity – building a bomb in the other room.

I had figured out by now that Cowburn must have been with the SOE so, when, as a committee member of the Paris Branch of the RBL, I learned that a lady who had worked for the SOE and indeed written about it, was joining the branch I was quite interested. She had even offered to talk to members about her experiences there. Consequently, it was with some interest that I attended Noreen Riols' presentation - which was most interesting. Afterwards, I made my way through the crowd around her and diffidently asked her: "You didn't by any chance happen to know a chap called Cowburn in the war?" She looked up sharply, "Benny Cowburn? Yes, of course. He was the only one who kept coming back!"

Noreen Riols and Benjamin Cowburn were both memorable characters.

M.Yates

No lunch this month but – Coming soon;

RBL Paris Branch Pub Night

Come and join us for our 1960's theme evening

On Thursday 20th February at 6pm
(Entrance free, paying bar)

Featuring...
THE ROLLING STONES · ELVIS PRESLEY
THE BEATLES · BOB DYLAN
THE DOORS · JIMI HENDRIX
JANIS JOPLIN · THE WHO
...and more

brigitte
L'APPAREIL A SOUS
INVITANGO
LES AMIS DE LA MUSIQUE
PMS SAINVITAGE
LA MADRIGALE
EL DUCHIE
EVERYBODY LOVES MY BABY
C'EST FRODOLO
PHILIPS

Claude Chappe and the Telegraph

Probably the most effective form of transmission of information, certainly the fastest over long distances until around 1800, was the homing pigeon. The inconvenience was that the only direction they would fly in was – home! That meant that you had first to transport the animal to the point from which you meant to send the message, a detail which may not have been easy to accomplish. Carting the wee fluffy thing around the battlefield before launching it to declare, hopefully, victory, can't have been that easy either.

Other forms of rapid news delivery were much slower, involving marathon runs and waving flags - provided the land wasn't flat and there weren't many trees, but it was indeed a substantial problem to get news, even over relatively short distances. And then there was reliability. Waving flags from one hillock to another not only meant a lot of people had to hang around on hilltops with nothing else to do but pass on the last gesture: We have all played that children's party game where a round of kids pass a message from ear to ear in a circle to see what comes back after a dozen successive attempts at interpretation. Once you've tried that it becomes easier to understand such notable failures in communication as those leading to the Spanish Armada

(from the Spanish point of view), Agincourt (seen from the French side) and the charge of the Light Brigade.



I must admit to a fleeting personal preference for the good old homing pigeon, probably affected by memories of crates full of them being loaded onto the southbound trains in Darlington railway station when I was a boy. They were, at journey's end, released simultaneously somewhere on the south coast to make their way home to their anxiously awaiting owners. (Keeping pigeons is still a popular activity in the north of England – as it is in the north of France. Oddly, the southern regions of both countries seem to eschew the hobby.) Whilst on the subject, it is also worth noting that in each of the two World Wars, messages by pigeon post saved the lives of hundreds of men. The going price of a good performer is in the order of €2000 and the pigeon illustrated here fetched a record price of over €2m.

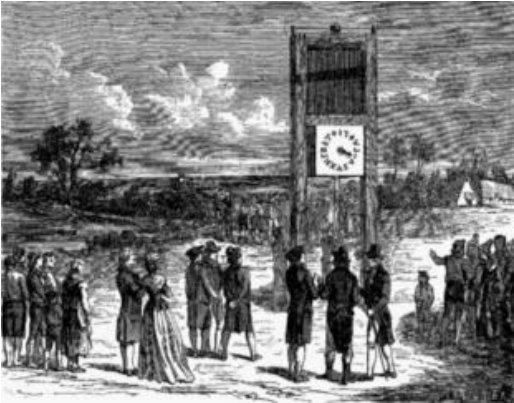
To turn to a more specific aspect of communication at a distance, our historian member Francis Jolivet has recently touched on the subject with an account of the invention of Claude Chappe and the following is a much-abbreviated account.

The transmission of messages at a distance using light or sound signals, or using wooden or metal indicators, dates back to the earliest times. The most developed method in this field, between the end of the 18th and the middle of the 19th centuries, was undoubtedly the Chappe telegraph. This might seem already somewhat *démodé* given the fact that the first electric telegraph was invented as early as 1753 by an anonymous Scotsman. Hampered, however, by the need for a separate wire for each letter and a somewhat unreliable system of moving pith balls at the receiving end, it didn't catch on.

The idea was taken up again some twenty years later by the Genevan Georges Louis Lesage, and then in 1794 by the German Reusser or Reisser. The latter machines, however, still featured the 26-wire handicap, i.e. one per letter. In 1808, Samuel Thomas von Soemmering had the idea of applying the voltaic battery to the electric telegraph. In 1820, a new step was taken by Ampère, who saw all the benefits that the electric telegraph could draw from Oersted's studies on electromagnetism. Numerous devices with magnetised needles were developed between 1830 and 1840, including those by Schilling, Cooke and Wheatstone.

Claude Chappe was born on Christmas Day 1763, into a family of astronomers and engineers. His father, Ignace Chappe, was controller of the King's estate in Laval. Perhaps an early portent of his future career, from an early age he enjoyed exchanging secret messages with his four brothers. Originally destined for the priesthood, the arrival of the Revolution put paid to his ambition in that direction when his colleges, the de Joyeuse in Rouen and the Royal in La Flèche were abolished.

In Paris, he carried out a series of experiments on electricity. The transmission of information by relaying signals aroused great interest. It was a time when the newly-born Republic was in favour of innovation, and Chappe's experiments with various aerial telegraph systems received official encouragement.



In 1791, Claude Chappe installed two mobile dials which he named tachographs (see pic), in two villages around fifteen kilometres apart. He then successfully experimented with sending messages between Lille and Paris. This had the limitations of any device of the sort: it could not work at night or in bad weather. Nonetheless, it earned the approval of the Legislative Assembly and Chappe was appointed head of the brand new "Administration des Lignes Télégraphiques".

Two years later he proposed an improved system to the Convention. It was really nothing more than a semaphore system.

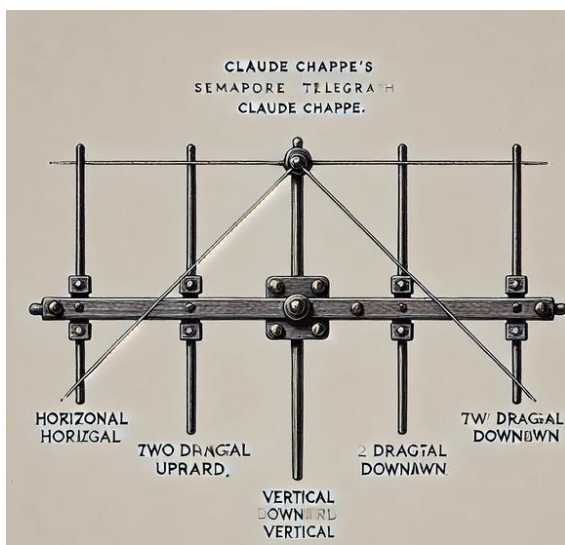
Devices with three articulated wooden arms were installed on high points, specially built towers or church steeples. In each telegraph station, a stationer (opposite) equipped with a telescope observed the actions of neighbouring stations and adjusted his own telegraph so that it was exactly the same. In this way, the signal travels from one station to the next until it reaches its final destination. It is necessary to allow six hours for the transmission of a



message from Paris to Strasbourg, provided that visibility conditions are favourable over the entire route. Given good visibility a dispatch could cover the distance in six hours.

The semaphore arms could be set in 98 distinct positions (7 per arm, plus neutral). Each position corresponded to a code, representing letters, numbers, or instructions in special codebooks.

Each signal, or group of signals, corresponded to simple figures or numbers that referred either to the pages and lines of an administrative, military and diplomatic code or letters and numbers (see opposite). The number of signal positions was slowly increased from 10 to 88 and during the Consulate and the Empire, numerous other improvements were introduced.



*An explanatory diagram
Basic positions*

Setting up the infrastructure was not without its problems. The towers were expensive and at first many rural populations were suspicious of the semaphore towers. They didn't understand their purpose and suspected they were a means of government surveillance or, worse, magic, or witchcraft. Public education campaigns had to be set up to explain the telegraph's function.

However, other lines were added bit by bit and the planned invasion of Great Britain in 1803 provided an opportunity to extend the Paris-Lille line to Boulogne

sur Mer. This led to the study of a giant telegraph capable of transmitting signals by day and night over the English Channel. The abandonment of the invasion project and of the Boulogne camp put a definitive end to this ambitious project. Napoleon turned to more realistic endeavours but continued to extend what was beginning to resemble a real network according to military needs.

Claude Chappe died prematurely on January 23, 1805, at the early age of 41. It was apparently a case of suicide, reportedly due to stress, depression, and accusations of intellectual property theft concerning his invention. Ignace and Pierre Chappe succeeded their brother as administrators of telegraph lines and the third brother, Abraham, was attached to imperial headquarters, where he supervised military telegraphy.

Abraham submitted three proposals to the government:

1. To authorise commercial and banking dispatches over the lines.

2. To publish a newspaper with a daily news summary (approved in advance by the First Consul).
3. To transmit the results of the State Lottery.

Interestingly, the first two were refused. Napoleon was interested only in military occupations. One can only suspect that the predilection of the French population for all forms of lottery, and the need to raise funds to prosecute his various campaigns, explains the fact that the last proposal was accepted. Napoleon's decision lasted until 1852, until which time telegraph lines were reserved exclusively for government dispatches.

Technical advances, such as the electric telegraph and then the telephone,



were to take their toll on the air telegraph, and the last station was dismantled in 1855.

Chappe was buried in Vaugirard cemetery; later, when that was decommissioned, his remains were transferred alongside those of his brother, Ignace in - where else? Père-Lachaise. His tomb, pictured here, is surmounted by a scale model of his signal arms and, in this picture, just to remind you of the beginning of this story, a couple of pigeons.

Francis Jolivet's article, in French is in his *Gazette de l'Histoire* numbers 453 and 454. He will gladly send you the pdf versions if you contact him at francis-jolivet@orange.fr

F. Jolivet & M.Yates.



A Word in your Ear....

Salary -

The word comes from the Latin *salarium*, "salt money." It's modern use derives from the fact that Roman soldiers were sometimes paid in salt. So common now that we rarely think of its curiously variable supply, always in shortage or abundance, which caused



blocks of the stuff to be transported and traded on salt roads - such as the Via Salaria in Italy or across deserts - above is a camel train transporting salt in the Afar, Ethiopia.



As for abundance, there are huge stretches of the stuff just lying around in places like this one, the Salar de Uyuni in Bolivia. There are 10,582 square kilometres of it.

Taxing salt has always been popular with governments and invariably unpopular with their subjects. Before refrigeration it was the principal means of preserving foodstuff over the winter and therefore essential. In France it was the “*gabelle*”, in India the British-imposed salt tax which led to Mahatma Gandhi’s famous Salt March in 1930 and thus later to the independence of the sub-continent. Always “*à la mode*” and a frequently subject of acrimonious dissension the word “salary” is charged with both meaning and history.

M.Y.



The Last Laugh:

60 - The Dead Donkey

George - Hi Jake. Haven't seen you for a bit. Have you been avoiding me?

Jake - Er, no. Just haven't seen you around.

G - Well I thought you might have been after you sold me that donkey for my daughter to learn to ride.

J - Yeah. Well, it wasn't my fault it died the very next night.

G - And you refused to give me my money back.

J - Well I couldn't, could I? I'd already spent it all. I did offer to take back the dead donkey and bury it.

G - Very generous!

J - Well it was the best I could do but you wouldn't let me take it. I've been wondering since. Why on earth did you want to keep a dead donkey?

G - For the raffle prize.

J - Raffle prize! You can't raffle a dead donkey!

G - Oh yes you can. I did! I just didn't tell anyone it was dead. I sold 500 tickets for €2 each: That makes €1,000!

J - But when they found out the ticketholders must have been furious, weren't they? I'm surprised they didn't lynch you!

G - There was only one complaint.

J - Just one? Who was that?

G - The guy who won. But I gave him back his €2 and he didn't make a fuss!

January *Quiz: Answers:*

1. Samuel Pepys	6. Portuguese
2. India	7. Ellis Island
3. Batista	8. The Times of London
4. 1999	9. Commonwealth of Australia
5. Paul Revere	10. Haiti



*Comments & contributions to mfyates@gmail.com
Back numbers: rblfrance.org/ then "Paris Branch Newsletters"*

