

*Admiralty - Hampstead - Woodcock Hill - St. Albans - Dunstable Downs - Lilley Hoo - Baldock - Cambridge - Newmarket - Icklingham - Barnham - East Harling - Carlton Rode - Wreningham - Norwich - Strumpshaw - Great Yarmouth*

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of September 1795 George Roebuck, a prominent surveyor, was appointed to establish the optical pathway and the siting of Telegraph stations, linking London to Deal, Sheerness, Yarmouth, Portsmouth and Plymouth. As the shutter telegraph was a line of sight communication a clear view from one station to the other was crucial, and had to be no more than 12 miles apart, Situated on elevated locations, the stations were often built upon hillsides, however occasionally pre-existing buildings were used in particularly flat areas. Roebuck had no precedent, at this time the majority of England was poorly charted.

However, George Roebuck was not a romantic wanderer who ambled around the English landscape at his pleasure. Rather he was provided with a large budget and a team of surveyors at his disposal. The surveyor was able to establish many of the routes from his office using existing maps. I imagine him to be a short man, sitting at a desk strewn with maps and compasses, although the brief mention of Roebuck in the history of telegraphy never refers to his height. Similarly, the basic maps of 1795 contained little information about the height of land, often his only clue being a reference to a hill or mound.

As I shadow his path north-east I rely upon similar methodologies. I am equipped with the contemporary equivalent of Roebucks materials. This consists of a collection of printed ordnance survey maps clipped together with a paper clip and a compass, although I also carry a video camera and cheap 35mm in my bag, alongside a tripod and the Senate House Library's brown-bound 'The Old Telegraphs' by Geoffrey Wilson. I am less a surveyor and more telegraphical tourist, my only real clues as to whether I have found the right location being the many 'Telegraph' prefixes to place names and the bands of lines that travel out from the epicentre of a hilltop on a map. Some are impenetrable farm fortresses, others I cannot reach as 'Private Property' signs block my path, although I do tend to ignore these. On one occasion, in Barnham I am caught by two disgruntled farmers in a white pick-up truck, who warn me I have trespassed upon private hunting grounds, and I'm shocked to discover I may have been mistaken for a deer through the site of a shotgun. Roebuck himself had to negotiate and compromise his sites with landowners, as the enclosure movement resulted in lines of fencing weaving themselves across the British isles, fragmenting the landscape into a passage of gates and bracken barricades. However, the National Trust has since unlocked some of these, I mostly find myself following public footpaths and bridleways, running in to kissing gates and dog-walkers more often than I do obstructions.

At optimum speed and visibility the shutter telegraph enabled a message to be sent from Yarmouth to London within 15 minutes. My journey requires weeks of travelling, and hours of walking uphill. Following the route of a self-appointed mission to discover more about the locations of a long-outdated form of communication, I have no message, no practical purpose whatsoever. I simply travel from site to site, many of which now have no function other than as untouched nature reserves. This is far removed from the origins of the shutter telegraph itself, which was a naval necessity borne out of a need to communicate important information. Superseded by the more efficient Semaphore Line, which was in turn replaced by the electrical telegraph, there was little nostalgia towards the shutter telegraph. The places upon which the stations were built are without 'ruins', and therefore my journey is for nothing more than a 'place', these sites have no contemporary relationship to their past. By visiting these places specifically because of what they used to be, I am reintroducing that past upon these sites, by recording this in a video I am reaffirming this further. I am creating this link between past and present, I have created my own heritage crusade. But, when this concept of 'history' is removed, when I am no longer searching for the signs or pathways I need to follow, what this is reduced to is views of flat East Anglian landscapes which disappear into blue horizons. What this is reduced to is my journey. And perhaps this is just as important as the history I seem to be hunting.

