

Telegraph Hill Upper Park

In 1795 a chain of wooden huts supporting a strange shutter structure began to appear on the hilltops of the English landscape. These were the stations of the shutter telegraph, creating an optical pathway which would link London to Deal, Sheerness, Yarmouth, Portsmouth and Plymouth, and could be used by the Admiralty to send important information from the coast to the capital in a matter of minutes. This was a dramatic improvement on the earlier method of relaying a message to the Admiralty, a rider on horseback. The London to Deal line was the first to be completed, the system being put in use from the 27th of January 1796. Having passed through West Square in Southwark the next station was just three miles away, at Plow Garlic Hill in Nunhead. Originally a 360 degree viewing point, Victorian urban development means that the view from the hill can now only be appreciated from one angle, however the history of the place continues in the name of Telegraph Hill Upper Park in New Cross.

Following the steep curve of the path from Kitto Road, I pass well-maintained borders of shrubs and trees framed by Victorian railings. As I walk towards the bench at the top of the path I come upon the tennis courts which, the information board tells me, now cover the site of the original shutter telegraph station. Unlike many of the sites I have visited which have become overgrown nature reserves and leave no trace of their past function as a component of the telegraph chain, the former signalling station of 'Plow'd Garlick Hill' has now evolved into a location of constantly used community recreation. Rather than being preserved as a static site of heritage the current presence of the tennis courts keeps telegraph hill alive as it continually reinvents itself for the purpose of the local community.

Sitting on the bench I watch two middle-aged women playing tennis despite the heavy grey skies and cold winds hitting the hilltop. They are experienced players, the ball bounces between them at a fast pace, rhythmically hitting their rackets and the tarmac. Walking past the court to look out onto the view of central London the pops and hisses of the game continue in the background, and the sound begins to remind me of the frantic tapping and knocking of a Morse Code key, the telegraphs development into an electric message. My knowledge of the history of telegraphy merges into one experience in this place which now has no practical connection with its former use, my imaginings of an visual form of communication are extending to an electrical one which I can relate to more recent apparatus of message sending.

Looking out to the skyline of the city I can barely decipher the landmarks of the BT Tower and Battersea Power Station that I know to be there, the sky is heavy and the buildings merge into a dark mass. Its reliance upon clear skies and good visibility was the main cause of problems with the Shutter Telegraph, sometimes even resulting in the miscommunication of messages due to fog or lack of light. The reception of part-messages could result in the messages meaning changing entirely, and looking into the foggy cityscape I am able to appreciate the Shutter Telegraph in both its usefulness and its failings in the temperamental English climate.