

An invitation by the BBC to visit their installations on Ascension Island was a typical example of something quite unexpected. Discovered on Ascension Day 1501 by the Portuguese Navigator João de Nova Castella, who gave the island its prophetic name, the Island had remained uninhabited until 1815, when British marines were stationed there to discourage Napoleon's escape from St Helena, 1100 km away. It has remained British ever since, and in modern times had become, because of its unique location on  $0^\circ$  and  $0^\circ$ , the Equator and the Greenwich Meridian, a vital centre for earth and space communications from the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.

Cable and Wireless, the commercial British telecommunication Company, were the first to utilise the Island's singular location and their underwater telegraph cable from England divided there in 1899, one branch going to South America, the other to South Africa. Later the BBC erected broadcasting towers on the Island, also beaming its short-wave broadcasts to the same two southern Continents. During World War II American Army engineers built Wideawake Airfield on the Island for the US and the Royal Air Forces, so that by the time NASA planned the Apollo Moon Project, it could easily place a ground station on Ascension to receive communications from space. Rumour had it that the British and American intelligence services had listening posts on the Island, but of course I was not shown these during my visit.

What I saw, when I landed after a rather spartan flight in a BBC-hired plane, was amazing enough, and I would not have had much difficulty in imagining myself on the Moon. An extinct crater had formed a 860 m high mountain in the centre, and around it was a small green fringe. Below it, a desert of grey dusty lava, no green blade or tree in sight. Everywhere radio towers with small huts at their base were the only evidence of man's existence to exploit the Island's position for communication.

Cable and Wireless had kept company housing on the Island for over a century for their 300 men, women and children which created great envy from the American engineers and soldiers—they had to fly to the nearby South American brothels to satisfy their sexual needs, as they were not allowed to bring their wives to the Island.

My news story, published 27 April 1966, four days after my visit, was called "British Equipment Link in Manned Moon Shot" and just mentioned that the BBC was about to increase its broadcasting facilities there. I stayed only a few hours on Ascension, but the most extraordinary sight was the green fringe of the mountain, called appropriately 'Green Mountain'. It was high enough to catch the moisture of the trade winds, and thus allowed fruit and vegetables to grow there in sufficient quantity for the permanent British inhabitants