

The Ekco SW86 is one of the more freely available pre-war receivers in New Zealand. Many collectors regard ownership of one as a 'must', but a lot of servicemen were not so kindly disposed towards them.

With a distinctively Ekco cabinet its curves and chrome make it a difficult set to ignore and visitors frequently admire the Lankshear domestic 'workhorses' SW86 which has been in the family since 1937. Despite virtually daily use ever since no major component has ever been replaced; there can't be many radios around with that sort of record.

As well as the familiar black and chrome model a version also appeared in a brown bakelite cabinet of the same size and shape. Not quite so common were several styles of consoles and also a bow-ended wooden mantel which seem to have been made in N.Z.; they all have the chrome circle and bar as featured on black bakelite cabinet. There is a seemingly improbable but persistent story about the SW86 being expressly designed for the New Zealand market. But why should a large manufacturer like Ekco bother to make a special model for such a limited market, and for what purpose, when they already had a good range of suitable models? There are, however, several significant features in the SW86 which are worth a closer look.

The SW86 seems to have been unknown in Britain and there is considerable evidence to show that it was an 'export only' model, while every other Ekco the writer has seen used British valves the SW86 used standard pre-1937 6.3-volt American valves. The FCC paper capacitors used throughout are metal cased and labelled 'Tropicalised'. Provision is made for operation on mains voltages between 100 and 250 volts with seven different tapplings on the primary of the power transformer.

Prime consideration seems to have been given to the shortwave bands as here the coils are large and efficient. Semi-bandspread tuning is obtained by using split-stator sections in the tuning capacitor. Instead of the almost mandatory pentagrid mixer of the day the SW86 uses a pentode mixer in conjunction with a separate triode oscillator to provide superior shortwave performance. The shortwave scales are placed at the outer edge of the dial to provide, in conjunction with a logging scale, easy and accurate tuning. Emphasis is certainly placed on features designed for export, but was it actually a special model?

Whilst pondering these points the writer came across a picture of a very familiar looking cabinet which contained a quite different chassis known as model AC86. A copy of the English *Radio & Electrical Trader* service data for this model was obtained and it proved to be most enlightening. The AC86, which appeared in 1936, was available with a choice of the same two bakelite cabinets as used with the SW86. The metalwork, dial and speaker were also the same, but from here on the similarity ended.

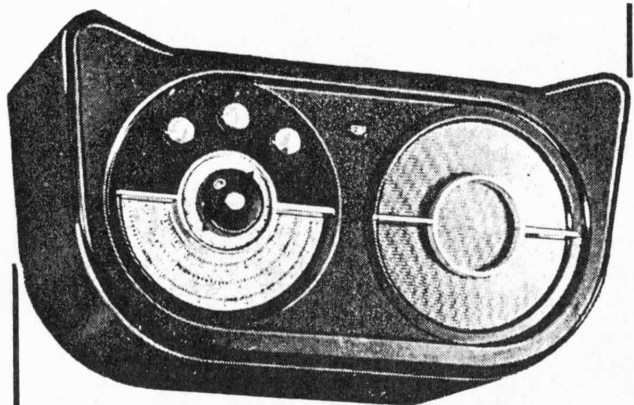
A mixture of English brands of valves was used, including an octode mixer. There was no RF stage and the set covered only the longwave and broadcast bands. A feature of the design was a combined AGC and squelch system which can best be described as 'dual action'. Briefly, the RF valve acted as a DC amplifier for the mixer AGC feed and had an adjustable 'noise suppressor' or squelch. The control knob for setting the squelch level was placed on the front panel where on the SW86 is a badge labelled Ekco. The service data refers to problems associated with this circuitry which can only be cured by replacing both the mixer and RF valves with a matched pair. But his was not all! The data sheet goes on: "The most common faults and some which can be baffling are an unstable AF motor-boating, insensitivity, unresponsive volume-control action and instability with bad quality in the output stage." The AC86 must have been what is known in automotive circles as a "lemon"!

After nearly half a century it is difficult to find any hard facts on the true story of the SW86 but the writer has a theory, based largely on circumstantial evidence, but if any reader has definite information on the origins of this receiver it would be welcome. For what it is worth the theory is as follows:

After 1935 New Zealand was encouraged to "Buy British" and import restrictions had practically cut off the supply of American receivers, so suitable for our conditions, which had strongly influenced the design of locally-made sets. By this time purchasing power was increasing and New Zealand was ripe for British manufacturers to

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(To be continued)

It is likely that Ekco researched the New Zealand market and got the message that if they were really to establish themselves they would have to offer a receiver which appealed to an American orientated trade, and this meant above all, the fitting of U.S. valves. This, too, was the period when the BBC's Empire shortwave service was becoming popular and there was a demand for a receiver with a good shortwave performance; it is a suitable British-made product was available, so much the better. Two prime requisites were then, American valves to overcome trade resistance, and a good shortwave performance to appeal to potential customers.

Was it fortuitous that the Ekco factory had an inventory of AC86 components left over? If so then what better than to revamp the original design? This was done, although the 'Americanisation' was confined mainly to the valves. Electrically it was completely redesigned, resulting in excellent shortwave performance but lacking in sparkle on the broadcast band.

With a sales network, established by Speeding Ltd., extending literally from Whangarei to Bluff the venture was successful and established Ekco sufficiently well that they were able, subsequently, to sell standard English models until the outbreak of World War II.

(To be continued)

OBITUARY

ARTHUR H. MCCLAY (86), a foundation member of the NZRS, passed away at his home in Auckland on Feb 10, 1984. He will be remembered as one of New Zealand's pioneer

broadcasters who in 1922 held one of the original ten transmitting permits, issued before licenses were introduced in 1923. Quite recently Arthur recorded some tapes of his early experiences dating back to schoolboy experiments in 1911. Copies of these tapes are now held by various organisations including BCNZ, National Archives, NZART-OTC, NZ DX League and the NZRS.

