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CLASSIFICATION	SUBJECT	SOURCE	DATE
Biog.	Preece, Sir	DNB	1912-21

William Henry

Preece 1912-1921 D.N.B.

PREECE, SIR WILLIAM HENRY (1834–1913), electrical engineer, was born at Bryn Helen, Carnarvon, 15 February 1834. He was the eldest son of Richard Mathias Preece, stockbroker, of Bryn Helen, by his wife, Jane, daughter of John Hughes, shipbuilder, of Carnarvon. He was educated at King's College School and King's College, London, and received his early training in electrical engineering at the Royal Institution under Michael Faraday [q. v.], who directed his inherently scientific mind towards the many unsolved problems of applied electricity and telegraphic engineering. In 1852 Preece entered the office of Edwin Clark [q. v.], as a civil engineer; but in 1853 he was appointed to the Electric and International Telegraph Company, becoming superintendent of its southern district in 1856. From 1858 to 1862 he was engineer to the Channel Islands Telegraph Company. Preece is, however, best known on account of his long connexion with the Post Office, of which he first became an official in 1870. The various telegraphic companies were at that date taken over by the government and Preece was appointed divisional engineer for the southern district of the Post Office telegraphic system. In 1877 he was made electrician in chief, and in 1892 engineer in chief. He retired from the latter position in 1899 and from that time until 1904 was consulting engineer to the British Post Office and to the Colonies.

The scientific field explored by Preece in the course of his career was extremely wide and covered telegraphy, telephony, and radio-telegraphic communication. During his career at the Post Office he was responsible for many improvements and inventions in telegraphic work. He also applied his experience to the question of railway signalling; and he regarded the improvements which he made to secure the safe working of railways as among his most useful work. He introduced the Preece block system of working single lines and the electric system of communication between different parts of a train; he also took out a patent for reproducing by miniature signals in the signal box the positions of actual signals, and a system of locking signals. Preece was one of the earliest pioneers of wireless telegraphy, and in 1892 originated

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a system of signalling across space by induction telegraphy with the aid of two parallel telegraph lines. This method is now of historic interest only, and the largest share which Preece had in the introduction of wireless telegraphy into this country was the encouragement which he gave to Signor Marconi by securing for him in 1896 the assistance of the British Post Office in the practical development of the work of James Clerk Maxwell [q. v.] and of H. R. Hertz. Preece was very zealous in urging the commercial introduction of telephonic communication, and he introduced into this country the first telephone receivers as patented by Alexander Graham Bell (1876). He also strongly advocated the purchase of the National Telephone Company by the government; this took effect in 1911.

Preece was made C.B. in 1894 and created K.C.B. in 1899. He was elected a fellow of the Royal Society in 1881 and president of the Institution of Civil Engineers (1898–1899). He died at Penrhos, Carnarvon, 6 November 1913. He married in 1864 Anne Agnes (died 1874), daughter of George Pocock, solicitor, of Southampton, and had four sons and three daughters. Preece's more important publications are: *Telegraphy*, in conjunction with (Sir) J. Sivewright (1876, 15th edition, 1899, new edition, 1905); *The Telephone*, in conjunction with Dr. Julius Maier (1889); and *A Manual of Telephony*, in conjunction with Mr. Arthur J. Stubbs (1893).

[*The Engineer*, 14 November 1913; *The Electrician*, 14 November 1913; private information.]

A. P. M. F.