

POST OFFICE TELEPHONES IN SHREWSBURY IN THE 1960'S

In the 1960's I worked as a clerical officer for the GPO in Shrewsbury. To begin, I'll give a brief background to the telephone side of the GPO.

Letters and parcels had been delivered by the Post Office across the country by various means for some time. In 1660, during the reign of Charles II, the General Post Office, or GPO, was formed by an act of Parliament. It continued for many years to be responsible for carrying the public and Royal Mail.

Alexander Graham Bell was born in Edinburgh in 1847. In 1876 he invented the telephone and in February 1877 he made his first long-distance telephone call. The postal side continued as the GPO and in 1912 they launched the national telephone system. The two sections were part of the same company and worked alongside one another.

Shrewsbury's main Post Office counter services were situated at the top of Pride Hill in a building on the right-hand side. This was closed in 1962 and the offices moved around the corner into St. Mary's Street.

Going down Pride Hill on the right was an inconspicuous door which led into the place where the telephone operators worked. This was before the new automatic telephone exchange, or ATE as it was called, was built at the site on Town Walls.

The door to this office first opened up to an unused area which was rather dismal as there were no windows on the ground floor. Ahead were stairs leading to the upper floor where the operators sat on their high stools. They each wore headphones and were in charge of placing and directing calls via their switchboards.

For every call the operator had to write on a pre-printed slip of paper called a ticket. This was about 3" by 2" and very flimsy. They had to record the customer's number, call destination and duration of the call. To speed this up every place was given an abbreviation which the operators would look up on a set of lists. They quickly learned the abbreviations for the most used places, such as SY for Shrewsbury, HR for Hereford and AE for Aberystwyth.

At the end of each session, the tickets would be bundled up and placed in sacks ready to be sent to the Telephone Accounts Groups to be processed.

The Accounts Groups were accommodated, along with the second smaller Post Office Counter services, in a building at the bottom of Mardol. This was on the left-hand side as you faced the river, about 100 yards up from Smithfield Road. On the other side of the road was a big shop called Pickering's, which sold mainly bicycles, and where my parents bought me my first bicycle.

I travelled to and from work each day by bike. I lived with my parents in Copthorne and in the winter the river would quite often flood. This meant boards would be put out along the sides of the shops in Frankwell and as far as the Welsh Bridge. They were a bit wobbly and narrow, especially walking with my bike. On a couple of occasions the water was so deep, beyond Welsh Bridge and up into Mardol, that I had to turn round and go into town through Kingsland and across the toll bridge. I would approach Mardol, which was a 2-way road at that time, from the top end and cycle down to work. There was an opening beside the building which led to the back where I would leave my bike.

On entering the building from Mardol, the door to the right led to the Post Office counter where customers could buy their stamps or deal with any postal enquiries. The door to the left led into the cash office where customers could pay their telephone bills or raise any enquiries about their telephone service. Ahead was a set of stairs which led to the first floor with the Sales Office and the offices for the Sales Reps.

A further set of stairs led to the Telephone Accounts Group, C6 and C7 as they were called, the C standing for clerical and more stairs leading to the third group called C5. On the top floor was a very noisy room where two people worked with metal plates about 6" x 4". The plates were fed into a machine and the customers' names and addresses were impressed into the metal. These were then used for printing onto the accounts when they were ready for billing.

The Accounts Groups were laid out with a Head of Department and six desks each having several work trays lined up one behind the other. A clerical officer and a clerical assistant sat at each side of the desk and they would deal with the different locations and sets of telephone accounts. The manager sat at a desk at the head of, and facing, the group.

The Shropshire Telephone Area covered all of Shropshire and Herefordshire and the central area of Wales across to Aberystwyth and the Welsh coast. Cheshire and North Wales were dealt with by the Chester Office and South Wales by the Cardiff Office.

When the sacks of tickets arrived they will be priced and distributed to the various Accounts Groups. Each group dealt with a different area according to where the call

had been made. The tickets from each of the exchanges would be sent to Shrewsbury to be processed.

The clerical assistants would be given a bundle of tickets which would then be sorted by hand into the originating number order. They used special trays which were divided into sections to sort the tickets. They would first be sorted by the last digit, then the next to last, etc., until they were finally in order and ready for the next process. They would then go into the room with the accounting machines where the bills were prepared. This was a noisy room with about six large accounting machines, all being used at the same time. Once the tickets had been listed they would be filed ready for billing.

During the 1960's the process of dealing with the tickets changed as mechanical ticket processing was brought in. These tickets were produced on card in place of the flimsy paper and, where the operators had marked a line across each number, this was punched with a hole for the machines to read.

The bundles of tickets were then sent to Cardiff where they had several new machines installed and able to deal with the volume of tickets much faster.

The bills were sent out quarterly in December, March, June and September.

When a request was received by a new customer for telephone service or for new apparatus for an existing customer, this would be dealt with by the Sales Office. They would issue an Advice Note which would have several different coloured copies. These were distributed to the various groups and engineers according to the work required. When the work was completed one copy would be sent to the Accounts Group to prepare a bill.

On receipt of the Advice Note the officer would enter the details into a daily ledger which was a large book with a black cover. The amount owing from the date of installation until the end of the quarter would be calculated and a bill prepared. This would be included when the main bills were sent out.

The clerical officers dealt with the daily, monthly and quarterly balances with the help of a table-top machine called a Plus-adder. This was a small box-like machine about 8 x 10 inches and maybe 5 or 6 inches deep. It had keys which you pressed down and a total would be shown on a display at the top of the machine. There was a handle at the side to clear the figures. They also dealt with enquiries and disputes following the despatch of the bills.

At the end of each three month period the ledgers would be balanced and the main bills produced. Copies of these bills were held in folders with a blue cover of about 8 or 9 hundred each. This depended on the size and number range of that exchange. Large exchanges, such as Shrewsbury and Hereford, had number ranges of several thousand and would be split into several folders. Smaller exchanges, such as Baschurch or Wem had much smaller numbers and were often included together with another exchange and group of accounts

Once bills were dispatched, there was a follow up procedure to ensure payment was received. Reminders were sent out after two weeks and again after three weeks. Should payment still not be forthcoming, the officers would make a telephone call and threat of the line being temporarily cut off. If payment was still not received following disconnection of the line, all the paperwork would be passed to the Outstandings Group where Mr. Bowen would deal with any legal proceedings. In the main, most bills were paid or queries settled amicably but on a rare occasion, if payment was still not received, the matter would go to Court.

At around 10am one of the juniors would come round asking if we wanted to buy a cake or a bun for our tea break. They would make a list, collect our money and then go to the bakers called Wards, which was a few doors away. I usually chose a butter bun or a chelsea.

One day when we came into work we were told that we could go, a few at a time, round to Hills Lane to Singleton and Cole, the wholesalers who backed on to the Post Office. They had a major leak from a burst water pipe and were selling off various goods that had been water damaged. There were sweets and chocolates and I remember buying several bars of chocolate!

Until 1963 the Post Office Telephones had several offices around the town. In addition to the offices in Mardol, the senior managers and engineers had rooms in The Mount House where Charles Darwin was born. This was also where the drawing office, the secretaries and typists were based.

The maintenance engineers were based in a depot on St. Michael's Street called Spring Gardens where they had their motor workshop. There were offices and a garage serving the vans and other Post Office vehicles. There was a wide entrance from the main road which was shared by the MEB who had their offices to the right-hand side.

The new automated telephone exchange, or ATE, was built and opened in the early 1960's, and the telephone operators and their switchboards moved into the new building. There were also offices for some of the engineers.

In 1963 Telephone House was opened on Smithfield Road in order to accommodate the office departments from The Mount and Mardol into one building. Heads of Department had their own offices on various floors of the building. Sales and Sales Reps had offices on the second floor.

The office dealing with directory entries was also on the second floor. All the work was done by hand, so neat writing was required! The pages would be worked on one at a time. Customers leaving or moving would have their entry crossed through and the new customers would have their entry added on a separate sheet. At the end of July the pages with all the alterations would be packaged and sent to the printers to produce new directories for the forthcoming year.

The third floor was occupied by the three telephone accounts groups and took up a large part of the room. The windows at the back overlooked the space where the old Smithfield Cattle Market had been. Pile driving, which was extremely noisy, continued for some time in this area, and we watched the new multi-storey carpark being built. There was also a bridge built to access into the backs of the shops on Castle Street. This has now been incorporated into the shopping centre.

Pay, the Drawing Office and Planning Engineers were on higher floors, with the canteen on the eighth floor. Stairs, a lift and the fire escape served all floors.

To digress a little, later in April 1990 the fire escape came into unexpected use following the earthquake at that time. I was on the second floor and watched things sliding across my desk. We all rushed to open the door to the fire escape and followed one another down to the ground. It was even more scary for those on the upper floors.

GPO Telephones continued as part of the civil service until 1984 when it was separated entirely from the Post Office Telecommunications and was privatised. It then became known as BT plc.

By 2013, following the end of its 50 year lease, Telephone House was made redundant. All the workers had been either employed at Communications House in Harlescott or the work distributed to other BT departments in Cardiff or Wolverhampton.

After it was demolished the new hotel, Premier Inn, was built in its place.