

HOW THE TELEPHONE CAME TO GLOUCESTER

by Arthur Dodd

Today, most people take the telephone for granted; it has become an essential part of everyday life and, with modern technology, it is possible to make a call to almost every part of the world from your own armchair. Yet the telephone is only just over one hundred years old.

On 14 February 1876, a young Scottish teacher of elocution, Alexander Graham Bell who, for health reasons had emigrated, first to Canada and then to the United States, applied for, and obtained, U.S. Patent 174,456. By so doing, he laid the foundation for a communication network which now covers the globe and even has tentacles reaching out into the vastness of space.

'Mr Watson, come here; I want you.' These were the first really intelligible words spoken over his primitive telephone apparatus by the inventor. They were heard by his assistant, Thomas Watson, who was listening on a receiver in an adjoining room. Sensing from the tone of voice that something was amiss, Watson rushed into the room to find that Bell had accidentally spilt a jar of acid and water on his clothes and was, in fact, calling for help. Not only the first really intelligible call, but the first emergency call had been made.

The new invention was shown to a sceptical public at the United States Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia during the summer of 1876. Lord Kelvin, famous British scientist and inventor, attended the exhibition and was most enthusiastic about the telephone when he returned to this country, despite one newspaper referring to it as 'American Humbug'.

During 1877, the American inventor, Thomas Alva Edison, made some improvements to the transmitter — although the apparatus remained basically as in the original Bell patent.

Early in 1878, Alexander Bell came to Britain and, on 14 January, gave a personal demonstration of his invention to Queen Victoria at Osborne House on the Isle of Wight. That evening she recorded in her diary that she had heard and seen the telephone. 'A Professor Bell', she added, 'explained the whole process which is most extraordinary'.

Later that year, experimental test calls were made between London and Norwich, using the telegraph wires of the Eastern Counties Railway. And, in the following year, on 6 September 1879, the very first telephone exchange in Europe was opened with just eight subscribers at 36 Coleman Street, London EC3.

Yet, incredible though it may seem, the people of Gloucester were not only given a preview of the new invention but were actually invited to try it out in 1877 *before any of the above British events took place!*

Just over eighteen months after those seven fateful words were spoken by Alexander Graham Bell in 1876, the telephone was introduced to an incredulous Gloucester audience by Francis T. Bond, who was the local Medical Officer of Health.

Dr Bond was a popular lecturer who had deservedly gained a great reputation in local circles for his interest in science and his far-seeing views. Space was taken in the *Gloucester Journal* of 27 October 1877, to advertise some of his talks:

THE TELEPHONE

We beg to call attention to the announcement that Dr Bond will lecture at four o'clock this afternoon, at the School of Science and Art on 'An Old Domestic Difficulty, with some new solutions' illustrating his subject by the use of a *telephone*, now introduced to Gloucester for the first time.

The 'Old Domestic Difficulty' referred to was the perennial problem of internal communications in a large house.

A report on the lecture was published in the *Gloucester Journal* on the following Saturday 3 November. It was notable for giving a detailed description of Bell's telephone transmitter/receiver of 1877, the scientific wonder of the age.

Unfortunately, it is not known from what source Dr Bond obtained his telephones but, at this early period — and on this side of the Atlantic — they must have been very rare indeed. Even Queen Victoria herself was not to receive a demonstration until the following January. However, we do know that in 1877, William Preece, Chief Electrician of the Post Office (later Sir William Preece, Engineer-in-Chief) visited the United States where he met Bell and was shown the newly invented telephone. In late July of that year, Preece returned to Britain with a pair of telephones which were the very first working instruments to be brought to this country. It is tempting to speculate whether these were the ones shown by Dr Bond to his Gloucester audience in October 1877. Alas, we shall probably never know.

However, Dr Bond's talk seems to have impressed at least one local business man. For in July 1878, Mr Edmund Nest, who was a printer with premises at 155 Westgate Street — now the offices of the Bradford & Bingley Building Society — decided to run some lectures on the latest electrical technology at the Assembly Rooms at the Bell Hotel where he had prevailed upon a Mr Viccars of Torquay to talk on '*The telephone, the phonograph, and the microphone.*'

But despite the apparent enthusiasm of Messrs Bond and Nest nothing came of the venture. The business community in Gloucester seemed to have been markedly reluctant to adopt the new method of communication — although well-advertised efforts were being made to open up telephone exchanges in London, Birmingham and Bristol.

A news report of February 1880 mentioned a 'Science Conversazione' held at the Gloucester School of Science when a variety of subjects came under discussion. A Dr Batten lectured on 'The Heart' Mr Embry and Mr Sawyer spoke on 'Crystals' (with magic lantern illustrations); Mr Allen Harker talked about 'The Warm Clothing of Animals' and a Mr Holland 'exhibited and explained a series of lantern slides illustrative of minute animal and plant life found in water'.

THE EXCHANGE EXPLAINED

No doubt, this was all stirring stuff; but in what seems to have been almost an apologetic afterthought, Mr T H Cothill of Bristol 'exhibited and explained the arrangements and facilities of telephone exchange'. During his talk 'Telephonic communication was established between the museum and the corridor leading to the laboratory, and was in use the whole evening', the actual distance between the two points being about 25 metres.

Interest was shown and, a few days later, Mr Cothill went to the trouble of installing a demonstration circuit from Brunswick Road to the shop of a Mr Davis, a watchmaker in Southgate Street. However, the interest waned and it all came to nought.

For over three years the question of a telephone service remained in the doldrums so far as Gloucester was concerned. Nobody seemed very interested and even the local papers did not appear to have considered the subject a newsworthy item.

Admittedly, both the Gloucester Wagon Company and Messrs Foster Brothers of the Oil Mills, now had short-distance private circuits installed in their works. But, as a local news report tells us: 'That Professor Bell has not yet attained perfection with his invention is apparent by the fact that speech is reproduced but faintly and can only be heard when absolute silence prevails'.

Nationally, it was a vastly different story. In 1881, the Government had given the Post Office the go-ahead to offer telephones to the public and there were soon no less than seven major telephone companies offering service in the UK together with a number of minor municipal undertakings and the GPO.

But the cautious Gloucesterians were not to be convinced and anyway, the cost of £20 per annum per line was considered to be far too high. The average householder just could not afford a telephone; but then, the need was not there with four postal deliveries a day (at 7 am, 12 noon, 2 pm and 7.55 pm) and one on Sundays (at 7 am). For the working man the telephone was an expensive luxury.

But Gloucester was an untapped market and, despite these initial setbacks, it was obviously only a matter of time before one or other of the new national companies took local initiatives. In November 1883, the United Telephone Company, who claimed that they were 'Possessors of the Master Patents of Bell and Edison', advertised for subscribers. But Gloucester was not to be moved and, once again, there were no takers.

Sixteen months were to elapse before the next onslaught on the obdurate Gloucesterians. March 1885 saw the publication of a detailed advertisement from the Western Counties & South Wales Telephone Company which even included what looked like the special of the month! For they offered substantial reductions in line ratings from £20 to £14 per year, together with the added incentive of further reductions for those willing to sign up for a seven-year contract.

During the autumn of 1886, local people began to realise the potential of the new invention — although, by now, it was already a decade old. Bristol, their ancient rival as a port, had been one of the first cities to open a public exchange in December 1879 and the system there seemed to be eminently successful and was growing rapidly.

Local interest started to revive; several prominent businessmen developed a latent regard for the spoken word and, as a result, a public meeting was held at the Tolsey on Friday 3 December 1886, to consider the establishment of a telephone exchange in the City. The Mayor (Mr R V Vassar-Smith) presided and the Chairman and General Manager of the Western Counties & South Wales Telephone Co. explained in detail what had to be done. Also present was Dr Bond who claimed the credit for introducing the whole idea locally. However, he emphasised that there were risks involved and advocated a spirit of mutual enterprise.

THE FIRST EXCHANGE

Finally, it was agreed that an exchange should be opened as quickly as possible. The telephone company took what were described as 'commodious offices' at 9 Berkeley Street where installation work proceeded apace.

Since underground cabling did not exist, all the external wiring had to be by overhead wires and the very great length and weight of the poles required to clear intervening rooftops caused some difficulty. The *Gloucester Chronicle* reported that 'one of the poles which was sixty-nine feet in length, had to have two feet of it cut off before it could be turned from Westgate Street up Bull Lane where it was speedily lifted over a high wall and deposited in its proper position in the back garden of the offices in Berkeley Street...'

By early June 1887 the Gloucester exchange was a working entity with a total of 16 subscribers. Appropriately, Dr Francis T Bond MD of 1 Beaufort Buildings, Spa, was listed among them. The first line to be connected



Alexander Graham Bell

was a circuit to the Ram Hotel (now the New County): '... the connecting wire from the offices passing up through a wooden spout to the pole which had been set up on the roof'.

However, the pioneering sixteen could only talk among themselves so the exchange was opened in an atmosphere of semi-obscurity. Work had been going on for some time on an overhead trunk line from Bristol and, as this was nearing completion, it was decided to postpone any formal opening ceremony until the work was finished. There was little doubt that the reason behind this was pure public relations. The imaginative idea of actually speaking to another town over 30 miles away was a lot more significant than mere local conversations with subscribers within walking distance.

The grand opening came on Wednesday afternoon, 6 July 1887, when the trunk line between Gloucester and Bristol was officially opened by the Mayor of Gloucester. Speaking over the telephone he said that talking with the City of Bristol at a distance of 33 miles gave very tangible proof of what could be done, and that he 'now had reason to believe that what had been promised would be realised — that they should be able to speak to towns in South Wales, even to the distant town of Swansea'.

Newspapers of the time tell us that 'Those present then adjourned to the next room, where wines, light refreshments and cigars were provided . . . Further conversations were held with Bristol . . . but the main portion . . . consisted of facetious remarks on sundry topics, whilst whistling and breathing into the receiver at the other end were distinctly heard; such airs as "Tommy make room for your uncle", "The girl I left behind me", "Rule Britannia" and "God save the Queen" being easily recognisable. Finally the company dispersed, highly pleased with the couple of instructive and interesting hours they had spent at the office'. Gloucester had finally joined the telephone network.

With hindsight, it is a pity that the audience had not been more forward-looking a decade before, in October 1877, when Dr Bond first demonstrated the possibilities of the new invention at the School of Science in Brunswick Road. It would have been rather nice for Gloucester to have gone down in history as the first telephoned city in Europe.

Source

'History of the Telephone Service in Gloucester'
Arthur Dodd & British Telecom PLC, 1987.