

Early Manchester telephone exchanges

The first British public telephone exchange opened in London in about August 1879, shortly followed by the first Manchester telephone exchange in Manchester. Indeed, some accounts claim that the Manchester telephone exchange was operational before the London one. The Museum holds switchgear and other material relating to early telephone exchanges in its BT Connected Earth collection of telephone equipment.

In 1878, two years after Bell's telephone patent was granted, the first commercial telephone exchange was set up in Connecticut, USA, serving just 21 subscribers. Manchester's first telephone exchange was set up on Faulkner Street by the Lancashire Telephonic Exchange, licensed under Bell's patent. James Lorrain, the joint manager of the LTE, was a pioneering telephone engineer who had gained experience in the United States. In an account written years later, Lorrain claimed that his Manchester exchange was the first British exchange, recalling it to have been operational by July 1879. However, articles in the *Manchester Guardian* and *Manchester City News* suggest that it opened in mid-September.

The first telephone exchanges in Britain served only tens or hundreds of local subscribers. In Manchester, the LTE exchange was swiftly followed by a second exchange operated by the Edison Telephone Company of London. The earliest surviving list of telephone subscribers in Manchester is for the Edison Manchester and District Telephonic Exchange. It (printed) 125 subscribers, with one handwritten deletion and 13 handwritten additions.



By 1881, according to the *Manchester Guardian*, the Lancashire Telephonic Exchange had 420 subscribers, used 400 miles of wire and had placed orders for another 200 miles. One of its main customers was the Royal exchange, where it provided five soundproof telephone boxes on the trading floor. These were heavily used, with about 430 phone calls made on a day in March 1881. Two months later, as a result of the 1880 merger between the national Bell

and Edison companies to form the United Telephone Company, the Lancashire and Cheshire Telephonic Exchange Co. Ltd (LCTE) was set up to unite the Bell and Edison Manchester exchanges. The new company was based at the original Faulkner Street exchange (shown above).

In 1888, the LCTE set up a new Western Electric switchboard in Manchester's Royal Exchange, fitted out under the direction of Joseph Poole, a Whitworth scholar. Considered to be the best equipped at the time, it had a capacity of 4,200 subscribers, but was initially fitted for 1,600 subscribers. The company soon established telephone communications between Birmingham, Liverpool, Leeds, Manchester, Sheffield, Nottingham, Bradford and Huddersfield at a time when London's only long-distance connection was a line to Brighton. In April 1890, the LTCE was acquired by the National Telephone Company (NTC) as part of a programme of takeovers that amalgamated most of the telephone companies in Britain.

However, another rival Manchester telephone exchange opened in February 1891. It was operated by a new company, the Mutual Telephone Company. It offered cheaper rates than the NTC, but used inferior equipment. After only a year, the Mutual Telephone Company was taken over by the New Telephone Company, which, in turn, was absorbed by the NTC in 1896. Competition between telephone exchange companies only finally ceased when the General Post Office took control of all telephone services in 1912.

Many exchanges initially employed boys as telephone operators, but they proved difficult to control. Women soon proved to be more reliable. This was one of the few occupations open to respectable middle-class women in the late nineteenth century. However, the work could be stressful and in 1896 *The Girl's Own Paper* advised that: '...if of a nervous temperament, and at all subject to headache and neuralgic pains, it would be well to choose some other calling.' Some women evidently thrived on the challenge. For example, Annie Wright began work as an exchange operator in Manchester in 1892 for the Mutual Telephone Company. Five years after the Mutual Telephone Company was taken over by the National Telephone Company, Annie was promoted to the post of Supervisor. She held this position until May 1907 when she became Clerk in Charge of the Manchester Central Exchange. This was the largest exchange outside London and Annie was responsible for about 200 operators and supervisors.



Telephone operators in the rest room at the Manchester Central Exchange in 1909.

For more information:

Read Robertson, J. H. *The Story of the Telephone*. London: Pitman & Sons Ltd, 1947.

Young, Peter. (ed.) *Person to Person: the international impact of the telephone*. Cambridge, UK: Granta Editions, 1991.

Emerson, Andrew. *Old Telephones*. Princes Risborough, UK: Shire Publications, 1986.

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