

Automatic Telephones come to Wheathampstead

Furious letters to *The Times*



In 1876 Alexander Graham Bell spoke the first words on the telephone to his assistant in a next door room and a new means of communication was born. Although Bell did not live to see the universal impact of his invention, it soon became the impetus for further developments.

In 1899 Parliament agreed to local councils setting up telephone systems but only six out of 1,300 councils took advantage of this opportunity. It was not until after the First World War that the telephone service expanded rapidly and, as prices of telephones fell, more and more people began to appreciate the benefit of Bell's invention.

At the heart of the telephone network was the switchboard, where operators routed incoming calls to their destinations. When users picked up the telephone, operators would ask, 'Number, please?' and then say, 'Hold the line, please' as they inserted jack plugs to connect the call.



William Beach Thomas
in 1917

In 1922 The Post Office selected an automatic system and the first automatic exchange opened at Bishopsgate, London in 1928. It was another ten years before an automatic system was installed in Wheathampstead.

Sir William Beach Thomas, a British war correspondent during the First World War, a journalist and author, lived in Wheathampstead at 'High Trees', Gustard Wood. In July 1938 he wrote to the Editor of *The Times* expressing his fury and dissatisfaction with the Wheathampstead Automatic Telephone Exchange:

Sir,

In case others in rural areas are to be subject to the experiment in telephony inflicted on this village, the record of our experience may serve a useful

purpose. The automatic telephone was installed in the Spring for about 90 users. Since then no one has had any satisfaction in the service. Very often the instrument is quite irresponsive to a call, though it utters petulant noises perpetually.

When the expert mechanics come they confess frankly that the overhead wiring and other features are ill-adapted to the extreme sensitiveness of the automatic system. Urban minds have imagined urban conditions. The rural wires run along hedgerows and through clumps of trees. A system that works smoothly in towns where wires are protected cannot possibly prove trustworthy where wires are exposed to wind and weather.

Before the installation, all our numbers were increased by the prefix 31 or 21, an unnecessarily large addition made for experimental purposes. The instrument has not proved sufficiently mathematical to distinguish between the two. When we ring up the owner of the only taxicab, who is, say, 2118, we are answered by the golf club, which is 3118. The golf club, as all of us, misses many calls, perhaps because all the members have not yet learnt that the right technique is to ring up the taxi-owner.

Again we sometimes listen against our will to our neighbours' conversations owing, we are told, to the sticking of the selector: and there seems no quick method of discovering the location of the flaw.

Under the old system the telephone was popular and was increasing, largely because aid and advice were always forthcoming from a kindly voice at the local exchange. Socially the automatic system is ill-suited to an isolated rural community.

The system was installed at very great expense and seems to us a mistake socially and a blunder mechanically. The extension of the service in the district will certainly be arrested.

Yours faithfully,
W. BEACH THOMAS
High Trees, Wheathampstead, Herts



1930s telephones

The following day *The Times* published a response from E T Crutchley, the Public Relations Officer at the GPO Headquarters in London, who assured readers that Sir William Beach Thomas's complaint was being investigated. Crutchley argued that the service offered in rural areas was comparable to that offered to town dwellers and that the Post Office had tried to benefit isolated country areas such as Wheathampstead. Considerable sums of money had been spent on this development, he added, and while certain teething troubles were to be expected, the service had been warmly welcomed.

Later that same day Olivia Upton Robins of Wheathampstead took up her pen and wrote another irate letter to *The Times*, tinged with sardonic humour:

Sir,

We unfortunates of the Wheathampstead Automatic Telephone Exchange entirely endorse Sir William Beach Thomas's letter in *The Times* of July 8, complaining of the inaccuracy of the present system. Not only do we all get the wrong numbers, but we usually get nothing !

At first we thought it was a new sort of game and took it in good part, feeling sure the chaos would right itself and all would be well. Unfortunately it has become steadily worse instead of better. The wind and the rain have quite demoralized the Robot who has been installed to give us that 'advantage of continuous service' as quoted by Mr. E T Crutchley in today's issue of *The Times*.

He goes on to say how wonderful it is for us in our country village to be able to ring up night or day in any emergency. We subscribers smile sadly as we read this optimistic account of our automatic exchange. Who would dare ring up the doctor in the middle of the night and chance waking a sick friend or irate neighbour? Or the fire brigade and wake the doctor? No, we must die, burn, or be burgled, the telephone will not help us. Twice this morning I was disturbed by the mechanic, but when I tried to ring up the butcher half an hour later the line was as dead as the mutton I wished to order. My mother always said it was cheaper and quicker to send a post-card - and she was right.

Yours faithfully,

OLIVIA UPTON ROBINS

The Dell, Wheathampstead, July 9

Sources

W. BEACH THOMAS, 'Automatic Telephones in Villages', *The Times*, 8 July 1938: 17. *Times Digital Archive*.

E.T. CRUTCHLEY, 'Automatic Telephones in Villages', *The Times*, 9 July 1938: 13. *Times Digital Archive*.

OLIVIA UPTON ROBINS 'Automatic Telephones', *The Times*, 13 July 1938: 12. *Times Digital Archive*.

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