



Ventnor Exchange Part 1: Ventnor's Hello Girls

Ventnor's telephone service was taken over by the GPO in 1929, and moved to the Post Office in Church Street where the new telephone exchange on the first floor boasted what was probably the last word in manual apparatus. All calls went through an operator, who greeted the caller and connected them to the number they wanted, and, since most of the switchboard operators were young women, they were known as 'Hello Girls'.

The Ventnor 'Hello Girls' shown here in 1969 are, from right to left, Margaret Gardiner (nee Horton), Jenny Squibb (nee Fry), Rosemary Hayward (nee Saunders), Barbara Osman (nee Oliver) and Anne-Marie Russell.



Those who worked in the Church Street telephone exchange have fond memories of their time there, as Margaret Gardiner describes.

"Anybody living in Ventnor before September 1970 will remember that as far as using the telephone was concerned, Ventnor hadn't reached the 20th century with STD (Subscriber Trunk Dialling) - one had to wait for an operator to say 'Number please!'

Female staff covered the exchange between the hours of 8 am and 6 pm Monday to Saturday, with men taking over the night shift and Sundays - we weren't allowed to mix in those days. Training for a manual exchange at that time was quite intense, and we had to go to a training school in Aldershot for four weeks - two weeks at a desk and two weeks let loose on the switchboard of Farnborough, which was very busy as it was an Air Force base as well. Being away from home and under the age of 18 one had to stay in digs and had to be indoors by 10 pm - I missed the end of the film 'The Ten Commandments' because I was a goody-two-shoes, doing as I was told!

Being at the hub of communication in Ventnor we knew all that was going on - if you wanted the doctor, dentist, builder, undertaker, garage, you didn't have to bother with the number, just the name would do. Number engaged? Don't worry, we'll ring you back when they're free. But whatever you do don't get cross with us and don't start flashing your receiver up and down - you might find you would be charged slightly more than you anticipated!

And what fun us 'Hello Girls' had in those days - especially when Miss Ruby Lowe, the exchange supervisor, was off duty. If she was on holiday we sometimes had a party in the exchange, with it being open house - mainly the police from next door and the telephone engineers - what fun it was.

Ruby Lowe (as she was known to family and friends but always 'Miss Lowe' to us girls) ruled the exchange like a tight ship. Everything was so correct in those days - she even had her own washroom (one of the girls crept in one day and put a rubber snake in her sink - when she found it, Anne-Marie nearly had to do CPR on her!) But Ruby never worked Saturdays and never after 5 pm in the week, and when she wasn't there, look out - extra long tea breaks, longer lunch hours and going home early on a Saturday. Anne-Marie was left in charge, and what a merry dance we led her! Sorry Anne we were young and silly and you were so sensible."

Next week: *The Ventnor Hello Girls say goodbye*

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