



Ventnor Exchange Part 2: Hello Girls say goodbye

Margaret Gardiner continues her story of working at Ventnor Telephone Exchange which was above the old Post Office in Church Street.

"Who can remember the likes of Peter Digweed (night supervisor) whose daytime job was in the office at Forrest the Butchers, Ron Newnham and Trevor Cruttenden who seemed to do all the gardens in Bonchurch during the day? Bert Western who worked for the Water Board, and Jim Dyce who religiously always met his wife Maisie from the exchange at lunch time, walked her home and back again, and then met her again when her shift had finished?"

We all jumped when the emergency button went in the public call boxes - usually nothing more exciting than a postman (perhaps Fred Farrow, Jack Rogers or Brian Squibb) letting us know he had emptied the box of money. Miss Lowe then had to read the meter and enter the figure on a card which would be checked against the amount of money in the box.

The proper excitement came when there was a real emergency, especially a fire, as we had control over the siren in the town and the bells in the retained firemen's houses - and what a noise they made, enough to waken the dead especially at night (I had firsthand experience of that as my husband was a retained fireman - what joy it was when 'bleepers' were introduced and there were no more bells in the middle of the night.)

'Old' Ventnor people will remember the night of Friday 23 October 1970 when the 'Pacific Glory' caught alight and drifted towards Ventnor. Peter Digweed was on duty that night and the whole exchange lit up like a Roman Candle! Poor Peter just couldn't cope so he rang Ron Newnham who lived opposite Ventnor Station to come and help out - which Ron did, running down Grove Road in his pyjamas!"

But telecommunications never stand still for long. In 1971 a new modern building was built further up the High Street, next to Ventnor Brewery. Ventnor was given the Isle of Wight's first electronic exchange - there were only two others in the whole country. The old switchboard equipment was shipped off to the Scottish Islands to serve the community there, but Ventnor had lost a unique personal service which was missed. One local newspaper story was headed 'Ventnor's Hello Girls say goodbye', with a picture showing the switchboard girls with supervisor Ruby Lowe behind them. Another newspaper described them as 'the operators whose work was taken over by the electronic brain'.



Ventnor's Hello Girls say goodbye

Margaret Gardiner remembers the exchange closing:

"Everything changed on 15 September 1971 when the exchange went automatic and us girls got transferred to Ryde Exchange. What a shock that was to us - you had to put your hand up to ask to go to the toilet! Ruby didn't go with us - she retired: very wise. But I can honestly say those years at the Ventnor exchange were the happiest years of my working life and friendships made that last to this day - thank you girls."

Although the Post Office has now moved to 'Seasons' in the High Street, the old building in Church Street is still known as 'The Exchange', and is still a happy place - a flourishing arts venue run by the Ventnor Fringe team.

Next week: The story of the 'Pacific Glory' disaster in 1970

Margaret Gardiner and Lesley Telford, Ventnor & District Local History Society, with thanks to the late Fay Brown.