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Background

I found the following article in an old copy of 'Cumbria Lakeland and the Border' magazine whilst on holiday at the Borrowdale Gates Hotel in the village of Grange at the south end of Derwent water. It was a serendipitous find that I found fascinating. The article, written by J T Walker, was published for a general readership and is about the new, in 1969, automatic exchange at Kendal in the south lakes. The magazine is still published by Dalesman Publishing as 'Cumbria';

our thanks go to Jon Stokoe the editor for giving permission to use the text.

I have shortened the article for the THG Journal.

Introduction

The GPO has plans to automate its network and introduce Subscriber Trunk Dialling (STD). Mr R.H. Ball is the telephone manager for Lancaster area. Lancaster exchange was automated in 1962 and 10 years after it will be Kendal's turn. The conversion of Kendal has been delayed because

there was plenty of 'life' left in its manual exchange. Some other exchanges in Lakeland such as Lancaster, Windermere and Milnthorpe already have STD, Ambleside and Grange will be automated in 1970. In 1969 the installers are at work in the new building at Kendal installing equipment. At this time Kendal was the biggest manual exchange in Lancaster area handling 40,000 calls a day originating in a 500 square mile area.

Careers and redundancies

Automation will cause many redundancies. Mr E W Hibberd, senior telecommunications superintendent for Kendal and Barrow and Mr M.H. Harman, Kendal's exchange superintendent, have staffing problems. "We can't offer much of a career at Kendal due to the new exchange and so for the last two years we have deliberately employed staff who didn't want a long-term career. Thus, there will be no problem of redundant staff."

The exchange will advertise for full-time temporary employment for the next year. It no longer attracts many school-leavers, so telephonists are 'borrowed' from exchanges like Sheffield, Cardiff, Hull and even Southampton for a few weeks. Due to a different type of working in Lakeland they must be instructed in strange accents and local geography. The idea of coming to the lakes probably attracts them. A hundred full-time and a dozen part-time staff are employed during the daytime. They are predominantly female.

There are 64 positions on the switchboard and the supervisors assume responsibility for certain sections. Miss E. Whittam is chief supervisor during the daytime and is one of Kendal's longest-serving telephonists. She started at the exchange in 1941 after spending four years in Manchester. Kendal had 13 positions then and its growth has pushed people out of office accommodation. Positions from old exchanges have to be utilised to keep Kendal going.

Up to the 1940s, operators could rely on their memories. Now, because of often complex dialling codes they must have more references.

Anne Nelson, 17 years of age, came to Kendal from Shap in search of a job. She has been at the exchange for nine months and if given the opportunity she will make a career of telephony. Says Mr Harman "Girls like Anne give good service and get good training in return, which will be a good reference for a career in private industry."

Training and career progression

Supervisors at the exchange took the training of new recruits as part of

their job, running courses for four to six trainees at a time. Each supervisor did about eight classes a year, each student's training takes five to six weeks followed by an examination, after which they are ready to take calls on the switchboard.

After working on the switchboard interspersed with clerical work handling call tickets, they could be trained to take enquiry calls. They had to be fast because the time-to-answer for enquiries was five seconds, a good personality, tact and the ability to deal with public were also a requirement.

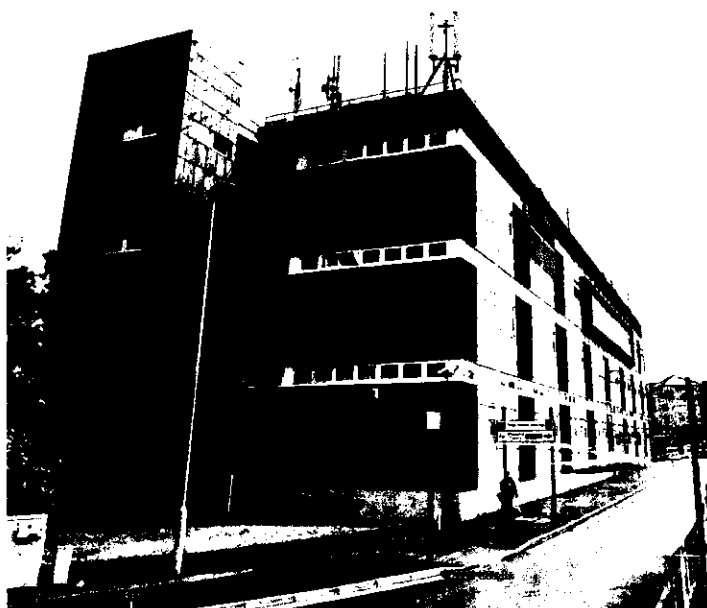
Different at night

While the daytime staff is predominantly female, the reverse is true for evenings and night-time. Between 6pm and midnight, the night staff might handle up to 2,000 trunk calls in addition to other traffic. Mr. W. Bell is a night supervisor who started as a part-time telephonist 25 years ago when there were 15 positions.

There are 25 full-time and 86 part-time night telephonists. They work seven nights a week and also on Sundays. "Busiest of the night is between 8:30 and 10pm; as the nights draw in, traffic creeps forward. There is more of a social traffic at night-time", says Mr Bell.

Every telephone call has a value, explains Mr Harman "by counting up the number of different types of call we can attain a rough idea of the number of staff required for a certain period. Once or twice in a year a days' calls are analysed to produce a value which can be used throughout the year. This is converted to the required staff hours."

Kendal is a seasonal exchange so a pattern emerges from this system. From the amount of traffic handled



Kendal's 'new' exchange [© 2019 Google Streetview]

one can discern a community's prosperity. Daytime traffic is brisker on a more efficient business lines while in the evening and at night, it tends to be comparatively slower. Administrators can estimate working hours and the number required to fill them—this is why telephonists work varied hours. A steady flow must be maintained.

Behind the scenes

Men like exchange maintenance engineer Brian Haslam are responsible for the miles of wiring, linking the fuse mountings, on which all underground cables terminated, to the switch room.

Electrical contractors are installing equipment in the Blackhall Road building. Underground wires are taken into the basement cable chamber are dispersed via holes in the room to a room above where the wires are set on iron frames. Here, in two years' time the two-minute change-over will take place.

Despite the apparatus installed partly to minimise labour, 36 operators will be employed. There will be a kitchen and dining-room adjacent to the switch room. At present the exchange rents the YWCA dining-room for the girls' dinner hours.

The new exchange will be a boon to Lakeland: it will streamline the entire service in the southern part of the region.