

## British phone books from 1880

### Introduction

BT Archives maintains a near complete collection of original phone books for the United Kingdom from 1880, the year after the public telephone service was introduced into the UK. It also holds phone books for Southern Ireland until 1921 and the creation of Eire as a separate state. The collection contains phone books produced by BT and by the predecessor organisations from which BT is directly descended, including Post Office Telecommunications and private telephone companies.

The phone books reflect the development of the telephone service in the UK, covering exclusively London when the telephone was first available; they gradually expand to include major provincial centres and are ultimately nationwide.

### Preservation of the collection

Phone books were not intended to be retained permanently, or even beyond their current status, with old phone books returned to be pulped for re-use. This was particularly important during the war and immediate post-war period because of a shortage of paper. The paper used in their production was also of poor quality. As a result many of the earlier phone books are in a fragile condition, and have to be conserved to ensure they survive for the future.

In 1993-94, because of heavy public usage and concern of damage to the originals, the collection up to 1992 was microfilmed.

A 26-month digitisation project has recently been completed in conjunction with Ancestry.co.uk to scan the phone books from 1880 to 1984 and make them available online through a subscription service. The project digitised 1,780 phone books - more than 280 million names.

It is hoped that storing the phone books in controlled environmental conditions combined with limiting the level of use of the originals will ensure the long-term preservation of this collection.

### Production of the phone book

The rapidly developing telephone network meant that updated editions of the phone book were required frequently, with sometimes several editions being produced in a year. From 1913 onwards they were generally produced twice a year, and then from 1940 production was less frequent, usually every 18 months.



Cover of the first phone book, 15 January 1880

The number of phone books produced has increased dramatically as the network has expanded. By 1914 the phone book was the largest single printing contract in the UK, with a million and a half phone books being printed each year. In 1921 approximately 1.7 million were issued, weighing a total of about 1,000 tons. In 1938 the total number of phone books published each year exceeded 10.5 million, with an approximate weight of 10,600 tons. By 1951 of the 8 million phone books printed and distributed, over half had more than 1,000 pages. In 1980 47 million phone books were published in 145 editions, using 42,000 tons of paper.



Gumming on front cover advertisements, 1938 (P 2375)

From 1970 onwards phone books were compiled by computer in Leeds, recorded onto magnetic tape and fed into photo composing machines. This was the world's first fully integrated computer printing process.

Production of the phone book has been almost continuous since 1880. The one exception is for the period from 1913 to 1920. There is some doubt whether, other than in London, any phone books were produced during this period, although it is possible that they were recycled for the war effort.

## Private telephone companies

The BT historical phone book collection includes phone books ('lists of subscribers') from some of the several telephone companies that were formed in the 1880s. By the mid 1890s these companies had either merged with or been taken over by the sole remaining private concern, the National Telephone Company (NTC), which ran the telephone service in competition with the smaller network of the Post Office. In 1896 the Post Office took over the trunk (long distance) network of the NTC, and finally the whole company in 1912.

The arrangement of the phone books varied considerably, particularly in the earliest issues, and it is only later that any standardisation between the Post Office and NTC appears. For many years, the different telephone systems of the competing companies and the Post Office were incompatible, resulting in customers being obliged to confine themselves to the network of one company or subscribe to others. This situation was not resolved until the latter days of competition when subscribers of the NTC and the Post Office were given access to the other's system, and were listed in the other's phone books as well as their own.

## Development of the phone book

The arrangement of the phone book has been reorganised periodically to accommodate the increasing numbers of residential and business subscribers, particularly domestic customers, as the telephone became available to a wider audience.

In 1879 The Telephone Company opened the first telephone exchange in the UK in Coleman Street in the City of London, with only seven subscribers. Demand grew quickly, with other exchanges in London opening within a year. In its first year, The Telephone Company handled 6,000 calls.

On 15 January 1880 The Telephone Company issued the first phone book containing 248 London personal and business names, but without telephone numbers. A caller simply rang the exchange and asked to be connected to another subscriber listed in the phone book. This system quickly became impractical and by April 1880 The Telephone Company listed telephone numbers for its subscribers.

In 1896 the first phone book for the whole country was published in one volume, containing 1350 pages and 81,000 entries. By 1900 the introduction of double columns was necessary due to the increase in the number of entries.

Until 1938, each volume of the phone book included an alphabetical index indicating in which telephone district a particular location lay. These indexes have been microfilmed along with the phone book information itself, which makes phone books of this time relatively easy to access and search. After 1938, indexes to the phone books were produced independently and not necessarily each year. Copies of these are available in the search room at BT Archives dating from 1939 to 1991.

Prior to 1969, phone books could be bound together into volumes, which were arranged according to a particular region of the country, such as North of England, South West and South Wales. Although the phone books could also be issued separately, the collection held by BT Archives holds them in the bound volume form.

In 1984 a new style Phone Book was launched with improved supplementary information and an easier to read format. This was initially introduced in Manchester and subsequently used nationwide.



Actress Pat Phoenix promoting the launch of the new style phone book, 1984 (HF 33-U)

A further major change to the format of the phone book happened with the launch of The Phone Book from BT as a combined book for residential, business and classified entries. York was the first place to get this new style edition in January 2003.

## London

In 1932 the London Telephone Area was extended to include some further outlying areas. The area was renamed the London Telecommunications Region (LTR) in 1936, as part of major organisational changes within the Post Office. From 1954 the arrangement of the London phone book was radically changed to cover only the London postal area and addresses with London postcodes, with separate volumes being produced for outer London.

## Telephone number format

In 1926, when automatic exchanges and dial telephones were first introduced in London, it was decided that all figure numbers would be less memorable than giving each exchange a 'name' with a three letter code. So, from 1926 the first three letters of the names of telephone exchanges appeared in the phone book in heavy print as part of a telephone number, **HAR**row 0119, **MAY**fair 0541, **HOL**born 1832. Callers would dial the three letters (which appeared on the telephone dial) and then the four digit number. As automatic exchanges replaced manual exchanges across the country this system was expanded.

In 1966 the introduction of All-Figure Numbering (AFN) replaced the letters and number combination. AFN was essential with the development of direct international dialling, as the

mixed letter and number combinations were insufficient to meet the needs of expanding service.

6 May 1990 saw the biggest change to the London telephone numbering system since the introduction of All Figure Numbering with the code change from 01 to 071 for inner London and 081 for outer London. This was necessary because of the growth in demand for numbers and the proliferation of 'number hungry' equipment such as fax machines and PBXs (Private Branch/Business eXchange) with direct dialling facilities. Changing to 071 and 081 doubled the amount of available London numbers. BT had publicised the code changes over the previous year through television, radio, newspapers, poster sites and mailings. A code change party at the BT Tower attended by several celebrities marked the actual changeover itself, which was broadcast live on television.



16 April 1995 was nominated by OfTel as National Code Change day, Phoneday. The code change effectively gave every geographic number an extra '1' after the '0'. Leeds, Bristol, Sheffield, Nottingham and Leicester were given new codes and new numbers were introduced to cater for future growth.

Promotional poster for Phoneday, 16 April 1995 (EHA 5421)

Despite these changes on 22 April 2000, new dialling codes were introduced combined with alterations to existing local numbers for London, Southampton, Portsmouth, Coventry, Cardiff and Northern Ireland.

## British phone books timeline

- 1879 The Telephone Company opened the first telephone exchange in the UK in Coleman Street in the City of London, with only seven subscribers
- 1880 On 15 January The Telephone Company issued the first phone book containing 248 London personal and business names, but no telephone numbers
- 1896 The first phonebook for the whole country was published in a single volume, containing 1350 pages and 81,000 entries
- 1900 Double columns were introduced as the number of entries increased
- 1914 The phone book was the largest single printing contract in the UK, with a million and a half phone books being printed each year
- 1926 Automatic exchanges and dial telephones introduced into London, and eventually across the country
- Decision taken that all figure numbers would be less memorable than giving each exchange a 'name' with a three letter code
- 1966 The introduction of All-Figure Numbering (AFN) replaced the letters and number combination
- 1970 From 1970 phone books were compiled by computer in Leeds, recorded on magnetic tape and fed into photo composing machines - the world's first fully integrated computer printing process
- 1984 Manchester was the first city to receive the new style phone book with improved supplementary information and an easier to read format
- 1990 The dialling code changed for London with 071 for inner London and 081 for outer London
- 1995 16 April nominated as Phoneday with every geographic number gaining a '1' after the '0'
- 2000 New dialling codes introduced combined with alterations to existing numbers for London, Southampton, Portsmouth, Coventry, Cardiff and Northern Ireland to increase capacity in these areas
- 2003 York was the first city to receive the new style phone book providing combined residential, business and classified listings
- 2007 Phone books online completed, bringing improved access to 1,780 phone books 1880-1984, but without the risk of damage to the original volumes