

WHERE IT'S "NUMBER PLEASE" 73,000 TIMES A WEEK

C.T. November 25, 1955

ARE you a heavy sleeper who finds it just a little difficult to get up in time to catch that early morning train or 'bus. If you are don't worry. A ring through to the telephone exchange before you go to bed will solve all your "rise and shine" problems!

Do this and at exactly the hour you want to get up, the night telephonist at the exchange will give you a call — several long rings on your phone to get you out of bed. The service will cost you 4½d. a call — 6d. from January — but it never fails. About half a dozen people in the Christchurch exchange area use it every morning.

You might well turn round and say. "I've an alarm clock", maybe. But if you are like hundreds of thousands of people in this county you will quickly confess that more often than not, when the alarm goes off, you just switch it off, turn over, and go back to sleep. With the telephone service you have to get out of bed to answer the phone, just to reassure yourself it is your early morning call, and not Aunt Mabel or 101 other people who might have good reason to call you at such an early hour.

This was one of the unusual services the exchange has to offer which I discovered when I went round to the up-to-date Christchurch exchange last week to see what happens there during the night hours.

NIGHT OPERATOR

The night service at the exchange starts at 6 p.m. and finishes at 8 a.m. From 6 p.m. until 9 p.m. usually six operators — some male, some female — answer "Number please". Then at half-hourly periods, starting at 9 p.m. an operator hangs up his or her headphones and leaves . . . until, finally, there is one man left — the night operator — who deals with all the telephone traffic through the exchange from 11.30 p.m. until 7.30 a.m. the next morning when he is joined by another operator.

Naturally telephone calls during the day are mostly of a business character. In the early part of the evening, the picture changes completely, and calls are of a more social nature. There are also more long distance calls in the evening than during the day (cost of a long distance call to London decreases from 1/- a minute to 6d. a minute in the evening). After 11 p.m. the call traffic slackens off and from then until midnight the calls are mainly for taxis.

Calls dealt with until the early morning are usually for doctors, an ambulance, midwife or in connection with an emergency. I was told though that the night exchange operator is kept very busy with calls to and from Hurn airport when passenger aircraft, unable to land at London because of fog, are diverted to the Christchurch Airport.

I must confess that I found it just as difficult to understand how the shifts for the operators are ascertained (simply, they each work 48 hours a week) as I did to try and understand how the operators work so speedily and accurately.

CALL TRAFFIC

Before I go into the technical workings of the exchange, let me tell you what sort of call traffic the exchange deals with. Average number dealt with in a week is around 73,000—just over 434 calls an hour — and for an average night—that is from 6 p.m. to 8 a.m.— some 2,600 calls are answered.

The Christchurch exchange operating panel is about 35 feet long and is built to take a total of 2,800 direct exchange lines. At the moment 2,460 subscribers are connected in the exchange area — which covers approximately 10 square miles and extends from Mundeford in the east to Tuckton and parts of Southbourne in the west. Waiting list for a telephone line stands at present, at about 130, of which 20 will be connected shortly.

I expect you have lifted your receiver to make a call and have had to wait what seemed like minutes before the operator answered you. Don't worry. The operator wasn't knitting, or chatting with her colleagues. She was trying hard to answer your call but was probably trying to cope with a large number of other calls at the same time.

Average time it takes from when you lift your receiver until the operator answers, at Christchurch, from five seconds upwards. What happens when you lift that receiver? A light shines on the switchboard—a maze of plugs and buttons—and the operator pushes in a plug, and asks what number you want. A white light shining on her switchboard tells her that you are using a private telephone and a red one shows that you are speaking from a public call box.

Now I am going to ask you to join the anti-button-pusher league. When the operator doesn't answer you straight away don't keep pressing the phone button. It makes the light button on the exchange switchboard flash on and off, and may confuse the operator when she is dealing with a number of calls at one time. I've done it. A lot of other people still do. But the operator hasn't forgotten you and I have vowed never to keep pressing the button on my office phone again.

I was shown over the exchange by the man who has to supervise the telephone service in this area Mr. E. Dennett, of the Manager's Office, Telephone House, Bournemouth.

AUTOMATIC

During the evening I asked him if there was any proposal afoot to make the Christchurch exchange fully automatic. He confirmed that there was no such plan at present but added if all the line capacity at the exchange became exhausted it might be just as economical to make the exchange automatic as to provide accommodation and install additional switchboard positions. "Looking into the future, he added," "there is indeed little doubt that subscribers will be able to dial their own trunk calls."

Mr. Dennett said there was usually a fair number of applicants for work as telephone operators. "It is a clean job," Mr. Dennett explained. "I think it is the sort of job people tend to like because they can speak to many different people. I think it gives them a feeling of satisfaction. Although we get the applications the individuals are not always satisfactory so a careful selection has to be made. Those who feel they would like to become operators, especially school-leavers, should write to the Head Postmaster, Bournemouth and Poole."

Mr. J. Lickman, of Athelstone Road, Southbourne, has been a night operator at Christchurch for the past seven years. He hasn't had a Christmas Day off for the past five years but, he told me: "I would'nt change the job for the world".

He went on: "You feel you are giving a service". Mr. Lickman works nearly every night of the week and has to sleep during the daytime. "Doesn't it interfere with your social life?" I asked him, "Well, it does," he replied, "but you just have to adjust yourself to it."

His most amusing experience on the switchboard? "One day I took a number and after trying it for some moments decided there was not going to be a reply. I told the caller who replied so seriously: "But there must be. That's the cemetery!"

EMERGENCY

What happens when there is an emergency call? Mr. A. Cooke, of River Way, Christchurch, for four years in charge of the exchange at night, explained this to me. He said: "When the emergency button in a call box is pressed it sets off a buzzer in the exchange. The operator answers the call and asks which emergency service is wanted. If it is for a fire she asks where and what is involved. Straight-away she presses a switch in the exchange which sets off the fire siren and then pulls the call-bell plunger which rings a bell in each of the firemen's houses. If the police or ambulance services are required the caller is connected to the appropriate number immediately."

During the year the exchange receives a number of hoax calls. Most recent was about a month ago. Mr. Cooke was the night operator and late one evening he answered an emergency call from a Wick call box. A youth on the line said there was a fire in the Wick area. Mr. Cooke asked for more details and the voice replied: "A fire in a grate".

Said Mr. Dennett: "We took a very poor view of that, although of course there was little we could do about it. People don't realise when they take up the time of the exchange staff in that stupid fashion they may be delaying an urgent call — a call which may decide between life and death."

By and large excellent service is given both day and night by the round-the-clock Christchurch exchange. "On the whole we have a very helpful lot of subscribers here in Christchurch," Mr. Dennett told me.