



Account of Purley on Thames

Telephone Services

The Background

The telephone was invented by Alexander Graham Bell who patented the first practical telephone in 1876. The first telephone system in England was opened in London in 1879 with 7 or 8 subscribers. By 1880 there were several companies offering services, but the courts decided that the telephone was a form of telegraph and as such was to be a monopoly under the Postmaster General. He issued licences to a number of companies and these gradually merged into a single company, with a few municipal companies remaining independent.

In 1896 the Post Office took over the long distance lines and in 1912 it acquired all the private companies, with the notable exception of Hull. It continued to supply virtually all the telephone services in England until 1984? when the postal and telephone services were separated and British Telecom formed.

Local Services - The Tilehurst/Reading Exchange

Initially the telephone service in the Purley area was provided from a small manual exchange in Minster St Reading. This had been started by the National Telephone Co. who opened their first exchange in Reading on 14th August 1885.

In 1899 Reading Council requested the Post Office to provide a service for the town in competition with the National Company. (ref 314) Eventually the Post Office took over all the telephone services in the area.

For properties along the Oxford Road, On the River Estate and down Long Lane the service was provided from the Tilehurst exchange using 5 digit numbers in the 67xxx series. Initially these were known as 'Tilehurst' numbers but after the war they all became 'Reading' numbers without change. These were changed some time after 1955 by substituting 2 for the 6. Other numbers were then allocated in the 2xxxx series. When this new series exceeded the capacity of the exchange the 41xxxx series was brought into use in Purley, taking over most of the Pangbourne numbers east of Purley Lane. In 1986 the 2xxxx series numbers were changed by prefixing a 4 to make a new 42xxxx series. The boundary line between the Pangbourne and Reading exchanges was then defined roughly by Long Lane and properties to the east being on Reading and Purley Lane and properties to the west being on Pangbourne. The incoming STD code for Reading was 0734. In 1987 the Reading exchange was converted to System X This provided a much improved switching service and enabled the introduction of many more services.

The Pangbourne Exchange

Service has been provided from the Pangbourne Exchange from at least 1894 when Mrs. Jane Rew, the tenant at Purley Hall was allocated the number 'Pangbourne 13'. (ref 212)

The establishment at the Pangbourne exchange included a sub-postmaster who was being paid £157 pa in 1922 and £170 pa in 1927. There were two posts referred to as 'SC&T', one male and one female in 1912 and in 1919 two female assistants were authorised. One full time and one part time (7.25 hours per week) In 1923 the posts were regraded with slightly more hours being allocated to

the part time post. (ref 504)

In 1926 a 130 line CBS2 exchange was established in Horseshoe Road, Pangbourne to serve Purley. This had 4 operators and was later upgraded to a CBS2A. Capacity was increased at first by transferring subscribers east of Purley Lane to a 'Reading' number. Manual operation was replaced in 1966 by an automatic, Strowger exchange. At this time all numbers were changed to four digits in the range 2000 to 4999. (ref 186)

This new exchange was opened on 6th June 1966 with 1150 lines connected and was one of the first in the Reading area to provide Subscriber Trunk Dialing (STD) facilities. The Pangbourne exchange has been extended five times (in 1968, 1973, 1974, 1981 and 1987) increasing line connections to 2438 (1981) and finally 2858 which is a physical limit due to space considerations. It was replaced in 1990 with a computerised exchange, located in Reading but the old equipment was left in situ.. (ref 186)

The Pangbourne exchange handled its own internal calls. Local calls from Reading required the number to be prefixed by 37 and local calls to Reading numbers had to be prefixed by 9. All connections elsewhere are routed through a Group Switching Centre in Reading. Originally the STD code for incoming calls was 07357 but when in 1990 System X was installed to serve Pangbourne all the Pangbourne numbers were prefixed by 84 and became effectively Reading numbers with incoming code 0734. At this time all the other local short codes were abolished.

Telephone Boxes

Public telephones were provided on Purley Rise near the shops and on Purley Village opposite Lister Close. This latter box was severely vandalised many times and eventually British Telecom had to remove it after vandals had rocked it over and severed the electric power wires beneath the concrete base in what the local telephone manager described as 'the worst example of vandalism I have ever seen'. The Parish Council campaigned for a replacement box and eventually in 1986 an open phone with a hood was placed on St Mary's Avenue near the Council flats. This lasted until April 1990 when it was replaced by a more modern kiosk.

Telephone Numbers

Some early telephone numbers from Kelly's Directory:-

Pangbourne	11	Carlton Nurseries (1935)
	13	Jane Rew, Purley Hall (1894)
	14	South Berks Hunt (1939)
	17	Purley Garage (1935)
	71	Menpes Fruit Farm (1928/31/35/39)
	123	Westbury Farm (1928/31/35/39)
	156	Home Farm (1939)
	184	Lower Farm (1931)
	190	Post Office (1931/35)
	217	Purley Garage (1939)
Tilehurst	67422	Cherrywood, Oxford Road (1935)
	67441	Carlton Nurseries (1939)

67497 Stadium Kennels (1935/39)

67549 Purley Cottage (1939)

Purley Telephone Numbers from the 1954 Reading Telephone Directory (Note this does not include Pangbourne numbers which had a separate Directory.)

67285 Amey, Donald - Clare Cottage, Long Lane

67513 Barouch, Albert - The Copse, Oxford Road

67545 Bell Mrs M - Greenaways, Long Lane

67294 Bruce CW - Ridgemount, Long Lane

67523 Chamberlain, RW - Winchcombe

67171 Duerdoth John R - 6 River Gardens

67608 Duncan Lt Col RFH - Purley Park

67817 Emery HT - The Thatch, Long Lane

67149 Farr & Sons, contractors - 12 Brading Way

67174 Garner MG Cattle Dir - 2 Long Lane

67543 Garton AFT - Chollerford, Long Lane

67529 Tilehurst Railway Station

New Technology

System X was the start of the move from the old technology to the new. What it provided was computer controlled routing of calls rather than the former clicking of switches as each digit was dialled. Unfortunately the new system could not completely replace the old as many business subscribers had made special arrangements which were hard wired into the strowger switches and no proper records had been kept. Consequently huge exchanges which were essentially redundant had to be maintained in use until services could be replaced.

Once computer routing became the norm the format of numbers became almost irrelevant and the distinction between local and trunk calls vanished. What was retained however was a prefix to denote a geographical area. This was in two parts country and zone so you would dial 00 followed by a country code (the UK was 44, North America was 1) or 0 followed by zone (Reading was 118, Newbury was 1635) and then the number within the zone.

Because Reading was a three digit code they could allocate 100 million numbers to subscribers whereas Newbury was restricted to 10 million. This gave plenty of scope for other providers to enter the telephone market as BT lost its monopoly. Zones starting in 1 were the norm but London's codes started with 2 and later 3 was used for national companies who wished to disguise their location. 9 was used for premium rate lines where the receiver could add a charge to the cost of the call. 8 was used for freecall numbers and reduced rate calls.

Then came mobile phones. They were allocated zones starting with 7. This released a billion numbers and effectively killed off the phone boxes so that today they are rare objects with none left in Purley. To provide mobile services it was necessary to erect signal masts and at first they generated fierce opposition as lurid accounts of deaths of small birds from radiation was interpreted as a death sentence for any young child living within a mile of a mast. Gradually however they came to be accepted and Purley now has dozens of them providing good coverage for most of parish.

Broadband and Internet

When telephones were first introduced service was provided from exchanges to individual premises by copper wires strung from telephone posts. Then by the 1960s it was more usual to provide service

by cables buried beneath footpaths and now overhead cables are either banned or rare survivors.

Before the copper wires were providing a means of carrying voices they had been used worldwide to carry telegraph signals initially via morse code of dots and dashes but later by a baudot code of 5 digits representing 32 characters and messages could be sent by what became known as telex. By the early 1970s this had expanded to 8 digits and services were emerging whereby subscribers could dial up a number and receive information by selecting options with the results displayed on a small cathode ray tube. When these first came into use line speed was limited to 2400 bits per second (old telex lines operated at 70 bps) but as more and more information needed to be sent much higher speeds became the norm as technology improved.

Then came the internet as the private exchange of information blossomed into public exchanges of e-mails and access to websites. This generated the demand for even more line speed and transmissions of a megabit per second became possible. At the same time independent companies were providing Television by cable instead of the use of transmitters and they were based on the use of optical cables rather than copper wire. Gradually BT, who had retained a monopoly of providing the land lines to peoples houses through Openreach, began to use the optical cables which could provide both a lot more traffic along the same line at much higher speeds.

What has emerged is a merger of the technologies of TV, radio, computers, telephone, telegraph etc. based upon micro-chips so small as to be almost invisible but yet more powerful than the biggest and fastest computers of the 1970s. Now virtually everyone has a mobile phone but hardly used for actual conversations as texting , gaming, browsing and social media have taken over peoples lives and line speeds of 100 megabits per second have become normal.

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