

# Wargrave Local History Society

**Latest News - March 2024**

## **A.G.M. and Reminiscences of Wargrave (part 2)**

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Wargrave Local History Society's March meeting began with the AGM. The Chairman, Peter Halman, reported that it had been another successful year, with a varied programme of speakers, and enjoyable visits both to the Chiltern Open Air Museum and to see some of the historic buildings in Sonning. A committee was elected for the coming year, and the programme for 2024-25 was announced to members.

Following the formal business, Di Evans recounted more of her Reminiscences of Wargrave in the 1950s and 1960s, following on from her presentation in December.

Di's secondary age education had been at (what was then known as) The Piggott Senior School in Wargrave. As she approached the time to leave school, she was unsure what she wanted sort of occupation she wished to follow. Several of her friends were working for GPO (General Post Office) telephones, at either the Reading, Maidenhead or Wargrave telephone exchanges. "She who must be obeyed" - or at least "listened to" (her mother) suggested that it might be a good idea for Di to look at working for the GPO, or at least to ask the careers service for advice.

Di duly applied for employment with the telephone service, and went for a selection panel at the main Reading Central telephone exchange, situated in Reading's Minster Street. Amongst those that she met that day was the chief supervisor - "the most daunting woman she ever met". Di was assessed as having excellent spelling, she had a good knowledge of national geography, and a clear speaking voice, and so was in the August after she left school, she embarked on a 6-week course to train as a junior GPO telephonist. It was intense. But by early October she was able to start work, within the Reading Central exchange, being paid £3 13s 0d per week.

The Reading exchange expanded from its original set of switchboards to occupy two floors of the building, with a third floor used for directory enquiries. It was staffed for 24 hours a day, 7 days a week - the day-time operators being ladies, whilst it was principally men operated the exchange at night. To ensure that the operators were following the correct practices there were divisional supervisors, who were treated "like Gods". The staff were subject to the Official Secrets Act, and the rules for staff were tightly applied, and any transgression - such as mis-reading the duty roster - could result in the member of staff being 'in trouble'. There was a strict dress code, saying what could - and could not - be worn to work - some of the younger staff found this difficult to accept, and so soon left the GPO. One particular rule related to the need to use the toilet. If the operator had a desperate need (known in GPO terminology as "an urgent"), they were only allowed 2 minutes away from their work - at Reading Central exchange the facilities were down 2 flights of steps, and there was a strict rule that there was to be no running! Some of the boards (known as multiples) at which the operators worked required them to plug in the leads quite high up, so they could spend many hours a day stood up, rather than on the basic chairs.

Di said that she did not enjoy her first few weeks working in this way at the Reading Central exchange. It so happened that there was a need for staff to work at the Wargrave telephone exchange, and so when Di was asked if she would be willing to help there, she readily agreed.

Wargrave was first provided with a telephone service in 1907, and the exchange was situated on the first floor of a building in the High Street, being over the local branch of W H Smith's newsagent and bookshop.

Originally, this belonged to the National Telephone Company, which later became part of GPO Telephones. A sign on the wall (*just to the left of the bay window in the photograph, right*) announced that “You may telephone from here” - most houses of course not being connected to the telephone network at that time. As more and more people subscribed to the telephone service, the small exchange was replaced by a larger manual one in 1938. This was located opposite Wargrave Hall, in the building next door to Jessamine Cottage.

By the early 1960s, this had 5 fully operational switchboards, staffed during the day by a supervisor, 5 full-time and 1 part-time staff, with a similar provision at night. There was also an equipment engineer, who covered not only Wargrave, but the Shiplake and Twyford areas as well. Several of the local businesses had more than one telephone line, with a small exchange worked by GPO trained telephonists - all of which would be checked by the GPO for the correct use of the equipment and to see that “correct speech” was being used. John Waterers’, were the largest of these companies locally, having 5 lines, whilst Shiplake College and Toga Manufacturing at Crazies Hill each had 3 lines.



The telephone system at that time provided various services, apart from just connecting subscribers so that they could talk to each other. Some of these were provided free of charge, such as directory enquiries, whilst others were paid for services. Those included TIM - the speaking clock, and during the summer the Test Match cricket scores. Di recalled that one local headmaster would call the exchange every day during a match to find out what the score was!

One of the other duties for the operators at Wargrave exchange was to summon the fire brigade when needed to tackle an emergency. The equipment for this was housed in the switch room, and the alarm siren was activated by a self-returning handle, whilst the equipment could also call the firemen at home or at work. On one occasion, Mary Long, the daughter of the family living at Cape Farewell, telephoned to say that there was a serious fire, with the thatched roof alight. Di pulled the handle to sound the alarm, and also contacted Bill Collyer, who was the station officer at Wargrave fire station. Somehow, the handle activated the siren again - 3 or 4 times. When she got home later in the day “she who must be listened to” asked what had Di been doing, as it sounded more like a wartime air raid warning!

Even in the 1960s, relatively few homes were connected to the telephone network. If they wished to make a call, they would visit one of the local red kiosks with a handful of coins to pay for it. The box by the cross-roads was popular, and so the coinbox would soon fill up. As an alternative, the caller could ask the operator to make a ‘transfer charge call’, where the person they wished to telephone would be asked if they would pay for the call. Shiplake College was somewhat smaller then than it is now. Nigel, a pupil there, was not at all keen to be boarding away from home, his parents living in London. He would call his mother daily, on a transfer charge call, but did not want her to know how very unhappy he was. When he rang the exchange, the Wargrave operators would talk to him for 5 minutes or so before connecting him, which had a calming effect on the boy.

Other incidents that Di recalled related to children who found the telephone instrument very attractive. As an example, Di was related to the family who owned Stringer’s fruiterer and greengrocery store in the High Street. On Thursdays and Fridays, customers would call to place their orders. The eldest of the family’s 3

daughters - aged about 3 or 4 at the time - would often answer these calls - the caller asking for her mother by name - resulting in havoc on a busy day when it became apparent that they were speaking to the young girl! There were some notable subscribers on the Wargrave exchange, including the actors Richard Todd, who lived at Shiplake, and Robert Morley, who lived at Crazies Hill - the latter would often be on the phone for 2 - 3 hours, in order to talk to his bookmaker.

The exchange also worked closely with the local policeman, Cameron Floate, Di's older brother being a special constable. There had been a spate of arson attacks affecting several of the farms around Wargrave. Whilst out for a walk with her brother and mother, they saw a glow in the sky when by the farm gate in Blakes Road ( near the present Dunnock Way). A young lad from the village called out to them "Good bit of a blaze, isn't it Mister". He lived in Victoria Road - and it transpired that he was the arsonist responsible for the series of fires.

Located behind the telephone exchange was the village postal sorting office. There were 8 full-time postmen then, with Charlie Ilsley being the senior man, and a part-timer, Arthur Langford, the groundsman at the Recreation Ground. They made their rounds by bike, with 2 deliveries a day on Mondays to Fridays and one on a Saturday.



Operationally, all the headsets used by the telephonists had a cut-out facility, but on a manual exchange it was not impossible for the operator to listen in on a call. One thing they could do, though, was advise a caller that the person they wished to speak to had gone out, so try later!

Because of the Official Secrets Act, the staff were not allowed to take photographs in the exchange, so the only known one of Wargrave exchange was that (*left*) taken just before it was replaced by an automatic one in 1969. Many of the Wargrave staff did not want to transfer to Reading Central, and most moved to other work, so that leading up to the change-over there were few 'local' staff. The photograph includes Di - at the far end of the row of operators - with the area General Manager, Robert Lack stood in the middle at the back. In the back left hand corner was Wargrave resident John Jonas, chauffeur to Robert Morley (who is thought to also be in the room).

At about the same time as the manual exchange closed, the houses in Recreation Road where Di's family lived were demolished for redevelopment, so Di moved to Barkham. However, they were the 4th generation to have

lived in Wargrave, and Di looked for a way to maintain her connection with it. She therefore joined the Special Constabulary, as her father and brother had done before her, serving in the Reading and Woodley area for 12 years.

Di commented that it was a pity that the telephone kiosk by the village cross roads - she remembered it as Wargrave 260 - had fallen into dis-use and dis-repair., and did not give a good impression to visitors. There had been efforts to persuade the local council to renovate it, but this produced no response, so she was pleased to hear that the Wargrave Heritage Trust hoped to restore it to look as it had done in time past.

Di added that, coincidentally, she was recounting her memories 55 years to the day after the Wargrave manual exchange had closed.

For more information about the society, visit the website at [www.wargravehistory.org.uk](http://www.wargravehistory.org.uk)