

NEWSLETTER

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From the Teléfono box to the mobile phone

Cover image: Garaidh Ó Gáire



Phone box being removed
from Aran Islands
*(image from the documentary
Bye Bye Now - True Films)*

From the Telefón Box to the Mobile Phone



“In the not too distant future, every man, woman and child will have a phone in their pocket” such was the prediction made at the launch of the Eircell mobile phone system in 1985. Far-fetched at the time but what an accurate glimpse into the future!

Little did we know that the mobile phone, and then the smartphone, would become an essential item in virtually every pocket or handbag on the planet. With high-tech cameras, instant messaging, video conferencing, social media apps, breaking news and all of the knowledge the world wide web can provide, our smartphones offer an ever increasing array of functions.

But how did we get here?

In Ireland, the first telephone exchange was opened in Dame Street, Dublin in 1880, four years after Alexander G. Bell got his patent for the telephone. For decades only the government, businesses and the very wealthy had telephones. Even by the mid-1900s, telephones were a very rare commodity in rural Ireland, only being installed in post offices, the priest’s house, doctor’s house and maybe the local pub. Back then it was expensive to get a phone installed and customers had to finance the erection of telegraph poles along the boreens to their homes. The first Irish telephone box, or kiosk as it was sometimes called, was installed on Dawson Street, Dublin in 1925 but phone boxes were not distributed to rural Ireland until decades later.

Identified by the colours green and cream and the words P&T and Telefón, they facilitated the communication of news of births and deaths and played a central role in the lives of those who had emigrated. People walked miles with bags of coins to the nearest phone box ... often to be met with a queue already formed.

Calls were made via an operator at a telephone exchange who would request the number, advise of the cost and then connect the two callers once the call was answered and coins were inserted. Interrupting the call, the operator would advise if additional coins were required or disconnect the caller abruptly if the money ran out.

Various designs of phones existed, some with a winding handle, others with “A” and “B” buttons, circular dial keys and later push buttons. A stuffy confined space, the phone box could facilitate two or even three people huddled together desperate to have a word with the person on the other end. Indeed, a trip to the phone box could be life-changing. One man recalls he went into the phone box but came out a father ... after having phoned the hospital to find out if his wife had come through labour and had a baby!. So whether you were Clark Kent or a person from rural Ireland, the phone box holds special memories....some good, some not so good!

During the 1980s and 1990s the telephone boxes were modernised as they still held an important role in everyday life and call cards were introduced to dispense with coins.

However, as mobile phone prices dropped drastically, from the initial £1,400 in 1985, and the network rolled out to more of Ireland, sales took off to such an extent that by the end of 1999, mobile phone ownership in Ireland had reached 40%.



Phone boxes being prepared for public use in Dublin prior to the 1932 Eucharistic Congress. (image from nlie.ie)

Less than 10 years later nearly all the telephone boxes were dismantled and destroyed. Ironically, and as a nod to times past, refurbished phone boxes are now being installed outside trendy pubs and bars to be used by persons on mobile phones.

Having ensconced itself in our lives to the extent that it is the last thing we see before sleep and the first upon waking, little wonder the mobile phone is now an extension of our personality. There is little doubt that the future of communications still lies in the six-inch gadget which is probably not too far from you at this very moment.



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DID YOU KNOW?
 On 11th December 1985, the Minister for Communications Jim Mitchell made the inaugural Irish mobile phone call to broadcaster Pat Kenny.



The cramped conditions of the exchange of Ballydehob post office in Co. Cork in early 1980s. (image from An Post Museum and Archive)