

First Payphone in Belgium, Circa 1913

by Jan Verhelst

Need for “public phones”

In the beginning of the 20th century, only a small minority in Belgium had a telephone in their home or business. If someone had to make a phone call, he could go to a telephone office during opening hours. This was usually located in the same building as the post office or the train station.

In such a public facility one could request a telephone call. Once the attendant had set up the connection, the customer was assigned to a telephone booth where he could make his call undisturbed. Afterwards he could pay at the counter.

The first public telephone booths in the street were introduced in Belgium in 1932 only.

Telephones with a “coin box”

Also before 1932 there was a need for publicly accessible telephones outside office hours, which is why telephones were placed in pubs, hotels and restaurants. In order to facilitate payment, a Belgian inventor had designed a “coin box”. This box was mechanically connected via a rod to the receiver hook of an “ordinary” telephone.

The coin box and his manufacturer

A company called “Contrôleur automatique du telephone” (Automatic Telephone Controller) was listed in a Brussels address book of 1912-1914.

A patent was requested in France by a Belgian inventor named Ernest Dejardin on 15 November 1912, and approved on 29 March 1913. It got the number FR 450.630 (see <https://worldwide.espacenet.com>) where a detailed description of the coin box is given.

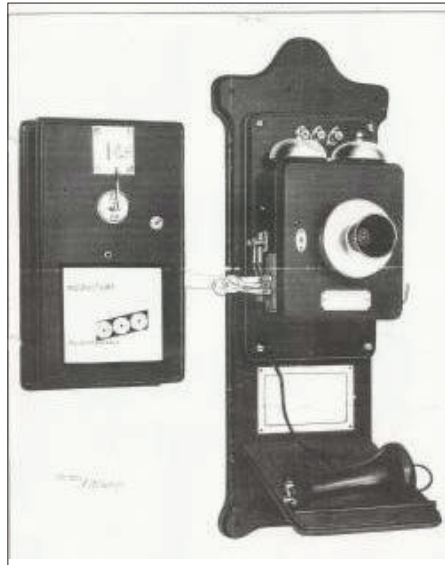


Fig. 1 - “Payphone” in 1913: coin box and regular phone

When the phone is not in use, the receiver hook of the phone is prevented from moving by a rod that is under control of the coin box. Only when a user inserts an appropriate coin or token into the coin box is the receiver released. It can now move upwards and communication with the operator at the exchange can begin. When the call is ended, the receiver hook is lowered and locked again.



Fig. 2 - BTMC 2551 phone

The telephone is a normal wall phone of the Belgian “Bell Telephone Manufacturing Company” (=BTMC) from Antwerp, a subsidiary of Western Electric, which was active since 1882.

It is a manually operated central battery phone, BTMC phone 2551, adapted by BTMC/Western Electric to the requirements of the Belgian government, mounted on a standard BTMC/ Western Electric 2001 backboard.

Social impact

In rural areas, such a “payphone” was installed in the local pub. If there was an incoming phonecall for a local inhabitant, the pub owner obtained a small fee to go in town to warn the inhabitant that there was a phone call for him.

Other coin boxes in the beginning of the 20th century

Most of the contemporary coin boxes at the beginning of the 20th century are systems requiring interaction with the operator. Coins may only be inserted when requested by the operator. Some examples: in Fig. 4 - 9.

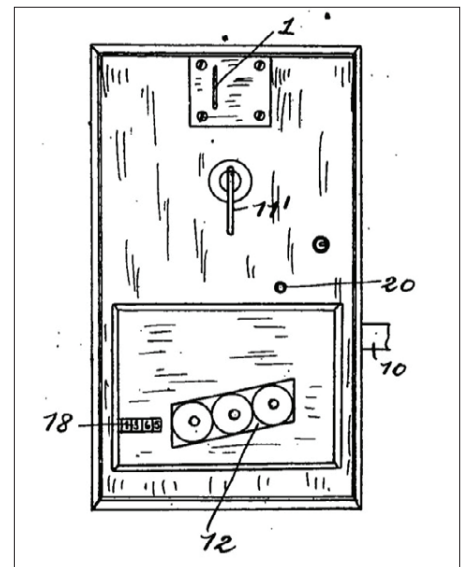


Fig. 3 - Front view of the coin box (Copied from the patent request)

After inserting a coin into coin slot 1 a user must turn knob 11' to allow the coin to start the internal mechanism and finally to appear in window 12. This window at the bottom shows the last three coins to prevent fraud. A mechanical counter 18 at the bottom left indicates how many calls have been requested so far, so that the administrator can check the phone company's bill.

To answer incoming calls, the administrator can place a key in hole 20, which unlocks the hook switch via rod 10 and allows the call to be answered. In the same way, the administrator can unblock the hook switch to make an outgoing call without having to insert a coin or token.

The administrator has a second key to retrieve the coins and tokens from the collection box at the bottom of the equipment.

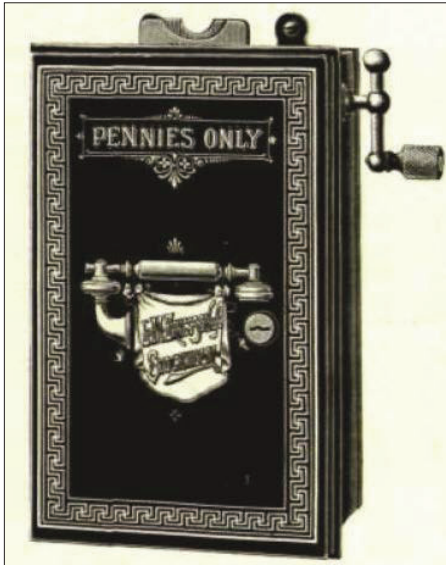


Fig. 4 - Ericsson's coin box (1902)
Ericsson offered a coin box in his 1902 catalogue, which was widely used, i.e. in the United Kingdom. After inserting the coin and turning the crank half a revolution, a "buzzer" was activated which generated an auditory signal that the operator could hear. The characteristics of the required coin could be adjusted per country.



Fig. 5 - Gray's coin box (1912)
Gray was the market leader in the USA at the beginning of the 20th century. In their catalogue of 1912, in addition to pay phones, they also displayed coin boxes. At the operator's request it was possible to insert coins. Each slot had its own sound, so that the operator could hear which coins were inserted. Gray was active in the US, but had also distributors worldwide. i.e. BTMC was their distributor in Belgium.



Fig. 6 - Western Electric's coin box 13-A (1908)
Contrary to the Gray solution, the Western Electric coin box only had one slot where three different coins could be inserted (nickel, dime or quarter). For each coin a gong was activated either one, two or three times.



Fig. 7 - Berliner (+/-1920)
Dutch PTT payphone (courtesy Jan Jansen, NL). The incoming coin activated a gong, which was acoustical forwarded to the operator via a small microphone.

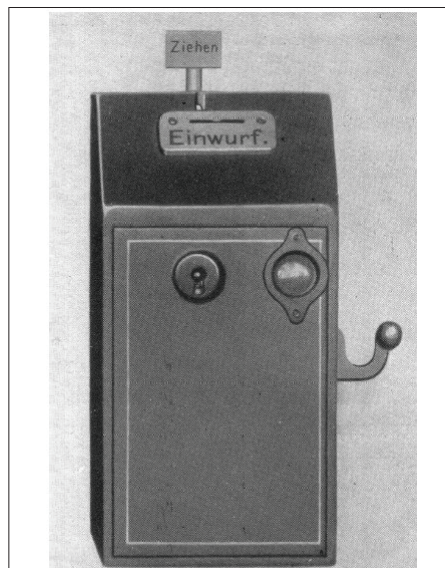


Fig. 8 - Zwietusch (1910)
This coin box from the German telephone company Zwietusch of Berlin (picture courtesy Dirk Bösterling, DE), has been used by the Reichstelegraphenverwaltung, the German PTT. Also with this device, the operator had an "acoustic link" with the coin box.

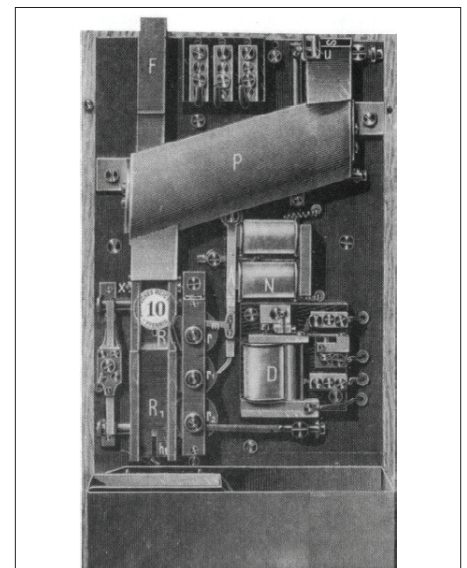


Fig. 9 - Mix und Genest (1889)
The German manufacturer "Mix & Genest" had already in 1889 a prototype of a payphone (picture courtesy Dirk Bösterling, DE), which is commercialized in 1891. Also here an acoustic link operator/coinbox was present.

Sources

- Catalogues of Ericsson (1902), Western Electric (1908) and Gray (1912)
- Archives of Dirk Bösterling (DE), Jan Jansen (NL),

- Pictures BMT/Western Electric phones 1895-1930, Telecommunication Heritage Foundation (NL)
- Patent FR 450.630 of 29 March 1913 via <https://worldwide.espacenet.com>

- Remco Enthoven (JKL Museum, California, USA)
Special thanks to Andy Emmerson for his assistance in obtaining the original patent and for making some language suggestions. ☎