

Conference of the European Communications Museums

25 - 27 November 2004

Museum of Communication Bern

One model for the care of corporate heritage: The BT Connected Earth partnership in practice since 2002

Connected Earth is a web based museum of the history of communication¹, underpinned by a series of major physical collections, distributed among a network of museums around the UK. It represents a £6 million investment by BT (British Telecommunications plc), to promote the widest possible access to its collections of historical artefacts, while ensuring proper standards of care for the collections.

Following the closure of the BT Museum in London in 1997, the object collections had been unavailable to the public for several years. The idea of creating a museum on the internet, supported by the distribution of the physical collections to a network of UK museums was first discussed in 2000 and launched in April 2002.

The vision was that Connected Earth would provide:

- UK wide access to a national, distributed collection for research and interpretation
- collections, exhibitions and curatorial posts endowed by BT, but managed in partnership with museum professionals

¹ www.connected-earth.com

- An engineering, social and economic history of the industry accessible to a wide audience.
- The preservation of key artefacts for future generations.

The network of partners

Connected Earth as an initiative to promote the awareness of the dispersed collections and related exhibitions is driven by the Connected Earth partners who represent museums, the funder and the deregulated industry's professional body. They are:

Museums

Amberley Working Museum, Avoncroft Museum of Historic Buildings, Milton Keynes Museum, Museum of London, Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester, National Museums of Scotland, Porthcurno Telegraph Museum, National Museum of Science and Industry (Science Museum).

These eight museums across the UK, representing the range from national, independent, local authority and volunteer run have taken custody of the majority of the Connected Earth collections. Most have also received funding towards an exhibition on the history of telecommunications, some of which are already established, others are due to open over the next four years (see Appendix 1).

Funder

BT Group Archives.

BT has chosen not to disperse its documentary heritage, which is available to researchers at the BT Group Archives in London.² The Archives retains a

² The BT Group Archives are at Holborn Telephone Exchange, 268-270 High Holborn, London WC1V 7EE www.btplc.com/archives/

collection of objects, mainly small models but also some telephones and related material. Responsibility for the Connected Earth project within BT lies with the Head of the Archives, whose title is Head of Corporate Memory.

The Visitor Centre at the BT run Goonhilly Satellite Earth Station.

Goonhilly is a working site with over 60 satellite dishes, including the vast 1100 ton dish, the first to receive live television signals via satellite from the USA in 1962. This antenna is shortly to be decommissioned, but as a Grade 2 listed structure its ongoing preservation will remain BT's responsibility. The Visitor Centre's Connected Earth Gallery also displays historical objects, currently retained in BT's ownership for this purpose despite the Connected Earth initiative to pass the responsibility for care of collections to museums.

Professional Body

The Communications Network

Originally The Institution of Post Office Engineers, established in 1906 to

'promote the general advancement of electrical and telegraphic science and its applications, and to facilitate the exchange of information and ideas on these subjects amongst the Members of the Institution'.

It was renamed The Institution of British Telecommunications Engineers in 1981 and was renamed again in May 2002 when, reflecting the changes in the industry, it took the decision to become an independent organisation providing information and educational services to anyone with an interest in the field of telecommunications. The members' role in Connected Earth takes the form of the involvement on a voluntary basis of ex-engineers who build,

operate and maintain many of the working equipment in the partner exhibitions.

The Communication Network is also responsible for a programme of oral history interviews, again carried out by trained volunteers. The interviewees range across the industry and also represent the public experience of various forms of telecommunications from the telegram to the mobile phone. The recordings are held by the BT Group Archives. Some are available on the Connected Earth website.

Posts

As well as the above network, the Connected Earth funding made provision for curatorial support by establishing three posts, one permanent and two on short term contracts.

The permanent BT Connected Earth Curator post at the National Museums of Scotland is funded through an endowment. This has meant a new position within the department of Science and Technology with responsibility for the care and development of the telegraphy and telephony collections. The curator also works with BT to co-ordinate the Connected Earth partnership and to develop projects with the partners to create greater awareness of and access to telecommunication collections and exhibitions. This post has recently made possible the development of a new Communications section within the department of Science and Technology, with responsibility for the TV, radio, audio, printing, telegraphy and telephony collections.

A three year Research Fellowship at the National Museum of Science and Industry (Science Museum), London, began at the end of 2003. The focus of this post is the development of a major international conference on Communications, Society & Change, to be held in November 2005 at the Science Museum in London, and a publication arising out of it.

In addition, there is a BT Connected Earth Curator based at the BT Archives since September 2003 on a one year rolling contract, involved in the ongoing administration arising out of the dispersal of material and the resulting transfer of title issues. Two colleagues within the Archive form the link between the partnership and BT and are responsible for the continuing public profile of the project as well as its visibility within the corporation. A consulting group of senior managers within and outwith BT help to provide focus and impetus to the project³. This group will invite senior management representatives from the partner museums on a rotating basis, to provide a museum perspective to a largely industry led advisory team. Neil Johannessen, previously the curator of the BT museum, became BT Historian in 2003, having overseen the closure of the museum and dispersal of its collections. He took redundancy from BT in July this year and now works as a consultant on corporate heritage.

Collections Dispersal

Since the project launch in 2002, around 4500 objects have been dispersed to over 60 different institutions around the UK and into Europe (see Appendix 2). Mostly these are museums, some already with specialist communications collections. Others have taken one or two items perhaps made by a local manufacturer or with local provenance of use. The first opportunity for acquiring objects through the dispersal went to the Connected Earth partner museums.

³ The Connected Earth Consulting Group appointed at the beginning of 2003 is currently made up of the following members:

Adrian Hosford	Director BT Group Social Policy
Meryl Bushell	Director Operations & Chief Procurement Officer for BT Group
David Hay	Head of BT Corporate Memory
John Newbiggin	Head of Corporate Relations, Channel 4
Steve Robertson	MD Operations, BT Wholesale
Larry Stone	Company Secretary, BT Group plc
Lucy Jones	BT Group Archivist (Secretary)

Alongside the highly significant historical material previously at the BT Museum, were quantities of material collected by engineers and stored in working exchanges. One of the largest of these collections was in Scotland and had formed the basis of an ex-engineer volunteer run museum which had preserved many of the exchanges used around the country, from early manual to prototype digital, which now form the core of the telephony collections at the National Museums of Scotland.

Much of the rest of this ex-working equipment and the vast amount of duplicate telephone handsets, tools and maintenance equipment has been allocated to museums with working exhibits, usually maintained by teams of retired volunteer engineers, or donated to preservation societies and other voluntary run organisations on the understanding the material will be used as spares for working exhibits. One of the strengths of the partnership is that such a disposal of useable material can take place, knowing that examples of all the technology is held within at least one of the permanent partner collections. After this extensive dispersal initiative, the final phase of the programme was an auction held in February 2003 where private individuals, collectors and enthusiasts were able to bid for around 1200 lots, ranging from early telegraph transmitters to Post Office vans.

Future developments

The main task ahead is to document all the dispersed material, in part as an audit for BT, but in the longer term for the creation of a database of the dispersed collections which will ultimately be publicly accessible via the Connected Earth website. This will fulfil BT's ultimate aim of increasing both physical and intellectual access to the material previously in their care thereby enhancing knowledge of, and interest in, the history of communications. The other more direct way of achieving these aims is through the partner museums' new or enhanced exhibitions, funded as part of the Connected Earth initiative and focussing on particular aspects of the subject relevant to their location or subject specialism (see Appendix 1). The phased opening of

these galleries from the first in 2002 and continuing over the next three years, will maintain the profile of the subject and the partnership.

In the shorter term, a major conference being organised by the Connected Earth Research Fellow and hosted by the Science Museum in November 2005, will put the subject of communications in a historical, social, political and technological perspective. The goals of the conference are to stimulate scholarly research in the history and developments of telecommunications. The aim is to explore the interactions over time between telecommunications and computing, electrical engineering, space technologies, government, culture and business practice.⁴ One strand of the conference will focus on the preservation of the material culture of telecommunications.

The long-term strength of the Connected Earth partnership will continue in its aim to work collectively in acquiring artefacts and presenting the subject of communications to as wide an audience as possible. The partners plan to develop a joint collecting policy, especially around contemporary collecting issues to ensure that current and future developments and their social impact are well represented, without the growth of parallel collections around the country, but still acknowledging that each has its own collecting priorities.

The foundation of Connected Earth by BT has not put an end to the company's obligations to preserve historical material, which it recognises by publishing a heritage policy in September 2004 as part of its corporate social responsibility programme (See Appendix 3). Such obligations now lie mostly in structures and buildings owned by the company and listed as historically significant by English Heritage or Historic Scotland, though also applies to the

⁴ Cross-Connexions: Communications, Society & Change International Conference
11th -13th November 2005, Science Museum, London, UK

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ethical disposal to museums of technologically significant equipment owned by the company but made redundant by new developments.

Collecting into the future

The inevitable ongoing acquisition of material by engineers in the field within an organisation that has spent substantial sums in dispersing its object collections is an issue still to be resolved by the Connected Earth partners with BT. It may be that the existence of a mechanism through the partnership that ensures that representative samples of such material is preserved in museums rather in corners of exchanges, will prevent a repeat of the build up of unofficial collections that has happened in the past. The partners are also addressing issues of contemporary collecting to represent current technological developments as well as collecting to recognise the deregulated nature of the telecommunications industry in the UK today.

The continued high profile and funding of Connected Earth within BT is dependent on senior managers' interest in the initiative. The long term commitment to the project therefore needs to lie with the partners and the institutions they represent. For this to happen the benefits to the institutions must be apparent and so far they have been. The move to partnership working and joint collecting policies is one supported by UK museums' own professional body, the Museums Association⁵, in their recent consultation document 'Collections for the Future', as is the core Connected Earth aim of greater public access, either through exhibition or academic debate. Those are now the areas The Connected Earth partners are focussing on and those are the areas that will take the project forward.

Alison Taubman BT Connected Earth Curator and Principal Curator,
Communications at the National Museums of Scotland

⁵ www.museumsassociation.org

APPENDIX 1

Museums which make up the Connected Earth partnership

Amberley Working Museum

- Gallery Open

www.amberleymuseum.co.uk

The new purpose-built building, is run entirely by volunteers from The Communications Network. The gallery presents the public experience of telecommunications down the ages with particular emphasis on its impact on everyday life.

Avoncroft Museum of Historic Buildings

- Exhibition Open

www.avoncroft.org.uk

Avoncroft Museum of Buildings is home to the National Telephone Kiosk Collection - with more than 25 working kiosks linked by an automatic exchange, all operated and maintained by volunteers. The newly refurbished and re-interpreted Connected Earth displays were paid for by BT and opened in April 2002.

Milton Keynes Museum

- Gallery Open 2005/6

www.mkmuseum.org.uk

Milton Keynes Museum has been home to 'The Telephone Museum' for several years. This small museum, housed in temporary buildings, and supported by The Telecoms Heritage Group (the UK's leading enthusiast body for telecommunications history), will hopefully be replaced by a new Connected Earth building, co-funded by BT and outside funders such as the Heritage Lottery Fund. The focus of the new displays will be engineering, switching, and transmission

Museum of London

- Gallery Open 2007

www.museumoflondon.org.uk

A number of key artefacts from BT have already taken their place in the new World City (C19th) Galleries, which opened in December 2001. Future permanent exhibitions at the Museum will focus on the pivotal role which

communications have played in Government, finance, and the growth of the capital as a world city during the 20th and into the 21st centuries.

The Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester

- Gallery Open 2005

www.msim.org.uk

Connected Earth will form the core of new communications galleries, which will be housed in the museum's historic 1830s Warehouse – the world's first commercial railway building. Telecommunications played a key role in the development of Manchester as a great industrial city, and this theme, along with the spread of telegraph in conjunction with railways, and the role of telecommunications in industry and commerce, will be explored in the new galleries due to open in Autumn 2005.

National Museums of Scotland

- Gallery Open

www.nms.ac.uk

The Communicate! Gallery in the Royal Museum, opened in October 2003. It focuses on Alexander Graham Bell, and other Scottish pioneers such as Alexander Bain, as well as innovation, enterprise, and the history of communications via telegraphy and telephony across Scotland and into the future. The BT telephony collections augmented a good early collection of telegraph material dating back to experimental material from 1816.

Porthcurno Telegraph Museum

www.porthcurno.org.uk

Connected earth artefacts have enhanced the unique collection of equipment – much of it working – held by the Porthcurno Telegraph Museum. Situated in underground tunnels, the Museum tells the technical and human story of international telegraph communications.

Science Museum

www.sciencemuseum.org.uk

No new gallery is intended at The Science Museum. The museum already possesses an excellent telecommunications collection, However the transfer of 100 or more significant artefacts from the BT Collections have expanded the Science Museum's collections in key areas, to tell the story of communications within the context of science and technology.

APPENDIX 2

Organisations with Connected Earth collections

Bath Postal Museum
Bletchley Park Trust
Bluebell Railway Plc
Colonsay and Oronsay Heritage Trust
Dean Forest Railway Museum Trust
East Lothian Museums Service
Emsay & Bolton Abbey Steam Railway
English Heritage-Dover Castle
Falkirk Museum Service
Friends of Drakelow Tunnels
Gainsborough & District Heritage Centre
Geffrye Museum
Gloucester Folk Museum/ Gloucester City & Art Gallery
Great Western Society
Harris Museum & Art Gallery
Harrogate Museums & Arts
Heritage Services, Royal Mail
Hertford Museum
Hull City Museums & Art Gallery
Hunterian Museum
Immingham Museum
Imperial War Museum
Ipswich Borough Council Museums & Galleries
Lincolnshire Wolds Railway Museum
London Transport Museum
Milne Electrical Museum
Museum of Electrical Technology
Museum of Communication Trust, Fife
Museum voor Communicatie
National Army Museum
National Maritime Museum
National Museum of Photography, Film & Television
National Railway Museum
RAF Signals Museum
Reading Museum Service
Ripon Museum Trust
Routemaster Heritage Centre
Rugby Art Gallery & Museum
Saddleworth Museum
Salford Museum & Art Gallery
Scottish Football Museum
St Albans Museum Service
Stockport Heritage Services
Swanage Railway Trust
The Telephonological Trust-Stonebow
Timespan Heritage Centre

University College London
Victoria & Albert Museum
Waltham Museum of Rural Life
Whaley Thorns Heritage Centre
Wireless Preservation Society
Woodborough Local History Group

APPENDIX 3

BT's Heritage Strategy

The history of communications over the last 200 years impacts on every part of our daily lives. The United Kingdom, and BT and its predecessors, have played a leading role in the development of communications technology and its influence on society.

BT is the world's oldest communications company, with a direct line of descent from the first commercial telecommunications undertaking in Europe. The history of BT is in many respects the history of telecommunications in the UK and internationally.

As guardian of the UK's telecommunications legacy, BT has publicly acknowledged a duty of care to ensure the long-term preservation of this nationally significant heritage, and to open up access to the largest possible audience.

We believe that responsible management of BT's heritage is a vital part of our Corporate Social Responsibility Policy, to encourage our customers to buy from us, investors to put their trust in us and the best people to work for us.

Fulfilling our obligations to our heritage is a critical part of being a genuinely socially responsible company

Our strategic approach

Our strategy covers all BT related historical material of any kind, including

- our three-dimensional artefacts and objects.
- our historical archives, records and information

BT's approach to managing its heritage has the following key features;

external custody of physical telecommunications artefacts by partner museums nationwide, including the BT Goonhilly Visitor Centre, through the Connected Earth Initiative

a full in depth story and reference on-line with the [Connected Earth](#) website, BT's world-class museum on the internet

custody of historical documentation and information within BT Archives, in compliance with our statutory responsibilities for our pre-privatisation records and our agreement with the National Archives

Our policy commitments

we will ensure that all our historical collections, not just our archives (most of which have statutory protection), are properly managed and safeguarded for the nation.

we will improve access to a hitherto hidden treasure to the largest possible audience using our expertise and technology, primarily through [Connected Earth](#), but also through other appropriate channels.

we will ensure the physical preservation and display of the most important of the physical artefacts in collections, exhibitions and galleries, sited within a network of leading UK museums.

we will develop and encourage our partners to work as a collaborative alliance in managing the distributed BT artefacts collection as an holistic entity, with Connected Earth as its hub and BT's archives as a resource.

we will seek opportunities with others in the heritage, educational and cultural domains to promote our heritage, the Connected Earth concept, and the profile and scholarship of communications - one of mankind's unique achievements - as topics worthy of exploration, study and research.

we will endeavour to keep the story up to date in preserving the heritage of BT's current and emerging technologies, products and services.

we will ensure that relevant professional standards and best practice apply to all areas of this activity.

we will manage these commitments in a cost effective manner so as to enhance BT's reputation, in the interests of shareholders

