



# Australia's First Automatic Telephone ?

By Chris. Cartledge

## About the author:

Chris. Cartledge was part of the P.M.G.'s 1959 technician-in-training intake, initially studying at Alexandria Training School. He was made redundant in June 1999 after 41 years, during which time he was based in Wollongong working at both local and national levels.

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Figure 1 - Telephone 137AWH

In 1963, I was a fifth-year technician-in-training taking my turn on a six-month roster as one of two area technicians in the Wollongong Exchange District. I was sent to investigate a fault report at a North Wollongong residence, it turned out the 1930s bungalow was being renovated and to my surprise the telephone that was reported faulty was a 137AWH (*an auto wall handset with timber case, Bakelite mouthpiece with inset transmitter and Bell receiver*). It was covered in paint and in a poor state.

The subscriber had heard about the PMG's new Colorfones (800 series) that had been launched the year before and was very keen to match her new decor with a white telephone. Before the 800 series telephones became available, you could have any colour you liked as long as it was Bakelite black (although I did see a white 300 series telephone handset once – imported from England I believe).



Figure 2 - Colorfone 800 Series

As it happened, I had a stock of 801s in the various colours in the van and was able to satisfy the customer's wish with an ivory table handset. She was not interested in "that antique phone on the wall" and was more than happy for me to take it away there and then so the painter on site could patch the wall. Now, I know it should have gone to the *Sifting Room at the Sydenham Workshops* together with a *Form S7*, but I know what would have happened to it there. By the way, as a 3RD year trainee, I worked on the sub-station equipment transformation from magneto to auto in the Stanwell Park district (*Helensburgh exchange*) where we took ute loads of superseded magneto handsets direct to the local tip – *the Sifting Room were not interested in this quantity of 'junk'*.

Before I continue, 1963 was a notable year in several other ways. My first born arrived in that year (*he's now 58 and retired!*), in fact, he was born on the 11TH of November, Armistice Day. The 11TH of November was also the day *Labor PM Gough Whitlam* was sacked (1975) and the day they hung *Ned Kelly in Old Melbourne Goal* (1880).

At the *Alexandria Training School (1959)* we were told the **37AWH** was Australia's first automatic telephone. The 37AWH had a solid back carbon transmitter, whereas the **137AWH** had a Bakelite mouthpiece with an inset transmitter. A major first year exercise was rewiring one of these wall sets, first creating a wiring loom using a template which consisted of a plywood board with nails and holes strategically placed to reflect the location of the various components within the telephone case. In those days, the wire we used was colour-coded silk and cotton covered enamelled copper.

This small box wall phone was based on a *British Post Office pattern, their Telephone No. 121*. They were supplied by a number of overseas manufacturers including *Peel Conner, British General Electric and British Ericsson*. A variety of local manufacturers also produced parts for the PMG (Sydney) Workshops assembled instruments. *Much of the timber used for the cases is of local Australian variety and is the reason for the wide range and variations in colour and grain found in these telephones*. In a final modification a handset was added on a modified switchhook and the model re-designated the **Telephone No. 237AWH**. (1)

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## Australia's First Automatic Telephone ? (cont'd)

But was the **37AWH** Australia's first automatic telephone in public use?"

Australia's first automatic exchange was installed in the GPO in Sydney, in 1911, for internal use. But the first automatic exchange for public use was opened at Geelong in Victoria in the next year - in July 1912. *The Geelong exchange was the first automatic exchange in the Southern Hemisphere and the second in the then British Empire – it was preceded only by the Epsom Exchange in England.*" (2)

"Melbourne's first auto-matic exchange was opened in the suburb of Brighton in 1914; the first public auto-matic (sic) exchange in NSW began operating at Newtown, Sydney in 1915; and Queensland's first was installed at South Brisbane in 1925. 1929 saw the opening of Tasmania's first automatic exchange in Hobart." (2)

*"The PMG Type 35 Automatic Electric*, this instrument was known locally as the 'Geelong' telephone because many were imported to work in association with Australia's first automatic Strowger exchange in Geelong, Victoria in 1912. Built of timber which is always painted black and generally have cheap construction, the sets were fully imported from the United states over a long period". (3)

In appearance these imported wall sets were very similar to the **37AWH** and its other derivatives the **137AWH** and **237AWH** except the 'Australian' phones had polished timber boxes and in many cases were made of local native timbers.

I've been unable to unearth which phones were used for Australia's first automatic exchange at the Sydney GPO (1911) however, in a way that is academic as it was not a public telephone exchange.

So, it would appear the first automatic telephone in use by subscribers in Australia was the so called 'Geelong' telephone, the PMG Type 35 Auto Electric wall phone. There were 800 subscribers in Geelong so it can be assumed around that many Type 35 wall handsets were in use at the time.

The 37AWH takes its place as the first Australian assembled/manufactured automatic telephone to be in public use in Australia.

--ooOoo--

**What happened to the faulty 137AWH recovered in 1963? I made a template for the loom and rewired the unit using plastic colour-coded wiring. Fortunately, all the component parts were still workable. The paint splattered cedar case was stripped and French polished for a second time and the bell gongs, switchhook and transmitter case brackets re-chromed. It still works well today, although the chrome fittings are once again tarnished after almost 60 years on the wall since its last refurbishment (See Fig 1)**

### References:

1. *Australian Post Office - Telephone No. 37AWH* <https://www.britishtelephones.com/aus/37.htm>
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3. *'History of the Telephone in New South Wales' by Jim Bateman, an ATCS Inc Reprint. This book is available from the Australasian Telephone Collectors Society Inc at <https://telephonecollecting.org/>*
4. *Bob's Old Phones* <http://www.telephonecollecting.org/Bobs%20phones/index.htm>
5. *Old Australian Telephones* <https://oldaustraliantelephones.weebly.com/>