TALES FROM THE HILLS
(Ashmansworth and Crux Easton)

One rainy night in the late 1960s, Crux Easton Telephone Exchange held an open event. Two engineers turned up from the GPO and showed us round the small brick building which stands just opposite the Three Legged Cross. The engineers were only there for an hour or so, and no-one else came.

While all the other small exchanges were closing, Crux Easton carried on. It became, for a time, one of the most exclusive exchanges in the country. It had a maximum capacity of only 99 lines and it served only Crux Easton and Ashmansworth.

You could dial direct from one 'Crux Easton' number to another but, for anywhere else, you had to go through the operator in Newbury. There you spoke to a real human being: you could say, 'Operator, get me the police!' just as they did in the old movie thrillers because, with only a two-digit capacity, the tiny exchange couldn't cope with 999.

Once we were inside, we found the building packed with glass accumulators and clicking Strowger switchgear. Or rather, the switchgear would have clicked, but actually no villager made a call while we were in there, so the engineers had to generate a few bogus calls of their own to set the mechanisms clicking for us.

The imposing racks of glass accumulators, with their china terminals and bubbling electrolyte, were like Frankenstein's lab; but, despite their dramatic appearance, they were only there as back-up, to keep things going whenever the mains electricity failed. We never had those hand-cranked phones you see in the old cowboy films, which generated their own electricity. More's the pity!

The exchange was closed in 1971. The name Crux Easton was scrapped, and we were called Highclere and given the extra numbers 2530 in front of our old two-digit numbers. Anyone in the two parishes who has a zero in the fourth position of their six-digit telephone number has one of the old Crux Easton numbers: the exclusive club of 99.

The old machinery went to the Science Museum, the two phone boxes were put to other use, and the building was sold off.

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