

Exhibition dialling up the past

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At the opening of the Heritage Telstra Centenary Exhibition at Black Mountain tower yesterday, Brian Mullins, from the Telstra Museum in Bankstown, looks at a phone that was used by former prime minister Billy Hughes. *Photo: Colleen Petch*

Telecommunications technology evolves so quickly that some of the venerable artifacts in the Heritage Telstra Centenary Exhibition that opened yesterday look old enough to have been used by King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table.

In fact, though, nothing in the display at Black Mountain Tower is quite that old. What looks as if they might have been the telephones of Sir Lancelot and Sir Galahad at Camelot turn out to be, instead, the big, black telephones used by prime minister Robert Menzies in his Parliament House office and by retired former prime minister Billy Hughes in his home at Lindfield in Sydney.

What looks as if it might have been the heavy, telephone contraption lifted by servants into the horse-drawn carriages of the rich in Jane Austen's novels is, instead, the first Australian car phone, installed in the cars of rich Australians (a maximum of 100) in the 1950s.

Brian Mullins OAM ("For services to the community for preserving telecommunications history" he explained, proudly), manager of the Telstra Museum in Sydney and an installer of the Black Mountain show, gave us his informed explanation of the Menzies' and Hughes' treasures in the display.

Menzies' telephone turns out to be a "scrambler telephone". If you look at it closely the big black telephone has two little silver buttons, one labelled "normal" and the other "secret". When Menzies wanted a secret conversation with someone he could press the "secret" button and it would mean that any eavesdroppers (communist spies, perhaps?) would not be able to hear the conversation but only a conversation-masking hissing noise.

Billy Hughes' circa 1933 telephone, retrieved from his home when that telephone was replaced by a more modern apparatus, comes with an amplifier, made by Research Laboratories of Melbourne, contained in a lovely box of honey-coloured wood. Hughes was rather deaf, Mullins explained, and needed the amplifier connected to his telephone.

"He'd complain, 'I can't hear a thing on this blasted phone', " Mullins said with a laugh. "So a technician would come out to Lindfield and open up the box and put his hand in and fiddle around and say, 'She's all right now, mate!' and off he'd go, leaving Billy happy."

The exhibition, a Telstra contribution to this city's centenary shenanigans, is open every day from 9am to 10pm.



The very first 'mobile' telephone service. *Photo: Colleen Petch*