

## PLUGGING INTO THE UNIVERSITY SWITCHBOARD

*"What I say to the girls: Never say you are only a switchboard operator. You're not. You are someone's first point of contact for the best university in the world."*

— Rita Townsend

RITA TOWNSEND was just 16 when she first began working in telephony, as an operator for the Cambridge city telephone exchange. "We had those plugs," she says, and nimbly demonstrates pulling and plugging the imaginary wires.

The days of rows of operators seated in front of panels of plugs are long gone, but Rita is still a part of a friendly team within the University's Telecommunications Office ensuring that callers reach their intended parties.

She came to work for the University in 1986, when there were nine telephone switchboard operators. Now there are three, and Rita is their supervisor.

"They all do a sterling job," says Rita. "My title now is Customer Services Manager. My job has changed to technical advice for the way phones are set up across the University." As Cambridge switches to a new phone system (see story, page 4), Rita will be involved in helping departments adjust to the new technology.

The three operators – Miriam Wenham, Pam Horsfield and Linda Evans – sit at desks in an Arup East Tower office on the New Museums

Site. The phones they use have a lot more buttons than a normal phone, and each woman wears a slender headset, but there are no other obvious clues that this room functions as a switchboard room. Rita sits upstairs in a separate office.

"Ten years ago, there might be 1,000 calls a day," she says. "Today, it's more like 200. With computers, people can find their own information. Emailing is taking a lot of our work. Not many people pick up the phone anymore, do they?"

But those that do can be assured the switchboard operators will do their utmost to help. Officially, their role is to connect their callers through to their requested destination. Want to speak to someone in Law? They'll connect you through to Law.

Unofficially, they are a font of practical information. Honed by years of receiving requests, the operators have compiled information pages on their computers that they can quickly access to tell a caller the number for everything from the flower shop at Addenbrooke's to a doctor's practice in Chesterton. They can also tell you which bus to catch to visit Churchill College or how much time you'll need after your train arrives to get to your meeting on the Downing Site.

They have a particular softness for requests from students. "We're all parents, we're all mothers, and we have all those young students



Rita Townsend has accumulated a wealth of knowledge about Cambridge through her work with the University's Switchboard.

running around here who need to know things," Rita says. "You can't just turn your back on them!"

Combined, the team has more than 40 years of experience handling University enquiries. On the occasion a difficult or vague request comes in, they savour the challenge. "There's not much we don't know," Rita says. "But we do like a good root."

→ To reach the University Switchboard, call 37733

## GOOD DEED FOR THE NEW YEAR

Make a new start in the New Year and clean up your workplace.

The Community Giveaway Board, a free web-based service recently launched by the University's Community Affairs team, can help you find a charity home for your redundant goods.

Filing cabinets, chairs, tables, computers and bookshelves are just a

few examples of items that can be put to good use in under-resourced community organisations, charities and schools. University departments who donate can feel good about extending the life-span of items and not-for-profit groups benefit by gaining valuable resources.

The site works as a virtual bulletin board. Offices and departments can



post details of items they would like to give away and not-for-profit organisations can post requests. Interested groups then simply contact the person who posted the item by clicking on their name or posting a response on the board.

→ Visit [www.giveaway.group.cam.ac.uk](http://www.giveaway.group.cam.ac.uk)