

A marvellous Belgian telephone from around 1890!

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A while ago, I received a postcard with a beautiful telephone (Fig 1). It came from the former Museum of Telephony & Telegraphy, courtesy of THG member, Fons Vanden Berghen.

According to information on the back of the postcard, this telephone

belonged to Minister Jules Van den Peerenboom, 1843-1917, who was Minister of Railways, Post and Telegraphy from 1884 to 1899. Later on he became prime minister of Belgium for a few months. A street in Brussels is named after him.

The Minister was also an art collector. His collection is currently, in 2021, in possession of the Royal Museum of Art and History. Telephony was also his responsibility, but this was not part of the official name of the Ministry in those days.



Fig 1: Postcard with telephone



Fig 3: Telephone in the museum



Fig 4: Destinations socket with engraved names



Fig 5: Manufacturer's nameplate on telephone
[Stefan Biesemans/ Jan Verhelst]



Jules Van den Peerenboom

The telephone we are looking at here is a typical telephone from around 1890. As the quality of the telephone lines was limited at that time, two “ear pieces” were provided to increase the intelligibility of the conversations.

- The microphone was presumably a carbon transmitter and was mounted behind the wooden rectangular panel on the front.
- It is a typical “hierarchical” telephone for a “boss”, in this case the minister, to call his assistants. His assistants could call the minister only, and not each other.
- On the front there is an oval plate with the name of the manufacturer, but unfortunately, it is unreadable on the postcard.

By coincidence, we came in touch with the “heirs” of the former telecommunications museum, being the Royal Museum of Art and History (RMAH) in Brussels and we were allowed to view this phone “in real life” (Fig 3).

The recipients could be chosen by inserting a plug in the appropriate socket and turning the crank.

The name of the recipient, which in this case was a department of the Ministry was engraved around the socket (Fig 4). “Direction Marine” and “Direction Exploitation” were two departments of the ministry.

The company “Compagnie de Télégraphie et de Téléphonie Internationales”, located at “Rue des Sables” number 22 (Sand street 22) has already in 1890 a phone with number 432. Fig 5 shows the nameplate of the telephone in the museum. A search in old Brussels address books (the so-called “almanacs”) showed that the “Compagnie de Télégraphie et de Téléphonie Internationales” was founded around 1890 by Charles Mourlon.

Charles Mourlon, 1851-1932, (below) was an important person in



Fig 6: Almanac entry



Fig 8: Mourlon et Cie advert 1882



Fig 9: Long-distance telephony demo at the 1885 Antwerp World's Fair

the Belgian electro-technical industry from about 1880 to 1930. Already in the early 1880s, he was active as an electro- technical manufacturer. In the Brussels address book of 1882, we

find the following advertisement about the company he was running at that point in time “Mourlon & Co”.

In addition to telephony and telegraphy products, he also manufac-

tured Leclanché batteries with a licence and other things such as electric bulbs.

In the mid-1880s, he commercialised François Van Rysselberghe's invention, which combined long-distance telephone connections with long-distance telegraphic connections over the same wires by using filters.

This was demonstrated at the 1885 Antwerp World Fair, where 35 listeners could simultaneously hear a concert performed in a concert hall in Brussels, sent over telephone lines to Antwerp (Figure 9). This was 1885 streaming technology! See article “François Van Rysselberghe- long distance telephone pioneer” in THG Journal 107, Summer 2019.

Charles Mourlon, who was called an “ingénieur-électricien”, was not only a good businessman, but he was also technically skilled. He wrote several books about electricity, including a book called “les téléphones usuels”(the usual telephones)



Charles Mourlon

written in 1887. He described all the telephones he knew at that time and how they worked.

In short, he was someone who strongly supported and promoted the emerging Belgian electro-technical industry at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century.

I shouldn't be surprised that this telephone should have been a gift from the business man Mourlon to the minister, but that's just a guess...

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