



# Mobile phones

by Craig Duncan

When Scotsman Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone in 1876, it was a revolution in communication. For the first time, people could talk to each other over great distances almost as clearly as if they were in the same room. Nowadays, though, we increasingly use Bell's invention for taking photographs, access in Internet, or watching video clips rather than talking. Over the last two decades a new means of spoken communication has emerged: the mobile phone.

The modern mobile phone is a more complex version of the two-way radio. Traditional two-way radio was a very limited means of communication. As soon as the users moved out of range of each other's broadcast area, the signal was lost. In the 1940s, researchers began experimenting with the idea of using a number of radio masts located around the countryside to pick up signals from two-way radios. A caller would always be within range of one of the masts; when he moved too far away from one mast, the next mast would pick up the signal. (Scientists referred to each mast's reception area as being a separate "cell"; this is why in many countries mobile phones are called "cell phones".)

However, 1940s technology was still quite primitive, and the "telephones" were enormous boxes which had to be transported by car.

The first real mobile telephone call was made in 1973 by Dr Martin Cooper, the scientist who invented the modern mobile handset. As soon as his invention was complete, he tested it by calling a rival scientist to announce his success. Within a decade, mobile phones became available to the public. The streets of modern cities began to feature sharp-suited characters shouting into giant plastic bricks. In Britain the mobile phone quickly became synonymous with the "yuppie", the new breed of young urban professionals who carried the expensive handsets as status symbols. Around this time many of us swore that we would never, ever own a mobile phone.

But in the mid-90s, something happened. Cheaper handsets and cheaper calling rates meant that, almost overnight, it seemed that everyone had a mobile phone. And the giant plastic bricks of the 80s had evolved into smooth little objects that fitted nicely into pockets and bags. In every pub and restaurant you could hear the bleep and buzz of mobiles ringing and registering messages, occasionally breaking out into primitive versions of the latest pop songs. Cities suddenly had a new, postmodern birdsong.

Moreover, people's timekeeping changed. Younger readers will be amazed to know that, not long ago, people made spoken arrangements to meet at a certain place at a certain time. Once a time and place had been agreed, people met as agreed. Somewhere around the new millennium, this practice started to die out. Meeting times became approximate, subject to change at any moment under the new order of communication: the Short Message Service (SMS) or text message. Going to be late? Send a text message! It takes much less effort than arriving on time, and it's much less awkward than explaining your lateness face-to-face. It's the perfect communication method for the busy modern lifestyle.



Like email before it, the text message has altered the way we write in English, bringing more abbreviations and a more lax approach to language construction. The 160-character limit on text messages has led to a new, abbreviated version of English for fast and instantaneous communication.

Traditional rules of grammar and spelling are much less important when you're sitting on the bus, hurriedly typing "Will B 15min late ~ C U @ the bar. Sorry! :-)".

Mobile phones, once the preserve of the high-powered businessperson and the "yuppie", are now a vital part of daily life for an enormous amount of people. From schoolchildren to pensioners, every section of society has found that it's easier to stay in touch when you've got a mobile. Over the last few years mobiles have become more and more advanced, firstly we saw the introduction built-in cameras, global positioning devices and internet access. More recently we have witnessed the arrival of the "third generation" of mobile phones: powerful micro-computers with broadband internet access, which will allow us to watch TV, download internet files at high speed and send instant video clips to friends.

Alexander Graham Bell would be amazed if he could see how far the science of telephony has progressed in less than 150 years. If he were around today, he might say: "That's gr8! But I'm v busy rite now. Will call U 2nite."

The end

