

The Bell Kettle Phone

By Jack Ryan

Introduction

The so-called “Kettle Phone” comes up on eBay quite often in a variety of colours and finishes. This article looks at the real identity of this telephone, who made it and where it was used.

There were two large telephone manufacturers in Belgium during the currency of the Kettle Phone (1937 to 1966); ATEA (part of the Automatic Electric group) and BTMC (part of the ITT group). Both made telephones for the Belgian state owned telephone company, the Régie de Télégraph & Téléphones (RTT). The RTT supplied and maintained four standard subscriber telephones; a desk and a wall telephone made by ATEA and a different desk and wall telephone made by BTMC.



Typical Kettle Phone complete with Bell Transfers



ATEA Model 50 Desk Telephone



ATEA Model 50 Wall Telephone



BTMC Table Telephone



BTMC Wall Telephone

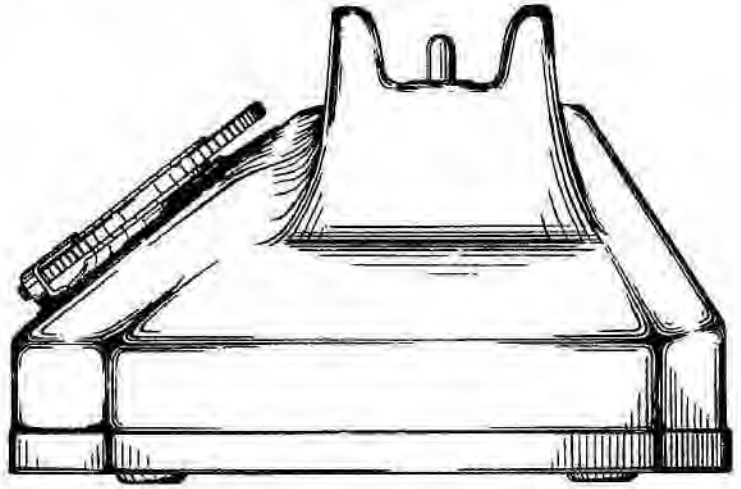
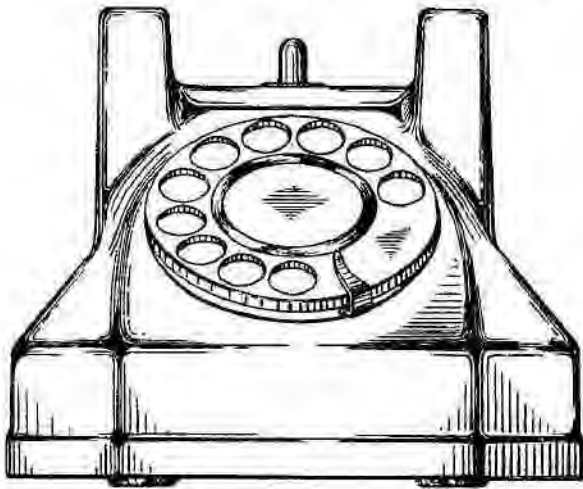
Feb. 16, 1932.

H. F. OBERGFELL

Des. 86,263

TELEPHONE DESK STAND

Filed May 18, 1931



US Design Patent 86263 for the AE 34

Origin of the ATEA Telephone

In 1955, probably at the request of the RTT so that it could reduce its cost and inventory, ATEA and BTMC formed a joint venture to design a single standard desk telephone. The design of the new desk telephone was based upon the existing ATEA telephone. The wall telephones remained as the individual products of ATEA and BTMC.

The ATEA Desk Phone began life in about 1937. At that time, ATEA was part of the same group as the Automatic Electric Company (AE). In 1934, AE released the Type 34 Monophone which may have formed the basis for the subsequent release of ATEA's similar telephone, the ATEAPHONE Type 50.

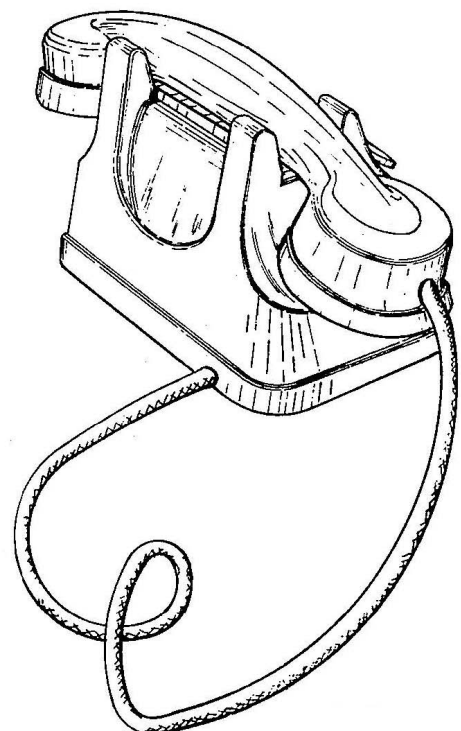
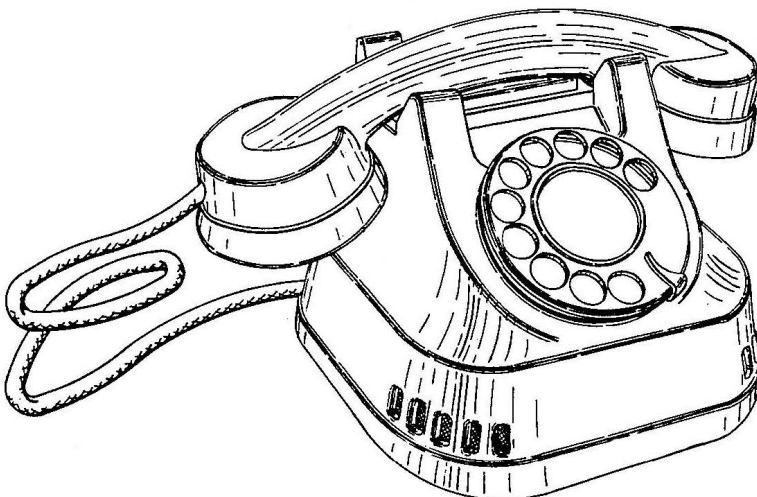
Oct. 12, 1937.

R. F. STEHLIK

Des. 106,457

COMBINED TELEPHONE DESK STAND AND HANDSET

Filed March 11, 1937



US Design Patent 106457 for the ATEA Type 50



Automatic Electric Type 34 Monophone

The AE 34 consisted of a Bakelite body and handset and the ATEA Type 50 consisted of a Bakelite or zinc alloy (Zamak) body and a Bakelite handset. In addition, the ATEA Type 50 was made with a large black button on the front for use in PAX and PABX networks and without a button for use on the RTT network.

World War II

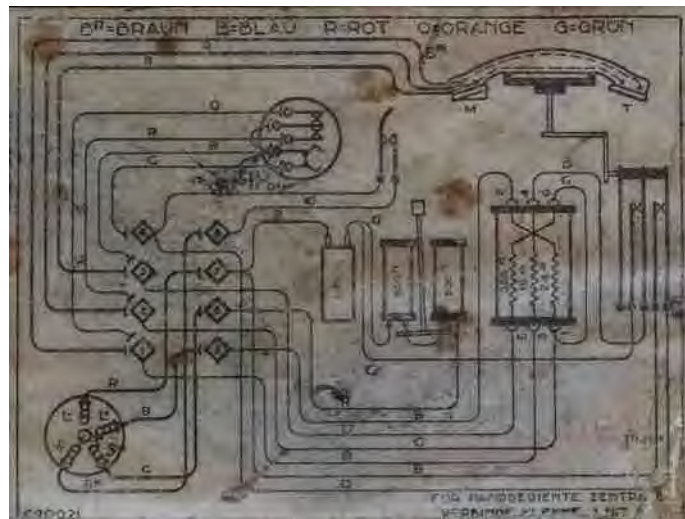
During the Second World War Belgium was occupied and ATEA came under the control of Siemens & Halske, a German manufacturer. During that time, ATEA continued to produce an identical Type 50 but the identification was changed to that of a German telephone.



Baseplate of the German Type 50 with Siemens & Halske Identification

The code “Fg. Sk. P. 54 S 258 9/Y” describes the telephone in the usual Siemens & Halske manner. Fg. Sk. means Fernsprechgerät Sammelkarte (tele-

phone apparatus description card) and is the code describing the telephone properties including the date of manufacture. These codes were not used on telephones used by the Reichspost (the German post office) leading one to conclude that they were used on PAX and PABX systems and perhaps in the German occupied territories.



Circuit from the base of the German Type 50

The circuit diagram from the German Type 50 contains German text rather than the bi-lingual (Dutch and French) of the ATEA telephone.

The 1956 “poste nationale”

In 1955, ATEA and BTMC formed a joint venture to design a single standard desk telephone.



Image from an RTT 56 flier

The translated text from an RTT 56 flier describes the new telephone:

The NATIONAL UNIT is the result of collaboration between the specialized Belgian industry and the Director of telegraph and telephone, to provide an apparatus of small size to subscribers, with all of the requirements of a modern telephone: elegance,

efficiency and good sound transmission.

The housing of the device and the handset cradle are manufactured entirely from pressure-injected metal resulting in a very neat and wear resistant finish.

The new desk telephone, the 1956 “poste nationale” was based upon the ATEA Type 50 desk telephone. There were some changes from the original ATEA telephone including:

- the ATEA handset was substituted by what was perceived to be an ergonomically and technical-

ly superior handset based upon the US Western Electric ‘F’ handset.

- a metal handle was added to make the phone more portable
- an RTT logo (originally a Lion) was added on the front in place of any manufacturer’s logos

This telephone, which was known by the RTT and its suppliers as the “RTT 56”, was subsequently manufactured and supplied by both ATEA and BTMC.



The ATEA Type 50. Notice the large black button on the front and the ATEA handset.



The ATEA version of the RTT 56 complete with the older RTT logo, the lion. Notice the small white button and the new handset.



The RTT 56 was only available in black and ivory. Notice the different finger stop locations; the ATEA dial (left) has the finger stop away from the ‘zero’ finger hole and the BTMC dial (right) has it next to the ‘zero’ hole.

This article draws from the work of Jan Verhelst. Jan is an ex-ATEA employee, historian and member of the “Friends of the ATEA Museum”. He has written extensively on the history of telephony in Belgium including a more detailed article on the RTT 56 (to which I have referred) that can be found on the museum WEB site.

http://www.kulentuur.be/ateamuseum/vrienden_atea_museum/publicaties/atea_thg_atea_phone.pdf

So far as the subscriber was concerned, there was no difference between the ATEA and the BTMC version of the RTT 56 but there were some differences. For example, the RTT 56 A used an ATEA dial that was based upon the Automatic Electric Type 24 dial and the RTT 56 B used a BTMC dial from their 7000 series.

The manufacturer can be identified from the code printed on the bottom of the telephone.



The base of an ATEA RTT 56 is marked RTT-56 A



The base of a BTMC RTT 56 is marked RTT-56 B

Note that in addition to supplying the RTT with the U56, ATEA continued to manufacture its original Type 50 desk telephone for use on private networks.

The End of Production

The RTT 56 served the RTT for a decade but eventually it was replaced by the new, colourful, U66 plastic telephone in 1966. As the old telephones were withdrawn from service they were sold in large lots to foreign buyers – this prevented them from being purchased and illegally installed on the RTT network.

The Kettle Phone

So, where did the Kettle Phone come from? Those thousands of RTT 56s that were sold to international buyers were refurbished and refinished to be sold to the telephone collectors all over the world. The result is that the vast majority of RTT 56s that are sold today are far from original.

The Original Telephones

The table at the top of the next page lists the original telephones. Notice that they are either black or ivory, none have Bell transfers and none have bell handsets.

Because the RTT 56 was used by the RTT for a decade, individual telephones would have been refurbished by the RTT and re-issued. In this process, parts such as dials were swapped and it is likely that older Bell or ATEA handsets may have been used. So, after a decade of use by the RTT many of the RTT 56s were no longer pure, but that pales in comparison to what has happened in the collector community in the subsequent five decades.

Kettle Phones

Here are some examples of the refurbished and non-original telephones that are available today. These are what the author would call “Kettle Phones”.



This appears to be an ATEA RTT 56 but the original finish has been removed leaving bare metal.

Conclusion

The conclusion is simple; there are many pretty phones out there, just make sure you know what you are buying. Remember - caveat emptor.

Years (approx.)	Model	Handset	Handle	Button	Colours	Manufacturer
1937 - 1942	Model 50	ATEA	No	None or Large	Black & Ivory	ATEA
1942 - 1944	S&H	ATEA	No	None? or Large	Black	ATEA
1945 - 1966	Model 50	ATEA	No	None or Large	Black & Ivory	ATEA
1956 - 1966	RTT 56	RTT F	Yes	Small White	Black & Ivory	ATEA & BTMC

The above table lists the authentic versions of the ATEA and RTT telephones



Perhaps a BTMC RTT 56 painted green - not an original colour.



This one refinished in red and fitted with the wrong handset and a British No 21 dial.



This RTT 56 has been stripped of its original finish and then chrome plated.



This one refinished in yellow and fitted with a British reproduction Whitehall number card.



These transfers were never used by BTMC or the RTT. They were placed on refurbished BELL and ATEA telephones by dealers after removal from service.



This one has been copper plated and is fitted with an ATEA PAX handset. It does not have a white button on the front so it may be a Type 50 with added handle.