

Phone number is up for Rhenigidale 1

UNTIL this morning, calling the operator and asking for Rhenigidale 1 was the only phone link the outside world had with the remote hamlet on the island of Harris in the Outer Hebrides.

But this will end today when the last single-digit number in Britain is deleted. The telephone will be given a four figure number, making it also the last in the country to be converted to direct dialling, according to British Telecom.

The telephone, connected to the operator in Inverness by radio link, was installed in the croft of Mrs Morag MacInnes, now 77, in 1958. The postman's widow has since provided a voluntary 24-hour service for the 20 inhabitants of the coastal community. She has

relayed messages day and night and opened her door to neighbours and strangers who needed to use the phone.

To connect Rhenigidale to even the closest telephone on the island, which is famous for its tweed, she previously had to call the operator and ask for a line. However, BT last month ran a cable from the hamlet to the island telephone exchange 12 miles away at Tarbert to link it to the main network.

Three of the six houses in Rhenigidale, including Mrs MacInnes's, have had lines installed and will be connected to the direct-dialling exchange from this morning.

Attended call services used to be common in rural commu-

By Philip Sherwell

nities which had no other telephone links, but they have been phased out in the rest of the country. It is now so unusual that when the Daily Telegraph asked the operator in London to connect us to Rhenigidale 1 yesterday, she said she had "never had a request like this" and suggested we try the international operator.

Mrs MacInnes will today be presented by BT with a rose-bowl and engraved telephone for the service she has provided for the past years.

One villager said: "For over 30 years, Morag has been opening her door to neighbours and strangers who wanted to use the telephone. It would have driven some

people mad, but she never complained. There has always been a welcome on the mat."

A presentation will also be made to Mr Donald MacPherson, 59, the engineer who used to trudge across a rough, cliff-top path to mend faults.

Mrs MacInnes said yesterday: "It is the end of an era. The phone has been a lifeline for us all. I've taken messages — some good, some bad — for villagers and delivered them at all hours of the day and night."

Subscriber trunk dialling (STD) was introduced for most of Britain in 1958, providing direct dialling to much of the world. The system went fully automatic in 1976 when the last manned exchanges were closed.

THE DAILY TELEGRAPH, MONDAY, MARCH 5, 1990