What was the Marconi Otophone?

In 1923, the Marconi Company launched a new kind of hearing aid – the Marconi Otophone. The Otophone was described as a “Scientific aid to the Deaf”, and followed a number of earlier devices called otophones from the 1880s. Marconi tried to convince medical professionals to recommend the Otophone to their patients by giving demonstrations at various international exhibitions. The Otophone itself made extensive use of some of Marconi’s early inventions. It was a far cry from modern hearing aids, which are portable and fit discreetly behind the ear.

Marketing the Otophone

Adverts for the Otophone appeared in prestigious newspapers such as The Times.

Are you DEAF

IF SO, the OTOPHONE (the marvellous aid made by the Marconi-Phone Company) will prove a boon to you.

THE OTOPHONE is the only two-valve appliance fitted with a Broad-casting Microphone, and both Volume and Tone control.

THE OTOPHONE is invaluable for use at board or committee meetings, theatres, lectures, churches, etc.

THE OTOPHONE may safely be used by those whose deafness is accompanied by loud noises.

THE OTOPHONE is the wonder of 1923.

M. A. (Cambridge) writes: “It would be impossible for me to dispense with the ‘Otophone’ now, either for my work, or socially. It does not exhaust the auxiliary nerve and temporarily increase my deafness.”

Call for a trial, or write for full particulars “A” to the Sole Distributors for Great Britain and Northern Ireland:

T. HAWKESLEY LTD. Phone, Mayfair 1133
Specialists, since 1859, in Aids for the Deaf,
351, OXFORD STREET, LONDON, W.1

The Marconi Otophone

The briefcase-like design meant that the Otophone would fit naturally into the office or study environment. It was comparatively heavy, and was not really portable.
The Otophone was manufactured by the prestigious Hawksley Company. They advertised to specialist practitioners and the general public. It weighed around 16lbs (7kgs), and this made it substantially heavier than other, non-electronic hearing aids of the period. The Otophone was not designed to be portable. Instead, it was primarily a static device for to be kept in an office or at home. It was advertised in prestigious newspapers to the well-off middle classes, who had money to spare, and who used the Otophone as both a hearing aid and a status symbol.

Marconi already had a very significant international reputation because of his work on radio. He was keen to tie this in with the new Otophone, and adverts aimed at the medical profession noted that the new hearing device was “the outcome of radio research for the deaf.”

**Who was Marconi?**

Guglielmo Marconi was an Italian inventor who lived from 1874-1937. He is best known for his work with wireless telegraphic transmission, and is seen as the pioneer of radio transmission. He was the first person to send radio messages across the English Channel and the Atlantic. He was also highly successful in incorporating the work of others into practical devices. In 1897 he set up what was later known as the Marconi Company to exploit these innovations.

Unusually for a man who was primarily an inventor and entrepreneur, Marconi was co-awarded the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1909 for his work on wireless telegraphy. He angered a number of prominent scientists, particularly Oliver Lodge, who claimed a major share of the credit for inventing wireless telegraphy.

Lodge and Marconi eventually settled their differences in 1911. Their wireless technology was crucial to British military communications in the
First World War. However, Marconi also defended his patents in the courtroom.

**How did Marconi use Patents?**

The Otophone used the radio valves which were patented by the Marconi Company in 1904. The use of Marconi’s radio valves in the Otophone set it apart from similar rival devices in terms of technology and reputation. By the time the Otophone was launched however, the valve patents had expired and therefore the commercial value of the valves was reduced.

Unlike Marconi’s earlier innovations, he did not patent any aspect of the Otophone. Instead, this electronic, medical device was designed to promote the reputation of his company by using a revolutionary technical invention to assist people who were deaf.

The Marconi Company had been instrumental in establishing the BBC during the early 1920s, and the Otophone sought to capitalise on this publicity.

Because the patents for the radio valves had expired, the Otophone was a relatively uncontroversial device. It was free from complex, public, and damaging patent disputes.

Although it was unwieldy and cumbersome, the Otophone also marked a shift in hearing aid design away from the traditional acoustic devices. After the Otophone, manufacturers concentrated on electronic devices. These came to dominate the marketplace.

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**Patent for the Radio Valve**

John Ambrose Fleming was employed by the Marconi Company, and applied for the patent for them. These valves were critical in the development of early radio, and were later used in the Otophone once the patents had expired.