

Today, the pillar box is quite literally ‘part of the landscape’. The history of its development shows evolution in design, technology and awareness of customer needs.

### Why letter boxes?

Following the introduction of Rowland Hill’s Uniform Penny Postage in 1840, the volume of mail greatly increased. As the number of posting offices was limited, the public urged The Post Office to adopt the continental practice of installing roadside letter boxes. Such boxes had been used in Paris as early as 1653.

### The first pillar boxes

On 23 November 1852, the first four British pillar boxes were introduced as an experiment in St Helier, on the island of Jersey. This was on the recommendation of a regional Surveyor’s Clerk, Anthony Trollope (now famous as a novelist). The red-painted hexagonal boxes were cast locally in the foundry of John Vaudin. To complete the trials, three further boxes were erected on Guernsey in February 1853. These proved very successful and popular.

Consequently, in September 1853, pillar boxes began to be installed on mainland Britain. Early designs were similar but not identical to the Channel Islands’ box, each Post Office District Surveyor having an input into the manufacture and design. The first mainland box stood in Botchergate, Carlisle but unfortunately no illustration of this historic box survives. Another early type of octagonal design, made by John Butt and Company of Gloucester, was installed in the south-west of England. At this time many boxes were painted a dark green

The first six London pillar boxes were installed on 11 April 1855. These were rectangular in shape and

stood about five feet (1.5 metres) above ground level, with a horizontal posting aperture on the side of the roof. Designed by A.E. Cowper, a Post Office consulting engineer, they did not prove very successful. It was difficult to remove the mail and the very low notice plates were quickly covered in wet mud and rubbish from the street making them difficult to read. It was clear that a new design was required.

### Early experimentation

The evolving design of early pillar boxes developed through trial and error, and the influence of the local District Surveyor. Pillar boxes of the 1850s were produced in various shapes and sizes, and at varying costs. From 1856, Smith and Hawkes of Birmingham made pillar boxes for the Midlands and Southern District in the style of a fluted Doric column with a vertical posting aperture. However, unclear manufacturing instructions meant the first three were eight feet (2.4 metres) tall, with a high domed roof, topped by an ornate crown! Further boxes were correctly produced and made without the domed roof and crown. They were distributed until about 1857, with either vertical or horizontal posting apertures. Several designs of early boxes have vertical apertures as there was no firm opinion on which was the most secure orientation.

Early in 1857, a cylindrical box designed by the Department of Science and Art was adopted in London, and was also sent to Dublin, Edinburgh and Manchester. This new design was about a foot (0.3 metres) shorter than earlier models, highly ornate, and had a horizontal posting aperture in the slope of the domed roof. An economy version without the ornate decoration was produced for use outside the major cities.

## National Standard pillar box

The National Standard pillar box was first introduced in March 1859. It incorporated the best features of earlier boxes, together with a protective hood on the roof covering a horizontal posting aperture and an internal wire cage to hold the mail when the door was opened. For the first time the boxes were available in a choice of two sizes. A variation on this style was the 'Liverpool Especial', a few of which were made in 1863. This box differed in having the words POST OFFICE round the circumference and a crown on top.

## The Penfold pillar box

Calls for a more attractive pillar box were answered seven years later in 1866, by the introduction of a hexagonal box topped with an acorn. It was designed by J.W. Penfold, an architect and surveyor. The 'Penfold' was made in three sizes and the design lasted for 13 years during which a number of small alterations and improvements were made. From 1874, all letter boxes were painted bright red as opposed to green in order to increase their visibility. Penfold pillar boxes remain very popular and in 1988 copies of the Penfold were reintroduced at various historical and tourist sites.

## Anonymous pillar boxes

A simple cylindrical design, introduced in March 1879 to replace the Penfold, has remained virtually unchanged until the present day. By accident, pillar boxes made between 1879 and 1887 bear no royal cypher or crown, only the maker's name, Handyside. It is for this reason that they are referred to as the 'Anonymous' boxes. In 1887, The Post Office corrected this oversight and subsequent boxes were cast with the wording 'POST OFFICE' and the 'VR' cypher. Since this time all boxes have a cypher of the current monarch. In Scotland, however, boxes feature only the Scottish Crown and not the EIIR cypher of Queen Elizabeth II, this is a matter of national identity and because the Queen is not Queen Elizabeth II of Scotland.

## Early 20th century developments

In the 20th century, there have been several periods of experimentation with pillar box design. In the

late 1920s, a combined posting box, stamp vending machine and telephone kiosk (K4) was trialled. In the early 1930s, oval letter boxes with stamp vending machines were also trialled. Neither type, however, proved successful and only limited numbers were installed.

## Airmail boxes

Between June 1930 and October 1938, distinctive blue boxes for airmail correspondence were installed firstly in London and then extended to the major cities of Birmingham, Liverpool and Glasgow. They were normal cylindrical pillar boxes painted light blue with an oval airmail sign attached to the top of each box. From 1932 they had double notice frames - one showed posting times, the other postal rates.

## Modern boxes

A new rectangular pillar box was first installed in October 1968. The shape allowed a new internal mechanism, which meant that the box could be emptied much faster. Two boxes could also be placed side-by-side to form a double aperture box. Made of steel rather than cast iron these boxes, unfortunately, did not stand up to the British weather!

In 1974 they were replaced by different rectangular cast iron boxes. These were known as the 'G' type pillar box and had an angled notice plate for easier reading and a rotary dial which displayed individual collection tablets.

At the end of July 1980, The Post Office unveiled the cylindrical 'K' type pillar box. This box, designed by Tony Gibbs, had a much smoother look and a slightly recessed aperture within its door, but does not have a separate domed top. The box did retain the angled notice plate and the rotary collection dial. This modern design, however, was not universally popular or acceptable in established areas. In 1990, the traditional style of cylindrical box was re-introduced as an alternative.

## Business boxes

Traditionally, meter franked mail has had to be taken to a post office, often quite a distance from

the business. To make life easier for the business customer it was thought a local posting box would be helpful. Royal Mail created a specially designed box for pouches of franked mail. Introduced in 1995, these can be found in business parks, industrial estates and some high streets where companies produce large volumes of meter mail.

## Recent developments

The words 'Royal Mail' first appeared on a British pillar box in 1991, reflecting organisational changes in the business. In 1994 a cylindrical indoor pillar box made of glass-reinforced plastic was introduced for use at special locations. In February 1995, the first pillar box in a departure lounge was placed at Heathrow Airport's Terminal Four. For security reasons this box has a very narrow aperture so that only letters and postcards can be posted. It is constructed from reinforced plastic with a transparent back for customs officers to observe any suspicious or illegally posted items.

## Preservation

In 1972 the Department of the Environment recognised that some rare and early examples of pillar boxes dating from the period 1852-79 were of special architectural or historic interest. Since then almost all of these surviving early examples have been officially listed by English Heritage. Subsequently, in 2002, both English Heritage and Royal Mail agreed a policy for the retention of all letter boxes in operational service at their existing locations, unless certain exceptional circumstances force them to be moved.

## Sources

**POST 14:** Inland mails organisation and circulation

**POST 15:** Inland mails organisation, letter books

**Post 30:** England & Wales minutes

**Post 33:** General minutes

**Post 92:** Post Office publications

Young Farrugia, J. 1969 *The Letter Box*.

Robinson, M. 1986 *Old Letter Boxes (2nd Edition, 2000)*.

More information on letter boxes in The Museum collection is available on our website and on request.

Further information on the listing of letter boxes may be obtained from:

English Heritage,  
Customer Services Department,  
PO Box 569,  
Swindon,  
SN2 2YP  
Tel: 0870 3331182  
Email: [customer@english-heritage.org.uk](mailto:customer@english-heritage.org.uk)

*Royal Mail Letter Boxes: A Joint Policy Statement by Royal Mail and English Heritage* October 2002

For further information about letter boxes also contact:

The Letter Box Study Group  
38 Leopold Avenue  
BIRMINGHAM  
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The Royal Mail Archive Search Room at Freeling House is open Monday to Friday, 10.00am - 5.00pm, and until 7.00pm on Thursdays.

We are open selected Saturdays 10.00am - 5.00pm, please call or see our website for dates.

Please bring proof of identity to get an archive user card. In most cases there is no need to make an appointment, but please contact us in advance if you have any questions.

**The Royal Mail Archive**    [www.postalheritage.org.uk](http://www.postalheritage.org.uk)

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