



INFORMATION SHEET NO 1

Pillar Boxes 1852-1968



1 Background

With the rapid growth of correspondence following the introduction of uniform penny postage in 1840 a demand for more posting facilities arose and the public began pressing the Post Office to follow France's example and provide road-side posting boxes.

2 Introduction to the Channel Islands 1852-1853

No action seems to have been taken, however, until 1851. In November of that year Anthony Trollope, then a Surveyor's Clerk, suggested, as part of his proposals for improving the postal services in Jersey, that the scheme operating in France be tried in St Helier, Jersey. Trollope's report reads:-

"There is at present no receiving office in St Heliers ..... postage stamps are sold in every street and, therefore, all that is wanted is a safe receptacle for letters ..... Iron posts suited for the purpose may be erected at the corner of streets in such situations as may be desirable, or probably it may be found more serviceable to fix iron letter boxes about 5 feet from the ground, wherever permanently built walls, fit for the purpose can be found ..... Should the Postmaster General be willing to sanction this experiment, I would recommend the four sites ..... marked on the enclosed map of the town ....."

(file 49a, England 685K/1814\*)

A subsequent notice issued by the Postmaster of St Helier advised the public that on November 23, 1852, "Roadside Letter Boxes" would be opened in the following places:-

"David Place, nearly opposite the Rectory  
New Street, in front of Mr Fry's Painter  
& Glazier  
Cheapside, top of the Parade  
St Clements Road, corner of Pleasance"

In December the Postmaster of St Helier wrote "..... the Road-side Letter Boxes ..... work satisfactorily ..... I feel assured that their introduction into England would be followed by most beneficial results ..... but there they must be introduced liberally and energetically, and with fitting modifications as to size, form and make".

(file 3, E706/1859\*)

\*Post 30



On February 8, 1853, the scheme was extended to St Peter Port, Guernsey.

("Guernsey Star" 10.2.1853)

Unfortunately, no record of the design of the original boxes erected in the Channel Islands appears to have survived; but they are known to have been made locally by a John Vaudin, and were painted red.

An hexagonal pillar box in Union Street, St Peter Port (see figure 1) still in use today, is one of Vaudin's original boxes. It stands 4'8" high, is hexagonal in shape and has a horizontal posting aperture.

Following the District Surveyor's report on the success of the Channel Islands' experiment the scheme was rapidly extended to the mainland. The first to be erected on the mainland was that provided at Botchergate, Carlisle, in 1853.

(file 49b, E685K/1814\*)

### 3 London's pillar boxes 1855-57

It was not until 1855, however, that London received its first roadside letter boxes. On the 11th of April six boxes were opened to the public. They were sited at Fleet Street: Strand; Pall Mall; Piccadilly; Grosvenor Place and Rutland Gate.

Their designer was A E Cowper, the Post Office's Consulting Engineer, and they were made by Messrs H & M D Grissell of Hoxton. The boxes were rectangular in shape and they stood approximately five feet in height above ground level. Their posting aperture was situated horizontally on the

Fig 4 side of the roof (see fig 4).

In December of the same year the Treasury sanctioned the erection of similar boxes in other parts of London but there is no evidence that this was carried out on a large scale.

(files 12 and 19, E706/1859\*)

### 4 New Standard pillar box for London etc 1857-59

Before the close of 1855, Mr Cowper was recommending the adoption of a new standard design for London pillar boxes.

In response to an official invitation to produce an improved design, following public complaint about the previous ugly appearance, the Department of Science and Art submitted a design for an ornamental box which was adopted. The contract for the manufacture of these boxes was placed with Messrs Smith and Hawkes of Birmingham in 1856.

(files 23, 24, 26 & 31, E706/1859\*)



Erection commenced early in 1857 and although they seem to have been originally planned for London the new boxes were apparently also distributed to the larger provincial towns.

(files 27 & 36, E706/1859\*)

Fig 5

These boxes stood 4' high and were 1'9" wide. Their posting aperture was situated horizontally on the slope of their domed roof (see fig 5).

5 Country pillar boxes, non-Standard 1853-1857

Meanwhile, since 1853, pillar boxes of varying design and manufacture had been erected throughout the remainder of the country.

Fig 2

Prior to 1856 Messrs Handyside and Co of Derby were making octagonal pillar boxes, very similar to the early box still in use today in Union Street, St Peter Port, but with the posting aperture in a vertical instead of a horizontal position. They stood about 4'6" in height (see fig 2).

Fig 3

In 1856 the design of these early Handyside boxes was modified to incorporate an "hours of collection" plate and a wider collar below the rim of the roof for the Royal Cipher and the wording "Post Office" (see fig 3).

Fig 7

During the same year Messrs Smith and Hawkes made three tall Pillar Boxes with fluted columns and vertical posting apertures. But, because of obscure instructions by Mr Edge, their designer, each had a high domed roof surmounted by an ornate crown (see Fig 7). Their overall height was about 8'. The Post Office, feeling it could not reasonably decline to accept the Boxes, erected one of them at New Street Station, Birmingham.

(files 8 and 15, E706/1859\*)

Fig 8-9

Smith and Hawkes' new boxes, similar in appearance to the earlier three, but without the domed roof and crown, were apparently being distributed until about 1857 (see fig 8). In that year thier pattern was altered to incorporate a horizontal posting aperture (see fig 9).

6 Country pillar boxes, Standard 1857-59

Fig 5-6

Early in 1857, however, the Postmaster General had agreed that "for the future ..... all Pillar Boxes for Country use should be manufactured after the same pattern ..... as those now made for London (fig 5), omitting the external decoration". The contract for supplying such boxes (fig 6) was immediately placed with Messrs Cochrane & Co of Dudley who submitted the lowest tender.

It was soon realised that the capacity of these new standard Country pillar boxes, due to less frequent clearances than for those in London, was inadequate for the heavy postings experienced by such towns as Birmingham and Liverpool. In October, therefore, Mr Cowper was asked to prepare yet another design.

\* Post 30



The lowest tender for these proposed larger-type boxes was that submitted by Messrs Leigh of Manchester and in October 1858 their sample box was erected for trial in Ranalagh Place, Liverpool; but after one week's use it was quickly removed. The main objection being that letters posted therein were too easily removed - by members of the public! Unfortunately, no pictorial record of this box appears to have survived.

(files 2, 6 and 8, E5439/1859\*)

7 Standard pillar boxes in two sizes 1859-1866

Before proceeding with a new standard design for use both in London and the provinces Mr Cowper first sought the views of the Deputy Comptrollers of the London Postal Districts. Eventually, in March 1859, a fresh contract, for the supply of one hundred boxes in two sizes, was placed with Messrs Cochrane. The main external improvement in the design of these new boxes was the incorporation of the horizontal posting aperture below a protective hood on the roof (see fig 10). They stood about 4'6" in height. These new-style boxes were found to be so satisfactory that the manufacturers were inundated with additional orders.

Fig 10

files 10 & 11, E5439/1859\*  
&  
file 1, E2751/1866\*

8 Liverpool, Special pillar boxes 1863

Liverpool, however, was not satisfied with the capacity of the larger new box, in spite of local modification. Eventually in February 1863, Mr Gay, the District Surveyor, was allowed to erect, near St George's Hall, a large model of his own design. His pillar box was surmounted by a crown and was manufactured by Messrs Cochrane and Co (fig 11). Mr Gay's "rough model" proved satisfactory and the trial of a further six boxes, slightly modified in design, was authorised.

Fig 11

The comments of the Comptroller of the Circulation Department on Mr Gay's design were:-

"I do not consider that it possesses any special feature which it would be desirable to introduce in the London District ..... the external appearance ..... differs so slightly from those supplied by the present Contractor that it seems to me immaterial which pattern is adopted ....."

(files 4 and 5, E2751/1866\*)

9 Hexagonal pillar boxes 1866-1879

In March 1864 the Postmaster General approved a recommendation of the Secretary to the Post Office that there be in future "two different kinds of Pillars, as well as two different sizes ..... as at present ..... the object of increased capacity is obtained with the new Pillar made ..... from Mr Gay's suggestions ..... but an improvement in the outward Shape and

\*Post 30



Appearance of the Pillars has not, I think been secured. In this latter respect the Wooden model of Hexagon Shape ..... tho' not perhaps remarkably handsome is, I think, a considerable improvement on the present Pillars. I therefore ..... recommend ..... that ..... this hexagonal shape should be adopted for Pillar Boxes hereafter, the present internal apparatus being retained in the pillars for use in the London Districts and of course for use elsewhere if desired and being omitted from pillars for general use in the country, as in the new specimens ..... For the London District one uniform size - ie the larger of the two present sizes - would probably be best for all Pillars.

The others - those without the internal apparatus - should probably be of two different sizes - one of equal capacity to the new specimen Pillar lately made from Mr Gay's suggestions and the other about equal to the ..... smaller of the two present sizes ....."

The Postmaster General agreed with these recommendations and the services of J W Penfold, an Architect and Surveyor, were employed to embody these proposals in a new design. In October 1865 his design for hexagonal boxes, to be produced in three sizes, was approved (see fig 12).

Fig 12

The tender of Cochrane and Co for this work was accepted and in September the following year details of the new boxes were circulated to the Surveyors with instructions for requisitioning.

(files 6, 7-10, E2751/1866\*)

#### 10 Colour red adopted as standard colour for Pillar Boxes 1874

Early in 1874 pillar boxes in Trafalgar Square, Pall Mall, St George's Square, Belgrave Road SW and Sussex Place, Regents Park, were experimentally painted red (the colour of those first introduced to the Channel Islands in 1852) instead of the usual dark green. Dark green was considered dingy and the Post Office felt the new colour would make the boxes more easily distinguishable.

In July of the same year authority was granted for the adoption of red as the standard colour for all London pillar boxes. The Surveyors in the provinces were told of the decision, and the change in colour throughout the country was implemented as and when boxes in their areas required repainting. This process took ten years to complete.

(files 1 & 2, E1817/1915\*)

#### 11 Reversion to Cylindrical shape, 1879

In the years following, there were frequent complaints of letters being caught up and delayed by faults in the internal construction of these hexagonal boxes and, by 1874, the Post Office was seriously considering reverting to the earlier cylindrical shape. In June 1876, the Office of Works having also recommended the change, the Postmaster General gave his approval.

\*Post 30



Fig 13

However, it was not until October 1878 that tenders for the new pattern (fig 13) were invited. In November, the contract was placed with Messrs Handyside and Co and production began the following March.

Fig 14

In August 1883, after complaints that larger letters and newspapers occasionally became lodged in the top of the new boxes, an experimental model with the posting aperture placed a few inches lower in the body was erected for trial in Newgate Street, London. In the following April the modification was made standard (fig 14).

Fig 15

Surprisingly, it was not until November 1887, eight years after their introduction, that it was realised the new cylindrical pillar boxes did not bear the Royal Cipher nor, indeed, any indication that they were the property of the Post Office! By the end of the year a new design incorporating the Royal Cipher on the door and the lettering "Post Office" on the collar below the rim of the roof, had been approved (fig 15).

(files 1, 3 and 5, E2697/1903\*)

#### 12 Double-width pillar boxes 1899

Fig 16

In November 1899, after trials in London, a contract for the supply of double-width pillar boxes, comprising two separate receptacles for the posting of town and country correspondence, to facilitate sorting processes, was placed with Messrs Handyside and Co (fig 16).

In 1903 the Post Office decided that the time had arrived to invite fresh tenders for posting boxes, incorporating the various modifications in design adopted over the years. The resulting fresh tenders were placed as follows:-

Pillar Letter Boxes      Messrs McDowall,  
   Steven & Co of Glasgow

Double Pillar Boxes      Messrs Handyside & Co of Derby

(files 11 and 23, E19655/1909\*)

#### 13 New design considered 1912

In 1912 the Postmaster General observed that pillar boxes were "unsightly objects and that in these days of Town-Planning and Municipal Aesthetics we ought to show better examples of art applied to postal uses". In consequence, students of the Royal College of Art were invited to submit designs incorporating the many improvements agreed over the years. But, due to the outbreak of the first World War, adoption of any of the chosen designs was indefinitely suspended.

(files 6 & 10, E1817/1915\*)

\*Post 30

14 New Rectangular design 1968

On October 9 1968, the first of a new-style rectangular pillar box was opened to the public. A pair were placed side by side (to form separate posting receptacles for town and country correspondence) in front of St Paul's Cathedral, London. The first letter posted, by the Postmaster General, was addressed to a descendant of Anthony Trollope (see figs 13 & 17).

Fig 13-  
17

15 Further Study

- a. "The Letter Box" by Jean Farrugia (Centaur Press, 1969\*).
- b. "Old Letter Boxes" by Martin Robinson (Shire Publications, 1986\*).
- c. Updated information and listings of historical boxes: this is maintained by The Letter Box Study Group (membership fee £2.50pa). Further details available from Sally Jones, 43 Miall Road, Hall Green, BIRMINGHAM B28 9BS.

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Post Office Archives

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\* Available from the National Postal Museum, King Edward Building, King Edward Street, London, EC1A 1LP (01-239 5420).



PILLAR BOX DESIGNS

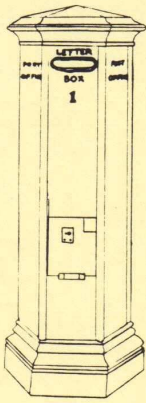


FIG. 1

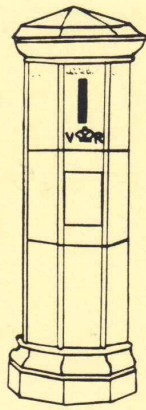


FIG. 2

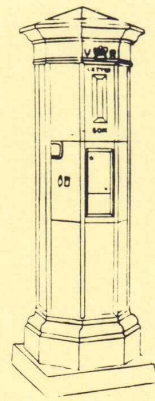


FIG. 3

Guernsey and Country  
1853 - 59

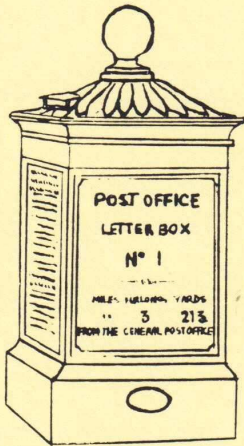


FIG. 4

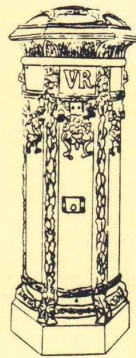


FIG. 5

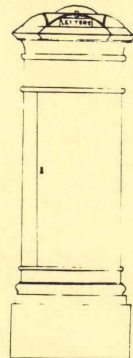


FIG. 6.

London and Country standard  
1855 - 59

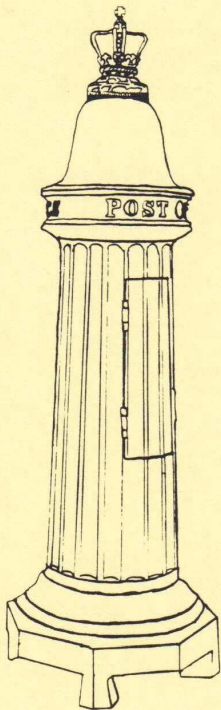


FIG. 7

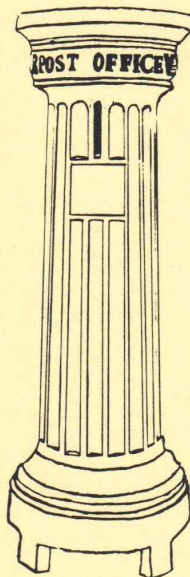


FIG. 8

Provincial non-standard  
1856 - 60

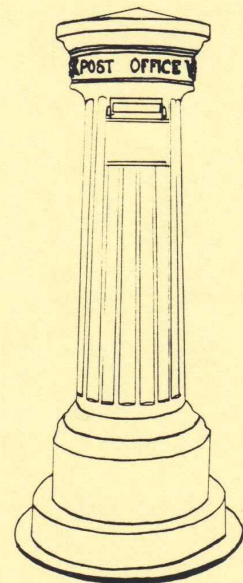


FIG. 9



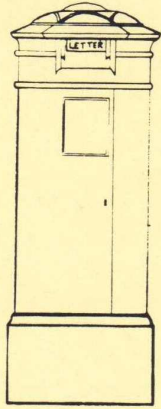


FIG. 10

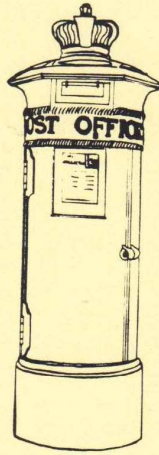


FIG. 11

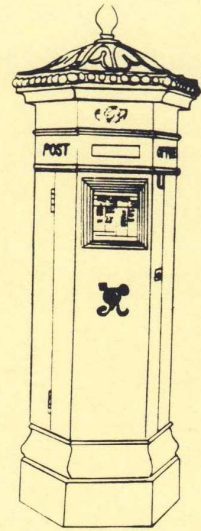


FIG. 12

National Standard and Local Version  
1859-79

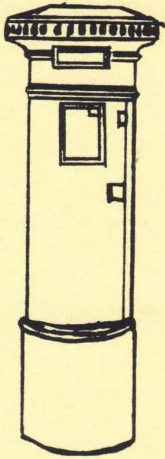


FIG. 13

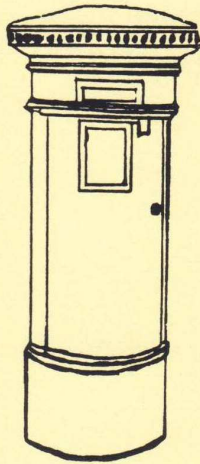


FIG. 14

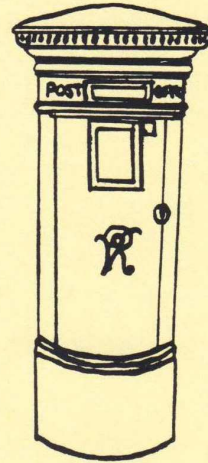


FIG. 15

Reversion to Cylindrical  
1879

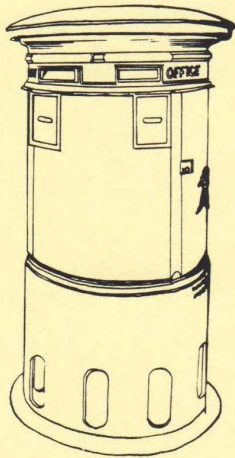


FIG. 16

Modern

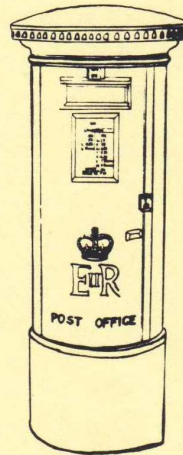


FIG. 17