Telephone kiosks

K1 Kiosk 1925 (TCB 417/ E3140)

The first public call boxes were provided by enterprising shopkeepers in an attempt to attract more customers.

The K1 kiosk was the beneficiary of a number of alterations by local authorities over the years, including a particularly strange development in Eastbourne, where two kiosks on the sea front were thatched in an effort to match the nearby 'rustic' public shelters. These thatched kiosks were in use from 1925 until they were replaced by the Jubilee K6 model in 1936, much to the dismay of many local residents.

K2 Kiosk 1925 (TCB 417/ E3364)

The classically styled dome of Sir Giles Gilbert Scott's K2 kiosk is said to have been inspired by Sir John Soane's self-designed mausoleum in St Pancras Old Churchyard, London (Scott was also a Trustee of Sir John Soane's Museum when he designed the K2 kiosk).

Graffiti has been a constant problem for the public kiosks, as far back as 1912 a number of the original K1 kiosks had their white paint replaced with varnish to combat the problem of what was referred to as "scribblers". The interior of the K6 was designed to feel like a personal office, with a writing space.

The main reasons for the phasing out of Scott's iconic kiosks were an increase in vandalism and the need for kiosks to be DDA compliant. It is important to note that BT is under an obligation from Ofcom to ensure that 75 per cent of the kiosk population offers access to disabled people. Even with drastic modifications, the traditional K2 or K6 kiosks are unable to meet the current DDA requirements. However, the old-style red kiosks are not actively targeted, and each and every payphone is assessed irrespective of its kiosk type.

In recent years the telecommunications industry has changed considerably. The dramatic rise in the ownership and usage of mobile phones has contributed to calls from BT payphones halving in the past three years.

K2 Kiosk Interior 1925 (TCB 417/ E3365)

Discover more about BT's astonishing heritage at **www.bt.com/btdigitalarchives** and **www.bt.com/archives**

Choice of colour

Over the years the colour of the public telephone kiosk, in all its guises, has been extremely contentious. Although most now regard the 'Post Office red' appearance as one of the main reasons they identify and love the design, it has not always been this way.

K6 Kiosk London c1970s (TCB 417/ E58384c)

Although Scott agreed to the use of 'Post Office red' for his kiosks he was never a supporter of the colour. He had initially suggested for the K2 that "the outside of the kiosk should be treated with silver paint and the inside coloured a greenish-blue" [10 October 1924, POST 33/1448 (24)].

He also preferred a more neutral coloured exterior for the K6 although he replaced his first suggestion of "toned white" with "a warm, dove grey". [15 May 1935, POST 33/5155 (7)]

Scott later conceded that red worked well in urban areas but proclaimed himself "more convinced than ever that bright red kiosks in an old village street or a village green will be an abomination." [19 August 1935, POST 33/5155 (9)]

In a leaflet about the K6 sent to all local authorities the Post Office set out the reasons behind the colour choice: *"it is desirable to adopt not only a standard design, but a standard colour, which must be sufficiently conspicuous to be readily distinguished from its surroundings. After consideration of all the factors, including the aesthetic aspect, the Royal Fine Art Commission has fully endorsed the conclusion of the Postmaster General that in town and country alike the most suitable colour is Post Office red; and full concurrence of this view has been expressed by the Councils for the Preservation of Rural England and Rural Wales, and the Association for the Preservation of Rural Scotland."* [POST 33/5100 (7)]

Image from K6 leaflet sent to local authorities, 1936 (POST 33/5100)

John Gloag, design writer and member Central Executive Committee of the Council for the Preservation of Rural England wrote of the choice: *"The only valid argument is that red, the good clean Post Office red, is a functional colour. The fact that I like it, and loathe the limp suggestion of a medium grey, is just an example of my personal taste…the vivid scarlet kiosk only appears to me as a piece of agreeable punctuation."* [POST 33/4983 (3)]

However, as predicted by Scott, red kiosks proved contentious in some rural areas. In a letter to his MP in July 1936 Hubert Thornley, clerk for the North Riding of Yorkshire, claimed the "super pillar-box red" to be "like an evil deed in a good world". [POST 33/4983 (4)]

Following pressure from its membership, the Council for the Preservation of Rural England later revised their position and began to petition for a colour change in sensitive areas, ultimately forcing a change, and in 1946 the GPO allowed kiosks to be painted dark battleship grey in areas of special beauty.

Discover more about BT's astonishing heritage at **www.bt.com/btdigitalarchives** and **www.bt.com/archives**

Total number of kiosks on the street:

Year	Number of kiosks	Year	Number of kiosks
1922	267	1953	52088
1923	420	1954	54459
1924	634	1955	56165
1925	1076	1956	58416
1926	1929	1957	60986
1927	3051	1958	63043
1928	4687	1959	64515
1929	6278	1960	65392
1930	8040	1961	66136
1931	10255	1962	66740
1932	12818	1963	67281
1933	14984	1964	67907
1934	17143	1965	68439
1935	19134	1966	68445
1936	21052	1967	n/a
1937	24053	1968	n/a
1938	27821	1969	n/a
1939	32359	1970	69840
1940	34409	1971	70468
1941	35262	1972	70789
1942	35674	1973	71211
1943	36225	1974	71753
1944	36450	1975	72053
1945	36519	1976	72680
1946	36562	1977	72917
1947	36727	1978	73036
1948	38177	1979	72995
1949	41398	1980	72964
1950	43886	1981	72527
1951	46951	1982	72415
1952	49531	1983	72001

K8 Kiosk, c1972
(TCB 417/ E60834c)

Discover more about BT's astonishing heritage at **www.bt.com/btdigitalarchives** and **www.bt.com/archives**

Telephone kiosks timeline

1884	Postmaster General, Henry Fawcett, allowed telephone companies to establish 'public call offices'.
1912	The General Post Office took over from the National Telephone Company and the first standardised telephone kiosk was mooted.
1921	The Post Office introduced the first standardised design, the reinforced concrete K1 kiosk. Around 150 were initially ordered at a cost of £35 each.
1923	Due to the need for an increased number of public kiosks and the relatively unpopular public opinion of the original K1 design, the General Post Office ran an open competition to find a new kiosk. Although as no designs were deemed appropriate, the GPO enlisted the help of the Royal Fine Arts Commission to rectify the problem.
1924	The Royal Fine Arts Commission asked the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) to nominate three eminent architects to tender some further designs in 1924. The architects chosen were Sir Robert Lorimer, Sir John Burnet, and Sir Giles Gilbert Scott along with submissions from the Post Office and the Birmingham Civic Society. The five prototypes were placed on vacant land behind the National Gallery with the Fine Art Commission eventually choosing Scott's design as the winner. This cast-iron design, designated the K2 kiosk, was the first incarnation of Scott's historic design.
1926	The K2 kiosk was first introduced, although only a handful of the kiosks were installed outside London.
1927	K4 kiosk was designed to be used as a 24-hour post office, combining a public telephone with a post box and an automated stamp dispenser. The K4 kiosk was often referred to as the 'Vermillion Giant', but due to its great cost, public complaints about the disturbing noises it made, and concerns over the stamps not being protected from the elements, only one single batch of 50 K4 boxes was ever ordered. Confusingly, the K4 kiosk was initially launched before the K3.
1929	The K3 box was the next incarnation of this famous icon, however this less common model was prefabricated from concrete and painted cream. Scott designed the K3 kiosk, to be used in areas of significant architectural merit, however the K3 boxes quickly became popular and over 12,000 were installed throughout the country over the next 6 years.
1934	An experimental K5 kiosk was briefly launched as a temporary kiosk, designed to be used at fairs and public events. This model never caught on however, and was never used permanently in public.

1936	The famous K6 or 'Jubilee Kiosk' was launched to celebrate King George V Silver Jubilee. As well as being significantly smaller and lighter, the subtle simplifications to the shape and form managed to acknowledge the emerging modern design style.
1939	The Royal Fine Arts Commission endorsed a policy of painting the kiosks red in all locations. The K6 (Mk 2) was introduced, boasting with more secure windows and a safer cash box that was intended to counter the increasing problem of vandalism. By the end of the 1930's over 20,000 K6 kiosks had been installed countrywide.
1946	The Council for the Preservation of Rural England petitioned the Royal Fine Arts Commission over their insistence on the colour red, and this time they relented allowing a small number of kiosk to be painted Dark Battleship Grey in areas of special beauty (although they still insisted on the glazing bars remain red).
1958	The GPO decided it was time to reconsider the design of the kiosk and asked three well known designers and architects – Neville Conder, Misha Black and Jack Howe – to tender a new design.
1962	The GPO eventually selected Conder's design, designated K7, and after commissioning a series of aluminium prototypes they decided not to take the design any further.
1965	A new competition was proposed to find a suitable design for a new K8 kiosk, and the winning design was an amalgamation of Douglas Scott and Bruce Martin's submissions.
1980	The 'Oakham' booth was introduced, and was a less private, open booth designed to combat rising vandalism.
1981	British Telecom was established as a separate public corporation. The British Telecommunications Act marked the introduction of competition in the UK although BT retains specific additional responsibilities including the provision of payphones.
1985	British Telecom announced its new range of 'KX' payphones and kiosks introducing easier access, anti-vandalism measures and new equipment.
1988	A new telecommunication company, Mercury Communications, opened a rival payphone service to British Telecom.
2002	As part of the Connected Earth heritage programme the national kiosk collection was relaunched at Avoncroft Museum of Historic Buildings.
2006	There are 13,000 traditional red kiosks in the UK. Whilst BT is under an obligation from Ofcom to ensure that 75 per cent of the kiosk population offers access to disabled people, traditional red kiosks have been retained or in some instances (such as outside of the Houses of Parliament) replaced modern kiosks in heritage sensitive areas.