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# THE RED TELEPHONE BOX


The red telephone box is a familiar sight in Britain, they are immediately recognisable as a symbolic piece of street furniture. What is not so well known is that there isn't just *a* Red Telephone Box design but eight different designs for a national telephone box and their history and development of the telephone box has been continuous for nearly eighty years. It is perhaps suprising to know but in 1924 a national competition, organised by the owners of the public telephone network - the General Post Office - was held to find a design for a new telephone box. It has perhaps difficult to understand such a competition for what is essentially just a box with a payphone in. Another lesser known fact is that while the vast majority of kiosks were painted red there are examples all over the country in colours such as yellow, green and gray; the city of Hull has its own telephone company with white-painted telephone kiosks. This site contains information and images of the different types of kiosk. Please use the menu to navigate this site.

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A telephone box is surely just a utilitarian piece of street furniture? However this is not the case. Such is the appeal of the telephone kiosk, books have been written about the Red Telephone Box, and these kiosks now have a museum of their own - the BT Museum at the Avoncroft Museum of Buildings in Bromsgrove, Worcestershire. Here examples of all the different kiosks exist, including a mock-up of the rare K5 kiosk.

Originally the nationwide network of public telephone boxes was owned by The General Post Office, but this changed in 1984 when the phone network was privatised to become British Telecom. They soon decided that the red telephone boxes were superfluous, and started introducing a number of new modern designs to represent the newly-privatised company's corporate identity.

However British Telecom had underestimated people's affection for the traditional telephone kiosk. After a the vast majority of kiosks were removed, they slowly and mysteriously began reappearing on streets up and down Britain, a much welcomed *volte-face* by British Telecom. Many kiosks are also listed by English Heritage, affording them statutory protection. The future existence of all kiosks seems secure, and they will remain a welcome sight.

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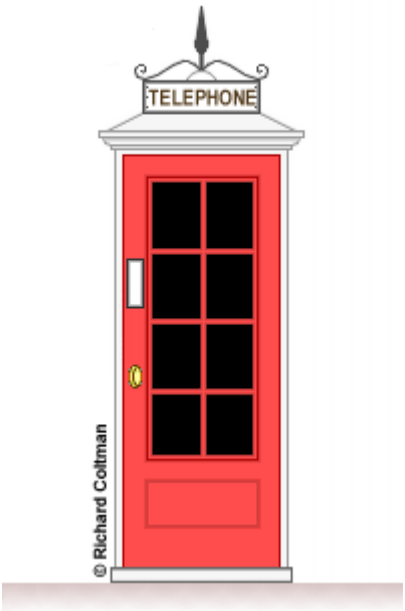
The K1 was the first standard kiosk was introduced by the Post Office, the organisation then responsible for the nations fledgling telephone network, in 1921. Constructed of pre-cast concrete the K1 was topped with a roof featuring a wrought ironwork spear and scrolls.

However its design was not universally appreciated and the Post Office, in conjunction with the Royal Fine Arts Commission looked into an alternative design for a universal kiosk. The K1 continued in use, altered in 1924, featuring different windows and a new sign on the roof. The K1 was the predecessor to the Red Telephone Box, of which there were seven evolving designs, each reflecting the taste of the period.



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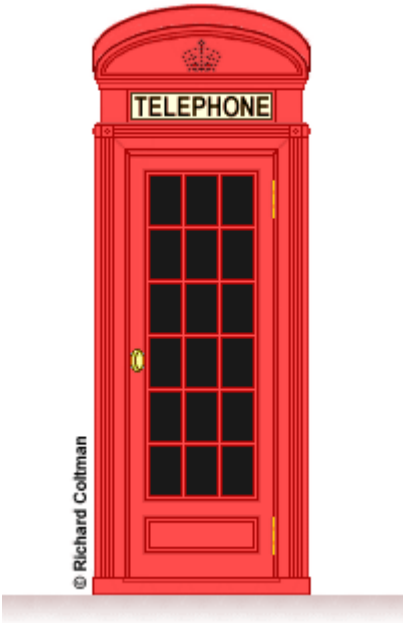
# THE RED TELEPHONE BOX

The K2 came about because The Post Office organised a competition in 1924, requiring architects and designers to come up with plans for a new standard kiosk. The winning design, which arrived on the streets of Britain in 1926, was a design by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, the renowned architect also responsible for Liverpool's Anglican Cathedral.

It proved too expensive and large to be introduced nationwide, so the 1500 examples were restricted almost wholly to London. The first order for Gilbert Scott's kiosk worked out at around £50 per kiosk. Despite its size the design of the K2 is a masterpiece. A classical-influenced design for a utilitarian piece of street furniture, the K2 is an architectural triumph.



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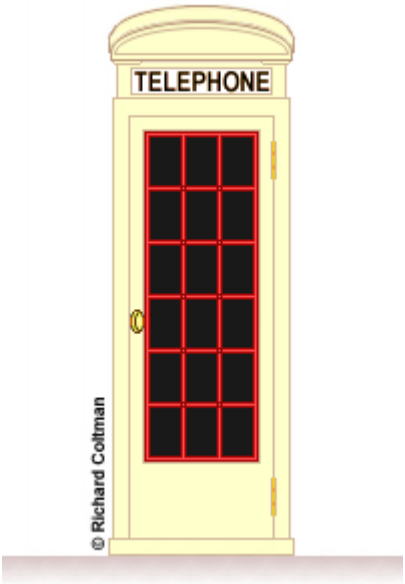
The K3 came about when The Post Office needed a design for outside of London, especially for rural areas; where the K2 proved inappropriate. The K3 was a variation on Scott's original design, by Scott himself and was specifically designed to be a cheaper kiosk, but it also maintained the design flair of the K2 in a simplified form. So The K3 was born, arriving in the streets in 1927.

The colour-scheme marked a departure, the cream stipple paint and red glazing bars wouldn't be so obtrusive in rural areas. In six years the Post Office installed in the region of 12,000 K3 kiosks nationwide. However they were made of concrete which proved fragile; few examples survive.



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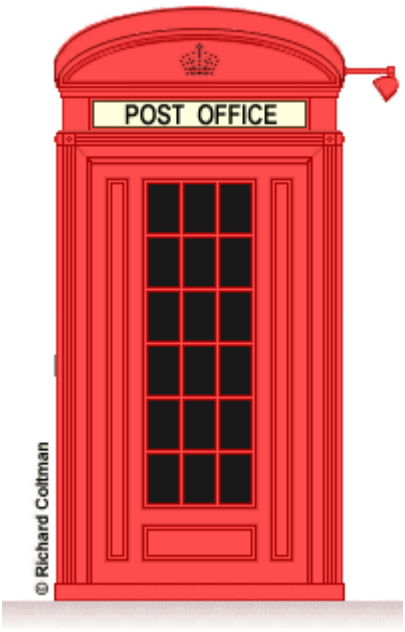
The K4 was not a Scott design, but was the "brainchild" of the engineering department. Introduced in 1927 and half as large as a K2 again, it was an ill-fated attempt to combine a telephone kiosk with a Post Office; the full-automated twenty-four hour postal service. Behind the kiosk there were two stamp machines and a postbox, illuminated by a lamp attached to the an elongated K2 domed roof.

It was christened the "Vermillion Giant", not a term of endearment. It proved too large for many streets, the stamp machines were excessively noisy during telephone conversations and the stamp machines were not weather-proof. It was another failure for the GPO, and only fifty were ever produced.



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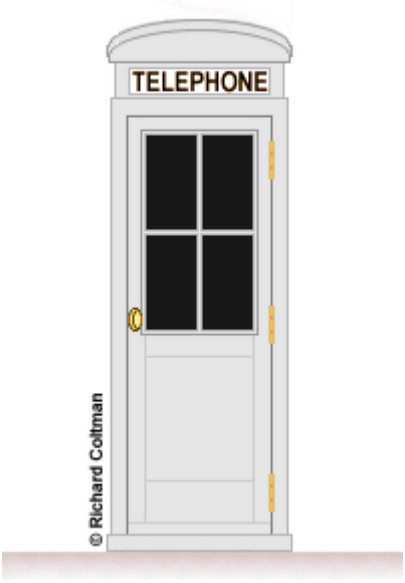
The K5 was an attempt to counter the large and expensive K2, but the attempt by the Post Office to take the best of the Gilbert-Scott design and incorporate it into a more appropriate package didn't work. The K5 followed this trend dramatically; it is the *kiosk incognito*. Introduced in 1934 it would prove to be even more scarce than the K4, so much so the illustration to the left is based on the scarcest of information.

It was intended as a temporary kiosk, the design was influenced by the desire to make a cheaper kiosk. Instead of the cast-iron of the K2 and K4 and the concrete of the K1 and K3 this kiosk was constructed of metal-faced plywood. However, this attempt failed.



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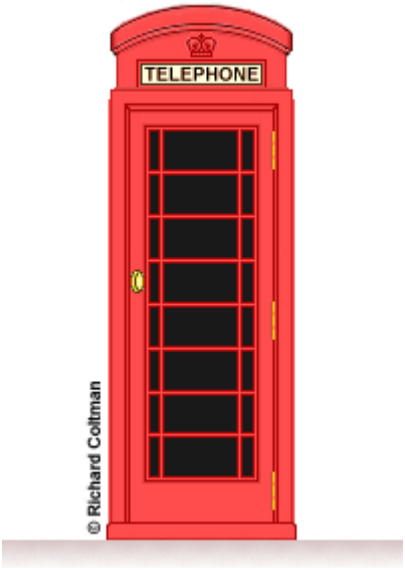
The K6 was commissioned in 1935 to commemorate the silver jubilee of King George V. The design of the "Jubilee Kiosk" needed to be good, so Sir Giles Gilbert Scott was again drafted in to design the new kiosk. The K6 was similar to his K2, but was smaller and had simpler detailing, but was still unmistakably a Gilbert Scott design and would be a success.

It appeared in 1936, followed by a more vandal-proof Mk2 in 1939; by 1960 some 60,000 examples existed. The Post Office allowed rural examples to be in different colours; so for example green, yellow, white and battleship grey examples exist. Red was initially chosen so as to stand out in case one needed to make an emergency call.



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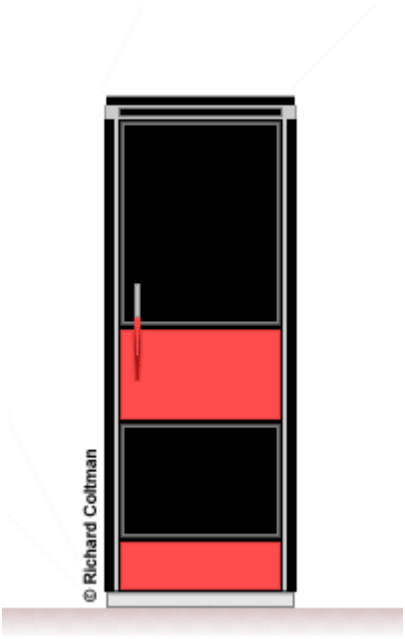
Tke K7 was planned in 1958 when the Post Office commissioned three designs, all of which used aluminium in the construction of the kiosk. Unlike the cast iron of the K6 aluminium weighed much less. There can be no starker comparison between the K6 and the final design for the K7.

Introduced in 1962 in an attempt to use aluminium in its construction it was designed by Neville Conder. Its modern appearance didn't even sport the word 'Telephone' unlike its predecessors. The materials didn't suit the British climate and thus it again proved a failure; it all must have appeared very amateur. In the end few examples of this type were introduced to the streets of Britain.



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The K8 was designed as a modern kiosk, appropriate for new towns, and stronger and more vandal-proof. The K8 could be construed as a compromise between the classical K2 and the overtly modern K7. This compromise was the K8, designed by Bruce Martin, and was introduced in 1968.

The K8 was more vandal-proof than its predecessors; it had less glass to break!, it was essentially prefabricated so it could be installed in any configuration depending on where the door was required. It proved more of a success than the K7, not a great challenge admittedly, but some 4000 examples were introduced. The K8 would be the last design for the telephone kiosk under Post Office ownership.