

Figs. 1 to 4

“You may telephone from here”

The story of the public call office

*George Orchin,
Public Relations Department*

IT IS PERHAPS A LITTLE SURPRISING NOWADAYS to see signs bearing the inscription in white letters on blue ground “You may telephone from here” affixed to the walls of old buildings in various parts of the country. They are reminiscent of the early days when most public call offices were installed in the local general store or chemist’s shop, perhaps as an added pull to custom. Such call offices, however, are now few and far between, for the public demands a 24-hour service which can be provided only at places accessible at all hours of the day: mainly, therefore, on the public highway. Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, R.A., architect of Liverpool Cathedral, was the designer of the present standard No. 6 kiosk which, with its distinctive appearance and colour, its simple inscription “TELEPHONE” written in glass opals around the top, and its black and chrome internal furnishings, provides a service to the community as important as and perhaps in some

cases, more important than, water, gas and electricity services.

The first kiosks appeared on the streets of our towns and villages in the early 1900’s. Fig. 1 shows a kiosk installed on the public highway at Nottingham and Fig. 2 one of a rustic arbour design in some public gardens at Folkestone, both in 1908.

Other types were coming into use by 1912, when the Post Office took over the National Telephone Company. A contractor in the south of England tendered for kiosks at an approximate cost of £12 free on rail and painted to specification. The maker’s catalogue read as follows:—

“This is the latest pattern of telephone cabinet for outside use with or without automatic penny in the slot lock. The door is fitted with a patent unique door spring for closing. We strongly recommend an automatic coin box inside the cabinet in preference to the automatic door lock, it having been found by long experience that these are very costly to maintain”.

This kiosk, shown in Fig. 3, was known as the "Norwich" type and was installed in east coast districts. Two other types, the "Wilson A" and the "Birmingham" (Figs. 4 and 5) were also brought into use. In addition there were some special rustic designs for rural districts, and galvanised iron kiosks for dock areas.

The colour of the kiosks varied from place to place. A kiosk at Southport was painted buff and dark brown outside and dark brown (lower half) and white top and ceiling inside. The "Birmingham" type was finished in oak varnish. Even in 1912 scribblers caused trouble, for white paint was replaced by varnish. About this time the Postmaster General approved the provision of scribbling pads, with advertisements, in call offices to prevent defacement of the kiosk walls, although this facility was short-lived.

Soon after the National Telephone Company was taken over it was apparent that there was a need to improve the design of kiosks and to standardise the colour at red. Drawings were made in 1913 for two types of more ornamental design which it was stipulated should combine aesthetic quality with economy of design and should be produced at no increase in cost over the existing types. It is doubtful whether the proposed new designs ever reached the building or even prototype stage, for in 1914 the "Birmingham" type was still being ordered.

With the outbreak of war the question of providing kiosks lapsed into obscurity and it was not until 1921 that the problem was again tackled seriously. In that year the first standard design was introduced and was designated Kiosk No. 1. It was a prefabricated concrete structure with metal glazing bars (Fig. 6). About 150 were first ordered, at a cost of £35 each, but there was such a demand that 500 had been ordered by March, 1923. By February, 1925, the demand was for 52 a month and the cost had fallen to £13. To reduce freight charges, contracts were then being placed in various parts of the country.

For more reasons than one London had lagged behind other parts of the country in providing kiosks on the highway. The National Telephone Company had installed kiosks on some London streets, but they proved to be unremunerative and were withdrawn. It was only after protracted negotiations with the various local authorities from 1923 onwards that provision in London was stepped up. There were some 99 of these authorities to negotiate with; further, because of the



Fig. 5

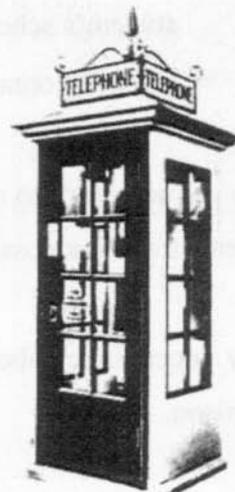


Fig. 6

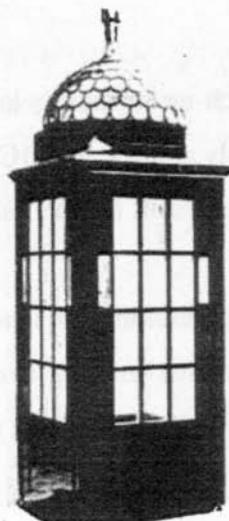


Fig. 7

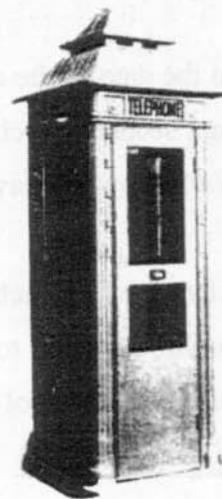


Fig. 8

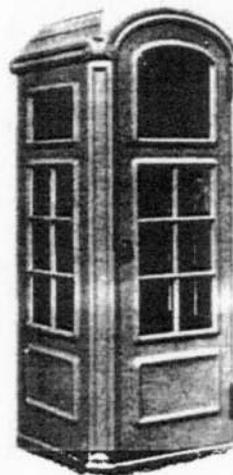


Fig. 9

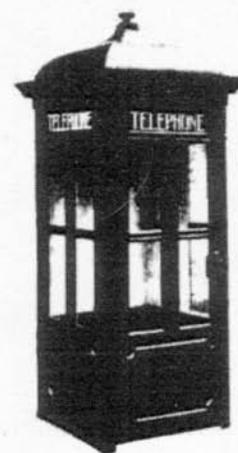


Fig. 10

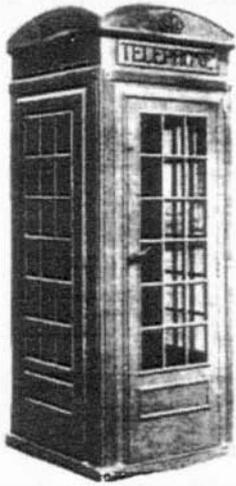


Fig. 11

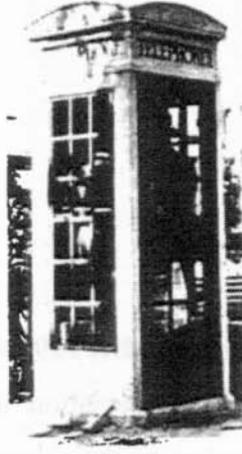


Fig. 12

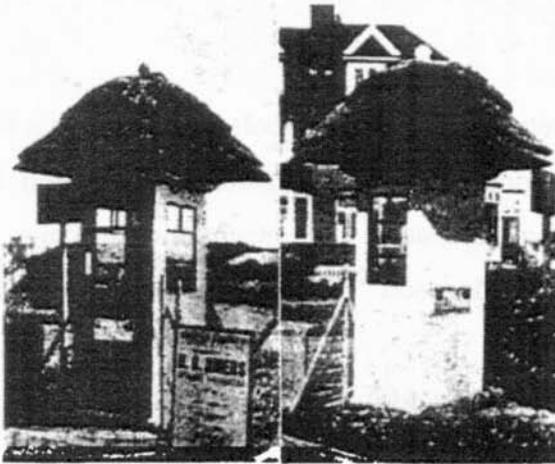


Fig. 13

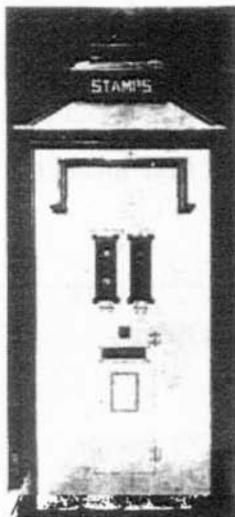


Fig. 14



Fig. 15

extraordinary congestion of pedestrian and vehicular traffic, both the police and the Ministry of Transport had to be consulted.

With the formation of the London and Home Counties Traffic Advisory Committee, on which the police and the Ministry of Transport were represented, procedure was smoothed out to some extent. By 1926 180 kiosks had been erected on the public highway, on sites controlled by the City Corporation, County councils, County Borough councils, Urban District councils, Rural District councils, Parish councils and the Port of London Authority; 115 were installed on private sites. By the end of 1929 the number of completed kiosks in the London area of all types had increased to 1,581.

In 1924 production of a new design of cast-iron kiosk was considered and the Fine Arts Commission recommended that a premium of £50 be offered for each of three designs to be submitted by architects of recognised standing, whom the Commission would select. Designs were prepared by Sir John Burnet, A.R.A. (Fig. 7), Sir Robert Lorimer, A.R.A. (Fig. 8), the Birmingham Civic Society (Fig. 9), the Metropolitan Boroughs Joint Standing Committee (Fig. 10) and Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, R.A. (Fig. 11). Models were placed on view on vacant land behind the National Gallery and selection was made by the Fine Arts Commission. The design by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott was chosen and, with slight modification to the door, was adopted by the Post Office. It was designated Kiosk No. 2.

In 1927 Sir Giles Gilbert Scott was asked to design a more ornamental kiosk than the No. 1 and his design was accepted. This kiosk was of prefabricated concrete and designated No. 3 Kiosk (Fig. 12). Although, in 1929, the Post Office did not consider it desirable to discontinue entirely the manufacture of No. 1 kiosks, they intended to regard No. 3 as the normal kiosk for sites of special architectural importance and the No. 1 as the kiosk for places where all aesthetic considerations were subordinated to economy, as in a rural area where the local authorities found it difficult to guarantee a minimum annual revenue.

During this period of development there were many difficulties to contend with; local authorities were very jealous of their amenities and, while appreciating the need for public kiosks, they did not readily accept standard designs or colour. In Eastbourne, for example, the Corporation insisted on having two kiosks along the sea-front thatched

to match the rustic public shelters. A local builder tendered to provide the thatched roof at a cost of £14 and the estimate was accepted. The two thatched kiosks (Fig. 13) remained from 1925 till 1936, when they were withdrawn and replaced by No. 6 kiosks.

It is interesting to recall a letter to the *Eastbourne Chronicle* dated March 19, 1936:

"Some years ago the Corporation persuaded the Post Office to put a miniature thatched top on the telephone kiosk which stood at the corner of the Redoubt Bowling Green. The result was rather quaint for the box was a cross between a Chinese Pagoda and a mushroom. Now I see the thatched roof has gone and in its place is one of those horrible looking red 'phone boxes which clashes with all the green hedges and grass. . . . I hope the Borough Surveyor hasn't given up the fight for making things of utility things of beauty as well".

The No. 4 kiosk was first proposed in 1923 and the prototype (Figs. 14 and 15) was erected at Bath in 1926. It contained facilities for buying stamps and posting letters, in addition to the telephone.

The standard No. 4 kiosk (Fig. 16) was designed by the Post Office Engineering Department on the basis of the No. 2 kiosk and was approved about 1927. It was painted vermillion outside and flame colour inside. The original cost figure was £50. 6s. 9d. and an order for 50 was placed at this time. It was argued that these kiosks would save opening town sub-offices and they were erected only at special places where it was expected they would be highly remunerative and only where there was a genuine public need. These kiosks were considerably larger than the other types and consequent difficulty was experienced in getting suitable sites. Other objections came to light with the kiosk in service; for example, the noise of the stamp machines disturbed callers, and there was difficulty in keeping rolls of stamps sufficiently protected from the weather.

For these reasons and because of the high cost the Post Office decided, about 1935, not to install any more kiosks of this type, and when those in service were withdrawn or replaced they were to be scrapped.

The Post Office had marked Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1896 by introducing a number of improvements in the country's communications and at the Silver Jubilee of King George V in 1935 further improvements were introduced, including developments in call office facilities. Sir Giles Gilbert Scott was commissioned to design a new kiosk retaining the best features of

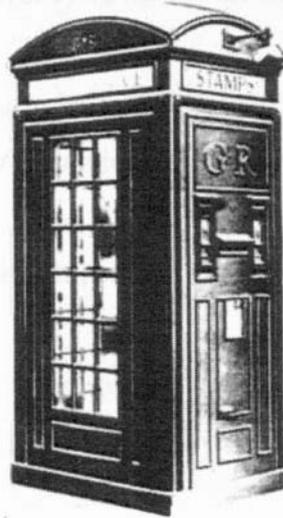


Fig. 16

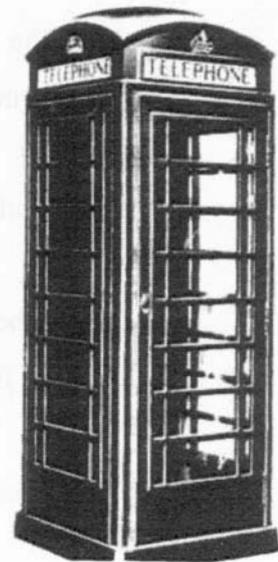


Fig. 17

the No. 2. His final design showed considerable improvement and received general approval of the Post Office and the Royal Fine Arts Commission. The Commission fully endorsed the use of Post Office red as the standard colour. This kiosk became known as the Jubilee kiosk (Fig. 17) and was adopted as a standard for all parts of the country. Simultaneously the Post Office re-designed the internal fittings in black and chrome (Fig. 18) and the unit is known as the Jubilee Assembly. The kiosk came into service in 1936.

Although this article is not intended to deal with the provision of kiosks, it is not perhaps out of place to mention that this notable year marked a step forward in the provision of call offices in rural areas. A scheme known as the "Jubilee Concession Scheme" was introduced whereby call offices were provided in every town and village on the mainland of Great Britain and Northern Ireland which had a Post Office. In the same year which, incidentally, was the tercentenary year of the Post Office, further development was encouraged, and the Post Office undertook to provide a call office wherever the local authority would contribute £4 annually for five years. The scheme was entitled the "Tercentenary Concession". Both schemes have now been replaced by the Rural Allocation Scheme under which call offices are provided in rural areas in co-operation with the Rural District Councils' Association.

With these further developments in rural areas it was not surprising that objections to the standard

colour increased and the Post Office had recourse once again to the Royal Fine Arts Commission and the Preservation councils in an effort to resolve the "colour" problem.

The Royal Fine Arts Commission was set up by Royal Warrant for the specific object of enquiring into and advising upon questions of public amenity or artistic importance referred to them by Government Departments or public bodies. As far back as 1924 the Post Office had asked the Commission's advice about the decorative treatment of kiosks. Their recommendation that Post Office red should be used as a standard had been adopted. In the ensuing years exceptions had, however, been permitted, especially in areas of particular natural beauty where, by special agreement with the County councils concerned, a few No. 3 kiosks were painted green to meet the councils' wishes.

Introduction of the No. 6 kiosk rendered No. 3 obsolete and it became increasingly difficult to

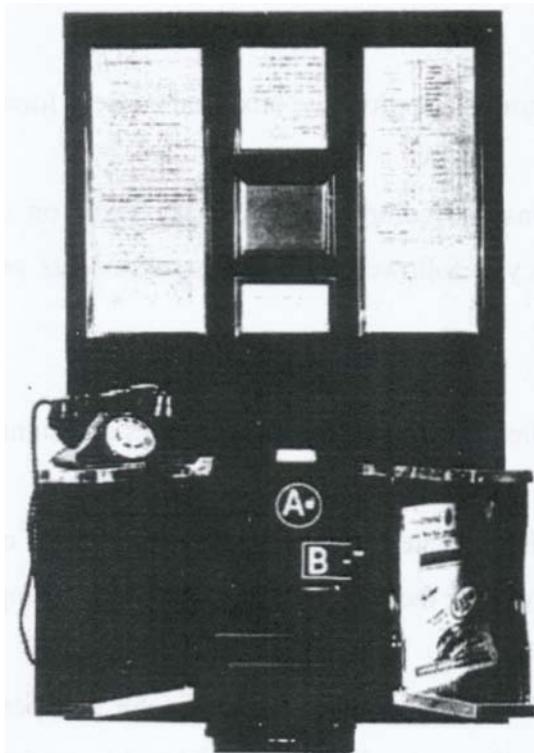
supply the obsolete type in the special areas; one of the difficulties with the pre-cast kiosk is that it is liable to damage in dismantling and re-erecting. Apart from the few exceptions noted, No. 6 kiosk was not provided in other than the standard colour. With the rapid increase of transport and the acceleration of movement throughout the countryside and the introduction of free emergency call facilities, it was considered essential to standardize design and colour to enable the public to recognize a kiosk so that assistance could be obtained quickly in an emergency, whether the fire, police, or ambulance service were required.

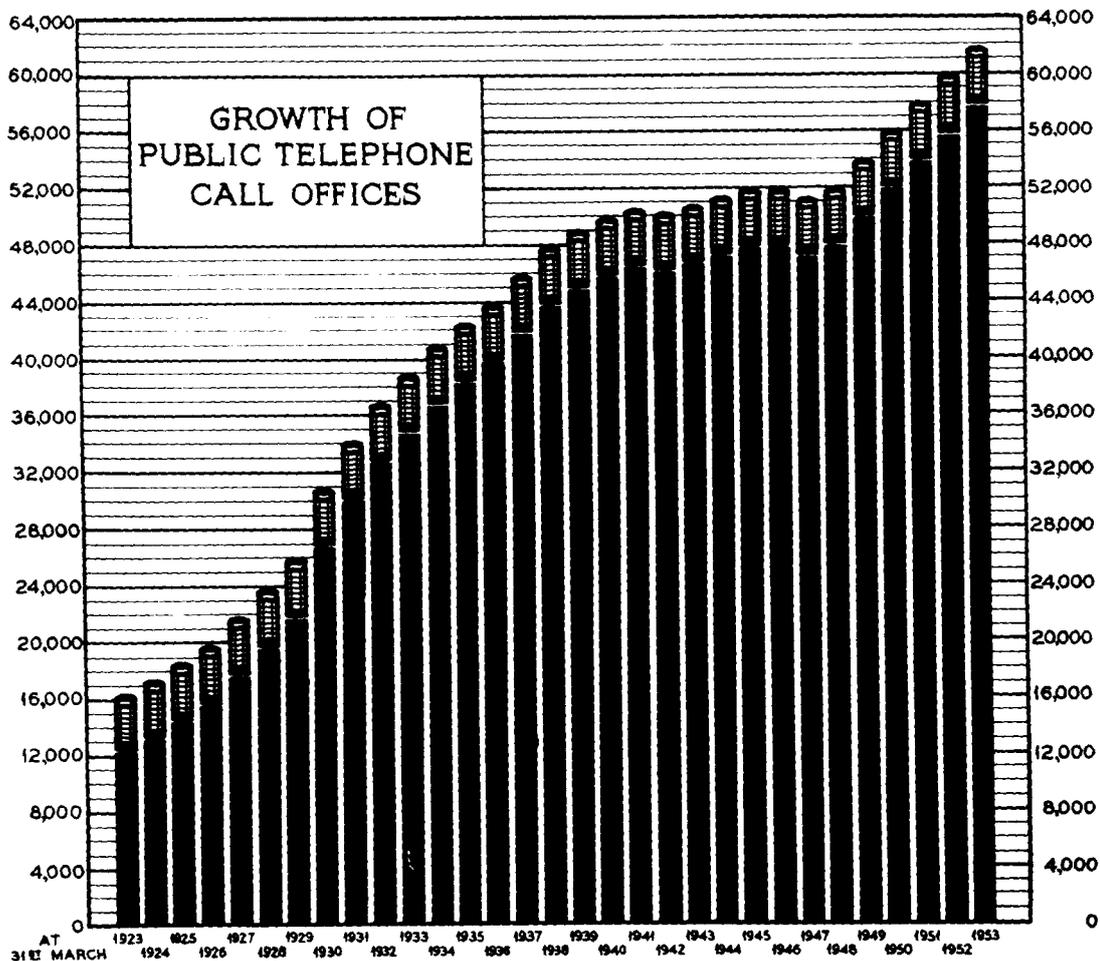
In 1939 the Royal Fine Arts Commission had endorsed their earlier recommendation. The war then intervened but in 1946 with the upsurge of interest in town and country planning and the expansion of call office facilities, post-war development brought the question again to the fore. The Council for the Preservation of Rural England raised the matter with the Royal Fine Arts Commission which, while adhering to their original recommendation, felt there were special cases in isolated rural areas and the wilder parts of the country where some variation from the standard Post Office red would be more in keeping with the surroundings and they suggested that in certain (unspecified) areas of special beauty, and with due safeguards, the Post Office should be permitted to paint kiosks dark grey or black, always retaining the approved red for the glazing bars.

In 1947 the Postmaster General, in reply to a question in the House of Lords, undertook to review the matter. Representatives of the Ministry of Town and Country Planning and the Royal Fine Arts Commission and the Council for the Preservation of Rural England took part in discussions and, to enable practical consideration of the different colours, six kiosks were erected in suitable surroundings for their inspection. The six kiosks were painted in Post Office Red, Deep Brunswick Green, Middle Brunswick Green, Black, Light Battleship Grey, and Dark Battleship Grey. With the exception of the red kiosk, the glazing bars of the doors and one other side of each of the five kiosks were painted in red and thus each kiosk could be viewed with or without this feature.

The conclusions were that Post Office Red should remain the standard colour for rural and urban areas, and that in certain places of very

Fig. 18





exceptional natural beauty, where objection was raised to the standard Post Office Red, one alternative colour only should be permitted—dark battleship grey with glazing bars picked out in red. These recommendations were accepted and a scheme was adopted which provided for co-operation between the Post Office, the local amenity societies and the planning authorities, which has proved very satisfactory in operation.

Much more might be said about the development of call offices but it is enough to say here that since 1925 some 45,200 kiosks have been provided and the total of all types in service at December, 1953, was 63,665. The annual growth

is shown in the graph. Considering the intervention of the war and the restrictive years which followed this is no mean achievement. To provide a high quality service to the public, a well-designed, clean and attractive kiosk, neat and durable fittings, has been the constant policy of the Post Office and it has not failed in this respect. Much more remains to be done and saturation point seems a long way off but there is no doubt that our Jubilee Kiosk will stand the test of time and remain a hallmark of successful enterprise and development in the interest of our people.

We hope to include in a subsequent issue a further article dealing with the more technical aspect of call office facilities.—EDITOR.