BRITAIN'S PUBLIC PAYPHONES

A social history

British TELECOM

□ *A Cartoon from 1931.*

British Telecommunications plc
Registered Office 81 Newgate Street
LONDON EC1A 7AJ

Registered in England no. 1800000

Printed at The House of Questa, London

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□ *An early example of a 'silence cabinet.'*

THREE MINUTES TALK FOR ONLY TUPPENCE

WHEN the notice above first appeared in 1886 on a small wooden hut at one of Bristol's best-known live-stock markets it caused the local people a great deal of amusement. What could it mean? Was the makeshift-looking little building hired out to courting couples at tuppence (two old pence = 1p.) a time so they could whisper sweet nothings in privacy? Or was it a "rehearsal booth" in which a public speaker could recite his speeches out loud to himself without being thought mad?

Needless to say, the locals soon found out, for the 'wooden shanty' was a public call office: remote ancestor of the telephone booths or kiosks and payphones we see about us today – and take so much for granted.

If we now accept that some kind of public telephone will be available to us more or less wherever we happen to be, it is because we have had a century to get used to the idea. For the people of Bristol in 1886 this rather puzzling notice was a rather different matter. The telephone itself had made its British debut a mere ten years before; besides being a totally alien object or at best a curiosity as far as the man in the street was concerned, even the experts did not take it very seriously. Britain already had a postal system which was the envy of the world and as a means of person-to-person communication, the phone was believed inferior to an invention in which Victorians took great pride: the electric telegraph. Certain Post Office officials were sure it was too expensive to appeal to all save the wealthier businessmen. Come to that, one pointed out, if you <u>really</u> needed to send a message you could get a servant to carry it for you!

Thus, when engineers were building that modest wooden hut in Bristol, there were probably little more than 13,000 telephones in all the British Isles: London had 4,000 of them and big cities like Manchester, Liverpool and Glasgow boasted just over 1,000 each. Today there are over 28½ million telephones in the UK, including 77,000 public payphones (kiosks, cabinets or booths in the street, airports and railway stations) plus 290,000 rented payphones in private premises (shops, hotels, hospitals etc). From the very start, the development of the telephone service had been a haphazard affair with no single body to decide how and where it was to be introduced. Instead, a number of large or medium-sized private companies competed with each other to attract subscribers (telephone owners or users). For obvious reasons, they tended to be interested only in the "best-paying" areas: towns with big populations where the number of likely subscribers (and profits!) would be highest.

Eventually the National Telephone Company emerged as a leader by managing to take over or combine with its strongest rivals. However, despite this company's ambitious title, there was nothing like a truly national telephone service. In 1884, the year which saw the birth of the public call offices like the one in Bristol, a mere 75 towns had phones. In the more isolated parts of the country the "machine you talked down" was just a rumour; elsewhere, it was an expensive luxury.

As a result, the idea of actually *owning* a telephone would have struck the majority of Britons as a crazy suggestion. Hadn't they been told on good authority that it was a toy for the rich? Even assuming they found out how to use this strange new instrument, many more would have been too scared to have tried…

But it was in 1884 that the Postmaster General took an important decision. Telephone companies, eager as they were to secure new customers, were allowed to establish "public call offices" – literally, phones which the public could use whether they were subscribers or not. This brought a vast new audience into contact with the telephone, many of them for the first time and most from classes unable to afford the luxury of having such a device in their own homes. The thing was still a novelty; but as the years rolled by, the idea of making a telephone call – or even of owning a telephone – seemed less and less unusual.

Typical advertisements for public "call offices" from local papers of 1884/85. Notice that the Sheffield office was situated in a High Street shop and that even then emergency calls could be made free of charge.

PUBLIC NOTICES.

THE NATIONAL TELEPHONE COMPANY, LIMITED.

CALL OFFICES have been Established at the SHOP of H. TAIT, 13 PANMURE STREET, and at the COMPANY'S OFFICES, 13 PANMURE STREET, where any Member of the Public may CONVERSE for THREE MINUTES with any SUBSCRIBER in DUNDEE, NEWPORT, and TAYPORT on Payment of THREEPENCE, with ONE PENNY additional for each Extra Minute.

Arrangements are being made for Opening CALL OFFICES in the East and West Ends of the Town and at Newport and Broughty Ferry.

SUBSCRIBERS to the NATIONAL TELEPHONE COMPANY ONLY will be allowed to SPEAK to FORFAR SUBSCRIBERS on Payment of SIXPENCE per THREE MINUTES' CONVERSATION, and ONE PENNY for each Additional Minute.

FRANK W. LUMLEY, District Manager.

District Offices, 13 Panmure Street, Dundee.

CHILDREN'S FREE DINNERS.

—The Committee will be pleased to receive Subscriptions to enable them to give Soap and Bread to Hungry ... suffering by the Destitution which exists

THE SHEFFIELD TELEPHONE EXCHANGE CO.

The Public are respectfully informed that a "CALL OFFICE" is NOW OPEN on the Premises of Messrs. DEAN and DAWSON, High street; the Charge being for a three minutes' conversation 2d., and for each minute extra 1d.

Free Service will be given in cases of Fire, or for calling a Cab or Medical Man in Cases of Accident.

Applications for District or Suburban "Call Offices" will have prompt attention, and be connected in the order of application.

Feb. 17, 1885. JOHN TASKER, General Manager.

sitting upright. Heavy sea still running."

EXTENSION OF TELEPHONIC FACILITIES IN DUNDEE.—The National Telephone Company have made arrangements by which the general public may participate in the advantages of the telephone. Two Call Offices have been established in the centre of the town, where any one, for a small charge, may converse with subscribers in the town or district. Similar Call Offices are to be opened at the east and west end of the town, and also in Newport and Broughty Ferry. We learn ... Office Department contemplate ...ceiving telegrams by

THE NATIONAL TELEPHONE COMPANY, LIMITED,

beg to intimate that they are now empowered by Licence from the Postmaster-General to open "CALL OFFICES," where Any Person, not a Subscriber, may converse with any Subscriber to the Exchange System (within a radius of Six Miles) on payment of a Fee of Threepence for Three Minutes' conversation, and One Penny for each additional Minute.

FEE MESSAGES can be telephoned from Call Offices at undernoted addresses:—

THE NATIONAL TELEPHONE COMPANY, LIMITED — District Offices, 28 Market Street.

THE NATIONAL TELEPHONE COMPANY, LIMITED — Railway Arches, Wellington Road.

THE NATIONAL TELEPHONE COMPANY, LIMITED — 132 Union Street (Ellis & M'Hardy).

THE NATIONAL TELEPHONE COMPANY, LIMITED — 44 Union Place (Wm. Bain).

NOTICE.—Subscribers can only use these Offices, or other Subscribers' Instruments, on producing the Call Office Ticket supplied by the Company. Subscribers are re-

THE LANCASHIRE AND CHESHIRE TELEPHONIC EXCHANGE COMPANY, LIMITED

Head Office 38 Faulkner-street, Manchester, Jan. 15, 1885.

The New Licences recently granted to the Telephone Companies by the Postmaster-General having entirely altered the conditions under which the telephone has hitherto been applied to commercial and general purposes in this country, the Directors of the Lancashire and Cheshire Telephonic Exchange Company, Limited, beg to announce the following in regard to the New Services placed at the disposal of subscribers and the public on and after the 19th instant.

CALL OFFICES.

In Manchester, Liverpool, Blackburn, Preston, and other towns in Lancashire and Cheshire, public Call Offices are opened, where any person, whether a subscriber or not to the Telephonic "Exchange" system, may speak to any firm or person that is on the Company's list of subscribers. The toll for conversing to a person or firm within the limits of the town spoken from is threepence for three minutes, or fraction thereof, and sixpence for the same period if the conversation is with a person or firm in another town in the district, by what is termed a trunk-wire message. Call Offices are already established in Liverpool at the undermentioned addresses, and further Offices will be opened at an early date:—

15, Castle-street, Fisk and Fairhurst.
76, South Castle-street, Wright and Co.
75, Lord-street, Galt and Capper.
1, Leece-street, R. H. Aspinall.
98, Dale-street, Thomas Jones and Co.
F 24, Exchange-buildings, Telephone Offices.
12, East Side Queen's Dock, W. J. Shepperd.
1, Regent-road, C. Webb.
73, Regent-road, P. Roberts.
185, Regent-road, Telephone Offices.

TELEGRAMS.

The Company's Telephonic Exchanges in Manchester, Liverpool, Blackburn, Preston, and other large towns in this district, will shortly be connected with the chief Post-offices of those towns, and subscribers who arrange for the service may send and receive telegrams direct, and thus save the time now occupied by messengers.

TRUNK-WIRES.

In addition to the Trunk Wire service at the disposal of the general public, as well as the Company's subscribers, from Call-offices previously described, it is intended to bring the convenience within easy reach of all the Company's "Exchange" subscribers, and they will now enjoy the privilege of speaking from their offices to subscribers in other towns, either by payment of a fixed sum yearly, in advance, or by a toll per message, of which the Company will made record, and furnish a monthly account.

For each end of the Trunk Line the ordinary annual rate per renter will be 10s. per mile (single circuit), with a special proviso that the minimum charge at each end of the line shall be £5 per annum to yearly renters.

The toll-rate from subscribers' offices will be sixpence per message of three minutes, or fraction thereof, to any town in Lancashire or Cheshire. The rates for messages to towns in other counties will be published when wires are available for use. Special rates to the press between eight p.m. and eight a.m.

The following is a list of the towns in Lancashire and Cheshire which are now connected:—Accrington, Ashton-under-Lyne, Blackburn, Bolton, Burnley, Bury, Chorley, Darwen, Heywood, Liverpool (including Garston, Gateacre, and Bootle), Manchester, Middleton, Oldham, Preston, Radcliffe, Rochdale, St. Helens, Stockport, Warrington, Widnes and Runcorn, and Wigan. Other towns in Lancashire, Cheshire, and Yorkshire will shortly be connected with those named above.

Estimates and full particulars in regard to the various telephonic services will be furnished on application to the District Manager, at F 24, Exchange-buildings, Liverpool.

15ja17

"CALL OFFICES" FOR TELEPHONE MESSAGES.—It will be seen from our advertising columns that the Sheffield Telephone Exchange Company have opened a call office in High street, where anyone desiring to communicate with any of the members of the Exchange can do so, the charge being for a three minutes' conversation 2d., and a penny for each minute extra. There is to be a similar office opened at Broomhill, and the company are prepared to open "call ... any district on application being made to


Greeting Cards
SMOKING
ALLOWED
PREPAYMENT
CALL OFFICE

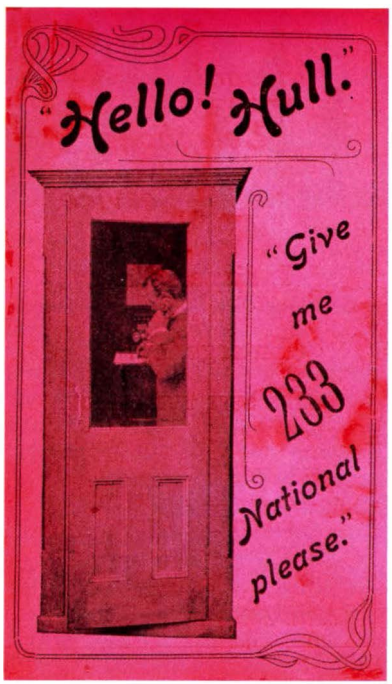
THE SILENCE CABINET

INDEED, many modern payphones – street kiosks or the booths found in airport lounges and railway stations – are still classed as public call offices. The first generation to use them, though, also spoke of "public telephone stations" and (from 1906, if not before) "kiosks" – or they resorted to the now-defunct name, "silence cabinets."

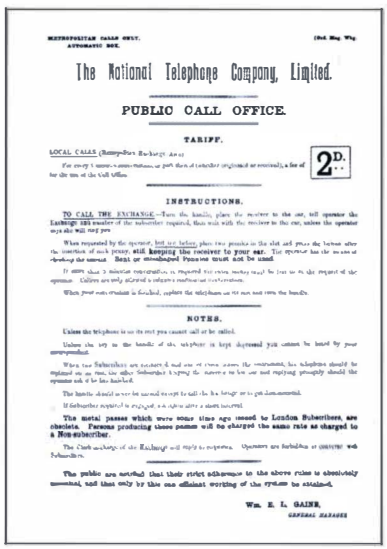
"Silence cabinet" was a slightly misleading term, since the earliest call offices, reliant on wooden walls and door to cut out the noise of their surroundings, could not guarantee telephone users perfect quiet while they made their calls. Once inside, the customer discovered a handset (the actual phone, in which at this time the receiver and speaking parts were separate), a coinbox and a set of directions on how to use the instruments. *(See opposite)*. There was no question of dialling direct to the number you wanted and inserting the coins only when you received an answer; all calls were placed by the telephone exchange operator (*"Hello! Give me 233, please."*) and payment had to be inserted in advance.

Naturally, the phone companies wanted to reach the largest number of customers possible. This meant providing call offices in places frequented by the largest numbers of people – railway stations and hotels, to take a couple of ideal examples. Shops were often put forward as shrewd locations for call offices, but not all were equally suitable; a call office in an undertakers', for instance, would not be likely to attract many customers!

"Canvassers" (sales representatives) of the National Telephone Co. were urged to keep these things in mind and to concentrate on 'shops of a class which a lady would not mind entering.' This seemed to rule out such all-male preserves as tobacconists or men's hairdressers, but the NTC was prepared to stretch a point here. Tobacconists always had numerous customers who might feel inclined to make a phone call while purchasing their cigars; besides which, 'with all due deference, ladies are in the minority of call office users.'



Publicity for one company's call office service



The National Telephone Company, Limited.

PUBLIC CALL OFFICE.

TARIFF.

2D.

INSTRUCTIONS.

NOTES.

The public are notified that their strict adherence to the above rules is absolutely essential, and that only by the due efficient working of the system be established.

Wm. H. L. GAINE,
GENERAL MANAGER

The earliest public call offices included "silence cabinets" located in suitable corners of the better shops. Despite the modern items on sale around it – tins of coke and decidedly un-Edwardian greetings cards – the setting for this wooden kiosk does not differ from those it knew back in 1903.
Courtesy of Alan Russell Photography.

THE SIGN OF THE BLUE BELL

IN the years around the end of the last century and the beginning of our own, a person in search of a public telephone might find him-or herself instinctively looking for the "Blue Bell."

This was the symbol of the National Telephone Company which by 1907 had no less than 7,800 call offices located up and down the country. Not surprisingly, thousands of people came to connect the word "telephone" with the increasingly-familiar blue bell sign. It can be seen in this c.1911 photo of the little iron kiosk built by the side of the road at Holborn, London – one of the attended public call offices. The sign is clearly distinguishable from the railway adverts above and beside it.

The National Telephone Co. was constantly urging its canvassers to note and report possible new call office locations 'in places much used by the public.' Kiosks were regarded as a good method of keeping the Company's name in the public eye and making sure that the Blue Bell was prominently displayed wherever call offices were sited, was part of NTC policy.

But shortly before the Post Office took over responsibility for the nation's telephones in 1912, a new sign began to appear on the streets. The old blue bell had to make way for a scarlet enamelled lion, crown, shield and unicorn motif: symbol of the new era and the PO's arrival.


POST OFFICE
PUBLIC
TELEPHONE

GUARDS' BOXES OR ROAD MENDERS' HUTS?

EDWARDIAN etiquette stopped many people from going into these shop call offices too often. Some felt obliged to buy articles they didn't want from the shopowner just for the privilege of using the phone on his premises; an unaccompanied female might feel she was risking her reputation by being seen in a shop full of men. Then there were shopkeepers who only allowed their best customers to use the phone (as if it was their personal property!) and a few who sometimes pretended the equipment was out of order. Worst of all, the call office was only available in normal opening hours. When shops closed for the night or for the weekend, so did the public telephone service.

The answer to these problems was to erect call offices that were independent of shops or similar properties: free-standing kiosks similar in concept to our modern telephone boxes. These were mostly of the same three-feet square floor dimensions as the kiosks in use today, but up to two feet taller. As the illustrations show, they presented a very different appearance to those we see today. The typical wooden ones bore a close resemblance to guards' boxes or road-menders' huts, but in the early years of the 20th century, they represented a revolution in public amenities.

The kiosks fell into two categories. The automatic-lock models could only be entered after the customer inserted a penny (or two halfpennies) into the door mechanism; in the best spirit of public service, those of the second type were manned by an attendant. His task was to admit each customer as he or she arrived, set up the call through the operator, take payment for it and log details of the transaction. Then – and only then – was he supposed to step outside the kiosk, leaving the caller to talk in privacy. For the attendant this last stage was sometimes the most trying. A 'most unpleasant circumstance if the weather happens to be wet', remarked one inspector, '– which is not an unusual occurrence in London.'

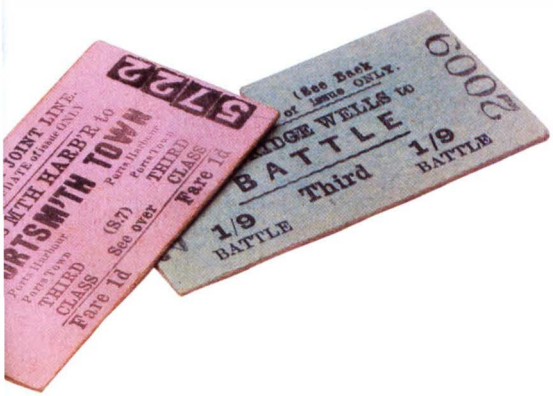
□ *One of six call office cabinets opened in Nottingham, March 1908.*

Despite their unavoidably noisy surroundings, railway stations have always been popular sites for payphones. Whether in the open (as in the picture opposite of a Portsmouth station kiosk around 1906) or under cover, they are heavily in demand and therefore profitable.

Some of the most opulent payphone booths ever used by the Post Office were the cabinets made for stations and other indoor sites during the 1930s. The carpentry and high-quality timber – Burmese or Honduras mahogany, English oak and Indian laurel – of examples found in larger post offices was especially admired.

But earlier station kiosks were criticised for being too small, especially for customers who, with umbrellas, overcoats, wraps and parcels, had little space to manoeuvre when struggling with the pages of a directory or fumbling for pennies to pay for their calls. Even so, the call office described in this snippet from the Daily Mirror of 20 March 1906 seems to have carried economy a little too far: 'A telephone for thin people – very thin people – is installed at the Oxford Circus Station. The door opens inwards instead of outwards and an ordinary-sized man has some difficulty in shutting it and getting at the instruments.'

□ *A kiosk at Portsmouth railway station in 1905.*



From the point of view of the call offices' owners the service was ideal – and, when kiosks were well-situated, quite lucrative. 'An excellent revenue-earner' was their opinion, not to mention the cheapest form of public communication service available by 1907. But what did the customers think?

Far from being frightened when confronted by the outlandishly unfamiliar telephone, most people found themselves *enjoying* the adventure. Gradually the automatic kiosks were seen to score over those where an attendant handled all the details of getting a number.

"Automatics" were not only more private – many customers assumed the attendants always listened to the conversations while hanging round outside the kiosks! – but you had the fun of using that complicated-looking equipment. (One of the attendants' biggest trials were the men who wanted to "do it myself" – often because they were showing off to their girlfriends). But of course, some were all too happy to be spared the fuss and bother of "working" the phone.

There were not uncommon cases of callers overwhelmed by the mental challenge of using the telephone. Some spoke into the wrong part of the instrument, a few even dismantled the mouthpiece to see what was wrong, while others 'perspire and fidget about in the cabinet the whole time they are speaking and emerge... in a state of semi-collapse.' Despite these failures and the small number of kiosks available, public call offices were becoming more popular. They were no longer curious objects in shops, streets and stations and as people became used to them they greatly assisted the sale and development of telephone services for *private* use. By using these amenities, people began to want their *own* phones – to become telephone subscribers – with the end result that Britain's telephone network expanded quickly. From being a "toy" of the rich or an expensive alternative to the telegraph, the phone was beginning to look an essential part of civilised life...

NINETEEN SHILLINGS WORTH OF DESTRUCTION

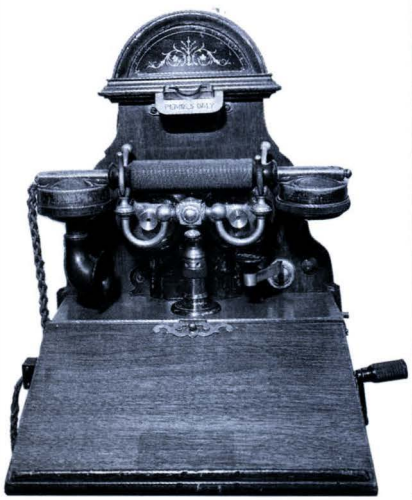
WHEN Samuel Wartski had problems with the phone in a Bishopsgate Street call-box one December day in 1907 – he claimed to have put in his coins, but the operator had not heard the money fall and refused to connect him – the result was a lot of swearing, 19 shillings' worth of destruction and a court appearance for causing wilful and malicious damage to National Telephone Co. equipment. 'I certainly broke the box open,' protested Wartski, 'but it was under provocation.'

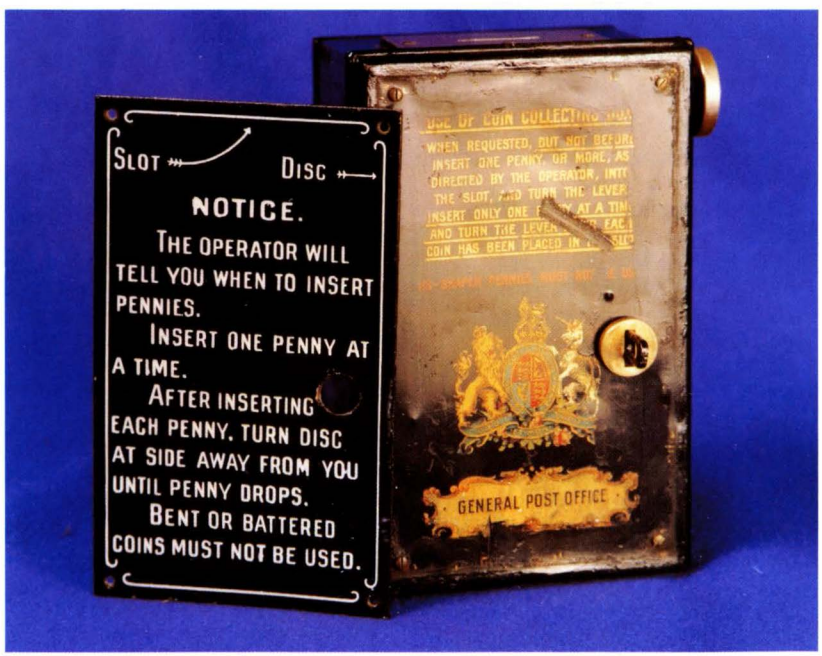
Believing himself unjustly robbed of tuppence, he decided to get it back by fair means or foul . . and invited a passing policeman to witness the event. The policeman declined and Wartski went to work on the coin-box with a chisel. But the box stayed firm and Wartski failed to retrieve his pennies.

*The customer's account of his lack of success moved the court to laughter. 'Of course, these telephones frequently are very troublesome and annoying to those who use them,' sympathised the magistrate, 'but that does not justify you in breaking open the box.' Still, perhaps having shared Wartski's sense of frustration at some time in the past, he only imposed a nominal fine of one shilling – plus two guineas to cover court costs.**

**In decimal currency Samuel Wartski was fined 5p with £2.10 costs for causing 95p's worth of damage – all in the cause of recovering 1p! But in 1907 values, these sums would have been far larger than they may sound to a reader almost 80 years later.*

☐ *By modern standards early coin boxes look flimsy and hard to operate.*





EMERGENCY!

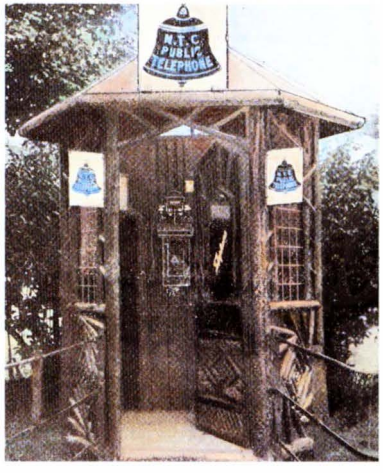
THE appearance of a telephone kiosk outside Thorpe Station in 1907 was no doubt pleasing to a large number of people in the Norwich area. But the announcements about it were not a week old when the little call office played an unexpectedly vital part in a local drama. Shortly after 11 p.m. on the Saturday night of 16 February, two policemen noticed a man struggling in the river, 'evidently fast drowning.'

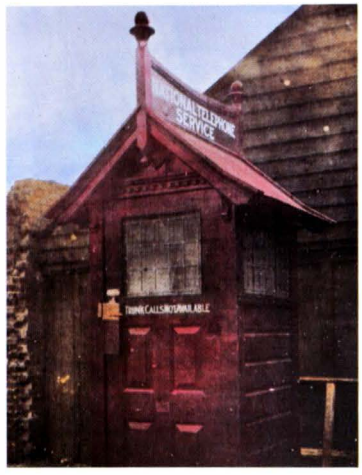
Josiah Mills, a 32-year-old labourer, was fortunate that one of the officers happend to be Sergeant Seaman, locally famous for his feats as a swimmer. He was doubly fortunate that two other people were around to assist in the by no means simple task of hauling him (and his rescuer) up the steep bank. And he was trebly *fortunate that there was a public telephone – the newly-opened Thorpe Road kiosk – so close to the point where he was pulled from the river. While the rescuers applied artificial respiration a "horse ambulance" was summoned by telephone and to this combination of resources Mills almost certainly owed his life.*

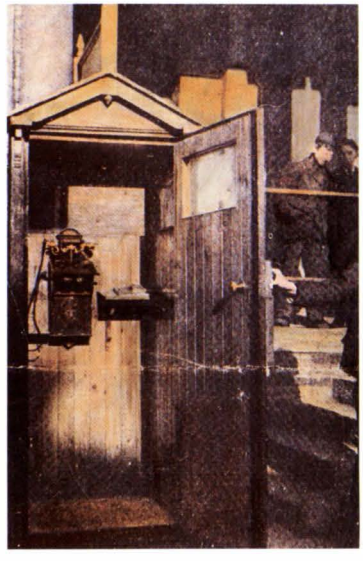
Since those early days, public telephones have regularly featured in helping to avert the worst of disasters. The emergency number for Fire, Police and Ambulance – 999, of course – is perhaps the best-known number in Britain. Back in 1907, however, people were only just waking up to the phone's role in improving public safety.

ALL SHAPES & SIZES

BY 1912, when the Post Office took charge of Britain's growing telephone network, the public call office was firmly part of the urban landscape. This was not to say that public telephones could be found in *every* sizeable town and in country areas there were even fewer; the day when an immediately-recognisable telephone box could be seen on nearly every street corner was still almost a quarter of a century away. There was also no standard agreement on what a telephone kiosk should *look* like. For the moment, such kiosks as were available came in many varieties: "rustic arbours" for rural spots, galvanized iron sheds for docklands and an assortment of small wooden huts for other locations.







'Somewhat picturesque'... was how one writer described the unusual telephone kiosk (on the right) situated on the outskirks of Blackburn in 1907.

As in the case of a similar design installed in Folkestone two years or so later (see bottom picture) the call office's resemblance to the ornamental park or garden shelters popular in Edwardian times was no accident: the "rustic arbour" model was meant to blend with a background of trees and foliage.

Located at a tram terminus, the Blackburn "arbour" was regarded as a profitable concern. Its measurements – six feet six inches by five feet eight inches – also made it a remarkably roomy kiosk. It boasted an electric light which came on when customers closed the door behind them, an imitation "red tile" roof (which was actually timber) and a clock, courtesy of Blackburn Corporation.

Originally the kiosk also contained a table and seats... but after the police had discovered four men using the call office as a quiet place for a smoke and a game of cards on the first Sunday following its opening, these facilities were quickly removed.

☐ *Three popular types of kiosk. Far left, the rustic arbour at Folkestone installed in 1909. Above centre column, the "Norwich" (with coin-operated automatic door). Below: "Wilson C."*

THE Post Office was encountering a problem which was to influence its plans to produce a single, standard telephone box design for the entire country until very recent times. Councils and other local authorities were not only reluctant to have phone kiosks cluttering the flow of pedestrian traffic along their streets; they were also prone towards criticising the shape of the call offices and even their colour. They saw the social advantages of such things, but strongly insisted that they be made to fit in with, or at very least not detract from, their surroundings. Thus there had to be strange *thatched* kiosks for the seafront at Eastbourne – 'a cross between a Chinese pagoda and a mushroom', said one who remembered them in 1936.

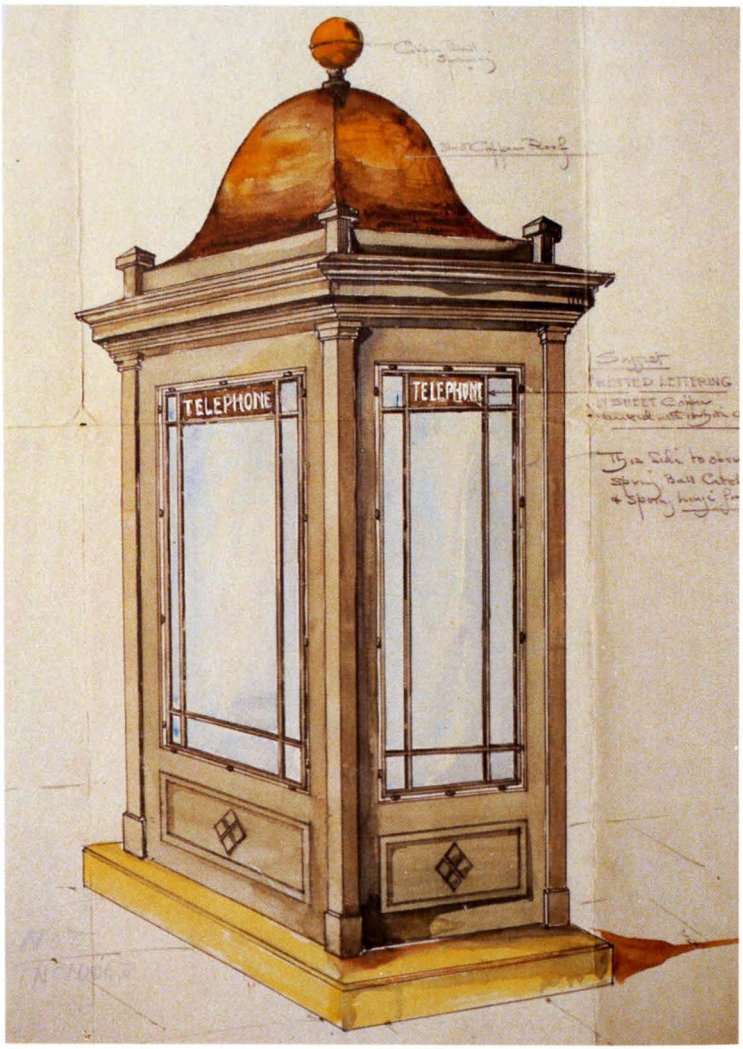
A useful object had to be a beautiful object, evidently, and when after World War I the Post Office revived its plan for a uniform, "all-Britain" telephone box, artistic considerations had to enter into the designers' schemes. The result which appeared in 1921 was called simply Kiosk No. 1.

DESIGN COMPETITION

KIOSK No.1 was little more than a reinforced concrete version of the old wooden-box call offices – plus a decorative spear-like finial on top. The first ones cost £35 each to produce, but within a few years they were being turned out for only £15.

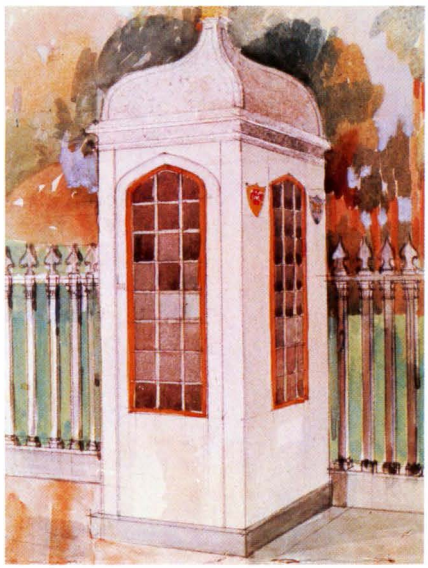
Although quite successful, it was felt that a still better design could be found. In 1924 several leading architects were invited to submit designs for a new cast iron kiosk. The result of this contest was a victory for Sir Giles Gilbert Scott – and kiosk No. 2.

K1



☐ *Kiosk no.1 – the first standard telephone kiosk.*

A design competition to find a new telephone kiosk organised by the Metropolitan Boroughs Joint Standing Committee in 1924 attracted these (unsuccessful) entries.



VICTORY FOR SIR GILES GILBERT SCOTT & KIOSK No. 2

KIOSK No.2 was not merely important for improvements to the door mechanism and window arrangement or owing to the introduction of a ventilation system (through its perforated domed crown). The basic design and more particularly the unmistakeable bright red colour scheme established an enduring popular image of what a phone box looked like. Nonetheless, its introduction in 1927 was restricted mainly to London and some large provincial towns.

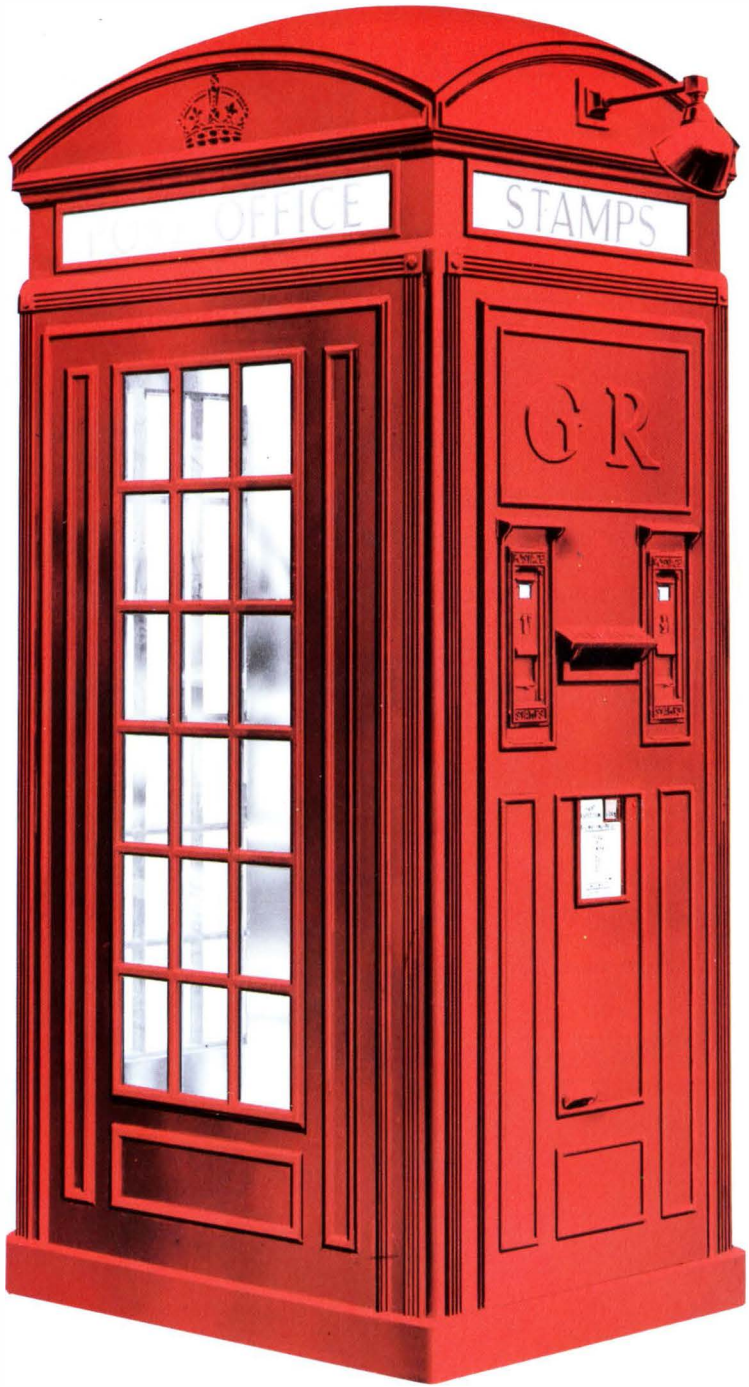
For sites of special architectural importance or for scenic areas, however, Sir Giles Gilbert Scott was asked to design a more "refined" telephone kiosk in concrete. Kiosk No.3 was very similar to its predecessor, but the only red paint was on the window frames; the body of the kiosk was painted in a light stone-coloured hue.

Concrete turned out to be a rather poor material for telephone box construction. It was surprisingly fragile – especially when kiosks were being transported to the sites where they were to be set up. It was also not very resistant to the British climate; the exteriors cracked, the paint peeled and the kiosks were hard to keep clean. Consequently, Kiosk No.3 (1929) was the last to employ concrete in this way.

Although made of cast iron, Kiosk No.4 (introduced in 1930) suffered from other problems. As the picture shows, it was intended to be a complete miniature post office – phone box, post

box and stamp vending machine all in one. The kiosk was designed chiefly for places where no such facilities existed or where expense prevented sub-post offices from being opened.

Unluckily, the "vermillion giants" – they were considerably bulkier than ordinary phone kiosks – were not very successful. The noise of the stamp-machines in use disturbed people who were on the phone at the time and the rolls of stamps themselves were apt to grow soggy in damp weather. Only 50 had been put in service when the short reign of Kiosk No.4 was brought to an end in 1935. Kiosk No.5 was an experimental one which never entered regular use, but the approach of another royal event – the Silver Jubilee of King George V – provided the inspiration for its successor ...



K4

THE JUBILEE BOX

WITH the possible exception of his work on Liverpool Cathedral, Sir Giles Gilbert Scott never produced a more famous design than his "Jubilee" telephone kiosk of 1936.

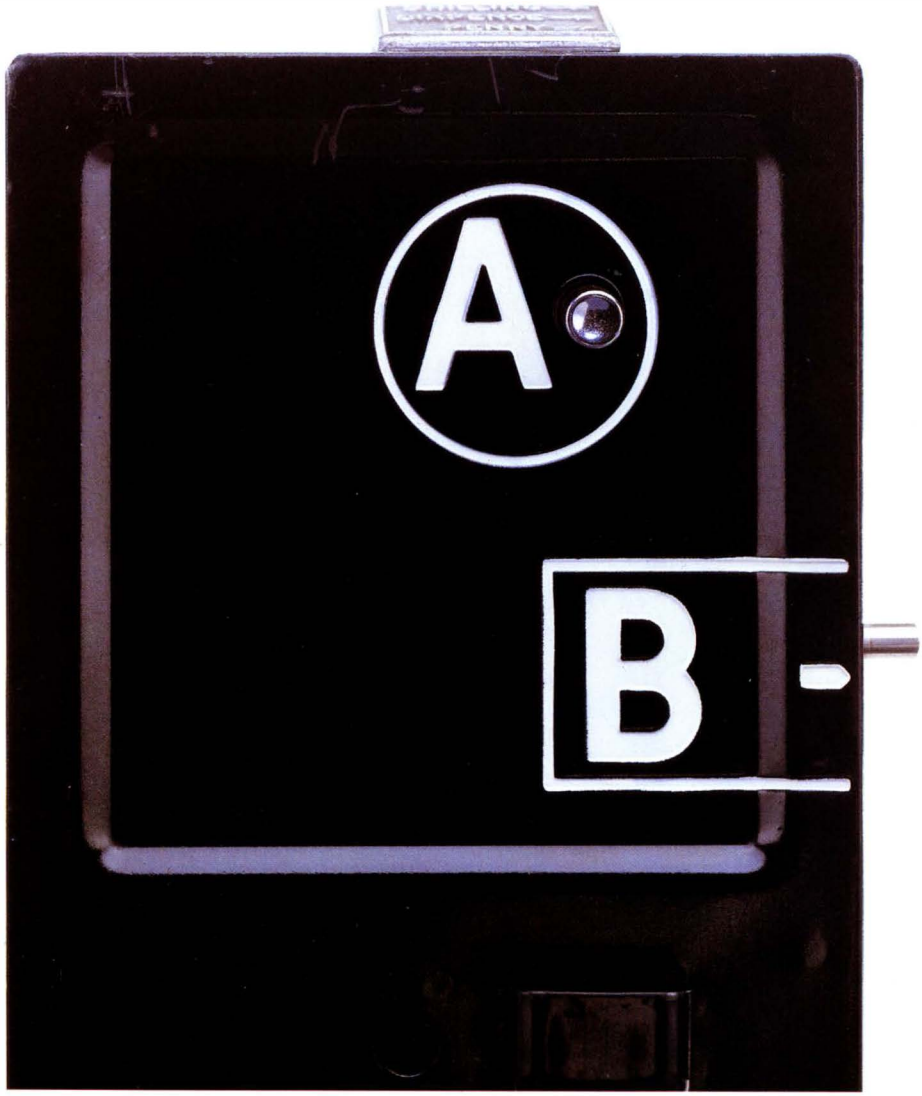
True, Kiosk No.6 – did not represent a dramatic change in outward design. As the illustration indicates, it was based upon the same architect's popular Kiosk No.2, differing mainly in the positioning of the vertical window bars (to improve visibility) and other relatively minor details. But whereas No.2 had not penetrated far outside London, the Jubilee became the first genuinely standard telephone kiosk by virtue of the fact that it could be found throughout the whole country; the PO installed it at sites where no such amenities had ever existed, including numerous rural areas where public phones had long been considered uneconomic propositions.

☐ *Sir Giles Gilbert Scott*
Courtesy of the British Architectural Library/RIBA

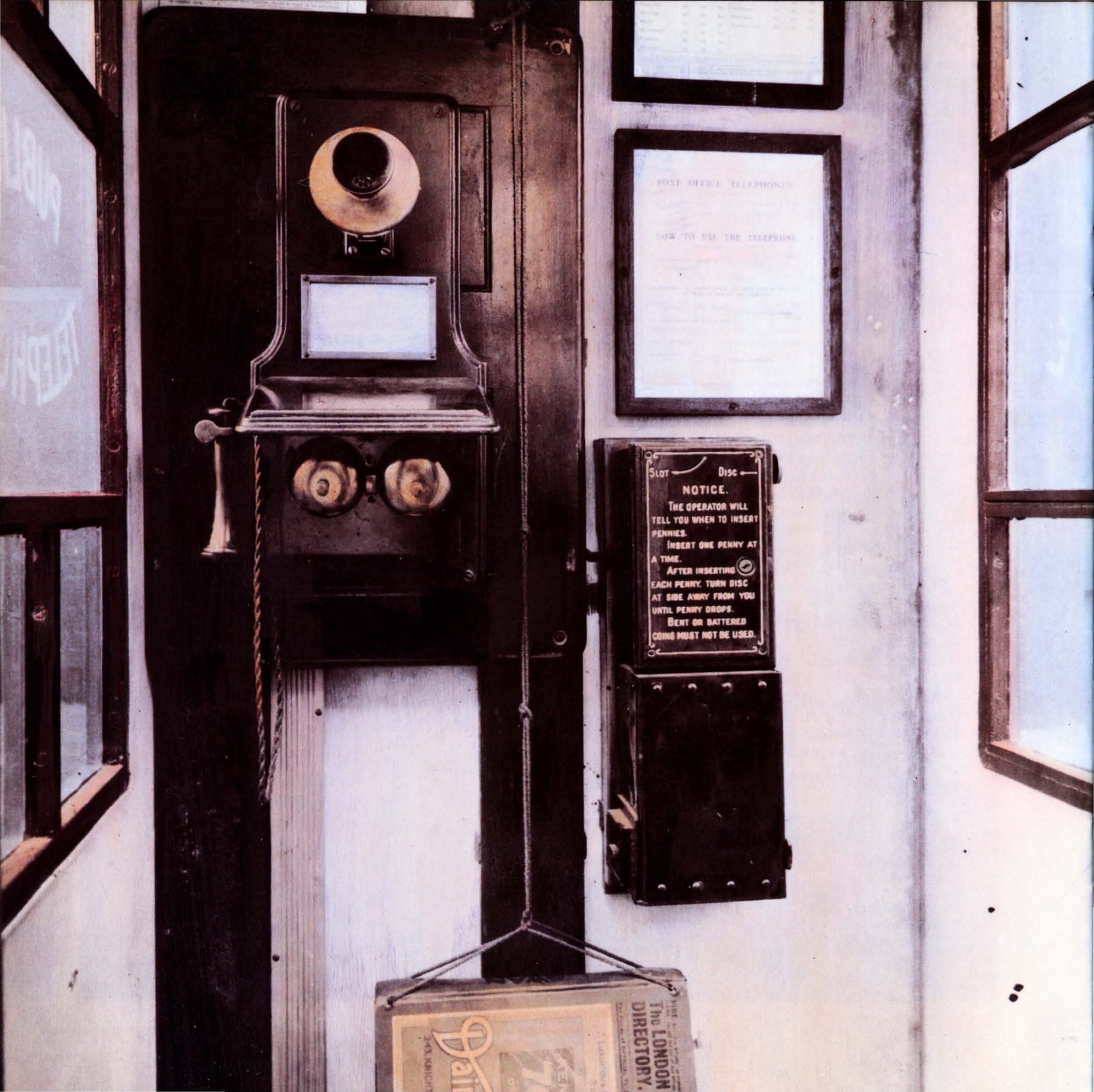
PRESS BUTTON B AND TRY LATER

KIOSK No.6 could be erected in a single day despite the 13½ cwt. of its cast iron frame and teak door. All the fittings were standardised, too, and they included a writing shelf, a place for parcels... and even an umbrella hook. Unless situated near a street lamp, the kiosks were illuminated inside by lighting controlled through an automatic timer switch.

Predictably, there were a few objections to the brilliant red colour scheme which the PO insisted must be used up and down the country, although for some natural beauty spots the boxes were made less obtrusive by painting them battleship grey – the only hint of red being confined to the glazing bars of the windows. But the cheerful-red Jubilee soon became an established British institution: one that was deeply rooted in our way of life. "Press Button B and try again later," – the instructions for obtaining the return of your money if the call was unanswered or otherwise unobtainable – became a national catch-phase.



Overleaf
Contrast: the left picture, taken in 1924, shows the interior of a Kiosk No.1. On the right is a comparable view of inside a "Jubilee" (No.6) kiosk some 38 years later with its famous "Button B" mechanism for refunding coins when a number was unobtainable.
Kiosk No. 1, courtesy of BBC Hulton Picture Library.


POST OFFICE TELEPHONES
HOW TO USE THE TELEPHONE
SLOT
DISC
NOTICE.
THE OPERATOR WILL TELL YOU WHEN TO INSERT PENNIES.
INSERT ONE PENNY AT A TIME.
AFTER INSERTING EACH PENNY, TURN DISC AT SIDE AWAY FROM YOU UNTIL PENNY DROPS.
BENT OR BATTERED COINS MUST NOT BE USED.
The LONDON DIRECTORY.


Correct addressing
speeds your mail
CASA & MAISON
"METRO MINI-CAB"
EMERGENCY CALLS
DO NOT INSERT ANY COINS
DIAL 999
FIRE, POLICE or AMBULANCE
HALL ROAD
JUNCTION MAIDA VALE N.W.8
CUNNINGHAM 1326
A
B
London Postal Area
L R
London Postal Area
S Z
London Postal Area
E K
LONDON POSTAL AREAS
A-D

SEEING RED

IN children's picture books telephone kiosks are depicted in the brightest crimson imaginable. As mentioned elsewhere, the Post Office was periodically criticised in the 1920s–1930s for insisting on a standard all-red colour scheme for its kiosks. Since some local authorities complained that this spoiled areas of natural beauty, Sir Gilbert Scott's Kiosk No.3 was produced in a more restrained, light stone hue – more decorative, perhaps, but much less distinctive.

Herein lies the chief reason for the decision that all Kiosks No.6 should be the now-familiar red, regardless of where they were situated. Red stands out – a kiosk of that colour is not easily missed. Once people learned to associate red with public telephones, anyone – even a stranger to an area – could pick out a phone box at a glance, in case of accident or some other emergency. The colour scheme was even approved by the Royal Fine Art Commission and by various rural preservation societies.

But not everyone was happy with the gleaming red telephone kiosks. In the Lake District, for example, there was a call for green kiosks to blend better with the countryside. When the request was turned down, one critic objected that the area's natural beauty was 'to be sacrificed to motorists who were half an hour late for dinner and wanted to telephone home so that the soup could be kept warm.'

The Jubilee's popularity lasted for nearly thirty years, for, as we shall see, it was not replaced until the 1960s. All through the Second World War and the 1950s the Jubilee provided a good service but during the 1960s it began to be considered a little outdated.

Anticipating this as early as 1959, the PO approached the distinguished architect Neville Conder for a more up-to-date kiosk design. He responded with one totally unlike anything that had gone before. Away went the multitude of small windows and criss-cross of glazing bars: Kiosk No.7 featured the kind of solid, almost floor-to-ceiling panes seen in modern office buildings. The bold all-round glass design provided the maximum visibility and as the kiosk was intended to look the same from all four sides it could be positioned to suit the individual lay-outs of different streets and open spaces. At a height of seven feet two inches, Kiosk No.7 was some 14 inches shorter than previous PO models; as a matter of course it contained the new trunk dialling payphone equipment.

Perhaps more remarkably the material from which it was intended to construct the kiosk was ultra-modern too. For six of the dozen experimental kiosks the traditional cast iron was replaced by red-painted aluminium panels.

When the first of the new kiosks went "on approval" in Central London in January 1962 amid a blaze of TV and press publicity, each carried a notice inviting customers to write in with their opinions about the box to the Postmaster General. The idea was to assess the public's reaction to Kiosk No.7 before it was introduced on a wider scale. The public seemed favourably disposed; people liked the more sensible door-handle, for instance "You can get a grip on it without breaking your finger-nails," and they agreed that the modern design was attractive.

But Kiosk No.7 suffered from a major defect that prevented it from progressing beyond the "prototype" stage. Its trendsetting aluminium body was no match for the weather. One kiosk which made a triumphal debut at the Royal Exhange was soon reduced to a streaky grey-black, heavily-blistered mess; the press cameramen who had crowded round in January would have hardly recognised it, let alone wanted to photograph it, a matter of months later. Those searching for a fresh "look" to telephone kiosks for the latter part of the 20th Century would have to think again.

And there were further problems facing the new generation of public telephones leading up to the centenary of the "call office"...

☐ *On trial: three No.7 kiosks set up at Grosvenor Gardens, London on 29 January 1962.*


LIMITED
LLOYDS BANK

When Kiosk No.8 appeared it had a striking sense of modern style: the clean lines and large undivided window panes of its weather-beaten predecessor were retained. But to combat the vandals its frame was cast iron and its windows specially-toughened glass.

By 1966 – the year when the England soccer team carried off the World Cup – around 40% of Britain's 200,000 coin boxes were still waiting to be converted from the old prepayment system to the more popular pay-on-answer method still in use today, when customers only insert their money when they hear the phone being answered at the distant end. A further complication: the Government was talking about going over to decimal currency – which meant that another new type of coin-box might soon be required. Meanwhile, the demand for public telephone services was rising, but so too was the tide of vandalism.

The last-mentioned problem was perhaps the hardest to solve. Figures suggested that on average *every* kiosk in Britain was vandalised twice a year (and some left almost permanently out of order) thanks to coin-box thieves or hooligans. At this time vandalism was costing the Post Office about £½ million per annum.

Ideas on how to beat the vandals flowed in from concerned members of the public. Most, like the scheme to have an automatic door-lock activated when apparatus was tampered with, trapping the culprit at the scene of the crime, were exciting but impractical. But the PO was experimenting with remote alarm systems, reinforced steel coin-boxes, stronger telephone cords, shatter-proof windows... and also with alternatives to the usual, conspicuous street kiosk. Rented payphones for shops, garages and hotel foyers – sites less appealing to the average vandal, who likes to work unobserved – were one possibility. Public wall-mounted phones with cutaway ("head and shoulders") perspex domes or USA-style "walk-up, drive-up" street phones were also proposed.

Against this background Kiosk No.8 arrived in July 1968. Regarded by the Post Office as a top-priority project – produced in just over a year, the shortest time it had ever taken to create a new kiosk – it was designed to meet the new social conditions of the day.

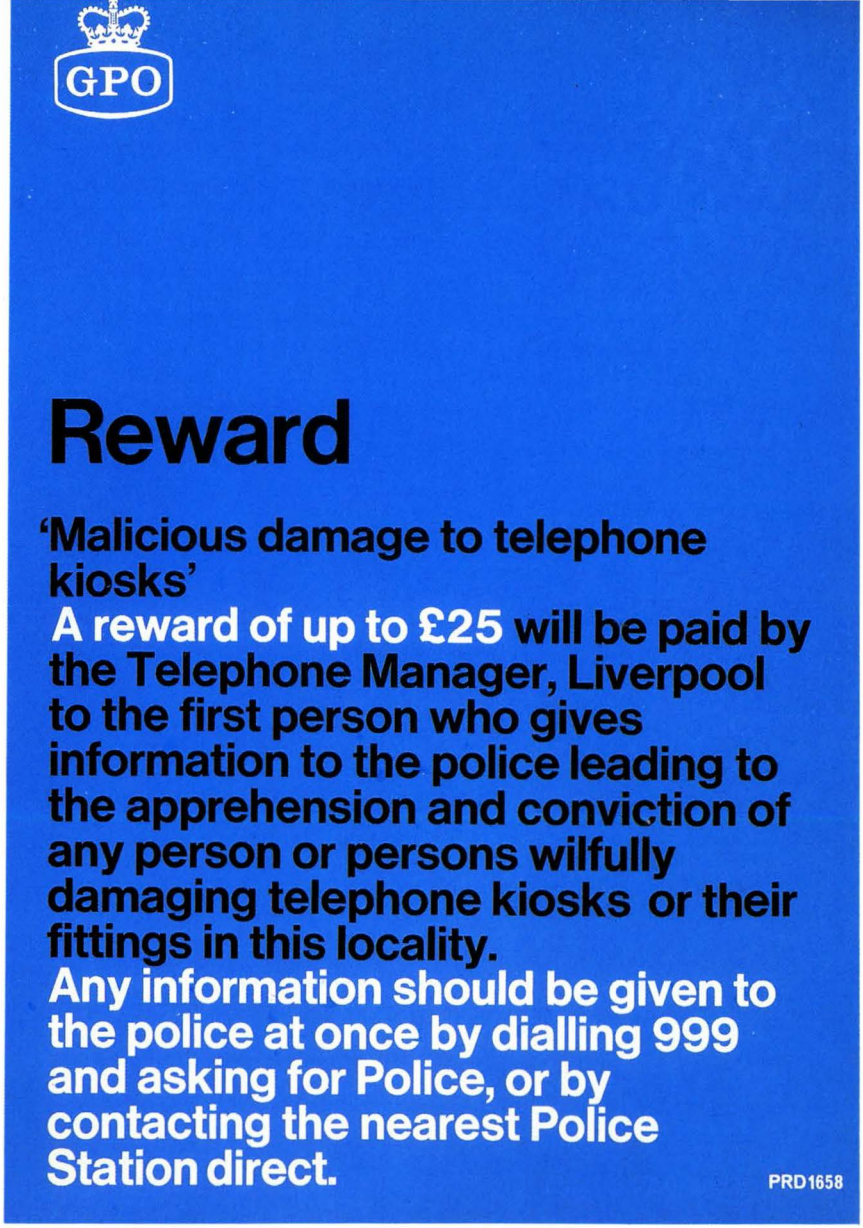
As a standard design, it was meant to blend in with its surroundings (city or country) while remaining instantly identifiable as a phone box. Making best use of new materials and manufacturing techniques, it was fashioned in seven main parts and was easy to clean. Finally, it was robust and as vandal resistant as any public telephone office was thought capable of being.

By and large, it met all the objectives which had gone into its design; and the Kiosk No.8 has taken over as the new standard payphone housing.

However, the social scene never remains unchanged for long. Public telephones are altering to keep pace with this constant process.

Increasing consideration is rightly being given to access for the disabled, to the 12lb "pull" needed to open the door and other consumer problems.

KIOSK VANDALS



PEOPLE who find telephone boxes out of order are prone to put the blame on British Telecom. All too often, though, the blame for this inconvenience really rests upon vandals.

Telephone box vandalism is hardly a recent development. As early as 1912 the Postmaster General toyed with placing writing pads inside public kiosks in a brave but futile attempt to save the walls from graffiti and habitual scribblers.

As familiarity with the public telephone grew, so unfortunately did vandalism; the phone box has always appeared fair game to hooligans bent upon damage. Likewise, the age of the public phone brought with it a new type of thief: one who preyed upon the ready source of money represented by coin-boxes.

In 1921 – the year when the PO introduced its first "standard" kiosk – a 26-year-old Sydenham man made a healthy "wage" of between £5-£10 a week by touring London Underground stations on his motorbike, opening the coin-boxes of the phone kiosks there with a set of duplicate keys he had somehow provided for himself. He was eventually caught in the act of assaulting the kiosk at Hyde Park Corner tube station thanks to an alarm bell rigged up by the police and by the marked coins found in his possession. In return for the £600+ his raids had cost the Post Office he received a sentence of one years' hard labour…

The Sydenham man was probably not the first of his kind – and he certainly was not the last. Today, British Telecom engineers report that in many places 96 out of every 100 of the new electric Blue Payphones they are called in to repair have been damaged by thieves. New modifications have been announced to combat this problem, alongside advanced electronic models which will automatically register faults or coinboxes which need to be emptied.

DID YOU KNOW...

*The most modern standard kiosk on our streets – Kiosk No.8 – first appeared in 1968. By March 1983 around 11,000 of this type were located all over Britain.

*The most southerly example of a British telephone box is on a small island in Antarctica! According to the *Daily Mail*, the crew of the Royal Navy Research Ship "Branfield" built a wooden replica of the familiar red kiosks they'd left behind in Britain... to make themselves feel more at home.

*There are 367,000 British Telecom payphones in the UK – 77,000 public ones (kiosks, cabinets or booths in the streets, airports, railway and tube stations) plus 290,000 rented equivalents in private premises (shops, hotels, hospitals etc.).

☐ *Left page, above, the highest kiosk in Britain at Aviemore. Below, a gift from Portsmouth to the USA is hoisted aboard an aircraft carrier.*

☐ *Right page, above, a telephone kiosk being flown out to the United States Eighth Air Force Museum, Louisiana. Below, a new callbox bound for a remote Scottish Isle where half of the 200 residents rely on the public payphone.*

THE FUTURE

DURING the next few years we shall be seeing great changes to our payphones (as public telephones are now called). All the old dial payphones are being replaced by modern electronic microprocessor controlled equipment. These 'Blue Payphones' have a push button keypad instead of a dial, take a large range of coins, not just 5p and 10p and let you call almost anywhere in the world without the 'pip pip' signal telling you to insert more money. These payphones are even clever enough to work out the best way of charging for your call from the coins you've put in and then return to you any wholly unused coins.

We'll be seeing more open booths containing payphones in the future, too, as opposed to big kiosks with doors. These help reduce collections of dirt and rubbish. Several different types have been tried out around the country and these have been made from material as varied as aluminium, steel and plastics.

Look out, too, for the green and white sign announcing the Phonecard phone. This new development – the UK's first payphone that is not operated by coins –makes use of a green and silver plastic card bought in advance of making the call. The phone shows how many units are left on the card and as the call progresses this number decreases. Each unit is encoded into the cards using holograms, which are patterns of light (unlike most credit cards, for instance, which use magnetic encoding) and these are erased during the call.

A whole range of new electronic payphones is also appearing in such places as hairdressers, pubs, restaurants etc. The Payphone 100, just 18cm high, also leads a double life; at the turn of a key it becomes an ordinary telephone so small businesses can provide their customers and staff with a payphone without having to rent a private telephone too!

Public payphone services have always tried to keep pace with changes in the way we live and Phonecard phones seem to be carrying us closer to the cashless society of the future where, according to some forecasters, no one will use actual money.

Other exciting possibilities are coming along all the time. British Telecom is experimenting with payphones on trains and other forms of transport and with the option of having payphone calls added to your home telephone bill.

Whatever form the public payphones of the *next* century take they will try to live up to the motto printed on some wooden kiosks in the opening years of this present one: "Open Always."

FOLLOW-UP WORK

1. Write a report for readers of a newspaper from around the year 1885 in which you describe (perhaps humorously?) the opening of the first "public call office" to be seen in your town.

2. Design a public payphone for the year 2084, giving reasons for the various features you include in it. (Remember that payphones have to take into account the kind of society in which they are meant to operate; for example, if you think that coins will have ceased to be used by the late 21st Century, how will this affect your design? And will vandalism still be a problem? – If so, how will your payphone deal with it?

3. Draw a simple sketch-map of your town or area. Mark on it (a) places from which you can make a public telephone call and (b) places where you think new payphones should be sited. Bear in mind that payphones cannot be placed too close to one another, nor in locations where they may cause an obstruction.

4. Why *do* people vandalise public telephones? Give a number of possible reasons for this problem and suggest how it could be prevented.

5. After re-reading the section of the text dealing with experiences of early 20th Century public call office attendants and their customers, write a story from the point of view of *either* an attendant *or* someone who is using the telephone for the first time.

6. Imagine that you feel a public telephone is badly needed for your area. Write a letter suitable for sending to your local newspaper setting forth some reasons to back up your opinion.

7. Draw a poster telling people to, "Support Your Local Telephone" – that is, one that encourages them to make greater use of payphones.

Places to Visit, Things to See

**Telecom Technology Showcase*
135 Queen Victoria Street,
London EC4V 4AT
(Telephone **01**-248 7444)
Open Monday–Friday 10.00–17.00.
Admission free. Parties by arrangement.
On 6 May 1990 this 01 code will change to 071

(The Lower Gallery includes a fine collection of photographs and other exhibits tracing the development of the public telephone up until the present day. Alongside numerous illustrations, posters etc. are: a reconstruction of a National Telephone Co. "silence cabinet" with original coinboxes from 1910/1911; a "Jubilee" or No. 6 kiosk and mounted wall displays of more modern equivalents like the Blue Payphone or Cardphone).

*British Telecom Museums can also be visited in *Norwich* and *Oxford*. Admission is free but hours of opening vary. Ring 0603 22611 and 0865 246601 respectively to check on these.

*The Telecommunications Gallery at the Science Museum, Exhibition Road, London SW7 presents another historical review of telephone growth, both public and private. You can hardly miss Sir Gilbert Scott's pale-coloured No. 3 kiosk which dates from 1929. This exhibit was recovered from Lingfield Park racecourse, Surrey as late as 1982. The Museum opens Monday – Saturday 10.00 – 18.00, admission free.
Tel: **01**-589 3456.
On 6 May 1990 this 01 code will change to 071

*Finally: – take a good look at the telephone boxes you see about you on the streets, especially when travelling in London. The Jubilee (N0.6) kiosks are most common, but perhaps you will notice the slight difference in the embossed crowns: the older ones belong to the reign of George V, the later ones date from 1953 and the reign of Elizabeth II. Older specimens than these are more scarce, but many No. 2 boxes are still used in London. A splendid example of the Post Office's first attempt at a standard kiosk – Kiosk No. 1, that is – has been reassembled outside Mercury House, headquarters of British Telecom's Southwestern Region in Bristol. Lastly, when visiting a railway station, keep an eye open for wooden platform kiosks which have not changed much since they were installed shortly after the turn of the century.

Produced by British Telecom Education Service
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81 Newgate Street, London EC1A 7AJ.

British Telecommunications plc ES 49 (1 / 90)