

BUILDINGS AT RISK

Time travelling through the island's telephone kiosks

Our Buildings at Risk series covers buildings and structures – at risk, lost, and saved. This week Keith Watterson, chairman of the Friends of Onchan's Heritage, takes a look at the evolution of telephone boxes on the island. Once common-place, many have disappeared, or are under threat – but some find new lives, including helping save the lives of members of the community.

In 1889, George Gilmore, a former electrician for the GPO's Manx telegraph service, obtained a licence to operate the island's first telephone service from 53 Athol Street, Douglas (later Mr Clucas's greengrocers shop).

Mr Gilmore's first subscribers were allocated numbers in the range 1 to 35 with No. 1 Quiggins, rope maker and timber merchants, No. 2 Mr Cain, builder, No. 3 butchers' slaughterhouse, White Hoe, No. 4 Mr Collister's stables, No. 5 Mr Torrance, grocer and merchant, No. 6 Villiers Hotel, No. 7 Mr Cowell, watchmaker, No. 8 IoM Times, No. 25 Steam Packet Co, No. 26 Railway Co, etc.

After three years' further growth Mr Gilmore was approached by the National Telephon Company who offered to buy him out – the offer of being retained as manager and cash in hand was enough to secure the sale.

Mr Gilmore also saw that NTC had the resources to expand the system in the island and to link the island with the UK.

The service had grown to 600 subscribers ranging from Port St Mary to Peel and Ramsey by 1901.

Mr Gilmore continued as manager until 1912 when he retired as the system was nationalised and merged into the General Post Office (GPO).

He died in 1940 aged 88 having seen the installation of the first off-island telephone link in 1929 inaugurated on June 6 by a call from Lieutenant Governor Sir Claude Hill in Douglas to the Postmaster General in Liverpool.

In 1933 the Douglas exchange moved to a new building on Dalton Street, the site of the former boys grammar school.

In 1967 that manual exchange was replaced by a new exchange built in Peel brick which still stands on the corner of Sydney Street and Dalton Street and has been subject to expansion and changes over the years.

The Isle of Man telephone service has been operated by Manx Telecom since January 1 1987 after British Telecom set up a Manx registered subsidiary in 1986 when the Manx Government announced that it would award a 20 year li-



Kiosk in Dalby with a new life to save lives

cence to operate the telephone system.

CALL OFFICES

Britain's first telephone exchanges opened in the late 1870s for 'subscribers' only.

The telephone service in the early days was only affordable by some business establishments and by domestic users who had a desire to be in the higher classes of society, as owning a telephone was a real talking point.

In 1884 non-subscribers were allowed to use the service by paying to use someone else's telephone for calls, hence the 'call office' arrived, often indoors at shops etc., where eventually indoor cubicles and booths would be introduced to give the caller privacy for their conversation.

As the system grew, other locations were used for call

offices, such as railway stations and post offices, but the locations and hours were still limited, and telephone companies introduced their own, standalone outdoor kiosks to provide service in the wider community, 24 hours a day.

This included the Isle of Man; the island never really had its own design of kiosk, and utilised many of the designs installed elsewhere in Britain by the GPO.

KIOSKS

• K1 was the first standard design, introduced in 1921 by the GPO.

Made of pre-cast concrete, the K1 kiosk was intended to be Britain's national telephone box.

It was not popular with local authorities, and central London districts refused to accept it, but some 6,300

were installed, albeit more widely in rural locations such as Baldrine.

Across Britain just five K1 original kiosks remain still in place now.

• K2 – the first 'red box' – was the next to hit the streets in 1926 and installed until 1935. Made of cast iron and a maximum price tag of £40 it was designed by Gilbert Giles Scott (not yet 'Sir') and painted vermilion red on the outside and flame red inside, weighing more than 1 ton.

Some 1,700 K2s were produced for £50 each and installed mostly in London, being too big and expensive for general use elsewhere.

• K3 was introduced in 1929 and picked the best points from the previous K1 and K2



A K6 kiosk on Peel promenade



A and B coin mechanism inside a 'Jubilee' K6

models.

This became the standard for Britain with 11,000 erected all over the country for the next six years.

Now, they are exceptionally rare, only two survive in Britain: one at London Zoo's Parrot House (with Grade II listing status from English Heritage), and the second at Rhynie near Perth in Scotland.

• K4 came along in 1929 and was nicknamed the 'vermilion giant' as it was a stretched version of the K2 which incorporated two stamp vending machines and a post box to give a 24-hour post office.

No more than 50 were made as there were siting difficulties; also the stamp machines were excessively noisy during telephone conversations and were not weather-proof, which caused problems with the adhesive on the

stamps.

• K5 was a lightweight portable kiosk fabricated from steel-faced plywood from 1934 in small quantities for use at exhibitions and temporary sites.

• K6 In 1935 King George was to celebrate his Jubilee and to mark the event a new Jubilee Kiosk was commissioned from Sir Giles Gilbert Scott.

It would be in cast iron, red, and to be used everywhere.

It arrived on the streets in 1936 and 60,000 were erected.

The door is made from a cast iron glazing frame which is encased in a teak wood frame fitted with three heavy duty brass hinges and a door closer.

The kiosk is comprised of 18 different cast iron sections which were usually built indoors and decorated before



A K3 kiosk on Colby Glen Road



Kiosk with a new life as a library in Peel



PC Derek Crellin at the police call post on Prospect Hill



A K6 kiosk outside the internment camp at Port Jack Glen



A modern K8 kiosk



A restored K1 kiosk

being moved to site for installation using a special kiosk trailer.

Vandalism and theft proved too much for these kiosks – glazing was removed for use in cold frames and cash boxes levered off in many quieter areas, so in 1939 a stronger Mark 2 was introduced.

After the Second World War when raw materials became available a further 2,000 kiosks were erected.

The K6 bore a royal crown motif, taken from the Post Office crest.

In 1952 on the death of King George VI the Post Office changed to using St Edward's Crown as adopted by Queen Elizabeth II; kiosks in Scotland being fitted with the Queen's Crown of Scotland.

This later motif in the roof was made to slide in a slot as required and the square slot

is visible if you look carefully at the roof where the royal crown is.

Between 1950 and 1955 about 25,000 new K6s were installed and continued at about a thousand a year until the mid-1960s.

• K7 was an attempt at a new, modern design.

Glazing was fixed in rubber gaskets just like car windcreens, but the K7 was made of aluminium which did not entirely suit the British weather and only five went into public service.

• K8 The Post Office preference for cast iron continued and there was a desire to have a more modern design in new housing estates and town centres that were being built, also something that was cheaper and more resistant to increased levels of vandalism.

Bruce Martin designed the

K8 in aluminium but the Post Office changed it to cast iron with a cast aluminium door. It appeared on the streets in July 1968 and was painted poppy red, slightly more orange than the old Post Office red.

About 4,000 K8s were supplied.

The prefabricated design allowed the kiosk to be installed in any configuration with the door, side and back panels placed in any position. There is no Royal crown on the exterior of the kiosk.

• KX Range During the 1980s the payphone service under the newly privatised British Telecom was in trouble with widespread unreliability of call boxes through vandalism and the failure to repair damage quick enough.

In 1985 the situation was rectified with the new KX range which took into account the needs of the disabled user regarding accessibility. The kiosks were attractive, functional and modern. Being made of stainless steel and anodised aluminium meant the end of routine painting too and they were more resistant to vandalism.

OTHER KIOSKS

It was not only the telephone companies who provided kiosks, the emergency services and motoring associations have also done so.

The AA and RAC began their network of boxes around 1912 by the AA and 1919 for the RAC. Police call points had a flashing light on top to attract the passing policeman and the public were invited to use the point for emergencies or rou-

tine enquiries.

Styles varied until some standardisation in the 1930s.

THE FUTURE

The number of kiosks is still reducing mainly because of the increased use of mobile phones. Some boxes have gone for scrap, some have been recycled as fish tanks, cocktail bars, sofas, payphones in night clubs etc. and many have appeared in back gardens and yards.

About 2,000 red telephone boxes of various models and marques have been declared 'listed buildings' in the UK, but no Manx telephone boxes are registered.

As kiosks in the Isle of Man become surplus to requirements they are usually offered to the local authority before being removed from site.

A K6 kiosk at Port

Lewaigue, Maughold has been turned into a book store, so has a re-positioned kiosk in the public gardens on Albany Road, Peel.

At Laxey near the MER station local volunteers from the Live at Home Scheme painted the kiosk in the scheme's colours and then it was fitted out with a defibrillator. Similar installations have taken place at Greeba Bridge, Patrick Corner and Dalby Village.

NEW LIVES

These kiosks show how structures evolve, and can become redundant; they also show that such structures can find new lives – and in the case of the defibrillator kiosks, not only are the lives of buildings being saved, but also possibly they are helping save the lives of members of the community